CHAPTER TEN

Silvio Berlusconi, One Man Brand

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"Politics is like the drinks market. On the one hand you have liquor. On the other you have sweet drinks. But in between you have an immense space for people who drink Coke or Pepsi." –Silvio Berlusconi[1]

Introduction

Italy's current prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, is a figure who has attracted much attention in the global media and who has become—for better or worse—a protagonist of contemporary Italian history. Berlusconi's unprecedented fusion of media, sports, and politics, his provocative statements and antics, and his sexual and financial scandals have brought him constant attention within national and international politics. He is also Italy's second wealthiest man, having built a fortune through media, retailing, finance, and sports before entering politics. In this chapter, we will examine how Berlusconi has innovatively used branding in his transition from business to politics and how in the process he has become a unique type of political brand that increases its force through the interconnection of formerly separate social and cultural domains.

Arvidsson (2006) claims that branding has become a central part of contemporary economic, social, and cultural systems. He contends that brands are to this century what factories were to the previous century, the fundamental form of social organization. Hence this study of Berlusconi as a brand is not exclusively focused on how Berlusconi won elections using branding techniques. Rather, it is a reflection on how power relations between communications and politics in Italy have changed over the past two decades, and how they are currently centered on brands as instruments of social organization. Likewise, Berlusconi's power has not simply been a

product of the fact that he controlled a large number of television outlets and hence was able to prevent opposing points of view from being heard; while definitely important, this repressive power was not central to his success. In Foucault's sense of "productive power" (Haugaard 1997), we focus on Berlusconi's capacity to produce and frame discourses—an ability that stems in large part from his success in managing consumer brands, such as his television network and his soccer team, and the centrality of his persona to that management. This success eventually generated allegiance to Berlusconi's public persona as the incarnation of different values—entrepreneurship, sportsmanship, family values, self-realization—allowing him to personify the economic, social, and political transformations that Italy has undertaken since the late 1970s.

The period of Berlusconi's rise to power is linked to the transformation of Italy from an industrial and agricultural economy with strong government participation to a free market economy based on services and mass consumption. The collapse of the Italian party system in the early 1990s and the decline of the Catholic and Marxist ideological pillars that sustained the post-fascist period constituted the backdrop for Berlusconi's rise as a new type of politician: not only a central figure of the new type of political and social organization which emerged during Italy's transition into the twenty-first century but also the all-encompassing "brand" that structured it. As he moved across and among the different realms and discourses, he promoted a deeply capitalist ideology of desire fulfillment, which he both offered to the masses through television and personally realized by ostentatiously obtaining what he desired. His brand thus came to connote success and wealth that could be transferred from his companies to his person and eventually to his voters.

Central to Berlusconi's success—and the launching pad for all his other activities—was his earlier success in television, which Doyle (1990) has argued arose from his aptitude for building differentiated brand images for his various networks, resulting in distinct communities of audiences. Berlusconi utilized television as a means to extend his brand to these communities, creating discrete manifestations of branded identification among them as well as establishing himself as the common thread uniting them. Beyond this use of television content, he also used television as a structure through which to realize his political aspirations. It is not incidental that Berlusconi used the organizational structure of his advertising firm Publitalia—Italy's largest media buying company—as the basis for creating his political party

Forza Italia (Poli 2001). The interconnection of different domains—segmented audiences for sports and entertainment television, electoral politics, and corporate enterprise—helped legitimize the transfer of power from the private sphere to the public sphere, and vice versa, further strengthening the identification between Berlusconi and the nation as a whole.

Yet as Arvidsson (2006) and Walker (2008) rightly point out, the designed communities that congregate around brands also actively participate in a brand's evolution, often by challenging the brand message. As crises and scandals broke around him between 2005 and 2009, Berlusconi's brand became subject to precisely this kind of challenge, prompting publics to question his brand's reliability. As we will discuss in the conclusion of this chapter, it remains to be seen whether the scandals recently endured by Berlusconi have resulted in an irreparable crisis or will instead generate further transformation of his brand and of the values associated with it.

We begin by recounting Berlusconi's rise to political power, followed by two sections dedicated respectively to the theorization of his brand and to an analysis of the circulation of values and symbols across different social domains.

