Visual Communication Strategy in Newspapers – A Case Study of the use of photographs during the Indian Parliamentary Elections in 2014

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ABSTRACT

Visual communication is one of the most crucial ways in which we interact and photographs play a vital role in creating vital messages that can inform, educate and influence. For this reason, use of photographs in almost all visual communication strategies is almost guaranteed. The use of photographs in political communication is also well documented with some memorable photographs having stirred entire nations and even the entire geo-political world. That provides the rationale for this study that aims to analyse the visual communication strategy in newspapers by focussing on the use of photographs used during the Indian Parliamentary Elections in 2014. Content analysis and critical discourse analysis were used to collect the data, which was manually analysed due to its perceptive nature. It was evident that there was a notable difference in the number and frequency of photographs for different political parties, published during the campaigning period in the TOI and the Tribune. BJP led the numbers in terms of the number of photographs published, the frequency with which they were published and the photographs where BJP leaders were seen interacting with the public. It is obvious that there was a greater visual presence of BJP in both the newspapers and it might have affected the outcome of the elections. A study focussing on other regional and national newspapers to obtain and analyse a bigger data-set is recommended.

Keywords: *Branding, Communication Strategies, Communication strategy of BJP, Confirmation Bias, Gratifications theory, image analysis, Photographic communication, Political Communication, Political parties, political images, Parliamentary Election 2014, visual marketing.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known phrase: "a picture speaks a thousand words". A picture or a photograph can communicate what mere words may not be able to. According to the Social Science Research Network, 65% of the people around the world are visual learners, i.e. they learn from what they see (Bradford, 2011). 90% of the information that reaches our brains is in the visual form. This is why photographs play such an important role in disseminating of crucial messages in campaigns and other forms of communication.

It is no surprise that articles with photographs in them tend to get more views online than articles without. We tend to look at images and photographs more attentively than we would at plain text. Even when we are sifting through the pages of a newspaper, it is easy to be distracted by a big bold graphic or image than by a well-constructed argument. The combination of the two might give us the best results. This strategy has can be seen

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employed in almost all news publications around us, as this is a proven communication strategy. This is probably why photographs have played such an important role in political communication.

II. ELECTIONS IN INDIA

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections in India marked a significant milestone for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. Out of 543 Lok Sabha seats, the NDA won 336; the BJP crossed the half-way mark comfortably with 282 seats. This was the first time since 1984 that a single party had emerged with sufficient strength to form a party on its own. It was also the first time that a non-Congress party had achieved this feat.

Electioneering has always had elements of marketing: parties create brand recall through prominent symbols and pamphlets or rallies, which influences people to cast their votes for candidates in exchange for the services or ideas that are promised. Successful political parties, therefore, adapt to the voters' needs and promise to fulfil them (O'Cass, 1996, pp. 37-53). The BJP's runaway success could be attributed partly to their recognition of this and the eventual consolidation around a theme of *Achche Din*: the idea that a positive result for the BJP would lead to greater gains and a better future for India.

The trend is not entirely alien to India; the Congress in 1970's had projected Indira Gandhi as a strong leader through its 'Indira lao Desh Bachao' campaign while in 1996 the BJP also had the 'Ab Ki Baari Atal Bihari' slogan. Until Modi came along, however, the personal rhetoric of a leader had been secondary to the party line. What is also important in the 2014 election context is that while the Congress had three prominent faces featured – Rahul, Sonia and Priyanka Gandhi – the BJP centred their campaign around Modi. This made it easier for the people in terms of recall value.

The strong effect of pictures on mental recall has been well studied (Grady, 1997). Coupled with distribution over mass media, they have the potential to create a lasting impact on the viewer. Recognising that newspapers are still one of the most consumed formats of media in India (print circulation grew at roughly 62 million a day from 2006-2016 according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation), it is imperative to study the role of such a powerful medium in the outcome of the elections. This study attempted to look at: **leading up to the parliamentary elections in 2014, how were the party leaders in BJP and Congress visually represented in the Times of India and The Tribune.** It can be argued that people already wanted change and that the BJP's campaign team took advantage of the visual recall of images to position Modi as an active agent of that change in real-life.

