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Altering Credibility Through Short-term Government Branding: A Digital Framing Experiment

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Abstract. Government branding is a practice that can be tied to promoting an institution (long-term orientation) or a particular administration and its elected official (short-term orientation), using both physical and digital artifacts. Reviewing the related work in the literature, we document the existence and visibility of an administration-dependent government brand in a developing country by mining social media data and the Google 2019 Spanish corpus. We test the hypothesis that administration-dependent government iconography (e.g. a logo) can lead to a change in the perceived credibility of public information in digital environments. Using an experimental survey approach that parallels the application of framing, we find that short term orientated government iconography can be detrimental to the credibility of government institutions, while they can also be seen as social opportunity costs, as budgets invested in them can be capitalized in later elections and not in the mission of the temporarily branded government body.

Keywords: Government Branding, Perceived Credibility, Framing, Experiment

1 Introduction

Due to the plethora of information on the Internet and increasing adoption rates of electronic devices, the digital era is characterized by the challenge of finding useful information to reach an optimal choice. Contemporary studies show that governments adopt behavioral science techniques to influence individual behavior [1]. One example is Government Branding, whichplays an important role in shaping citizens' attributes about government by introducing symbolic elements (logos, images, and celebrities [2]) signaling factors [3], framing strategies [4, 5] or concepts of brand equity [6].

Government branding can have a short-term orientation, which focuses on the benefit of a particular administration and its elected official, or a long-term orientation that favors the public body and its mission. While government brand elements can be tied to positive emotional effects, they are also problematic as compensation mechanisms for poor policies [2]. When citizens are exposed to long-term orientated logos of government bodies that are not changed at the same rhythm of elections, government branding fits the purpose of communicating policies. However, when government bodies brand themselves differently every time a newly elected official arrives, as it currently happens in Colombia, communication-related budgets can be

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linked to a short-term orientation that favors the elected official and nurtures "wasteful spending cultures" [7].

The central research question addressed by this study reads as follows: "how does government branding impact user judgment from a credibility perspective when information is displayed online?". This paper has two main contributions. On the one hand, it conceptualizes short-term orientated government branding, using the example of digital environments and framing. On the other, it provides empirical evidence regarding the detrimental effects of short-term orientated government branding, departing from an experimental survey design that was carried out in Colombia. These effects materialize in the loss of perceived credibility of citizens regarding available public information on government websites. Short-term government brands act as salient elements that may alter the way we evaluate information.

We follow Alon-Barkat in his semiotic approach to branding, as symbols "can affect citizens' attitudes through a psychological mechanism of evaluative conditioning, whereby the positive associations triggered by the symbols are unconsciously transferred to the public organization" [8, p. 553]. We expand this notion, however, exploring whether those attitudes can also go in the other direction, both positively and negatively. This means that associations that spark from the brand iconography could lead to the evaluative conditioning of other elements, which could be seen as neutral if the brand had not been there in the first place. This relates again to the possibility of exploring online judgment via digital framing, which is possible when government-related information is presented using brands.

Our experimental survey involves one of the most visible administration-dependent government brands in the recent history of Colombia, i.e. "Bogotá Humana", which was used during the administration of former Mayor Gustavo Petro (2012-2015) in Colombia's capital, Bogotá.Moreover, the aesthetics of this brand served as a base to brand Mr. Petro's political movement, "Colombia Humana", which has featured in two presidential campaigns after 2015, making the Bogotá Humana brand the most visible of all past government brands of Colombia's capital.

This paper is structured as follows. We provide the research background in section 2, revising distinct approaches to government branding and marketing in digital environments. Section 3 introduces the context and data-backed visibility of the Bogotá Humana brand, while Section 4 delves into our experimental approach, presenting our empirical results. Note that throughout this paper, when referring to government brands and government branding, we will only refer to the administration and not institution-driven brand, as the former is imbued with political attributes and aesthetic salience. Section 5 summarizes the work, discusses the limitations and future work.