Berlusconi's Rise to Power

In the winter months between 1993 and 1994, giant pictures of smiling toddlers appeared on billboards all around Italy. Underneath the pictures, the cryptic caption read "Fozza Itaia," a playful reference to the way a young child would pronounce the words "Forza Italia" ("Go Italy!"). It was later revealed to be a teaser for the upcoming electoral campaign of Forza Italia, a new political party founded by television and soccer entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi (Muscau 1994). Confounding most expectations, Forza Italia won the Italian general elections on March 27, 1994. Since that landmark campaign, which introduced a new political party in a manner similar to how a new branded product might be launched, the direct inclusion of the logic of branding has irreversibly changed Italian politics. The protagonist of this revolution in the style and the substance of doing politics in Italy was Silvio Berlusconi, who has since been elected Prime Minister three times.

A law school graduate with some early successful experience in the real estate business, Berlusconi rose to prominence in the early 1980s with the development of the first national commercial television network in Italy.

Starting from a small cable station in Milan, Berlusconi's channel, Canale 5, emerged as an innovative force in the chaotic private sector in Italy, which had been liberalized by the Constitutional Court in the late 1970s. Using semi-legal means to circumvent the court-ordered regulation of national broadcasting, by the end of the 1980s Canale 5 had developed into a full-fledged national commercial network, thus creating a new major venue for advertising and investments in Italy (Doyle 1990). Entertainment-based programming and innovative scheduling techniques, the acquisition of well-known television talents and the availability of significant—and controversial—amounts of capital put Canale 5 in the position to take over the rest of the competition in a short period of time.[2] The result was the creation of the Fininvest network which, under the political patronage of the then-prominent Italian Socialist Party (PSI), became the monopolistic force in commercial television, able to mount a very effective competition against the public service television network RAI.

The key to Fininvest's success in commercial television was its synergy with the advertising agency Publitalia, also owned by Berlusconi, which introduced a set of important innovations in television advertising. Due to nearly thirty years of state monopoly over broadcasting, television advertising in Italy was a largely underdeveloped sector compared to the United States or to other European countries. Publitalia entered the market with a well-trained sales force and with an unmatched ability to sell air time, virtually creating a whole new business sector. As a consequence, television advertising spending in Italy rose significantly throughout the 1980s, contributing to a period of economic growth for the country, which in some regions had evolved from the agricultural–industrial phase to a post-industrial, service-based economy (Ginsborg 1990). Consumer brands—from fashion to food products—became permanent fixtures of the Italian cultural landscape, largely thanks to the exposure provided by Berlusconi's networks. By 1987, the year ratings company Auditel was introduced, Fininvest controlled more than 60 percent of Italy's television advertising market (Grasso 2004).

In 1986, Berlusconi purchased the then-ailing soccer team AC Milan, which in a short period of time—thanks to innovative management and the acquisition of prized soccer stars—produced a series of striking victories both nationally and internationally. This contributed significantly to the rise in general awareness of Berlusconi as a public figure, given the sport's national popularity. Beyond real estate, television, and soccer, Berlusconi di-

versified his business activities by acquiring stakes in insurance, finance, film distribution, and retail, turning Fininvest into the major financial holding in Italy and himself into one of the country's richest persons ("Fininvest—The Group"). The successful style of business of Fininvest, mixing entertainment, sports, and service, became a hallmark of a rapidly modernizing Italy.

From a larger sociopolitical perspective, Berlusconi's channels helped the country transition from the 1970s—a decade plagued by terrorism and political unrest[3]—to the more stable and prosperous 1980s. The alignment between television and politics, which under RAI had strictly followed the party lines of the two major ideological currents, the Catholic and the Communist, eventually evolved under the cultural and economic effects produced by the private television sector. While seemingly steering clear of the model of politicized media typical of the Italian tradition, Berlusconi's channels had an important role in the evolution of political communication in Italy nonetheless. The very language of politics on commercial television had evolved, adopting most of the stylistic features of the medium, such as the emphasis on the visual qualities of the candidates, simplification of discourse, and the hybridization of different genres (Novelli 1995).

Buoyed by the economic success of his multiple enterprises, later in the 1980s Berlusconi concluded two controversial business deals which, coupled with Fininvest's growing indebtedness, soon put the company at risk of bankruptcy. The first was the acquisition of the Standa chain of department stores in an attempt to vertically integrate the entire chain of product distribution from advertising to large-scale retail. Standa proved to be an unsuccessful investment, however, and it was later sold. The second was the acquisition of the publishing company Mondadori, linked to the attempt to acquire a majority stake in the popular left-leaning newspaper *La Repubblica*. This maneuver had a number of legal implications—some are ongoing. But most importantly, the move revealed Berlusconi's intentions to use the media to influence the balance of power in Italian politics (Ottone 2009).

