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THE POWER OF JUSTIN TRUDEAU'S MEDIA IMAGE: THE ASCENSION AND DEMISE OF A MEDIA-STAR POLITICIAN

Abstract

The article explores the evolution of media image of Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau. In particular it takes interest in how Trudeau's impactful use of traditional and social online media helped popularize and convey his positive portrayal to wider audiences, which at peak of Trudeau's popularity amounted to a phenomenon called 'Trudeaumania'. The article evaluates the effects and political implications of Trudeau's media activity on his political career and posture, but also on the global reputation of Canada.

Keywords: Justin Trudeau, media branding, media image, Canada, Trudeaumania

Introduction

Online media have become essential campaign tools and hold enormous power in today's political arena. It is virtually impossible for modern politicians, especially in highly developed democracies, to become widely known to voters without engaging them through images, stories and messages presented on various media platforms. Social networking platforms in particular have transformed the communication between politicians and voters into a more interactive and direct mode. But they also made it more superficial and celebrity-like, especially when politicians yield to the growing public demand and publish so-called personable and user-friendlier social media content. Oftentimes, however, such an approach is politically rewarding given the fact that voters tend to receive "more positively politicians with personable [social media] content than those who relied on professional content" (Hellweg, 2011, p. 22).

Social networking media have now long served as platforms through which politicians increase their likability, recognizability and thereby electability, particularly among the youth constituents. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, even Twitter, or LinkedIn, are now employed by campaign strategists as key tools for conveying politicians' constructed brands to general public. They are the platforms "through which public figures can curate and control the image presented to a wider audience (...), carefully crafting a visual rhetoric suited to their brands and communications strategies" (Dingwall, 2017, p. 1). It specifically applies to Twitter, which – due to its mechanism of easy reposting and microblogging – is "an excellent platform for collecting and displaying expressions of support, thus creating a persuasive social proof" (Kuś, 2020, p. 402).

In other words, in the era of omnipresent social media, politicians – alongside thoroughly planned political strategy – need to develop and effectively use a wide range of new rhetorical devices to make their political message carry sufficient persuasive force to win them credibility and popularity before the electorates. Not only does it involve the skillful application of what can be called a classical Aristotelian rhetoric, understood as the ability to know what will be persuasive in a given case (Jamar, 2002, p. 62). It also involves the incorporation and understanding of the nature of non-discursive and visual rhetoric or, in other terms, a recognition that one can exert influence on others' perceptions not only through talk or verbal texts, but also through non-linguistic, sonic or visual symbolicity, including personal individual images, portrayals and brands (Foss, 2005, pp. 141–142). Rhetorical effectiveness thus, in modern politics specifically, is achieved through the combination of verbal discursive skills and visual arts; through the blend of sensible ideas with appearances.

Justin Trudeau, Canadian Prime Minister since 2015, is often credited for his exceptionally skillful and rhetorically impactful use of online media. He has even been dubbed Canada's "first prime minister of the Instagram age" (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2020, p. 68), "the perfect prime minister for the social media age" (Beauchamp, 2016), and the "king of the selfie" (Raynauld, Lalancette, 2018). The labels, on the one hand, recognize Trudeau's outstandingly active presence on visual-based platforms and point out to the global fame the social media have garnered him. On the other hand, such labeling is a veiled criticism of Canadian prime minister's propensity for excessive use of social media in branding campaigns.

This article explores the evolution of Justin's Trudeau media image. The analyses focus on two elements of that process: a) on how the use of visual rhetoric and choreographed narratives helped convey Trudeau's unprecedentedly intensive and phenomenally positive media image, b) on the failures that have led to what recently has been dubbed by some columnists as the "diminishment of the [Trudeau] star" (MacDougall, 2021).

Amongst the world's politicians, Justin Trudeau was a forerunner in the arena of social media image management and – especially at the beginning of his prime

ministership – he was particularly successful in the field of digital media self-promotion. This, at the height of his popularity, earned him a personality cult and celebrity-like status (Rodrick, 2017). The phenomenon even got its own name: *Trudeaumania*.

1. Trudeaumania 1.0

The term *Trudeaumania* was coined as early as in the late 1960s and since then has been used by political analysts and scholars (Wright, 2016; Litt, 2016). In 2018, *Trudeaumania* was even officially recognized by the *Oxford Lexico Dictionary* as a new Canadianism and is explained as “extreme enthusiasm” shown for Justin Trudeau nowadays and for Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Justin’s father, in the past. The term originates from Beatlemania and equates the Trudeau zealous supporters with the most devoted fans of the Beatles.

In Canada, *Trudeaumania* has happened twice.