Keywords: Political parties, Political Communication, Branding, Communication Strategies, visual marketing. Parliamentary Election 2014, Confirmation Bias, Gratifications theory, image analysis, political images

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

As the NDA campaign demonstrates, the 2014 elections seem to have brought the concept of political marketing to the Indian fore-front. This is the continuation of a trend that has seen political parties change their model of functioning over the years from an active, party functionary model where members were instrumental in spreading the party's messages to a more consolidated, leadership driven model (Michaels, 1962). Kirchheimer (1966) provides the example of Western Europe, where the weakening of political ideology had made parties focus on 'catch-all' votes.

This has led to the decline of 'traditional' parties which depend on labour intensive campaigning and a core constituency of voters. Parties are no longer obliged to reward every member with influence. Katz and Mair (1995) point out the rise of 'elite' parties that source funds from a wealthy group of donors rather than depending on party members.

Political marketing has, therefore, emerged as a viable tool for modern parties in a democracy. Marketing professionals – who are used to relentless news cycles – favour a party with strong central leadership; this allows them direct access to decision makers. While the old approach was member-focused, marketing aims to win over voters (Kavanagh, 2003).

The influence of marketing can be seen in the increased presence of campaign consultants, speechwriters and advertising agencies during election campaigns. For the BJP's campaign in 2014, reputed advertising and marketing firms such as Ogilvy & Mather and McCann Worldgroup worked on positioning Modi as a forward-thinking change-maker with a development agenda (Pande, 2014).

Despite a decline in the average daily readership time spent on print media, the Indian print industry is expected to grow at a CAGR of 9 per cent for 2013-18 (Sanjay, Sharma 2015). Indian newspapers witnessed a 60% growth in readership in the ten years between 2006 and 2010, which is against trends in the West (Audit Bureau of Circulation 2017). Newspapers also attract over 94.4% of print ad revenue meaning marketers clearly view them as important means to influence an audience.

Pictures have become increasingly common in newspapers as communication tools. Ballenger in 2014 argued that language is limited because of its relation to the context in which it is produced, whereas photographs can be universally understood. Moreover, images are easily recalled as compared to verbal or textual information (Anderson and Bower, 1974).

Bower in 1972 had already studied the effect of mental association with images on learning. In his recall tests, participants in two different groups were given two random words to memorise; one group had to visually recreate a link between the words and the others used flash cards to memorise them. He found that the 'imagers' recalled 80% of the words as compared to just 45% for the 'non-imagers'.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was used in this research. Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012) and critical discourse analysis (Bloor & Bloor, 2013) were used to analyse the necessary data that was collected using descriptive, inferential and evaluative observation. The data was coded and tabled in Microsoft Excel. The sample from which the data was collected was obtained using stratified purposive sampling which allows the researcher to pick samples within samples (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The data was analysed both manually and using SPSS for the best possible results, as some of the data was highly interpretative.

Findings

Number of photographs in TOI and the Tribune – political party

Bhartiya Janata Party featured in The Times of India and The Tribune 49 and 56 times respectively, while the Indian National Congress featured 21 and 40 times. For the second most prominent party in the picture, both BJP and INC featured 8 and 9 times in The Times of India and The Tribune, respectively. BJP and INC did not feature in photographs where multiple political parties were captured. Figure 1 shows the numerical advantage

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BJP had over other parties in both the newspapers; the difference between BJP and INC numbers are remarkable in TOI, although the difference seems to be smaller in the Tribune.
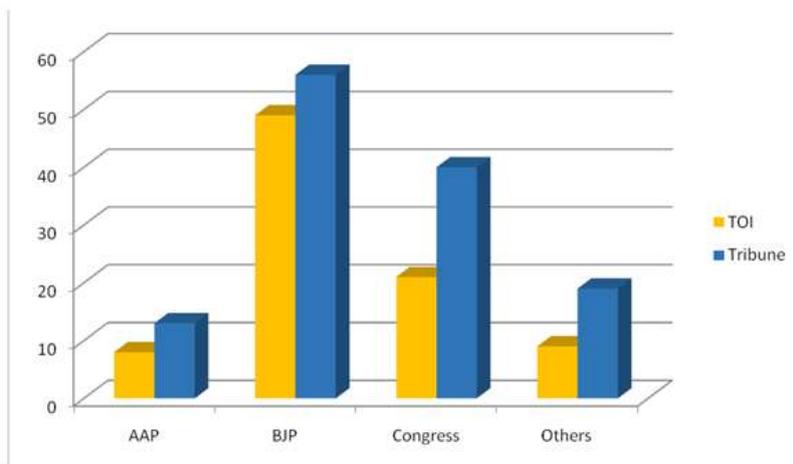

Figure 1: Comparison of the number of pictures that appeared in TOI and the Tribune during the campaign period

Within the BJP, Narendra Modi was featured in 68 photographs in the TOI and 27 times in the Tribune; Rajanath Singh had 10 photographs in the TOI and 4 times in The Tribune; and Arun Jaitley had 7 photographs in the TOI and 12 in the Tribune.