2 State of Research on Government Branding in the Digital Age

2.1 Research Background

To inquire into the current research topics in the field of government branding in a structured manner, we used the guidelines proposed by Kitchenham and Charters in

their Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach [9]. An SLR is a method to identify, evaluate and interpret all available research results that are relevant to a particular research question or topic. Due to a low number of hits, we narrowed down this procedure only to the "identification" phase. In other words, the evaluation and interpretation of the results do not follow the characteristics of a mapping study due to the low numbers. Taking this limitation into consideration, we complemented our procedure with the "Literature Search Checklist" proposed in [10] to ensure the quality of the search process.

The term used for test searches was "government branding". After reading the abstracts, the search term was extended with three further terms "government logo", "government marketing" and "public branding". As our study covers the effects of the short-term branding in a digital environment, the initial search term used in the abstracts for the trial reviews was ("Government branding" OR "Government logo" OR "Government marketing" OR "Public branding") AND (internet OR technology OR digital OR online).

We searched for journal and symposium articles as well as book chapters in the following scientific databases: Wiley, Ebsco Host (all databases), Web of Science, ProQuest (all databases), Taylor & Francis Online, IEEE, AISeL and ACM Digital Library. These scientific databases were chosen due to the advanced search capabilities, i.e. the ability to use Boolean operators in the search and to parse the abstracts only. Applying the search term returned a low number of hits in the above-mentioned databases, thus we used only the first half of the search term and investigated the relevancy of information technology (IT) separately. Subsequently, the final search term applied on the abstracts was ("Government branding" OR "Government logo" OR "Government marketing" OR "Public branding").

To assess the relevance of the potential studies, we decided to include articles focusing on government branding that study its behavioral aspects. To reduce the risk of missing the relevant articles, we investigated the references of the selected studies and include them in the final pool when they met the criteria. Furthermore, the following exclusion criteria were defined: 1) government branding is not the main focus, 2) we have no access to the article, 3) the article is a duplicate or 4) it is not in English. In this sense, articles concerning place branding or political marketing in a broader sense should be excluded.

To enable the traceability of the search and selection process, a review protocol was developed. The template for the review protocol included the name of the scientific database, the search term, the name of the publications, author information, the decision to include (yes/ no), the criteria justifying this decision, and additional notes.

2.2 Interpretation of the Findings

The research resulted in a total of 506 hits. After applying the exclusion criteria 2, 3, and 4, a total of 83 articles remained in the pool for further analysis. Abstracts of the 83 articles were read applying the exclusion criteria 1. In case of an exclusion decision for unclear cases, a full-text reading was also performed. This resulted in a total of five relevant articles as well as six additional studies referenced by them. The list of the

included and excluded articles as well as the criteria justifying this decision can be obtained from this link. All in all, eleven articles qualified for a further analysis.

A brand is formed from a set of overarching messages that rise to the top of public consciousness [11]. Branding, which entails a process of increasing visibility and awareness of an icon and its connected elements, is being increasingly utilized in the context of political marketing and brand building [6, 12].

There is empirical evidence suggesting that public organizations are perceived as less efficient and inflexible than similar private organizations [13, 14]. Along those lines, government branding is perceived as a strategy to affect the way people evaluate the performance of public sector organizations and influence their behavior [2, 8, 13, 15, 16].

Karens et al. discuss the impact of public branding with an experiment conducted in the EU [16]. The authors test the hypothesis whether including EU brand elements to policies positively affects trust in those policies. Even with a negative overall EU sentiment, they report a significant and positive effect of applying the brand. Alon-Barkat performs a similar experiment focusing on the case of the Israeli Environmental Protection Ministry [8]. The study hypothesizes that citizens are less susceptible to persuasion by branding the more they perceive the policy issue as personally relevant. A notable finding is that even high levels of perceived relevance do not attenuate the effect of branding. This is supported in a different setting by [17], which reports that familiar promotional symbols can shape citizens' attitudes, and compensate for the effect of poor performance. The effect of symbolic elements is found to be stronger when communications include logically unpersuasive information [2].

There are a few studies noting that governments and nations manage public brands for manipulation purposes and branding helps to manage image and reputation [15, 18, 19]. Contrasting the investigated studies in the pool, no surveys or experiments are performed in those three articles. Instead, they discuss theoretical and practical developments and enumerate further research questions, e.g. how branding strategies differ in developing nations versus those considered more economically stable.

