Journal of Political Marketing

Web Sponsorship and Campaign Effects: Assessing the Difference Between Positive and Negative Web Sites

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Web Sponsorship and Campaign Effects: Assessing the Difference Between Positive and Negative Web Sites

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This 2 × 3 experiment investigated the impact of Web-based political campaigns on viewers. Three distinct sites were created as stimuli: the first is positive about the feature candidate, the second is negative toward his or her opponent, and the third contains both positive and negative messages. Subjects viewed identical Web sites sponsored by the feature candidate and by an interest group. Researchers then tested for potential differences in liking, voting intention, credibility, and apathy. Results show that positive messages lead to higher liking and voting intention. Site sponsorship only makes a difference to credibility of negative information. Additionally, viewers' apathy plays a significant role in political information processing.

KEYWORDS negative campaign, political campaign, sponsorship, Web campaign

More and more political pundits have pointed out the increasing importance of the Web for campaigns. Jesse Ventura was probably the first successful gubernatorial candidate who was able to raise substantial funding and recruit volunteers using the Internet. Howard Dean's upsurge in 2003 was primarily attributed to his multifaceted Web functions. In early 2007, Barack Obama was able to surpass Hillary Clinton in fundraising by using the Internet to raise almost $7 million (Zeleny and Healy, 2007). Candidates' home pages

are usually the first stop for voters who are serious about learning more about the candidates. Additionally, the Web is a unique mass medium in that candidates are allowed to present their values, beliefs, and platforms without the interaction of a gatekeeper and without the need for paid advertisements. The key here is that the Web allows candidates to present their own platforms and their views about opponents without the traditional context and background of advertisements. This vehicle shift might create an impact on the perception of the electorate.

The medium of the Internet itself presents different capacities and functions from traditional counterparts. For example, the level of "information density" (Lang, Park, and Fox, 2006) provided by this medium is much higher than that of other media. The processing of information by those who turn to the Internet as a media source is expected to differ significantly from the information processing of those people who turn to traditional media. Also, the use of the Web as a political information source has potential impact on the news media as well as on voters. In fact, a recent study found that in the 2000 presidential election, the campaign agenda presented on candidate Web sites later became the agenda of traditional news media (Ku, Kaid, and Pfau, 2003). Therefore, ensuring that candidates' home pages are credible and persuasive becomes essential.

Web pages launched by independent interest groups or issue advocacy organizations are equally significant in their influence. Organizations such as the NRA, NOW, and the Sierra Club all sponsor Web sites to propagate their messages and indirectly support candidates. The fact that the independent site www.moveon.org was able to lure a great number of supporters in political campaigns is a vivid example of Web influence in the political arena (Ives, 2004). These independent organizations' influence is worth noting, particularly in the wake of the campaign finance law that does not limit individual donation (or soft money) to these independent organizations (Van Natta and Oppel, 2002).

Additionally, there is no doubt that the Internet has made searching and accessing information far easier than using traditional media. The new medium has surpassed the traditional media in the convenience of search and retrieval, multimedia, and information storage capability. Research has shown that the rate of audiences using the Internet has grown exponentially, reaching more than 68 percent of American households as of May 2005 (Fox, 2005). It is therefore no wonder that traditional media feel fierce competition from the Internet and that media researchers are obliged to research the impact of this new medium on its audience.

In the political spectrum of our society, one of the Internet's main functions has been to provide timely and sufficient information to the electorate so that they can make a sound decision in elections. The Web sites of political candidates are probably the most direct and resource-rich place for curious voters to seek information on a candidate's background, platform, and issue positions (Davis, 1999). However, candidates' official Web sites do not always

appear in the search result when one uses any of the search engines. Various interest groups or civic organizations may also launch Web sites to support, attack, or lampoon political candidates, which can confuse and obscure users. For example, www.gwbush.com, in spite of the seemingly official domain name, was not an official site that George W. Bush's campaign team sponsored in 2000.