In the early 1990s, the Italian political class was almost entirely wiped out by the largest corruption scandal of the postwar period. The investigations brought to an end forty years of political domination by the Christian Democrats (DC) and interrupted the growth of the PSI party, Berlusconi's main political ally. The scandal led to the most severe institutional crisis in Italy since the issues of terrorism in the 1970s and created the conditions for drastic political changes. Accelerating the political transformations, a

new "majoritarian" electoral system was put in place in 1993, effectively changing the traditional consensual dynamics into a winner-takes-all scenario. With the demise of the old ideological pillars, the DC and the Italian Communist Party (PCI)—the latter largely unaffected by the scandal but still deeply traumatized by the fall of the Berlin Wall—new political cultures started to emerge. In the Northern regions, the party Lega Nord had risen to prominence with an aggressive federalist message, expressing popular discontent with the centralized and unaccountable Roman government (Gold 2003).

It was against this backdrop of profound economic and social change, Fininvest's financial crisis, and the waning protection of the Socialist party that Berlusconi decided to enter politics. The most logical, and perhaps inevitable, means of doing this was to create his own political party. Combining his personal experience and skills with the help of pollsters, focus groups, and creative talents, the brand new Forza Italia party was a post-ideological, flexible organization that could offer a liberal agenda, attention to the core values of Italian society, and the ability to engender a renewed sense of national belonging in the simplified, catchy language of television—by then the preferred medium for political communications. Nearly twenty years of experience with television, advertising, and the marketing of consumer products qualified Berlusconi as the most suitable candidate to win the consensus of the Italian electorate. This is the brand of politics that the majority of Italians have since chosen for three terms, most recently in 2008.

Theorizing Berlusconi as a Brand

Berlusconi's success in politics wasn't simply the product of his control of media outlets and his capacity to persuade audiences of his opinions or suppress opposing points of view. If his ownership of television networks was useful to him, it was because television provided a model for changing habits and engendering beliefs in a society where media are increasingly central to social and cultural participation—managing what Davenport and Beck (2001) call the "attention economy." Such knowledge of the functioning of the media translated into a striking capacity to generate and manage belief around his brand across multiple markets, from television to soccer, and eventually into the political sphere. Rather than attempting to rationally persuade the Italian electorate of the validity of his positions, Berlusconi devel-

oped an innovative and relentless branding strategy to unify his political project.

Following Arvidsson's suggestion that the value of a brand is essentially linked to the notion of "consumer attention" (2006: 7), we understand Berlusconi's main political innovation as resting on his capacity to generate and maintain public attention with an innovative use of language, the strategic use of visibility, and the capacity to move across multiple social domains. Closely related to this, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) argue that brands create communities and identities. In this vein, television audiences created by Berlusconi's networks, AC Milan fan groups, and other forms of mediated identities functioned as vital centers of public attention for Berlusconi's political strategy. Furthermore, Lury (2004) argues that brands are no longer simply signs that allow consumers to identify products but rather objects of value in their own right, which are in turn able to generate value for utterly different kinds of objects. A well-known example is the *Virgin* brand, which has moved from music retail to airlines, soft drinks, and even insurance. Just as the *Virgin* CEO Richard Branson was a key figure in shifting brand allegiance from one product to another within the same brand universe, Berlusconi used his image as a successful television tycoon to move audiences and publics from television to soccer and into the political domain. Berlusconi thus acted as a kind of meta-sign, an embodiment, in Lury's sense, of certain beliefs and practices that circulate from one domain to another.

Not only did Berlusconi become a brand; he also persuaded much of the Italian public that promoting mass consumption through branding and marketing was a political strategy that could resolve Italy's problems. He achieved this by selling himself as a personification of the consumer economy, as the person who had satisfied his own desires, achieved wealth and celebrity, and as Prime Minister could do the same for Italy. While outside Italy Berlusconi is often portrayed as a *commedia dell'arte* type of buffoon (Saubaber and Luksic 2009), Italian public opinion tends to perceive him as a person who overcomes the hypocrisy of Italian politics by speaking directly about what he wants. In this regard Berlusconi has compared himself to Casanova: "Casanova said the man who desires something, if he really desires it, can even become king. Let's take him as our model" (qtd. in RCS 2000). Berlusconi has thus branded himself as the personification of the successful satisfaction of desires.