The effect of government branding is not only investigated in the context of citizens. As an example, Ostwald and Dierkes study the relationship between Canada's brand and the activities of the civil servants within different Ministries in the digital domain [20]. Keppeler and Papenfuß investigate how certain *signals* of public employers affect the interest of potential employees [3]. The authors state that for public employer branding, sending convincing signals during the earliest stage of recruiting is important. In the digital domain, one relevant implication for our work is that the target orientation is key for public employer branding. In the digital age, prominent social media platforms offer the capability of addressing specific groups, which may lead to an enhanced representation of the organization.

Two findings summarize the current state in the topic of government branding. First, the literature on branding and politics is limited, and that this topic is studied in the political marketing literature. As Marsh and Fawcett note, branded products/services are used within the government, particularly in the information technology (IT) sectors [12]. Examples are the 2012 decision that all British government departments must fall under the gov.uk address and replace logos with the royal crest [11] and the Bogotá

Humana case explained in section 3. The adoption of social media platforms in bidirectional interactions with citizens raises [21, 22]. Thus, we opt for the view that government branding needs further research in digital environments. Second, our results show that government branding has been studied only in the context of developed economies, i.e. Belgium, The Netherlands, Poland [16], Israel [2, 8, 17], Canada [18, 20], and Germany [3] and that the implications of government branding in developing economies are understudied.

3 Government Branding in Colombia

Colombian governments, both at a local and the national level have traditionally used government brands, i.e. administration-related iconography, which may appear next to national or local symbols such as the coat of arms, meaning that the logos and the corresponding merchandising materials have to be changed every time there is a new administration [23]. While the subject has been gaining visibility due to City Council's attempts to ban these brands in cities such as Bogotá and Bucaramanga, the discussion is at an early stage. Following a year-long study of former City Council Member Angela Garzón, in terms of explicit costs, i.e. those that could be identifiable as short-term government branding costs in Bogotá, ca. 360 million USD have been spent between 2004 and 2019. Table 1 summarizes the findings, including the ratio of spending to the city's GDP, as a means to exemplify concrete costs of administration-dependent logos.

Table 1. Branding costs in Bogotá

Source: calculated using Councilwoman Garzon's data, Banco de la República, exchange rates USDCOP, DANE (National Institute of Statistics) for GDP data

Year	Brand	Spending in USD	% brand spending/ GDP
2004-2007	BOGOTÁ SIN INDIFERENCIA	$61,641,969.76	0.14%
2008-2011	BOGOTÁ POSITIVA	$75,594,346.22	0.11%
2012-2015	BOGOTÁ HUMANA	$146,055,006.50	0.18%
2016-2019	BOGOTÁ MEJOR PARA TODOS	$76,972,552.44	0.10%
	TOTAL	$360,263,874.92	

One of the most visible and also controversial cases regards former Mayor Gustavo Petro's "Bogotá Humana" brand, which is aesthetically related to that of this later presidential campaign movement "Colombia Humana", as can be seen in Figure 1 and 2[1]. The Petro administration has been amid controversies and public debates, including the inefficient procurement of poorly functioning garbage trucks and motorcycles, yet also for a radical perspective regarding institutional change and potential expropriations [24]. These discussions have received visibility in the context of several presidential campaigns, including the run-up to 2022. A simple ProQuest query in the three of the

[1] Source: Wikimedia Commons, Colombia Humana logo, redesign by Santiago Castaño. License related information CC BY-SA 3.0

best-known newspapers (El Tiempo, El Espectador, La República) yields more than 554 articles related to controversies with the search string "Bogotá Humana" between 2012 and 2020. It is also worth noting that the words "Mayor's office" (Alcaldía de Bogotá) were often omitted in reports, websites, and articles, including those that regard the presentation of the administration's development plan. This suggests that the government brand can become a discursive proxy for the institutional name.