The first *Trudeaumania* started in 1968, when Pierre Trudeau took the helm of the Liberal Party of Canada and won the federal election. Canada had never had such a prime minister before. Pierre Trudeau was good-looking and photogenic, charismatic, athletic and energetic and, most importantly, nonconformist. In the age of social revolution, he symbolized change and progressive values. His tenure brought deep social changes: abortion and homosexuality were legalized, divorce laws were liberalized, multiculturalism and official bilingualism were adopted as Canada’s official policies, and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* was incorporated into the Canadian constitution (Cohen, Granatstein, 1998). All these achievements transformed Pierre Trudeau into a figure of the father of the nation, “a man who supervised the nation through its immaturity” (West, 2008, p. 815), a leader who framed Canada’s modern brand.

Pierre Trudeau’s rise in politics came in the 1960s, the same time the medium of television rose to great importance in politics. His media-friendly outlook made him both “a product and a master of television” (West, 2008, p. 798). In terms of the popularity of the Trudeau name, “for comparisons, one would have to look abroad: to members of the Kennedy family in the United States or the royal family in Britain” (Wherry, 2019, p. 11). In the pre-Internet era, he was one of the first politicians in the world to understand fully the power of visual media and importance of image management in politics. He mastered the command and construction of visual rhetoric and successfully used it for framing his well-crafted portrayal in voters’ minds. He developed a coherent televisual narrative through which he created his media persona and promoted his brand (West, 2008, p. 796). Pierre Trudeau’s appeal extended far beyond politics – he “embodied a mod subculture of trendy music, stylish suits, pop art and a cosmopolitan world outlook in a country that was breaking free from its colonial roots” (Marland, 2018, p. 140). He became Canada’s

first celebrity politician, even a pop-culture icon. Crowds followed wherever he went, cheering and hunting for his autographs and handshakes. Today he would have been called a hipster politician. In his times, he was dubbed “swinger” Prime Minister (Stein, Gross Stein, 2003, p. 70). Although his popularity waned in his later political career, he stayed in office for around 15 years (1968–1979 and 1980–1984), which makes him the second longest-serving prime minister in Canada’s history.

Pierre Trudeau’s success in popularizing his own brand lied in the fact that he kept the right balance between what is true and what is imagery or, in other words, between what is genuine and substantial about a politician and what is simply designed, invented, narrated and mediated for the purpose of image and brand promotion. His somewhat rebellious personality matched the socially tumultuous era of the 1960s, which helped create him a media star of his time. His physical appearance and private-life connections to celebrity world, e.g. through love affairs with Hollywood actresses and famous American musicians, only added to the success (Wente, 2009). Yet, despite his media appeal, he never lost the qualities of a principled and visionary politician, “who could back up his flash and celebrity with intellectual heft and political convictions” (West, 2008, p. 798). He demonstrated what Bradford Vivian calls “the ideal of a representational unity among speech, perception, and understanding” (Gottweis, 2007, pp. 471–472). To be more specific, Pierre Trudeau’s media persona, though carefully choreographed and managed, was not merely an artificial or superficial creation, but largely an extension of his natural off-screen self. The same cannot be easily said about his son.

2. Trudeaumania 2.0: Like father, like son?

Justin Trudeau’s brand, particularly in his early political career, was rather weakly anchored in his own accomplishments. His public image was often seen as a mere “extension of that of his famous father” (Marland, 2018, p. 140). Alternatively, it was perceived as an offshoot of Canada’s strong brand of a liberal, multicultural and open democracy. However, such an image of modern progressive Canada was largely framed under Pierre Trudeau’s tenure as prime minister and thus could be regarded as yet another instance of the legacy Justin Trudeau simply inherited from his prominent parent. That explains why he often faced the accusations of lacking his own substance and building his political prestige by “riding on the coattails of his father” (Kassam, 2019).

The fact is that Justin Trudeau, in fashioning his own image, eagerly grasped his parent’s brand, benefitting from the positive connotations his father had in the minds of many voters, who saw him as a nation-builder and the embodiment of such modern values as: minority rights, multiculturalism, universal healthcare, women’s rights and feminism or race-blind immigration policy. Having embraced those values in his own political platform, Justin Trudeau could naturally present

himself as their staunchest defender and a man most suitable to carry the torch of his father's progressive legacy (Gabryś, Soroka, 2017, p. 234). Suffice to say that authenticity, or rather evoking the impression of it, is key to achieve a persuasive effect in personal or political branding. The truth is that as a continuator of Pierre Trudeau's accomplishments, his son seemed exceptionally credible and authentic.

Pierre Trudeau's legacy, and Justin's loyalty to it, gave the latter immediate recognizability and a deep connection with millions of voters who valued his father's brand. Most of all, however, it imbued Justin Trudeau's political career with a symbolic touch of continuity, enabling him to portray himself as "a refreshing combination of [both] optimism and heritage" (Maynard, 2018). As one of his biographers pointedly observes, no Canadian politician has ever come to politics "with quite the same prologue as Justin Trudeau" (Wherry, 2019, p. 42). Younger Trudeau, though, adopted not only his parent's brand. His PR strategists also choreographed the rise of his public image along the lines of his father's screenplay. They recreated the Trudeumania, or rather its revitalized version – Trudeumania 2.0.