Berlusconi also ruptured the Italian political tradition by marketing himself as if he were marketing a new product, targeting specific audience segments susceptible to vote for his brand and unabashedly characterizing himself as a type of "political Coke." Just as his television networks during the 1980s encouraged the exposure of media-friendly political personalities and discourses, he produced a simulacrum of himself for public consumption. After using his media empire and vast resources to change cultural and then political habits, he now tried to institute a new ritual among Italian voters: to "consume" Silvio Berlusconi, the entrepreneur, the soccer personality, and the would-be politician.

In the Berlusconi brand of politics, appearance matters and the capacity to manipulate appearance is a virtue rather than a fault. As evidence of this, Publitalia held casting sessions to choose candidates for the new party, often selecting candidates for their looks as much as for their politics (Schwarz 2001). This ideology resonates with a society where value is produced less through material labor than through forms of mediated communication whose main output is the production of communities and identities. Berlusconi consciously encouraged the formation—or fabrication—of these new types of political subjects, conforming to Arvidsson's (2006) claim that brands function as resources for the construction of the self.

Circulation of Forms between Private and Public Spheres

One of the distinctive elements of Berlusconi's political language is his constant use of metaphors drawn from soccer, religion, and business, often mixed together, which disrupt Italian political discourse with symbols and sentiments generated in other domains. Soccer references were particularly frequent in the early phase of Berlusconi's political career, allowing him to harness their affective power. When he decided to enter politics he famously used the words "*Scendo in campo*" (Italian for "I am going to run onto the football [soccer] field"). The reference to the sport also functioned as a metaphor for the reformed electoral system, which encouraged competition between two poles with a clear winner and a clear loser. Remarking on this communicative strategy in 2001, *The Economist* observed:

> Even now that it is in government, Mr. Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, feels rather like a cross between a football club and an advertising agency. The mood in its offices is cheery, slick, and businesslike. […] As a former Forza Italia senator who previously worked for Mr. Berlusconi's advertising company blithely put it: "We saw a market niche and decided to fill it" (2001).

The adoption of forms from the soccer domain does not simply occur discursively but also organizationally (Russo 2001). If Berlusconi's campaign machine and candidates were from Publitalia and its logic from television programming, his new party structure was largely built from the network of existing AC Milan soccer fan clubs. The main function of such a structure was to connect communities of fans rather than build political activists. This encouraged the emergence of a new political culture where the forms of popular culture were translated into the world of politics—penetrating even to the symbol of the Forza Italia, an Italian flag on a blue background that resembled the national football symbol. Again, *The Economist* explained it well:

> Like many Italians, Mr. Berlusconi adores football […] Forza Italia's name comes from the words Italians use to cheer on their national football team, known as "gli Azzurri," the Blues—just what Mr. Berlusconi likes to call his own political team. He sees himself as the player–manager (2001).

In 1994, on the same night the Senate voted to accept Berlusconi's first government, AC Milan beat Barcelona and won the Champions League. That very night, his network Italia Uno screened a summary newscast, showing footage illustrating the Senate's confidence in the new government interspersed with that of his soccer team running around the field in triumph (Rodotà 1994). This tableau illustrates how thoroughly sports and politics had been fused, bringing together different audiences in ways rational persuasion might not.

Another set of metaphors Berlusconi often uses are derived from religion. As Semino and Masci (1996) have argued, his use of phrases such as "I believe in the Italian miracle" when announcing his entrance into politics coded the move in religious terms. Semino and Masci likewise argue that his entry into politics maps neatly onto a "good Samaritan" narrative, where Berlusconi heroically came to the aid of an Italy in distress. In addition to alluding to himself as a political prophet, Berlusconi has said at least once that he was chosen by the people and anointed by the Lord; he occasionally refers to his assistants as disciples (*La Stampa* 2009). In 2006, referencing legal troubles he was experiencing at the time, he likened the situation to persecution, saying "I am the Jesus Christ of politics, a victim, patient, putting up with everything and sacrificing myself for everybody" (qtd. in *La Stampa* 2009). On other occasions he has conflated religious metaphors with sports. When speaking at the Vatican, for instance, he compared the Pope to his football team, saying, "Your Holiness, let me say that you re-

semble my team Milan. You, like us, go around the world to announce a winning idea, God" (qtd. in Maltese 2001).

In a further example of combining metaphors from different domains, Berlusconi once compared the Holy Roman Catholic church to a faith business (Fiori 1995) and has expressed his wish to "spiritualize" capitalism (Musso 2003). Indeed, the third set of metaphors Berlusconi draws upon emerges from the world of business. Guided by what is termed *aziendalismo*, the idea that the principal business of government is to govern affairs, Berlusconi promotes the notion that politics is simply economic management—allowing him to translate his success as an entrepreneur to the political world, as have other contemporary business figures-cum-politicians (see, for example, Greenberg in this volume). It comes as no surprise that he announced during his 1994 campaign that he would be the "CEO of Italy" (qtd. in Musso 2008: 75). That this business success is at times infused with religiosity functions to give some sense of saintliness to material success, which was certainly never the case in Catholic Italy.