Figure 1: Bogotá Humana Logo

Figure 2: Colombia Humana Logo

Figure 1 portrays the original Bogotá Humana Logo, which was used during Mr. Petro's administration between 2012 and 2015, while Figure 2 shows the Colombia Humana Logo, which was used for the presidential campaign for the run-up to 2018. The similarity of aesthetics appears in the "heart" icon that is complemented with a colorful prime regarding the city (Figure 1) or the country (Figure 2), as well as the adjective "human", as a brand mantra of the movement's policy promise.

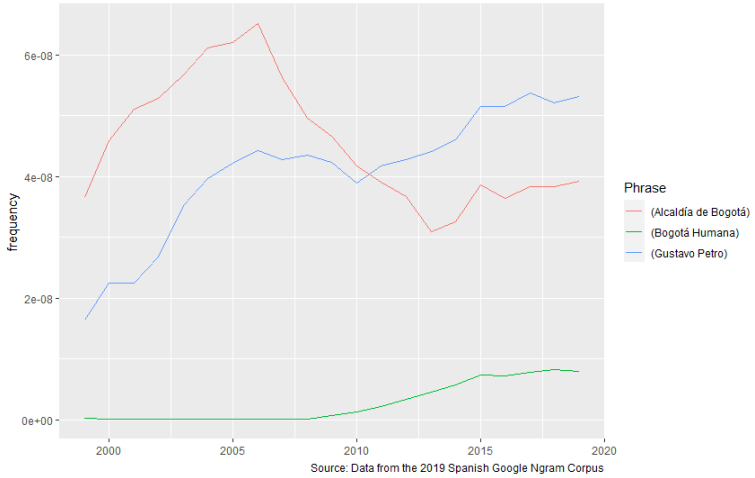

Figure 3: Searching strings via text mining

The visibility of the brand name can also be exemplified by text mining using the Google Books 2019 Spanish corpus, which suggests an increase in visibility in published books after 2012. Figure 3 contrasts this rise in visibility with that of Mr. Petro and the fluctuating presence of the official mayor's office term "Alcaldía de Bogotá", which responds to the perennial institutional name, not to a short-term brand

While the decline in mentions in the Google Spanish corpus is clear between 2005 and 2013 for the official Mayor's Office string, its visibility grows in line with the more frequent presence of the political leader's name (Gustavo Petro) and that of the government brand (Bogotá Humana).

Additionally, it is possible to revise whether the brand still has visibility on social media. As an example, Figure 4 presents a tweet query that uses the exact search string, in mid June, 2021. The figure shows peaks of more than 60 tweets per hour, and an average of ca. 12 tweets per hour, even five years after the end of the administration that introduced the brand.

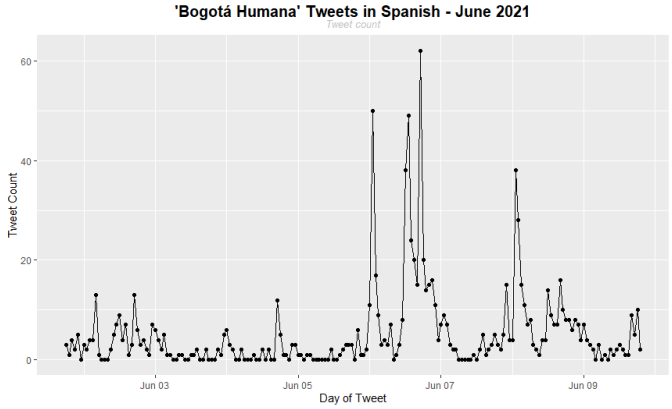

Figure 4: Brand visibility on social media

4 Survey Experiment

4.1 Methodology

An experimental survey is designed for randomly selected students from three different universities in Bogotá, Colombia. We translate and adapt the perceived credibility scale –PERCRED- following [25], also using Beaton's back-translation method to have a consistent translation [26]. The latter was carried out by one of the authors, who is bilingual in Spanish and US-American English. The final version was revised with other bilingual peers and tested until a final version was approved for the experiment.