Additionally, we have recently seen consumers of the widely used search engine Google manipulating the findings of the search engine to make their own political statements. Google "bombers," as they have been known in the cyberworld, have linked phrases such as "miserable failure" to the official Web sites of George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton, and filmmaker Michael Moore.

This paper aimed to investigate the impact of candidate- and independent organization–sponsored Web sites that provide ample information about political candidates. We examined how and to what extent these sites affect viewers' attitudes toward the opposing candidates, their learning, and subsequently their voting intention. Additionally, we explored the potential difference of impact among positive, negative, and juxtaposed information about the candidates. This research topic is timely and increasingly important because more and more people—especially politically intrigued audiences— access the Internet, rather than TV or other traditional media, for serious political information that cannot be obtained elsewhere (Johnson and Kaye, 2000), and the younger generation relies more, if not exclusively, on the Internet to get involved in politics than previous generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Web-Based Campaigns

In spite of a great number of empirical studies about media effects, research directly addressing the impact of Web-based political information on the electorate is still in the infant stage. Given the nature of the Internet—whose users cannot be precisely identified and measured by researchers—it is technically challenging to assess the exclusive impact of Web-based messages on viewers. Our survey of existing literature only leads to various anecdotes about the Internet's increasing popularity in the campaign circle (e.g., Lillkvist, 2004). The present study, however, is interested in knowing how distinctive characteristics of Web messages affect people's perception, the credibility issue of varied sponsorships of messages, and Web information processing. A survey of the above three categories of literature is as follows.

Effect of Political Messages

A great number of political campaign literature focused on the impact of advertisements, especially ads broadcast on television (Kaid and Johnston,

2001). Political advertisements, particularly negative ones, have been able to catch most scholars' and media practitioners' attention primarily because their tangible size, specific scope, and dramatic highlight of a simple message on an issue. Negative political advertising has been found to demobilize and alienate voters (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon, 1999). Nevertheless, advertisements are not the only vehicle for campaign practitioners to convey candidates' messages to the general public. A large amount of the research on political advertising has concentrated on the impacts of the valence of the messages. This study is also interested in investigating the effect of negative, positive, or comparative information (posted on candidate-sponsored and independent group–sponsored Web sites).

While positive messages would almost always elevate a feature candidate's support level, the findings about negative messages' impacts—the intended and unintended or backlash effects—are not consistent across empirical studies (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner, 2007). For example, Jasperson and Fan (2002) found that negative political information can, sometimes, induce backlash effect, which was attributed to low source credibility and overwhelming ad volume. Pinkleton, Um, and Austin (2002) found that negative ads had a lower utility rating, and the more negative the advertisement, the more negativism subjects reported toward political campaigns. However, their results did not show significant effects on cynicism, efficacy, or apathy, indicating a lack of uniform findings about the impact of negative advertising on voting (Pinkleton, Um, and Austin, 2002).

Some scholars were concerned with the backlash effect of running negative campaigns. Recent empirical studies (e.g., Perloff and Kinsey, 1992; Shen and Wu, 2002) showed that negative advertising engenders no backlash effects, whereas others (e.g., Shapiro and Rieger, 1992) indicated that negative advertising led to a greater number of votes for the ad's target candidate than for the sponsor. Regardless of the conflicting findings, campaigners tend to believe in the effectiveness of negative ads and continue to use them in political races (Trent and Friedenberg, 2002).

Many candidate Web sites share a similar function with the ads they place on television, even though the amount of information in cyberspace is greater and the tone is more likely to be positive (Klotz, 1998). Because political candidates put their information on the Web (Connell, 1998), and given that the younger generation relies on the Internet for news and information (Chyi and Lasorsa, 1999), it is worthwhile to investigate the impact of the political candidates Web sites.

The past literature was used to form the following hypotheses:

> H1a: Overall, participants will like the featured candidate better than his or her opponent.
> H1b: Participants will like the featured candidate better after exposure to only positive Web sites.