As we have been arguing, Berlusconi's managerial and political success is related to the ability of stories to travel from one context to another: television shows into sports, soccer stories into politics, his private life into the public sphere. Berlusconi's meaning is not fixed but changes constantly as he shifts from one genre of discourse to another. As Italian scholar Federico Boni has argued, "Berlusconi is a superhero without characteristics. Like a comic book figure, he can assume any shape: football coach, messiah, sex-crazed monster and family man, national leader and nightclub pianist […]" (qtd. in Smoltczyck 2009). It is precisely Berlusconi's capacity to move between genres, to mutate from one form to another, and to appeal to different groups that constitute the essence of his brand. Following Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003), we argue that this circulation of forms is central to the construction of value and meaning for Berlusconi's branded politics.

This rhetorical strategy also has the capacity to change the relationship between private and public domains. Musso (2003) offers the example of how Berlusconi built his campaign around an image of himself as successful entrepreneur, family man, and celebrity, as illustrated by the biography he distributed to 12 million households in 2001 as a kind of electoral brochure. The glossy booklet was called *Una Storia Italiana*, which literally means "an Italian story," but it is also evocative of "*La Storia Italiana*," or Italian history. Berlusconi thus presented himself as a sort of synecdoche of Italy which, according to Musso, fundamentally realigned the definitions of

private and public, in which the private life of Berlusconi the political celebrity becomes the ideal representation of national identity.

The Brand in Crisis: Soccer Fiascos

On the evening of May 25, 2005, Berlusconi's successful combination of television, soccer, and politics came to an unprecedented climax. In Istanbul, AC Milan was leading 3-0 in the Champions League final against Liverpool. Berlusconi, in the double role of AC Milan president/owner and Prime Minister, was at the stadium. Canale 5, his television channel, was showing a live broadcast of the game. The network's cameras often zoomed in to reveal his glowing expression. The TV commentator could hardly maintain a neutral tone, overwhelmed as he was by the excitement of being part of such a mighty assembly of powers. The Berlusconi brand was in full display and about to be rewarded with an all-round triumph. Then the unexpected happened. In the now infamous "six minutes of folly," Liverpool tied and then won the game during the penalty shots. The Milan players were in a state of disbelief; the fans were shocked. Berlusconi, visibly disappointed, commented: "[s]occer is like politics. You think you've won, but instead..." (qtd. in RCS 2005). In hindsight, the impromptu comment is revealing: for the first time, Berlusconi had experienced a soccer defeat from a political perspective.

For a decade Berlusconi had been developing an entire political strategy based on establishing synergy between soccer and politics—a connection that was structural, rhetorical, and ultimately political (Russo 2001). By maintaining the AC Milan presidency while prime minister, he continued to leverage the popularity of the team for political purposes—a fact that led Italian pollster Luigi Cresp, a former Berlusconi communication consultant, to comment that the destinies of AC Milan and Berlusconi were inseparable (Ceccarelli 2006). The Istanbul fiasco inaugurated a period of crisis, not only for the AC Milan brand but for Berlusconi as well. Such a spectacular defeat had tarnished AC Milan's aura of invincibility, halting nearly two decades of expansion and success. To make matters worse, the following spring AC Milan and other leading Italian soccer teams underwent investigation for match-rigging charges, resulting in severe penalties in the following season. Over the next two years, Berlusconi embarked on a campaign to revamp the AC Milan brand, purchasing several well-known but aging players, including British footballer and pop icon David Beckham. Commenta-

tors speculated that Berlusconi was managing AC Milan mostly as a show business enterprise, rather than as a soccer team demanding technical improvement (Bocca 2009); one argued that the purchase of star players "responds more to the logic of marketing than to that of soccer: [the goal is] to increase the value of Milan's brand" (Tito 2009).