Within the Congress party, Rahul Gandhi had 28 photographs in the TOI and 8 times in The Tribune; Sonia and Priyanka Gandhi had 11 and 29 photographs in the TOI respectively and 7 and 2 times in the Tribune respectively.

In respect to other parties, Arvind Kejriwal had 9 photographs in the TOI and 4 in The Tribune. Figure 2 depicts the distribution of pictures for most important leaders in the parliamentary elections in 2014.

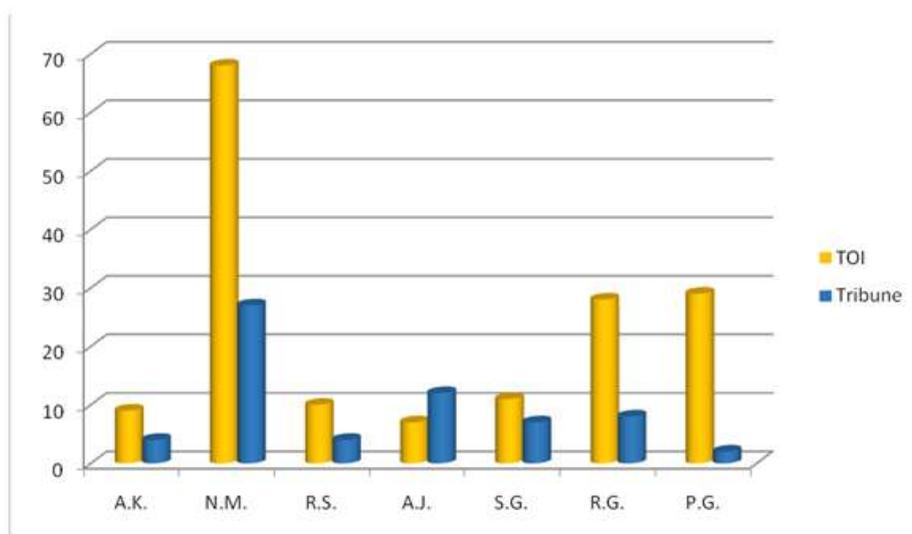**Number of photographs in TOI and the Tribune – political leader irrespective of party affiliation**

Figure 2: Representation of the comparison of number of pictures of political leaders that appeared in ToI and Tribune

Photographs where the leaders can be seen interacting with the public

The Tribune published 79 photographs and the Times of India published 63 photographs showcasing the politicians engaging with members of the public. Of the photographs mentioned, in the Times of India Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi were featured in 10 photographs each; the remaining 43 photographs depicted other politicians. The Tribune featured Narendra Modi in 16 photographs and Rahul Gandhi in 7 photographs, with other politicians accounting for the remaining 56 images. It has been established that in comparison to any other politician, Narendra Modi has been featured in a greater number of pictures carried by the two newspapers for the timeframe in question. Figure 3 shows the difference between the number of photographs of Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi where they can be seen interacting with the public.
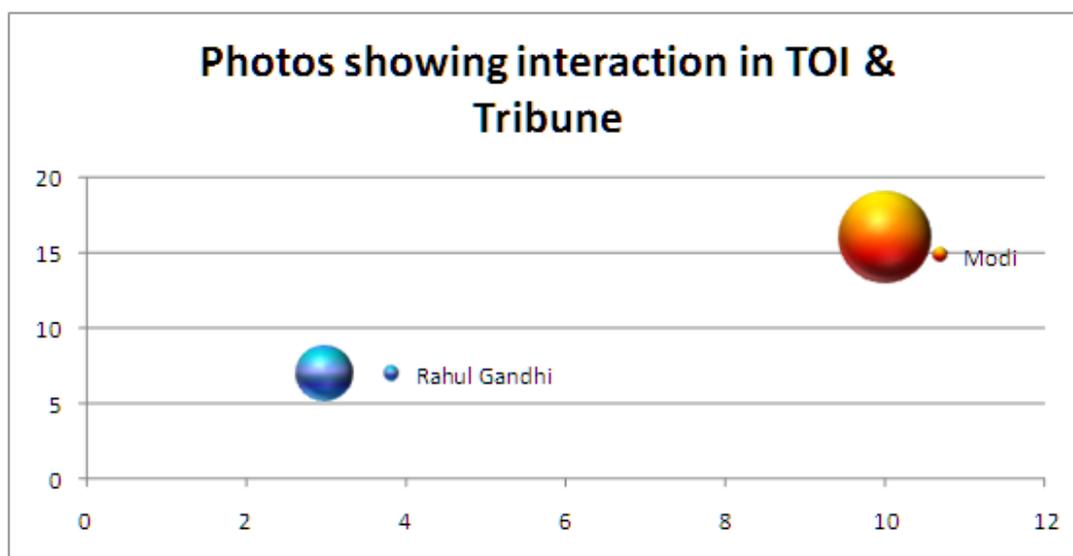