H1c: Participants will like the opponent candidate less after exposure to only negative Web sites.

H2a: Participants will learn more about the featured candidate from the positive Web sites than other sites that include negative information about his opponent.

H2b: Participants will learn more about the opponent candidate from the negative Web sites than other sites that include positive information about the featured candidate.

H3: Participants will have less apathy toward the political process after exposure to the positive Web sites.

H4: Participants will have a higher voting intention for the featured candidate than for his or her opponent.

Credibility of Web Sites

Source of information is highly relevant to perceived credibility of the information (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Since the advent of the Web, the medium was questioned for its perceived level of credibility. However, a 2002 study by the Online News Association found that survey respondents believe that online news is about as credible as news from other traditional sources (Feinberg and Stone, 2002). In fact, cable news Web sites were ranked as the third most credible from a pool of 16 choices, and 13 percent of respondents stated that the Internet is their most trusted source of news (Feinberg and Stone, 2002). These findings echo Kiousis' (2001) study that indicated that the Internet as a news medium seems to trail newspapers in credibility, but it is still viewed more credibly than television news. Various scholars (e.g., Metzger, Flanagin, and Zwarun, 2003) pointed out that few Web users have the skills or habits to identify the authenticity and reliability of Web sites and that it takes high-level Internet literacy to truly comprehend the mechanism of producing and hosting Web sites. But overall, the public is eager to search the Internet for the information needed, despite the risk of possibly retrieving incredible or incorrect information.

The use of the Web to gather news and political information is growing, particularly among younger voters. A Pew Research Center (2008) survey indicated that 37 percent of the public and 55 percent of Internet users say they get news online. An earlier survey found that 51 percent of respondents said that the Internet is an important source of information in the political decision making process (Faucheux, 2000). Additionally, these users were found to be twice as likely to vote, which further shows the importance of campaigning through the Internet in the political world.

Given the unique attributes of the Web—particularly its affordable production cost, unlimited space, and widely available authoring software—it would be intriguing to examine whether political sites sponsored by independent organizations or interest groups will be perceived as equally

credible as those sponsored by candidates. Alias sites that aim to mimic official candidate sites, with identifiable domain names, tend to provide as much information and even more entertainment appeal than candidates' official Web pages. Most of the time, the sponsorship of these alias sites is unclear or unknown, but the sites may still pop up in the midst of all relevant sites using search engines like Yahoo or Google. Therefore, a certain level of persuasion could be associated with those alias sites, which merits exploration.

Past studies showed that independent sponsorships of political ads (Groenendyk and Valentino, 2002) and established sources (such as the *New York Times*) of Web-based news stories (Greer, 2003) improve people's perception of credibility level. Web campaigning seems to cut across and leap beyond the known categories of sponsorship and source in that both political candidates (especially incumbent) and independent organizations could present an equal level of credibility to Web surfers. Additionally, Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (1949) found that two-sided information is considered more persuasive to educated audiences. In light of this, presentation of both candidates (featured as well as opposing candidate) should be perceived as more credible in the case of Web campaigning to college students. The aforementioned empirical studies on credibility and Self's (1996) three dimensions of credibility—reliability, truthfulness, and accuracy—helped us form the following hypotheses:

H5: Participants will perceive the candidate information presented by candidate-sponsored Web sites as less credible than that from the independent group–sponsored Web sites.

H6: Participants will perceive Web sites that contain information about both candidates as more credible than the Web sites that contain information on only one candidate.