The crisis of AC Milan, and Berlusconi's unsuccessful attempts to counter it, revealed unexpected fissures in the association of sports and politics. As Berlusconi was to discover, such an innovative synthesis could also yield negative effects. An image-based politics tied to the success of a soccer team could backfire if the team did not win enough or if the team conduct was tainted by scandals. The realities of Italian soccer, pressured by aggressive financial operations, competition for television rights, and rising costs for acquiring talents, had finally caught up with the dream of an undefeatable AC Milan and an ever-victorious Berlusconi. In the spring of 2009, the team's management announced its intention to sell the fans' beloved Brazilian player, Kakà—a move meant to provide AC Milan with a prompt injection of cash in the wake of growing financial problems (*Corriere dello Sport* 2009). As a journalist observed in the months leading to the player's transfer, "The romantic veil of Milan as a family team that treasures its champions has fallen" (Currò 2009). Fans vehemently protested, some even going so far as to write Kakà's name on the ballot for local elections in the city of Milan (Sorrentino 2009)—arguably an explicit reference to Berlusconi's use of soccer for political ends. The Milan brand was perceived as having been "desacralized," tainted by worldly ailments such as corruption and poor finances. Consequently, the ability of soccer to provide Berlusconi's brand of politics with symbolic capital had been drastically diminished. Berlusconi himself commented that Kakà's sale had cost him "at least two percent of the votes in the [2009] European Elections" (qtd. in Tito 2009).

After the Istanbul debacle, Berlusconi lost the 2006 political elections to center-left candidate Romano Prodi. While there is no available study linking the political results to Berlusconi's soccer-related setbacks, it is worth pointing out that during the pre-election debates Berlusconi adopted a unexpectedly sober and statesman-like attitude, distancing himself from the image of the entertainer and sports personality he had so often embodied on public occasions. During the second debate in particular, Berlusconi centered his rhetorical strategy on the reiteration of figures and statistics trumpeting the accomplishments of his administration. The following summer, Italy won the soccer World Cup, and Prodi celebrated the victory in

Rome with the players, among them several top AC Milan players. Berlusconi reportedly complained that Prodi had used the victory as an advertisement for the government, and that Berlusconi himself should have been the one celebrating the World Cup victory (Bocca 2006). One might argue that Berlusconi felt betrayed by the very game he had helped to create. While the "soccer as politics" metaphor continued to circulate within the Italian political sphere, it had become harder for Berlusconi to retain full control over it.

The Berlusconi Brand, Up Close and Personal

The soccer-related setbacks and the defeat in the 2006 presidential elections dented not only Berlusconi's brand but also his self-esteem (Bei 2007). In one of his first post-election public appearances, he distanced himself from the unsuccessful domain of soccer, choosing a much more familiar trope of "community" with which to ally himself. Yet his well-crafted brand would soon endure another critical transformation. During an appearance at the 2007 Telegatti television awards, broadcast by Canale 5, Berlusconi flirted with several women, including Mara Carfagna, former television starlet (later appointed Minister of Equal Opportunity in the fourth Berlusconi government). A few days later, Berlusconi's wife, Veronica Lario, wrote a letter to *La Repubblica* deploring his disrespectful behavior and exhorting that "from a public man, I demand public apologies" (Lario 2007). The incident was the first of a series that began to tarnish his image over the next few years. Throughout his career as a public figure, Berlusconi had often revealed a macho penchant for acts of gallantry and appreciation of feminine beauty (Amato 2007); nonetheless, he had usually attempted to temper this with an image as family man, loving father, and devoted husband. The electoral booklet "Una Storia Italiana," for instance, was a celebration of both his entrepreneurial success and his strong belief in family values, personified by his five children—albeit by two different marriages—and his publicly declared fondness for his mother. In the brochure, the divorce from his first wife in the early 1980s was presented as unfortunate incident in a history of otherwise morally impeccable conduct.

What began to surface in the aftermath of the Telegatti episode was a much less romantic picture of a powerful man with a promiscuous lifestyle. Reports emerged that he had used his position to lure women into sexual relations, often under the pretense of professional advancement. Berlusconi seemed at first unprepared to address the breach of trust opened by his pub-

lic flirtations with other women. When first challenged by his wife in 2007, for instance, he immediately responded with a letter of apology to the same newspaper. Shortly afterwards, however, pictures of him in his summer residence with three young women appeared on the cover of a popular Italian tabloid magazine (Rizzo 2007). The cover ran the title, "Berlusconi's Harem," a term that was repeated in subsequent journalistic accounts of Berlusconi's private life. Indeed, the Italian media, particularly the newspapers that did not support Berlusconi, seemed eager to dive into the details of his private life. In late 2007, several Italian newspapers published the transcripts of wiretappings from an investigation for possible corruption charges against Berlusconi and RAI executive Agostino Saccà (D'Avanzo 2007). The wiretappings revealed, among other things, that Berlusconi was pressuring Saccà to hire a number of female acquaintances to work in important television productions. In the summer of 2008, a politician revealed to the press the existence of an unpublished wiretapping that allegedly contained explicit reference to sexual intercourse between Berlusconi and Mara Carfagna, who was by then serving as Minister of Equal Opportunity (Lopapa 2008). Berlusconi's television networks tended not to cover such scandals, signaling a mounting apprehension around the exposure of information about his private life.