Figure 3: Representation of the difference between the number of pictures that appeared in ToI and Tribune for Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi where they appear to be interacting with the public (The horizontal axis represents the numbers of TOI and the vertical represents the numbers of the Tribune)

Page-wise/Section-wise Photographs

BJP appeared in The Times of India a total of 125 times, out of which Narendra Modi was prominently featured in 68 photographs. INC appeared 97 times, and these photographs prominently featured Rahul Gandhi 28 times, Sonia Gandhi 11 times, Manmohan Singh 11 times, and Priyanka Gandhi 29 times. AAP appeared 9 times, and Arvind Kejriwal was prominently featured in all 9 photographs. Figure 4 depicts the considerable difference between the number of photos published in TOI and the Tribune for BJP, Congress and AAP.
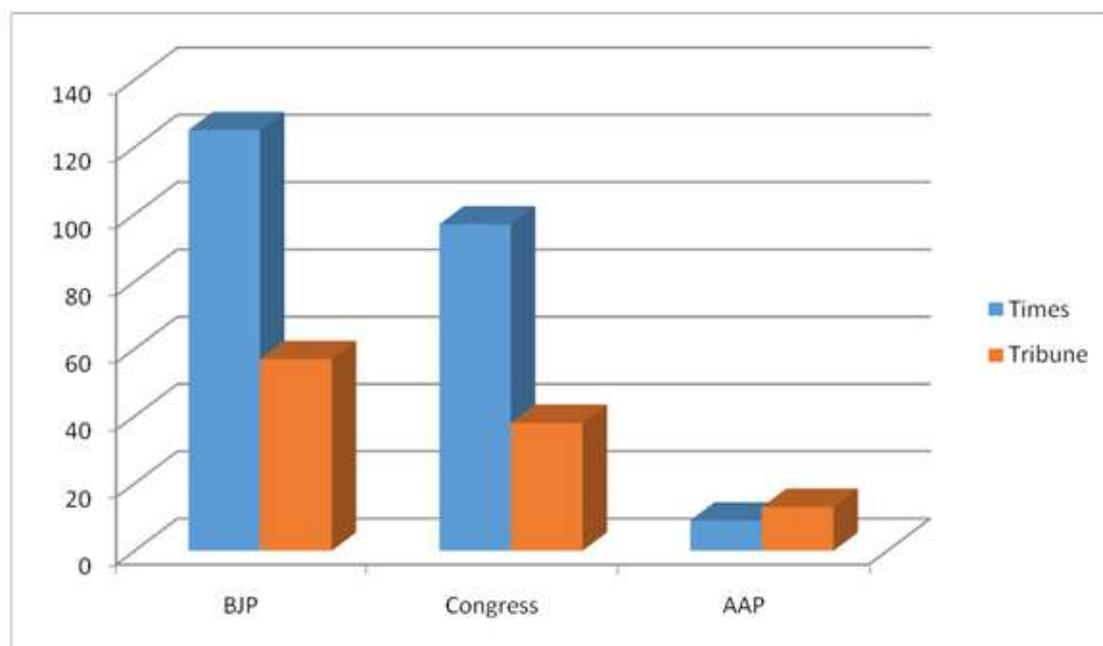
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Figure 4: Chart showing the distribution of pictures by party in both newspapers