We adapt the scale by eliminating the dimension of "understandability", as the online publication's full text is not revealed to the experimental subjects, precisely because the objective of the experiment is to test the credibility after a mere exposure, which goes in line with a brief period that citizens are exposed to information on social media, which can range from 1.7 seconds on mobile to 2.5 seconds on a desktop computer, while only 0.25 seconds of exposure are enough to recall content [27]. We thus use the three categories of the PERCRED scale [25], i.e. truth (subdimensions: accuracy, truthfulness, and facts), sincerity (subdimensions: intentions, and trustworthiness), and appropriateness (subdimensions: norms, context, and legitimacy). The null hypothesis is expressed as follows

H0 = A government brand, specifically an administration-dependent logo, does not affect the perceived credibility of a digital publication on a government website.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The survey[2] was run among a group of students in Colombia, specifically in three Bogotá based universities of similar socioeconomic conditions (N=78). The groups stem from different fields of study (international relations, economics, and engineering), and each university group was composed of two subgroups of the same field. This allowed for a random allocation of students into a merged group that includes the three universities and the three different fields of study. Participants were invited by their instructors to carry out a voluntary survey for a scientific study during an online course. The survey was composed of two main sections. The first related to the assessment of the webframe itself, whereas the second section included numeric scales regarding the last four government brands of Bogotá, as well as a short answer format for words that come to mind when the test subjects are exposed to the iconography of each brand. This offer the possibility to understand eventual predispositions towards the brands.

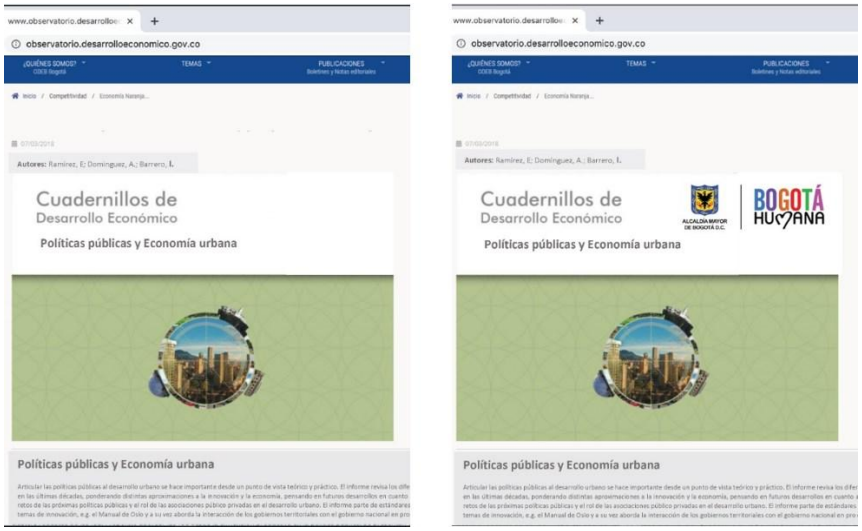

Figure 5: Paper abstract for the control (left) and the treatment (right) groups

The control group was exposed to a reconstructed webpage frame of a local government observatory, which depicted the summary and the front page of a fictional paper called "Public Policy and the Urban Economy" in Spanish, whereas the treatment group was exposed to the same web frame with one single difference: the cover included the "Bogotá Humana" brand, which was included in the publications of the

[2] The questionnaire, data and webpage frames of the control and treatment groups can be downloaded from here.

same observatory during the corresponding administration (2012-2015), as shown in Figure 5.

It is important to revise whether the government logos presented to the test subjects tend to relate to a certain administration. We assume that the further away the administration is in time, the less they will recognize the logo. However, in the case of Bogotá Humana, we find that 80% of the test subjects explicitly identify the brand using keywords, relating it to its political context.

To control for potential bias that could affect the result of perceived credibility, participants were asked to rate the credibility of four government brands of previous administrations, including Bogotá Humana. This allows for control regarding the consistency of evaluating the brand independently and the brand as part of another exhibit, i.e. the digital publication. We carried out a further exercise by filtering for the test subjects that evaluated the brand negatively (the same can be done for positive evaluations) to assess their evaluation of the document, both in the control and the treatment group. We labeled these the "revised treatment" and the "revised control group" as supplementary calculations beyond the t-tests used to test our hypothesis. The reasoning behind this departs from the assumption that an already negatively perceived government brand, which implies that the test subject has evaluated it thus, will be linked to evaluating a digital publication negatively if the government logo is on it.