The branding success, however, would not have been possible without Justin Trudeau's unique predispositions for becoming a celebrity politician. Rhetoricians and media experts give a long list of attributes a politician needs to be equipped with in order to gain public acceptance in personal branding. These include: consistent messaging and desirable physical features (Fitzsimons, 2016, pp. 18–19), the ability to appear authentic (Sabag Ben-Porat, Lehman-Wilzig, 2020, pp. 232–234), media-savvy and awareness (Dingwall, 2017, p. 2) or the acclimatization to media attention and crowds (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2020, p. 66). Justin Trudeau, at the outset of his branding campaign, as Aaron Wherry (2019, p. 10) puts it, "was blessed" with the whole "sort of advantages that can't be easily acquired or learned: good looks, nice hair, youthful vigour, a sunny disposition (...), a romantic story and a lifelong relationship with the public." He displayed charm and charisma, was known for his open-mindedness, interpersonal skills, approachability, discursive talent and support of positive and progressive causes. An ideal candidate to be transformed by PR specialists into, quoting Marland, "another debonair cosmopolitan who projects the idealism of the liberal elites" (Marland, 2018, p. 141).

It must also be said here that the rationale of political media branding rests, as Lancalette and Raynould rightly note, "on three broader rhetorical underpinnings: (1) the *ethos*, related to the image of the political leader; (2) the *pathos*, associated with mobilization of affect; and (3) the *logos*, connected to logic and cognitive strategies" (Lancalette, Raynould, 2017, p. 2). Trudeau seemed to fulfill all those three Aristotelian criteria of effective persuasive appeals (Gottweis, 2007, pp. 236–250): (1) he appeared credible and knowledgeable; (2) was good looking and appealed to public emotions, evoked sympathy, offered a tempting perspective of a better and desired future; and (3) his public-image communication seemed consistent, his brand matched his personality and was a logical continuum of his father's brand.

Overall, Pierre Trudeau's brand and media style were inspirational and helpful for his son's public image-building. Just like his father half a century earlier, Justin Trudeau became a media superstar, massively profiled across the globe as both a pop-culture celebrity figure and a forward-thinking statesman of the modern era (Gabryś, Soroka, 2017, pp. 272–273). It can be said that in developing his own identity, Justin Trudeau has simply executed a "similar playbook" to his father's, except that it happened, as Marland notes, "in different technological terrain" (Marland, 2018, p. 140). Pierre Trudeau was the prime minister of the television era, Justin Trudeau's media persona was created mostly in online digital media. The Internet, non-existent in Pierre Trudeau's era, became a major channel through which Justin Trudeau was selling to the public the appealing image of himself. A large portion of this image-making process was based on the use of visual, even emotive, imagery.

3. Justin Trudeau: a youthful and sporty figure, yet one of the people

Canadians have been very well acquainted with Justin Trudeau as a public figure at least since 2008, when he won a parliamentary seat for the first time (Wherry, 2019, pp. 225–226). However, general public across the globe is largely unfamiliar with Canadian politicians and takes interest in Canada usually when something extraordinary happens. Or when someone outstanding rises to the leadership of the country.

In October 2015, however, the world heard about Canada's newly elected prime minister. Many of those who saw Justin Trudeau for the first time were initially attracted to him not by his political stature, exceptional ideas or political philosophy, but by his physical appearance. Social media channels, blogs, tabloids, even broadsheet newspapers, were flooded with expressions of astonishment at prime minister's physique. The references in international media to Canadian prime minister's physical appearance, his athleticism, haircut and an outstandingly sporty figure were so plentiful that some analysts examining Trudeau's portrayals in the media even introduced a separate analytical subcategory called "comments or phrases regarding traits and features of Trudeau's body" (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 22). Some authors wondered whether Trudeau was "the sexiest world leader alive" (Marr, 2017), others had fewer doubts, calling Trudeau a member of "what has to be the sexiest political dynasty since the Kennedys" (Smith, 2015); "The world meets Justin Trudeau and likes what it sees. The new Canadian PM is pretty hot!" read the title of the article on Canada's national public broadcaster's website, reporting the explosion of admiration for Trudeau's looks in social media ("The World Meets", 2015). Even the mainstream international media yielded to Trudeau's visual appeal: the *CNN* (Ap, 2016) and the *Business Insider* (Baer, 2016), for instance, named him "the most athletic world leader." The *New York Times* underlined Trudeau's "athletic build" and "his hair neatly trimmed" (Lawson, 2015), the *Time* called him "one of

the world's most charming political leaders" and "a confirmed heartthrob" (Lang, 2017). The most enthusiastic coverage of Trudeau's visual attractiveness came, however, from the editors of *GQ* and the *Vogue* – both magazines recognized him respectively as "the most stylish politician alive" ("The 13 Most Stylish Men", 2016) and one of the world's top ten "convention-defying hotties" (Okwodu, 2015).