Processing Web Information

Graber (1984) has focused on distilling information-processing strategies of the audience of conventional media. As suggested by scholars (e.g., Zaller, 1992) who studied traditional media use in political process, people with different demographics and political involvement may process identical political information very differently. For example, Zaller (1992) maintained that politically inattentive persons will be more likely to accept persuasive information. Yet, the known concepts derived from traditional media use may not necessarily be applicable to the Web; the motivation, attention, and utilization of traditional and Web media can be drastically different. Another difference may come from demographics. Youth, for example, is found to use the Internet more efficiently than the elderly (Cody, Dunn,

Hoppin, and Wendt, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2000). It is therefore logical to speculate that they are likely to process the Web-based information more efficiently. Additionally, researchers have argued that campaign strategies and the interactions of candidates and voters are being "reshaped" by the Web (Foot and Schneider, 2002).

Existing political views can be one factor that filters political information processing. Festinger (1957) predicted that people would evade or avoid threatening messages to avert cognitive dissonance. In line with this thought, viewers are expected to search and retain attitude-consistent messages and disregard counter-attitudinal counterparts on the Internet. Similarly, viewers are expected to perceive the Web sites offering agreeable messages as more credible than other sites.

Johnson and Kaye (2002) found that politically interested Web users who believed online sources to be "moderately or very" credible increased significantly from the 1996 to the 2000 presidential election. Additionally, they were interested in determining whether media reliance on the convenience of the Internet had a prediction on perceived Web credibility. Through survey methodology, they determined that reliance on traditional media was the strongest predictor of perceived online credibility. However, reliance on the Web did not influence the perceived credibility of Web-based information (Johnson and Kaye, 2002).

Ku, Kaid, and Pfau (2003) found that in the 2000 presidential election, those exposed to candidate Web sites were more likely to be exposed to the actual campaign agenda than were traditional media users. Additionally, they found that candidate Web sites had the only direct agenda-setting impact on the public (Ku, Kaid, and Pfau, 2003).

Based on these ideas, the following research questions were developed:

R1: How do demographics of participants affect their Web campaign reception?
R2: How does political interest interfere with the Web reception process?

METHOD

To provide answers to the hypotheses and research questions, an experiment with 2×3 design was implemented. Specifically, the experiment was designed to test the difference of impact between campaign Web sites of different orientations sponsored by a fictitious senatorial candidate, John Robinson, and an independent interest group. Undergraduate students from various mass communication classes of a Southern public university were recruited to participate in the experiment sessions on a voluntary basis. The total number of subjects was 223, with a roughly equal number of

respondents assigned to each of the six cells. Each of the conditions represents one sponsor-specific stimulus to which participants were exposed (positive information about Robinson sponsored by Robinson, positive information about Robinson sponsored by the independent interest group, negative information about Robinson's opponent sponsored by Robinson, and so forth). Of the participants, about 28 percent were male, 82 percent were white, and their median age was 21. Most of the participants were juniors. Forty-four percent of the participants identified themselves with the Republican Party, while 27 percent reported themselves as Democrats.

Six distinct Web sites were designed to mirror conventional candidate home pages or Web sites of interest groups. Three of them appear to be official sites of a feature candidate and the other three sites are sponsored by a civic nonprofit organization called Citizens for Change, which supports the fictitious senatorial candidate. Of the six sites, four contain identical information and pictures about the feature candidate John Robinson, except for sponsorship. All four sites include links to Robinson's short biography, platforms, campaign news, and contact information, yet only two of them provide links to sites that attack his opponent Bill Carter. Two other Web sites sponsored by the feature candidate and by Citizens for Change contain only negative messages about Robinson's fictitious opponent Bill Carter. Both feature and opponent candidates are white, male, and middle-aged (40s) and share similar backgrounds and political experiences. The two candidates are running for a Senate seat in Illinois, which was picked to avoid participants' acquaintance with or prior knowledge about the politicians. The two fictional candidates and their platforms were purposively not associated or identifiable with any political party to reduce party bias.