Despite the surfacing scandals, in 2008 Berlusconi won the presidential elections with a very large majority, possibly because of the poor performance of the center-left administration led by Prodi. However, in late April 2009, nearly a month prior to the elections for the European Parliament, Berlusconi's wife publicly denounced the recruitment criteria his party had adopted. She insisted that a number of female candidates in Berlusconi's party shared a background in television or entertainment and were chosen more for their physical appeal than their political credentials. Lario dismissed them as "shameless trash" (Gruppo Espresso 2009), and the candidates were promptly removed from the electoral lists. Then, upon discovering that Berlusconi had attended the eighteenth birthday of Noemi Letizia, an aspiring showgirl from Naples, Lario accused her husband of "consorting with minors" (Cresto-Dina 2009). A few days later she filed for divorce. Though previously the Italian press had tended to ignore the private lives of politicians, Berlusconi's sex scandals were reported in major Italian newspapers, signaling that the increasing publicity of politicians' private spheres had over time given a whole new dimension to the political battle in Italy.

The final episodes of this difficult period came from two unexpected sources. The first involved the revelations of escort Patrizia D'Addario, who handed to Italian prosecutors the audiovisual recordings of two encounters she had had in Berlusconi's residence in Rome, one involving sexual intercourse (Bonini 2009). In the second, paparazzo Antonello Zappadu took pictures of Berlusconi's private mansion in Sardinia, which showed scantily clad young girls entertaining him and famous guests, including an entirely naked Mirek Topolanek, former Czech prime minister (Bisso 2009).

In a 2009 article written for *The Guardian*, editor-in-chief of *La Repubblica* Ezio Mauro commented that Berlusconi's "potent mixture of the personal and political has become his undoing." What Mauro saw as "the most ambitious experiment in modern populism that the West has known"—based on the constant "consecration of the leader before his people" and the removal of "every barrier between the public and the private"—was coming to an end. Just as with the crisis of the AC Milan brand, Berlusconi's brand as a public figure and politician began to fray.

We argued in previous sections that Berlusconi's brand of politics operates according to a logic of seduction rather than according to a more traditional model based on rational persuasion. Sports victories, picture-perfect families, luxurious homes, and tanned and attractive bodies are the tenets of a "new dimension of leadership," in which both physical and fictional appearances "are used to build consensus" (Ceccarelli 2009). In Italy, as in other contemporary liberal democracies, the media exposure of politicians has increasingly contributed to the politicization of their private spheres and to their transformation into mediated celebrities. Coming from advertising and television, Berlusconi was a pioneer in this process of "celebrification" of politics (Turner 2004). By seamlessly moving from soccer to television in order to maximize the exposure of his own brand, Berlusconi contributed to the erosion of the distinction between private and public. This has facilitated the aggregation of different communities of public and audiences around the same brand and the circulation of values among genres. But negative stories can circulate as well, simultaneously affecting multiple domains.

The exposure of the private sphere has over time generated an increase in the supply of personal information that cannot always be monitored and controlled by the gatekeeping function of the traditional media, often creating the conditions for critical information to be released and for scandals to arise.[4] Giuseppe D'Avanzo, Italian political journalist, commented that Berlusconi's politics "has been so far an effective consensus machine" based on

a "powerful psychological weaponry… and on the full control of the entertainment industry that creates myths, lifestyle, desires and spells." However, by the spring of 2009 Berlusconi was "tied to an agenda that he hasn't written… He is forced to chase a 'reality' that he can't remove from public attention" (D'Avanzo 2009). The brand has been first extensively exposed and then challenged by its public. What remains to be seen is whether continued exposure will cause the brand to enter an irreversible crisis, or instead create the conditions for transformation.