The truth of the matter was that Justin Trudeau had been deliberately building his image of a physically attractive, sportive, youthful-looking and fashionable man in social media and beyond. To a great success, as the abovementioned media reaction showed. His Twitter and Instagram accounts had been full of pictures showing his athletic prowess. The most iconic photographs presented him doing a so-called *mayurasana* or peacock yoga pose (Trudeau, 2013), balancing his child on one hand (Ap, 2016) or posing shirtless and flexing muscles before a charity boxing match (Hopkins, 2015), in which he knocked out a Conservative Senator, Patrick Brazeau (Young, 2016, pp. 52–59). The unexpected boxing triumph paved him a way to an international pop-culture-star status – in 2016, he became an action hero in a *Marvel* comic book, depicted as a boxer on the front cover (Glasner, 2016).

Trudeau's positive media image was reinforced by the fact that he was constantly, and rather convincingly, featured in social media as a regular person from the neighborhood – a caring father and someone who had never lost touch with real life and people's everyday problems. His social media channels brim with photo stories of Trudeau's day-to-day family life, portraying the Trudeau family as big fans of outdoor activities, enjoying their leisure time like average Canadians and unseparated from average Canadians (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2019, p. 64). The media captured him and his family vacationing among or socializing with regular Canadians – he was photographed photobombing wedding and students' prom pictures, during a hike in a cave or in a park, taking selfies with passers-by (Golgowski, 2016). All this resonated so well with the public that the *Washington Post* wrote that "the Internet's love of Justin Trudeau knows no bounds. And it grows greater still" (Chokshi, 2016). Indeed, the Internet filled with countless viral photos of Justin Trudeau striking photogenic poses, looking uncommonly athletic, energetic and admirable, which boosted his global popularity.

Justin Trudeau's spectacular rise in popularity worldwide was driven, as Aaron Wherry puts it, "by a combination of old-media storytelling and new-media glee" (Wherry, 2019, p. 233). On the one hand, Trudeau performed exceptionally well in so-called conventional media, such as television, especially during televised political debates and at press conferences (Gabryś, Soroka, 2017, pp. 211–212). At the same time, he and his media advisors proved outstandingly skillful in the use of social media. In that domain, as Remillard, Bertrand, and Fisher (2019, p. 65) observe, Trudeau surpassed everyone who had occurred before him in Canadian politics.

Most importantly, in constructing his visual media brand Justin Trudeau seemed to display genuine authenticity, at least at the outset of his prime ministerial

career. His image of a sport-loving and athletic person was deeply rooted in his sincere penchant for physical exercise. As early as in his high-school years, as Huguet Young (2016) notes, “Justin played all the team sports (...), from lacrosse to hockey and football to soccer” (p. 22), plus he “regularly did yoga and boxing” (p. 128) and was a snowboard instructor (p. 30). Similarly, his media creations as a family man, a loving husband and a caring father were not – in fact, still are not – fake. Even the most outspoken critics of Trudeau’s political record, such as John Ivison, admit that his family relationship, particularly his marriage to Sophie-Gregoire, despite some rocky patches in the past, has been authentically strong, solid and passionate (Ivison, 2019, pp. 30–32). Besides, Trudeau “has a flair for the dramatic and an ability to appear authentic on camera” (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2019, p. 66). He is a proficient user of modern technology, especially new online media, which makes him a good example of a “social-media oriented politician” (see: Lofti, 2019, p. 9). He was the first politician in Canada to fully appreciate the impact social media have on public opinion in modern politics and eagerly incorporated them into his strategic political communication with voters. Last but not least, as a son of prime minister, raised in the public eye, he has been accustomed to media interest and publicity since the early years of childhood. Thus, a combination of experience and unique personal predispositions for visual communication made him a highly marketable politician. As one columnist wrote, there was a “naturally emotive and performative quality” to Trudeau’s entourage, camera loved him, and he displayed an “obvious enjoyment of people and crowds of any size” (Proudfoot, 2016). All these assets and qualities contributed immensely to the initial success of Justin Trudeau’s social media branding campaign.

To sum, Justin Trudeau, both in real life and as a media persona, radiated with genuineness, luminous cheerfulness and youthful enthusiasm. With his highly mediated visual campaign, he managed “to project a positive image of leadership defined by athleticism, friendly jokes or pranks, engagement with public, and overall joyful public persona,” thus becoming an iconic antithesis to all conservative and dull politicians (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2019, p. 67). However, Trudeau’s branding campaign’s greatest success in social media was the ability to “blur the lines with regard to what is professional or privatized in his public image” (Dingwall, 2017, p. 41). By allowing himself to be photographed playing with his children or hugging his wife, or by taking selfies with ordinary people, even if many of those photo ops were not spontaneous but choreographed by his media team, he managed to create “an intimate image of a politician” who seemed “approachable, authentic, and down-to-earth” (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2019, p. 66). As Lofti accurately remarks, in an increasingly image-hungry era, Trudeau’s visual branding campaign made him appear more relatable and easier to identify with – he looked like “a normal person taking a ‘selfie’ picture, rather than an empowered politician” (Lofti, 2019, p. 8). This naturally established a new level of visual and emotional

engagement – and a much more direct and personal connection – between him and youth audiences.