We calculate the average PERCRED values for each scale item and then compute the ratio between the Treatment and Control deltas to check whether the potentially negative evaluation is stronger when the test subject already has a negative or neutral evaluation of the brand, i.e. $x \leq 3$. We define this ratio, ϕ, as

$$\phi_i = \frac{\Sigma_{i=1}(x_{cr,i} - x_{tr,i})}{\Sigma_{i=1}(x_{c,i} - x_{t,i})} \quad (1)$$

wherein the numerator, $x_{cr,i}$ refers to the PERCRED scale average of test subject i of the revised control group, when being exposed to the web frame and $x_{tr,i}$ refers to the score of credibility that test subject i of the revised control group ascribes to the brand when being exposed to it. In the denominator, the same values apply, with the only difference that both the control and treatment groups involve all test subjects, regardless of their evaluation of the brand.

4.3 Results

First, we conduct the Shapiro-Wilk test to evaluate the likeliness that the data was drawn from a Gaussian distribution [28]. With p-values of 0.243 (revised control group) and 0.176 (revised treatment group), the null hypothesis that the sample came from a normally distributed population cannot be rejected. We then test the reliability of the survey with Cronbach's alpha measure resulting in a score of 0.86 (control group), 0.85 (treatment group), 0.74 (revised control group), and 0.86 (revised treatment group).

Following the revision of the homogeneity of the samples in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic stratum, an official category available in Colombia for every

household, we conduct a two-sample t-test that goes in line with our assumptions, as the treatment group evaluates the digital publication with $\mu = 3.35$ and the control group with $\mu = 3.79$. Note that this refers to the revised control and test groups after controlling for evaluative coherence, i.e. we revise if there is low credibility regarding the digital publication -with and without the logo- by considering the test subjects that can identify the brand and perceive it negatively. This can also be repeated with those test subjects that evaluate the brand positively. We thus find that at a 5% significance level, the digital publication is perceived as being less credible overall when the logo is present (cf. Table 2).

Table 2. Two Sample t-test Results

Database	Control	Treatment
Mean	3.79	3.35
Variance	0.27	0.55
Observations	15	23
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	36	
t Stat	2.12	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.04	
t Critical two-tail	2.02	

After breaking down the PERCRED scale into its items, we perform the Mann-Whitney U Test with α=0.05 for checking the differences between the two samples from the revised groups [29]. Results confirm our finding that the decrease in the overall credibility is statistically significant (see Table 3). The common language effect size (CLES) is calculated as 0.70, i.e. there is a 70% chance that a value from the treatment group will be lower than a value from the control group [30]. Two subdimensions, i.e. sincerity and appropriateness are affected by the government brand. We do not find enough evidence to reject that including a government brand reduces the perceived truthfulness of the digital artifact.

Table 3. Results of the Mann-Whitney U Test with revised groups

	U-val	p-val	RBC	CLES
Truth	180.5	0.988	0.00	0.500
Sincerity	309.5	0.020	-0.41	0.708
Appropriateness	303.5	0.030	-0.38	0.694
Total PERCRED	**306.5**	**0.026**	**-0.40**	**0.701**

Furthermore, we also find differences in the assessment when the logo is present, as shown by Table 4 for both Control vs. Treatment and Revised Control vs. Treatment, which leads to $\phi > 2$ for every item of the scale.

Note that even with *all* test subjects, there is still a difference that suggests that the document is evaluated more negatively when the logo appears. However, we find no

evidence of statistical significance. This is consistent with the intuition that a group that includes test subjects who have different views of the brand need not result in an overall negative evaluation of a digital publication, as those who view the brand positively will offset the effect of those who view it negatively, which will then be subject to random group composition. This highlights the importance of controlling for coherence in brand perception.