BJP appeared in The Tribune a total of 57 times, out of which Narendra Modi was prominently featured in 27 photographs. INC appeared 38 times, and these photographs prominently featured Rahul Gandhi 8 times, Sonia Gandhi 7 times, and Priyanka Gandhi twice. Manmohan Singh did not feature at all. Figure 5 & 6 depict the distribution of the photographs for BJP & Congress in both newspapers combined. It is evident that while Narendra Modi was the focus of the photographs for BJP with him featuring in more than 52% of the photos, there was no such standard for the INC where Rahul Gandhi (their projected leader) featured in only 27% of the total photos published. Priyanka Gandhi appeared in nearly 23% of the photographs.
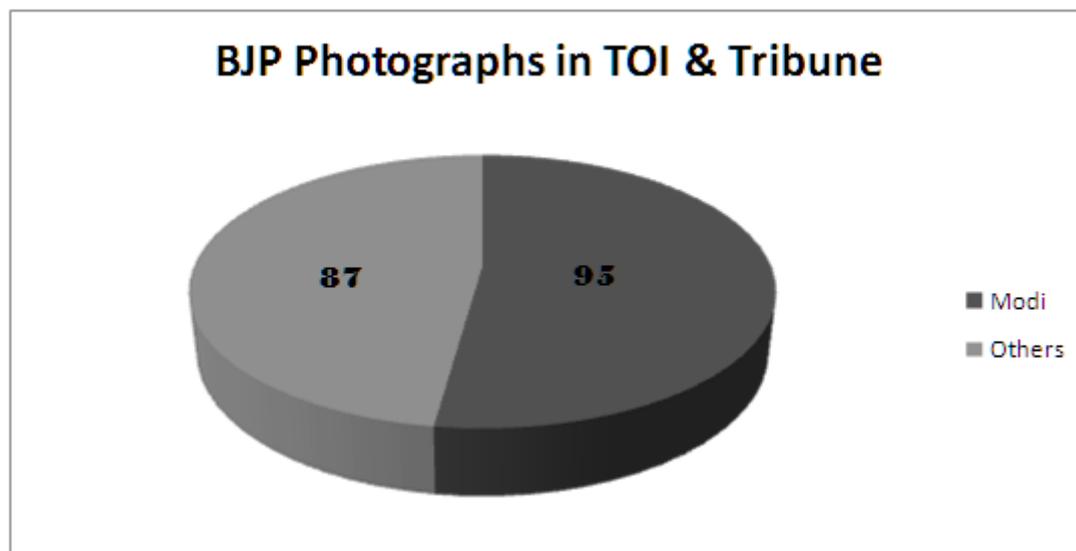

Figure 5: Distribution of the number of photographs that appeared in TOI & the Tribune: Modi vs other BJP members
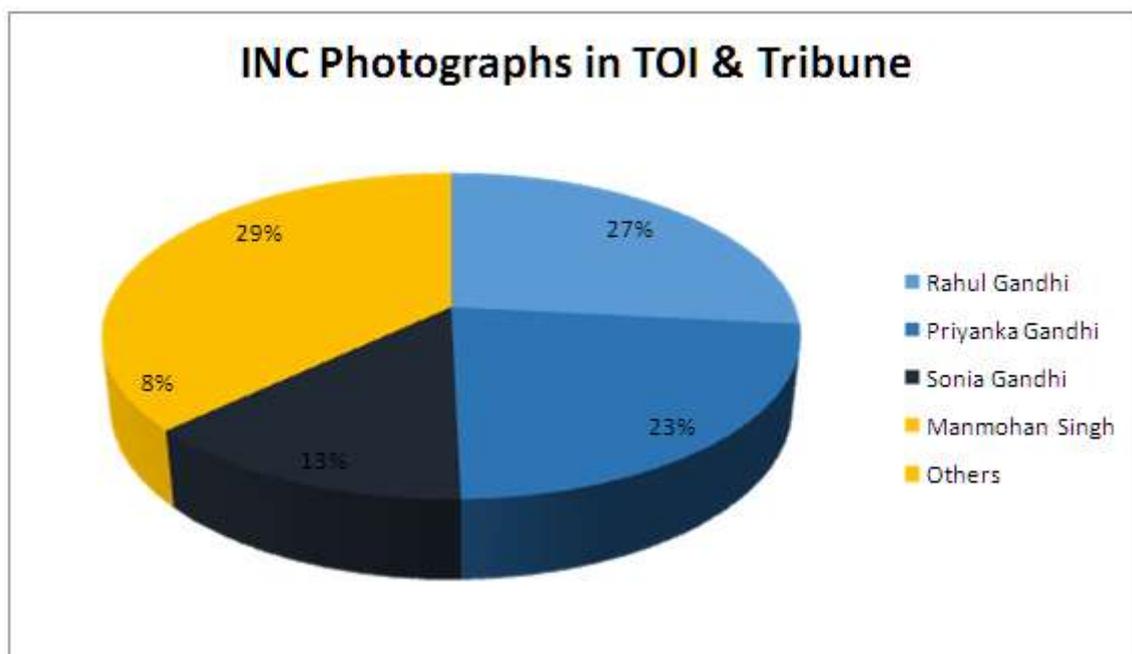
Figure 6: Distribution of the number of photographs that appeared in TOI & the Tribune: Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh & others Congress members