Political Brands in the New Media Milieu: Risks and Opportunities

Berlusconi is said to have once claimed that "with the housewives I freed, I could become Prime Minister" (qtd. in Wolff 2009). He was most likely referring to how his private networks had engaged the "housewife" demographic with targeted programming and tailored advertising, giving this segment of the population both cultural representation and a steady flow of entertainment to facilitate their daily chores. The claim sums up Berlusconi's vision that demographics segmented for marketing purposes can develop into cultural identities and in turn into political ones. The economic and cultural operations required to achieve such innovative political strategy demanded the creation of a sophisticated seductive apparatus that started with his television network, evolved via the creation of the Forza Italia party, and culminated with the celebration of the persona and body of Berlusconi himself. As a result, Berlusconi now maintains an electoral base consisting of voters who engage in a relationship with him based on trust and affection. Berlusconi's celebrity-based brand of politics functions particularly well as a source of identification between a leader and the public. Although he is a billionaire with political and financial ties to the world's elites, Berlusconi's supporters perceive him as a relatable "people's man" with whom they can connect emotionally. This type of media-centered populism works by dispersing itself into the private spheres of identity and affection—what Musso (2008) calls the management of emotions—and by focusing on the bonds of trust that the personal qualities of leaders can elicit.

In this context, the recent scandals could produce two potential outcomes. On the one hand, the breach of reputation suffered by Berlusconi's brand of politics can have a detrimental effect not only in a moral sense—as

recently expressed by the Catholic Church's criticism of Berlusconi's conduct[5]—but also, more importantly, in the political realm. In the most recent European elections, Berlusconi's party did not perform as well as expected, possibly as a consequence of his impending divorce and extramarital affairs (Fiammeri 2009). The scandals revealed that the border separating the allure of Berlusconi's physical and symbolic persona and "political porn," as one commentator aptly defined it, can be very thin.[6] The recent revelations about Berlusconi's extramarital affairs, his abuses of power, and the allegations about his consorting with minors have affected the stability of his brand as a family man. Patrizia D'Addario has emerged as the most vocal representative of what a Spanish newspaper has called "the revolt of *veline*" (Mora 2009)—the challenging of Berlusconi's dynamics of power by some of the very instruments of his show business politics, the attractive young starlets. Such issues ignite a critical reaction both from within and from outside his private sphere. Just as managing AC Milan as a show-business operation upset fans and players alike, so did his image-obsessed political strategy meet with mounting criticism and backlash.

These episodes reveal the inherent instability of Berlusconi's political project. His type of branded politics is increasingly difficult to sustain within a mediated environment where the potential for access to and dissemination of private information has multiplied. It is telling that Berlusconi has pushed aggressively for a law restricting the spreading of information obtained through wiretappings during criminal investigations (Galluzzo 2008). Yet in the media-saturated space of contemporary society, an image-based politics increasingly exposes itself to breaches and interferences not only by means of prosecutors but also by uncontrolled sources of information such as the ubiquitous paparazzi or even regular citizens.

On the other hand, the Berlusconi brand has proven its ability to constantly transform itself. It is possible that this period of crisis can be seized upon to evolve into new directions. As Fiske has argued, scandals as media events are "moments of visibility and turbulence," when elites and publics negotiate the definition of the border between public and private spheres (1994: 7). In the aftermath of the scandals, Berlusconi dismissed the accusations, admitting to "not being a saint" (qtd. in RCS 2009). From the religious tones used in his political debut to the more mundane tones of recent public appearances, Berlusconi has demonstrated an uncanny ability to constantly navigate among different genres and types of discourse. As a result, he has tended to maintain his "fan" communities. Even after the recent

scandals, Berlusconi retained solid approval ratings in Italy; he remains one of Europe's most popular political figures. Thanks to his media empire and his ability to connect with public sentiment, Berlusconi has also been able to remain at the center of media attention. In a political sphere based on the economy of attention, what seems to be essential is the ability to attract and maintain interest in the brand. It could be argued that Berlusconi's scandals fit into a framework of desire satisfaction that can strengthen a sense of identification among some segments of the voting population. It is in this sense that crisis can be turned into opportunity.

Here is one opportunity: Berlusconi's latest mutation is into a rock star. In November 2009, the Italian edition of *Rolling Stone* declared him "rock star of the year" on the basis of his celebrity and sexual exploits (Reguly 2009). Berlusconi's brand has now become that of a libertine celebrity, a transgressor of norms. In the new media milieu of reality television, saturated by individualism and narcissistic self-exposure, Berlusconi the "one-man brand" may still be the ideal representative of his public.

Notes

1. Quoted in Guarino and Ruggeri (1987).
2. See Guarino and Ruggeri (1987).
3. See Ginsborg (1990).
4. For example, see Delli Carpini and Williams (2004).
5. For example, see La Rocca (2009).
6. See Hourihane (2009).

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