In the pilot test, 16 students viewed and rated the feature candidate and his opponent to ensure that the messages of the sites had the appropriate level of positive and negative nature. The results of this pretest, with a significant α value, showed a successful manipulation of negativity in the opponent candidate. The participants in the regular experiment sessions were briefed first about the purpose of the study, signed the consent forms, and then were instructed to view the designated Web site. The moderator also explained that the site they were seeing was directly accessed from either the feature candidate's home page or the interest group Web site. After the participants finished viewing the Web site, the post-test instruments were given to assess their attitudes toward the candidates and their demographic information. Each session took roughly 25 minutes.

FINDINGS

The first statistical result indicates that participants like the featured candidate, Robinson, better than his opponent, Carter (M: 2.39 vs. 3.73;

$t = -16.625$, $df = 296$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H1-A is supported. H1-B states that participants will like Robinson better after exclusive exposure to the positive sites than to other sites that include negative information about Carter. H1-B is not supported because the *t*-test result is insignificant ($t = .668$, $df = 150$, $p = .505$). However, it is interesting to point out that backlash effect is not evident because the candidate that provides negative information about his opponent received even slightly more favorable rating (*M*: 2.36 vs. 2.43). H1-C tests whether participants like the opponent Carter less because of their exposure to the negative-only Web site. The statistical result (*M*: 3.97 vs. 3.49, $t = 4.067$, $df = 144$, $p < .001$) supports the hypothesis, indicating that the attack information is more damaging when it is exclusively negative and not accompanied with other messages.

H2-A states that respondents will learn more about the featured candidate from positive Web sites than from other sites that provide identical information but also attack the opponent. The result shows that the knowledge gain about Robinson ($M = 3.88$) is not statistically different from the level of knowledge gain from other sites that also attack Carter ($M = 3.80$; $t = .470$, $df = 150$, $p = .639$). Therefore, H2-A is not supported. H2-B aims to test whether the knowledge gained about Carter via negative sites will be greater than from the sites that additionally include positive information about Robinson. The result is not supportive, either ($M = 3.48$ vs. 3.6; $t = -.927$, $df = 144$, $p = .356$). These findings suggest that Web-based learning about candidates is independent of the nature of campaign messages.

Various scholars (e.g., Pinkleton and Austin, 2004; Kenski and Jamieson, 2008) have pointed out the younger generation's apathy toward politics. Negative campaigns were blamed as contributing to political cynicism and disinterest (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). This study, with youngsters as participants, provides a great opportunity to compare the attitudes after varied exposures. The apathetic attitude was extracted from five distinctive questions that tap each participant's inclination toward elections in general. Even though the mean values indicate a difference among the groups that receive different candidate messages (positive $M = .063$; mixed $M = -.009$; negative $M = -.058$), one-way ANOVA resulted in insignificant statistic ($F = .275$, $df = 2, 220$, $p = .760$). Therefore, the third hypothesis is not supported.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that Web viewers will be more likely to vote for the candidate featured in the positive Web sites than in the negative counterparts. The result shows that both types of sites have significant—positive and negative, respectively—persuasion power, yet as predicted voting intention was much higher for those who were exposed to positive messages (positive $M = 2.68$ vs. negative $M = 3.88$; $t = -12.98$, $df = 296$, $p < .001$). H4 is supported. Interestingly, the backlash effect does not appear to exist, since the viewers who saw both positive and negative sites are even slightly more likely to vote for the featured candidate than those who only saw the positive site (although the result is statistically insignificant, $t = 1.018$,

$df = 150$, $p = .310$). This finding may provide empirical support for campaigners who attack opponent candidates and anticipate little backlash effect.