Lalancette and Raynauld observe another important trend, or rather a pre-meditated strategy, in Trudeau's social media practices: the pictures published on his private social media feeds intentionally showed him as a politician "interacting with individuals with varying sociodemographic backgrounds, affiliations, political interests, and objectives." Such images not only helped "project and reinforce in a consistent manner his credibility and trustworthiness as political leader," but also underpinned his stature as prime minister of all Canadians (Lalancette, Raynauld, 2017, pp. 14–15). They made him a personification of Canadian diversity, multiculturalism, equity, even democracy. By mingling with movie stars, world politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens, Justin Trudeau, as Marland aptly notes, projected "an image of democratic accessibility" (Marland, 2018, p. 141).

Most importantly, however, he represented hopefulness, optimism, dynamism and progress. The portrayals of him as a stylish, dynamic, youthful and cheerful politician seemed to reinforce the image of Trudeau as a progressive politician, a political leader of future days. His mediated visual images, especially those published in his own social media channels, were constructed on the premise that physical and political (ideological) appeal and attractiveness were somehow intertwined. That gave his media image a load of consistency – not only did he look hip, chic and trendy, but he was also speaking a progressive language. Moreover, his youth's demeanor and youthful looks perfectly accentuated his modernizing agenda – they amplified the liberalism and progressivism Trudeau wanted to symbolize and promote in Canada and beyond. This way, as Fitzsimons accurately remarks, Justin Trudeau demonstrated "a fascinating crossover between personal branding and politics" (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 1).

4. Trudeau: A progressive liberal and a feminist

Following his father's footsteps, Justin Trudeau presented himself as a vocal supporter of progressive social values. Once taking prime minister's office, he waged an intensive campaign on international forums and in social media to make Canada and himself known as major promoters of inclusiveness, open society, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, tolerance, and respect for human rights. Social media, including Trudeau's own Instagram (Trudeau, 2022a) and Twitter feeds (Trudeau, 2022b), as well as international online media (Hoffman, 2017), are full of photos of Trudeau celebrating pride parades. Other photographs, depicting Trudeau welcoming the Syrian refugees at the Toronto airport, went immediately viral in international media (Austen, 2015). He also made headlines when he appointed Canada's half-female cabinet. The decision was met with a massive, mostly positive,

international reaction (Chartrand, 2015), including in the social media (“Justin Trudeau”, 2016).

All this earned him a label of an antithesis to almost everything conservative and populist politicians stood for. Pro-free trade and socially liberal, he was portrayed as “a paragon of progressivism in an era marked by strains of authoritarian populism” (Kassam, 2019). His political platform and foreign policy goals contrasted sharply with the isolationist agenda or nationalistic approaches of many right-wing governments in Europe or the Trump administration in the U.S. Unsurprisingly, with so many opposing views, Trudeau’s interpersonal relationships with some conservative leaders – including President Donald Trump in particular – evolved into ongoing struggles, which eventually led to Trump’s retaliatory trade policies against Canada and direct, insulting *ad hominem* attacks against Trudeau (Collins, 2018; see: Soroka, 2021, pp. 108–111).

Conflicts as this one, in fact, only increased Trudeau’s popularity among left-wing and liberally oriented audiences worldwide. In consequence, Trudeaumania and Canadamania first spread to the U.S., where passion for Justin Trudeau and his brand peaked so high that in 2017 “it was revealed that Canadian diplomatic missions in the United States were displaying life-size cardboard replicas of him so that visitors could take selfies” (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, p. 60). Then Canada’s prime minister’s popularity went far beyond North America. Trudeau was on the covers of leading magazines and became a darling of the liberally-oriented media, portrayed among the progressives as “a champion of embattled values” (“The Last Liberals”, 2016) and “a tonic for the populism of Brexit, the Donald Trump presidency, anti-immigration sentiments and right-wing rhetoric” (Marland, 2018, p. 140). Trudeau was dubbed “an inspiring northern beacon of stability” (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, p. 60), “the free world’s best hope” and “a progressive, rational, forward-thinking leader”; one of the American magazines even asked on its cover: “Why can’t he be our president?” (Rodrick, 2017). As Aaron Wherry observed, the world was “intrigued by the arrival of a handsome young man bearing progressive values” (Wherry, 2019, p. 233).