Table 4. Breaking down the PERCRED scale ratio between the Treatment and Control deltas

	Treatment	Control Group	Delta	Revised Treatment Group	Revised Control Group	Delta	Ratio (ϕ)
Truth	3.25	3.36	0.10	3.19	3.41	0.21	2.06
Sincerity	3.39	3.61	0.22	3.30	3.81	0.51	2.32
Appropriateness	3.65	3.80	0.14	3.68	4.08	0.40	2.79
Total PERCRED	**3.40**	**3.55**	**0.14**	**3.35**	**3.70**	**0.34**	**2.36**

5 Summary, Limitations, and Future Work

The purpose of this study was to investigate how government branding impacts user judgment from a credibility perspective in an online environment. Government branding can be crafted with a short-term orientation, as Colombia's case shows. This means that logos included in the digital sphere will not respond to the institutional need of overarching coherence beyond administrations but to the need of elected officials while and as long as they are in office. This expands the notion of government branding, separating it into long or short-term branding. If public policy credibility can be affected by the mere presence of a short-term orientated brand, it is important to ask whether the funds spent in positioning these brands could be seen as wasteful spending, as their purpose fades away once an administration has finished its term.

The hypothesis tested was a government brand, specifically, an administration-dependent logo does not affect the perceived credibility of a digital publication on a government website. Through an experiment among 78 students from three different universities in Bogotá, Colombia, the effect of government branding was determined.

While our approach offers evidence regarding the effect of salient short-term orientated brands, it faces further limitations. First, we report CLES as 0.70, corresponding to a Cohens'*d* size of 0.72. Both values indicate an intermediate effect, i.e. the results are not only statistifaclly significant, but the differences among the groups have a practical value inferred from the effect sizes. Nevertheless, the statistical power of our test is around 61%, which requires an improvement to detect the true effect. We are planning to perform the experiment with a larger sample, which is one area that motivates our further research. Second, our test subjects are mainly young adults who need not know the past of the Bogota Humana brand in detail, which also begs the question for future research whether a perception of past brands may differ from that of a currently active one However, due to the several presidential campaigns of the Colombia Humana movement, its attributes are still visible in social media, the

press, and books, as already discussed. Third, we do not test the "understandability" item of the perceived credibility scale [25], as the digital stimulus that test subjects received was limited to a web frame containing information. Also, we are not able to assess whether there is an effect on perceived credibility before and after the COVID19 pandemic, as our study unfolded in a digitalized environment where test subjects participated from home. Lastly, we consider only one visible brand, yet further experiments can assess more brands in other cities and countries, as the use of short-term government brands continues in Latin America. At the same time, further efforts, even beyond academia, would be valuable tools to foster transparency regarding government branding expenditures, albeit for the sake of identifying whether they follow a short-term vision that favors elected officials or a long-term orientation that benefits the policymaking process.

Another limitation relates to the scope of this study. The related work shows that more research is needed in the field of government branding, not only from the point of view of documenting the short-term government brands and the corresponding budgets but also from the experimental perspective regarding digital framing, digital nudges, emotions, online judgment, i.a. when purchasing an item, booking a flight, watching a movie, or listening to music, our decision making is influenced by the design of the choice environment. Small modifications of the choice environment to exert an impact on individuals' decision-making is termed nudging [31]. Recently, the role of nudging in digital spaces is recognized amongst Information Systems (IS) scholars [32], which is termed as "digital nudging". Nudging influences citizens in many countries concerning the political decision-making process and it is being currently studied in the governmental context [1, 33–35]. As Framing is already shown to be one important psychological effect of digital nudging, our future work aims to widen the scope towards digital nudging as a way of short-term branding.

To reflect the current state of research in government branding, a review of the related work was performed with three limitations. First and foremost, the two important databases, GoogleScholar and SpringerLink were not chosen as a source, since as they do not allow an abstract search. As a result, conference proceedings, whitepapers, and theses were not investigated. Second, five articles were left out due to the limited access. Furthermore, no tests to measure the reliability of inclusion decisions were performed during the selection phase, which can have an impact on the validity of the literature review results. We tried to mitigate this bias by documenting the search process as well as by discussing the research strategies, the inclusion/ exclusion criteria, search parameters, and the list of included/ excluded papers in the team.

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