V. PAGE-WISE DISTRIBUTION

On the front page of The Times of India, BJP appeared in 15 photographs, out of which 10 prominently featured Narendra Modi. INC appeared on the front page 10 times, and these featured Rahul Gandhi thrice, and Priyanka Gandhi five times. The Aam Aadmi Party did not feature on the front page of The Times of India during the selected period. Table 3 shows the page-wise distribution of the pictures published in the Times of India.

Page-wise Distribution of Pictures in TOI								
TOI	**Page 1**	**P 2&3**	**P 4-7**	**P 8**	**P 9-17**	**P 18**	**P 19-20**	**P 21-22**
BJP	15	4	13	9	71	4	1	1
Modi	10	4	5	8	37	2	0	1
INC	15	3	8	2	57	5	5	2
RG	3	2	1	1	18	1	1	1
PG	5	0	6	1	15	1	0	1
AAP	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	0

Table 1: Page-wise distribution of the photographs published in the TOI

On the front page of The Tribune, BJP appeared in 7 photographs, out of which 3 prominently featured Narendra Modi. INC appeared in 7 photographs, out of which both Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi prominently featured twice each. The Aam Aadmi Party appeared twice on the front page of The Tribune, and

Arvind Kejriwal was prominently featured in both photographs. Table 4 depicts the page-wise distribution of the photographs published in The Tribune for BJP, Congress and AAP.

Page-wise Distribution of Pictures in The Tribune								
Tribune	**Page 1**	**P 2&3**	**P 4-7**	**P 8**	**P 9-17**	**P 18**	**P 19-20**	**P 21-22**
BJP	7	13	9	2	22	2	2	0
Modi	3	3	4	1	15	0	1	0
INC	7	4	11	3	12	0	1	0
RG	2	1	2	0	2	0	1	0
PG	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AAP	6	2	1	0	0	1	0	0

Table 2: Page-wise distribution of the photographs published in The Tribune

In the first two pages of the City section (Page 2 and 3) of The Times of India, BJP appeared 4 times, and Narendra Modi featured in all 4 of these photographs. The INC appeared thrice on these pages, and Rahul Gandhi was prominently featured in 2 of these photographs. Priyanka Gandhi did not feature on these pages.

On pages 4 to 7 (city section) of The Times of India, BJP appeared 13 times, out of which Narendra Modi was prominently present in 5 photographs. INC appeared 8 times in this portion, out of which 1 photograph prominently featured Rahul Gandhi, and 6 prominently featured Priyanka Gandhi. The City section in The Times of India did not feature Aam Aadmi Party.

One page 2 and 3 of The Tribune, BJP appeared 13 times, and Narendra Modi featured in 4 of these photographs. The INC appeared 4 times on these pages, and Rahul Gandhi was prominently featured in 1 of these photographs. Priyanka Gandhi did not appear on these pages. The Aam Aadmi Party appeared once on these pages, and Arvind Kejriwal was prominently present in the photograph.

From Pages 4 to 7 of the The Tribune, BJP appeared 9 times, out of which Narendra Modi was prominently present in 4 photographs. INC appeared 11 times in this portion, out of which 2 photographs prominently featured Rahul Gandhi. Priyanka Gandhi did not appear on these pages. The Aam Aadmi Party also did not feature on these pages.

On Page 8 of The Times of India, BJP appeared 9 times, out of which Modi prominently featured in 8 photographs. Congress appeared twice, out of which Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi prominently featured in one photograph each.

On Page 8 of The Tribune, BJP appeared twice, out of which Modi prominently featured in 1 photograph. Congress appeared thrice, but did not feature Rahul Gandhi or Priyanka Gandhi. AAP did not feature at all on Page 8 of The Tribune.