Undoubtedly, Trudeau personified change and through his first years in office his personal brand was relatively strong and positive. The question was whether Brand Trudeau could positively influence Canada’s national brand. In other words: was Justin Trudeau going to follow his father’s footsteps and translate his personal charm and efficiency in building the positive images of himself into positive perceptions and imaginations of Canada?

5. Branding Canada

It is impossible to disagree with Alex Marland's observation that any Canadian leader is routinely associated worldwide with stereotypical images of Canada. For a Canadian prime minister it often means being "internationally typecast as the leader of a nation of polite, law-abiding citizens who (...) enjoy a high standard of living and live in a safe environment of natural beauty" (Marland, 2018, p. 140). But the branding mechanism also works the other way round: a leader's overexposure in the media, as was the case of Justin Trudeau, generates the international exposure of their country and influences, sometimes even defines anew, the national brand. Being media-savvy, Justin Trudeau was aware of the global impact of his personal brand and was skillful, and rather effective, in the use of his own media image to promote a more positive and cheerful image of Canada abroad.

According to Larissa Fitzsimons, nation branding is most successful when two key criteria are met: a) "there is a change in political, economic or social systems, as opposed to the result of a wishful campaign"; b) when country's uniqueness has been identified and used "to appeal to the global masses" (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 11). As for the former, the change was implemented by Trudeau through an introduction of many new policies, some of them already mentioned above: the appointment of gender-balanced and racially representative cabinet that "looked like Canada" (Beauchamp, 2016), the openness towards immigrants and refugees, the adoption of a feminist foreign policy, but also the legalization of recreational use of cannabis and the expansion of the access to medically-assisted death to patients not terminally ill (Wherry, 2019, p. 267). On rhetorical level, Trudeau also sent a clear signal to international community that Canada had changed simply because of his election victory in 2015. "Canada is back," he declared on a multitude of global forums. Obviously, what he had in mind was Canada's return to the role it had played before the Harper conservatives had come to power in 2005. It was a comeback to the idea of the liberal Canada of his father's days – "a constructive interlocutor in multilateral fora" (Gabryś, Soroka, 2017, p. 16), a "helpful fixer" (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, p. 60), "a nice, co-operative, helpful and progressive country that was eager to work with the other nations of the world" (Wherry, 2019, p. 249). In more concrete terms, it was the declaration of Canada's future active involvement in peacekeeping, in tackling climate change and refugee crises, and in the promotion of human rights.

Canada's uniqueness, in turn, was promoted by Trudeau by his "frequent reference to Canada's multicultural and dynamic population" and "the cohabitation of so many nationalities in one country" (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 11). Not only was this reflected in his social media practices of publishing photographs of Canadians of various ethnic backgrounds. Also, in his addresses to domestic and international audiences, he praised Canadian multiculturalism, boasting that Canadians „see diversity as a strength, not a weakness" (qtd. in Gabryś, Soroka, 2017,

p. 234) and “focus on what brings us together, not what divides us” (qtd. in Wherry, 2019, p. 250). “We define a Canadian not by their skin color or a language or a religion or a background, but by a shared set of values, aspirations, hopes and dreams,” he famously stated when he was welcoming Syrian refugees arriving in Canada (Trudeau, 2016).

Naturally, the brand of Canada Trudeau was (re)creating was a concept based on the qualities and values represented by himself and his Liberal Party – on diversity, inclusiveness, gender equality, environmental awareness, multiculturalism and multilateralism. He desired to promote these notions as the predominant values of the whole nation. Canadian national values, as his narrative seemed to imply, were condensed in Trudeau himself (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2020, pp. 69–70); he was branding Canada in his own image (Hustak, 2017, p. 176). Although such a perspective has never been accepted by his critics, many of his supporters eagerly accepted the extension of Trudeau’s brand to Canada’s national brand, and even formed a kind of an emotional attachment to the idea (Lofti, 2019, p. 12). Trudeau’s progressive and passionate language was interpreted as being representative of “a forward thinking Canadian population” (Fitzsimons, 2016, p. 3). His positive reception in international media and on global forums was presented as a boost to Canadian collective self-esteem (Wherry, 2019, p. 235). Even his stylish looks, athletic figure and handsomeness released new waves of national pride as such features were apparently “coupled with Canada’s reputation for being polite and progressive” on the one hand (Giese, 2017), and “kind but muscular” on the other (Rodrick, 2017).

Most importantly, however, Trudeau had a substantial influence on the enthusiasm with which Canada was portrayed in international, liberally-oriented news media. The progressive media world bought Canada’s brand crafted by Trudeau and his team. The *Rolling Stone* made comparisons between Trudeau’s Canada and Trump’s U.S., praising “Trudeau’s vision of what a country can be.” One could read there that “[h]is land races toward inclusion, while our nation builds walls and lusts for an era of vanilla homogeneity that ain’t coming back.” Trudeau’s Canada was depicted as “a beautiful place to ride out an American storm” (Rodrick, 2017). The *Economist* struck very similar tones depicting Trudeau’s Canada as an “example to the world,” “a citadel of decency, tolerance and good sense” and a place that “remains reassuringly level-headed.” The authors wrote that “[i]n this depressing company of wall-builders, doorslammers and drawbridge-raisers, Canada stands out as a heartening exception.” The article concluded with a very straightforward postulation: “The world owes Canada gratitude for reminding it (...) that tolerance and openness are wellsprings of security and prosperity, not threats to them” (“Canada’s Example”, 2016). *Die Welt* and the *Washington Post* also commended Canada for being a bulwark against populism and isolationism (Hustak, 2017, p. 172).

The above are merely few out of a multitude of examples which prove that, at least for progressive and liberal environs, Trudeau was a good image manager

and a strong brand ambassador for his country. In the first years of his tenure, he demonstrated high skills in using the soft power of his own carefully staged brand for the projection of “a positive image of Canada as a country that is approachable, sympathetic, and ready to collaborate and work constructively” (Gabryś, Soroka, 2017). For the time being, it looked as if Canada's prime minister, “a young do-gooder,” had managed to create “the spirit of an inclusive, welcoming, positive Canada” (Wherry, 2019, p. 234).

6. Fading Trudeaumania

Unfortunately for Trudeau, his perfectionated media image did not last. It started to deteriorate gradually around the middle of his first term in office, in 2017. The analysts give countless reasons for the downfall of his brand and, as a consequence, for the fall of carefully crafted Canada's brand, which was largely built on Trudeau's political superstar popularity.

Marland and Nimijejan (2021, pp. 60–68) present an extensive list of Trudeau's slip-ups, missteps and political mistakes. They included, among others: Trudeau's grief after Fidel Castro's death and naming Fidel “a remarkable leader”; Trudeau's verbally articulated admiration for communist China's economic model; his numerous violations of Canadian ethics law; a trip to India in 2018 which turned into an epic media catastrophe after Trudeau was photographed overdressed in traditional Indian costumes performing a local folk dance, and after his administration invited a Sikh convicted extremist to an official event; the press revelations over Trudeau wearing blackface and brownface makeups on multiple occasions in the period preceding his political career; and Trudeau's private travels during the COVID-19 pandemic despite the lockdown restrictions.

A list of Trudeau's unfulfilled campaign promises was also long. He retreated from justice and electoral reforms. His decision to expel three Indigenous female ministers from his caucus put into question the seriousness of his reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and undermined his pro-feminist policies. The same can be said about his decision to continue exports of military equipment to countries with regressive women's rights record, such as Saudi Arabia (Wherry, 2019, pp. 258–282). And even though, as researchers revealed, Trudeau had not been worse in keeping campaign commitments than his predecessors (Birch, Pétry, 2019, pp. 18–21), the unfulfilled promises were important enough for his earlier brand-building campaign that his failure to deliver them contributed immensely to the downfall of his brand.

A rich collection of Trudeau's mishaps and broken promises was met with harsh criticism from academia. Political analysts highlighted the fact that Trudeau's temporary rhetoric and lofty, fine-sounding slogans were “not necessarily followed by political actions or decisions” (Gabryś, Soroka, 2017, p. 276) and that “gaps between

political rhetoric promoting the brand versus policy and program delivery produced a disconnect that weakened Trudeau's political capital" (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, p. 68). Trudeau's progressivism and political freshness were also doubted. Instead of representing "hope and optimism," he was now seen as absorbing "the attributes of the establishment" (Marland, 2018, p. 142). "Trudeau cannot be said to have changed the modern approach to political discourse," one could read in one of his biographies (Wherry, 2019, p. 263). Marland and Nimijean (2021), quoting his gaffes with blackfaces, wrote about the "betrayal of his carefully honed image as a champion of diversity and inclusion" (p. 61). They also gave the best account of the moral problem Trudeau faced because of his "rhetoric-reality gaps": "It is difficult for him to preach progressive values (...) when his own record, and that of his government, are coloured by inconsistency between political messaging, values and actions" (p. 71).

More importantly, Trudeau's honeymoon with the media seemed to be over, which gave a decisive blow to his mediated and idealized brand. The liberal and left-wing news media outlets, which had previously portrayed the prime minister favorably, now hit him with a wave of negativity. Canadian *Maclean's* wrote about "Trudeau's turn from cool to laughing stock" (Glavin, 2016). The *Politico* pointed out to "disturbing Trudeau track record" and sarcastically asked: "is his good brand (...) disappearing like one of the fun memes it was based on?" (Heath, 2019). The *Economist* accused Trudeau of "practising politics as usual" despite his promises of introducing "real change" ("The Liberals Lose", 2019). The staunchest criticism was apparently raised by the *Guardian*, which, citing the failures of Trudeau's climate policies, called him "a stunning hypocrite" and "a disaster for the planet" (McKibben, 2017). The shift in the media portrayals of Trudeau was immense – from a "golden boy" who had been shown on the cover of magazines, Trudeau became "a teflon prophet in trouble" (Iverson, 2019, p. 189).