In the Nation section (Pages 9 to 17) of The Times of India, BJP appeared 71 times, out of which Narendra Modi prominently featured in 37 photographs. Congress appeared 57 times, and Rahul Gandhi prominently featured in 18 of these photographs, while Priyanka Gandhi prominently featured in 15. AAP appeared 7 times in this section, and Arvind Kejriwal appeared in all 7 of these photographs.

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In the Nation section (Pages 9 to 17) of The Tribune, BJP appeared 22 times, out of which Narendra Modi prominently featured in 15 photographs. Congress appeared 12 times, and Rahul Gandhi prominently featured in 2 of these photographs, while Priyanka Gandhi did not feature at all. AAP appeared once, and Arvind Kejriwal was prominently featured in the photograph.

In the Op-ed section of The Times of India, BJP appeared 4 times, and Modi prominently featured in 2 of these photographs. Congress appeared 5 times, and Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi prominently featured in one photograph each. AAP did not feature in this section of the newspaper.

In the Op-ed section of The Tribune, BJP appeared twice, but Narendra Modi did not feature in the photographs. Congress and AAP did not appear in this section of the newspaper.

In the International section of The Times of India, BJP featured once, but Narendra Modi was not present in the photograph. Congress appeared 5 times, out of which Rahul Gandhi was prominent in one photograph. Priyanka Gandhi did not feature at all. AAP did not appear at all in this section of the newspaper.

In the International section of The Tribune, BJP featured twice, out of which Narendra Modi was prominently present in one photograph. Congress featured once, and Rahul Gandhi was prominent in the photograph. Priyanka Gandhi did not feature at all. AAP did not appear at all in this section of the newspaper.

In the Business section of The Times of India, BJP featured once, and Narendra Modi was present in the photograph. Congress appeared twice, out of which Rahul Gandhi was prominent in one photograph. Priyanka Gandhi did not feature at all. AAP did not appear at all in this section of the newspaper.

BJP, Congress, and AAP did not feature at all in the Business section of The Tribune.

VI. DATE-WISE FREQUENCY

BJP had 5.6 photographs in the TOI and 2.3 photographs in The Tribune on a daily basis during the election campaigning period out of which Narendra Modi appeared in 3 and 1.2 photographs respectively. For the Congress party, the overall frequency for all party leaders was 4.3 in the TOI and 1.76 in the Tribune; Rahul Gandhi appeared in 1.18 photographs per day in the TOI and 0.38 photos per day in The Tribune. Priyanka Gandhi had a share of 1.3 photos per day in the TOI and 0.09 photos per day in The Tribune.

For political leaders from other parties, in the TOI, they featured in 4.45 photographs on a daily basis, whereas in The Tribune, other leaders appeared in 6.09 photographs on a daily basis. Figure 7 compares the frequency of photographs for various photographs.
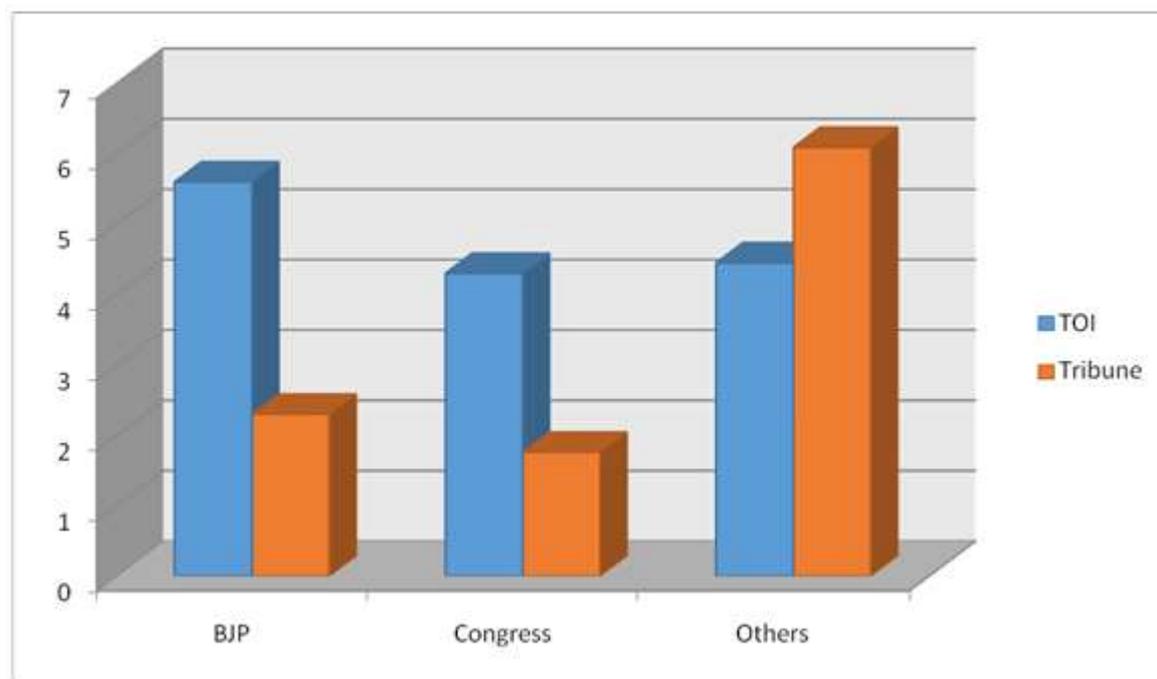
Figure 7: Distribution of the data-wise frequency of the photographs of political parties appearing in the newspapers