Trudeau paid a big political price for the fall of his image, both domestically and abroad. The very fact that he took blame and apologized for some of his mistakes did not help much; his brand seemed to have endured an irreversible damage. In Canada, voters punished Trudeau in the 2019 election – his Liberals won against the Conservatives, but only in the number of seats, losing in popular vote and thus being forced to form a minority government with the weakest mandate in Canada's history (Levitz, 2019). Internationally, the deterioration of Trudeau's personal brand had undermined Canada's global reputation. In the eyes of many, under Trudeau, "Canada was reduced to promoting its celebrity prime minister" (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, p. 69), who "says all the right things, over and over (...) [b]ut those words are meaningless" (McKibben, 2017). It was a reference to an indisputable fact that Canada led by Trudeau had reneged on too many of its international commitments when it came to contributions to international assistance, peacekeeping and tackling climate change. In 2020, these failures were punished – Canada, in the first voting round, lost out to Ireland and Norway in its bid for a seat

on the United Nations Security Council. Not only was it “a stinging rebuke of the Trudeau brand and arguably that of Canada,” but also an evidence that as long as “a political brand can raise a country’s profile, a tarnished political brand can drag it down” (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, p. 68).

The downfall of Trudeau’s political brand had another damaging effect on the prime minister’s image – the positive reception of Trudeau’s earlier activity in on-line media almost disappeared. Once a social media superstar and a darling of the Internet, now he was chastised for his omnipresence in social networking platforms and for “flirting with the sort of overexposure,” typical only for actors and musicians (Wherry, 2019, p. 235). He was accused of placing “excessive attention on public relations and photo-ops” and building his brand “through social media superficialities” (Marland, 2018, p. 142). “Narcissistic and image-obsessed,” “more image than substance” – such characterizations appeared more often in his context. All this supposedly questioned Trudeau’s gravitas as a statesman and the leader of the nation. “While on the international stage we saw leaders of the Western world come together, (...) our prime minister was consumed with taking selfies” – that was the impression shared by many Canadians (Remillard, Bertrand, Fisher, 2020, pp. 65–66) who dismissed him as a diletante or “the Paris Hilton of Canadian politics” (Kassam, 2019). He was criticized for excessive theatricality, kitschy self-promotion, insincerity and fakery.

Since Trudeau’s brand had already suffered, then what had previously been widely praised as his media success, now was treated as an exaggeration, hypocrisy, and fakery. Eventually, at the outset of the 2019 election campaign, he recognized his overexposure and the fact that too many Canadians had already had enough of his somewhat light-hearted celebrity policymaking. He reduced his public appearances, even temporarily grew a beard to look more serious, and put his more popular ministers to the fore (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, pp. 63–64). He seemed to have experienced it firsthand that “the media shine wears off as the thorny business of governing takes over” (Marland, 2018, p. 142).

Conclusions

In social networking platforms and in more traditional media, Trudeau has been portrayed (and has profiled himself) as a sporty figure, a women’s and LGBT rights advocate, a caring father and husband, animal lover, environmental activist, even a pop culture star. Thanks to his skillful use of various media and political marketing, he earned a label of “the first prime minister of the Instagram age.” His branding campaign was a success, the projection of his image triumphed. Part of the success was that it was easy to contrast Trudeau with far-right politicians such as Donald Trump. As one observer said, “Trump was a gift (...) So Trudeau got

lucky. He was (...) some sort of version of youthful exuberance, enthusiasm, optimism and a lack of cynicism” (Kassam, 2019).

However, in the middle of his first term in office (in 2017), the cracks on Trudeau’s brand started to appear and Trudeaumania began to fade. His good brand story was coming to an end. On the one hand, it was damaged by his own “glib, simplistic, or confusing thoughts” (Marland, Nimijean, 2021, p. 60). On the other hand, his multiple gaffes and controversial decisions, inconsistent with his progressive rhetoric and idealized image, contributed to the waning of Trudeau’s and Canada’s meticulously polished brands. Also, Trudeau’s involvement in political scandals and his ethically dubious conduct gained him deserved negativity in media news. Last but not least, Justin Trudeau failed to deliver fully on those campaign promises that were supposed to change Canada and bring it back to the world as an example to follow. In other words, the real Justin Trudeau, with his deficiencies and failures, did not match an overidealized version of the Trudeau brand. Trudeau’s mishandlings brought severe criticism on him – he was labelled as unnatural and superficial, a “selfie prime minister” or a “fake feminist” (Geddes, 2019). As some rightly noted, this could have been predicted, given the fact that “political celebrity is prone to ebb and flow, to be fêted or derided,” especially when “a brand [is] so well-devised, so symbolic and emotive (...) that in reality no politician could match” (Kassam, 2019).

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