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that two communication theories were used to influence an audience: Confirmation Bias and Uses and Gratification. The concept of Confirmation Bias was theorized by British psychologist Peter Wason in 1960. Wason was a proponent of falsificationism, which suggests that for any theory to have credence, it must be disprovable. The theory suggests that people view and consume information in a selective fashion. They have a tendency to completely disregard information that threatens their pre-existing worldview and beliefs (Gormon and Gormon, 1984). As a result, they tend to seek out information that reinforces their beliefs. It is easier to succumb to a confirmation bias as information that supports an already established outcome is easier to absorb and rationalize. One can ignore evidence against their strongly held beliefs. It is therefore, an important step in research to actively attempt to disprove hypothesis.

The Uses and Gratifications theory is an audience-centric approach to understanding the relationship between media and its audience. It studies how people use and consume media, and proposes that they do so in a manner that meets their desires and studies how people use media to fulfil their desires and achieve gratification. The theory assumes that people are not passive consumers of media, but actively choose the media that they engage with. It is a theory that studies, therefore, how people use media. For instance, today, people turn to social media for entertainment or to express themselves in a pool of like-minded people. These actions are undertaken to gratify a need. The theory has contributed to the understanding of the motives for people to use and consume media. For instance, their motives may include entertainment, social interaction and acceptance, relaxation, knowledge enhancement, self-improvement, etc. Additionally, examining these motives can also help understand the popularity of a particular medium, and the role that it plays in society. For example, the study of

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how users today consume and engage with Twitter can throw light on the use and popularity of social media in general.

VIII. CONCLUSION

While there are various factors in a complex election system such as India's that result in a victory, a strong argument can be made that the BJP consciously adopted political marketing to their advantage: Modi was positioned as the face of the BJP, and this consolidation helped focus their messaging. Another aspect of this is the positioning of Brand Modi. His careful crafting of messages on social media (Pal, Chandra & Vydiwaran, 2016) also found its way to other public platforms. Such positioning is not an entirely new phenomenon. In the US Presidential election cycle, the candidate necessarily becomes the face of the party. Campaigns there are centred on the personality of a single leader representing the entire party. Similar to how campaigns were run in the US, Modi came to be seen as the sole representative of the BJP. It is possible that the landslide election victory came about due to this strong identification of a focal point through various media which helped create immediate recall in voters' minds. Among other things, the BJP campaign team seems to have made use of the wide readership of papers in India and the strong recall that images create. Our findings clearly indicate that Modi had the maximum share of pictures wherever political parties were mentioned, including front-page prominence.

The image analysis also indicated that the Congress did not seem to adopt any consolidation strategy; their images were split among three leaders (Rahul, Sonia and Priyanka Gandhi) versus (mainly) Modi for the BJP. Deriving from the uses and gratification and conformation bias theories, it is possible that this intelligent use of images amplified an existing desire in the electorate for change which led to the BJP's landslide victory.

To substantiate the findings of this study, future research could focus on other regional and national newspapers to obtain and analyse a bigger data-set. Another important aspect that needs to be looked into is the political images used in the social media, which is changing the way political parties are campaigning and reaching out to people.

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