H5 and H6 hypothesized that sponsorship and message orientation of the Web sites will affect people's perception of the credibility level of campaign information. The result shows that the information about the feature candidate presented by independent interest groups is perceived as slightly more credible despite statistical insignificance ($t = 1.629$, $df = 150$, $p = .105$). It also shows that the information about the feature candidate presented in the sites that attack his opponent is perceived to be slightly more credible, although, once again, the difference is not statistically significant ($t = 1.017$, $df = 150$, $p = .311$). Additionally, the negative information about the opponent (Carter) presented by the independent interest group was perceived as more credible than the identical information presented by Robinson's site ($t = 2.705$, $df = 144$, $p = .008$). The negative information about Carter presented on the Web sites that also contain positive messages about Robinson is perceived as more credible than the identical information presented without Robinson's campaign message ($t = 2.129$, $df = 144$, $p = .035$). Therefore, H5 is supported only when the candidate message is negative. H6 is also supported only when the negative information is the target of examination. The finding leads to an intriguing conclusion: attack campaigns on the Web are perceived to be more credible when placed in a comparison context, whereas promoting campaigns are not.

The first research question asked whether demographic factors may play a role in determining the impact of Web-based campaign messages. Gender, race, income level, party affiliation, and the user's experience of the Internet search were therefore treated as covariates in the ANCOVA models of predicting liking, learning, voting, and credibility level, respectively. Table 1 shows that, aside from race and income, no other demographic traits seem to affect people's processing of Web-based campaign messages. White voters appeared to like the featured candidate more ($F = 11.317$, $p = .001$) and were

TABLE 1 ANCOVA of Liking, Learning, Voting, and Credibility (Toward Featured Candidate, Robinson)

IV	Favorability	Learning	Voting	Credibility
Sponsorship	0.238	1.800	0.150	1.411
Attack	0.896	0.000	0.320	1.282
Sponsorship X Attack	0.128	0.386	0.353	0.626
Covariates				
Gender	2.052	1.694	0.466	2.569
Race	11.317**	3.055	5.570*	0.757
Income	4.687*	0.328	4.737*	0.706
Party	0.243	0.212	1.088	0.544
Net experience	0.002	0.012	0.366	0.628
R^2	.165	.085	.101	.069

Presented in the cells are F values. $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

TABLE 2 ANCOVA of Liking, Learning, Voting, and Credibility (Toward Attacked Candidate, Carter)

IV	Favorability	Learning	Voting	Credibility
Sponsorship	3.303	2.324	3.673	5.737*
Attack	8.857**	1.80	1.091	2.927
Sponsorship X Attack	0.682	1.636	0.618	0.038
Covariates				
Gender	1.869	0.230	0.633	0.11
Race	1.727	7.925**	0.275	0.000
Income	0.211	0.539	1.253	0.008
Party	1.273	2.677	0.827	1.358
Net experience	0.305	0.035	0.419	1.629
R^2	.173	.09	.091	.093

Presented in the cells are F values. $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

more likely than minority viewers to vote for him ($F = 5.570$, $p = .02$). Income level seemed to play a similar role: the higher the family income, the more likely the subject was to like ($F = 4.687$, $p = .033$) and to vote for the featured candidate ($F = 4.737$, $p = .032$). The fact that the candidate was white perhaps led to varied liking and voting tendencies between white and minority viewers, but the income factor was unclear to us. Perhaps some of the issues resonated better with the well-to-do subjects.

It is intriguing to note that none of the demographics or manipulations can accurately predict learning, credibility, and apathetic attitude toward election when the campaign message is predominantly positive. In contrast to this phenomenon, race played a significant role in negative message processing ($F = 7.925$, $p = .006$), while sponsorship was crucial in perceived credibility of attack information ($F = 5.737$, $p = .018$; see Table 2. Also, negative campaign messages—in line with anticipation—generated a substantial impact on favorability toward the opponent ($F = 8.857$, $p = .004$). Last, none of the demographics or manipulations affected voting toward the opponent.

Our second research question centers on whether viewers' attitude toward politics may affect their political information processing. Table 3

TABLE 3 MANCOVA of Credibility and Learning (About the Featured Candidate)

IV	Credibility				Learning			
	df	MS	F	Sig	df	MS	F	Sig
Attack	1	1.285	1.319	0.253	1	0.998	0.094	0.760
Sponsorship	1	3.540	3.634	0.059	1	3.776	3.548	0.062
Attack X Sponsorship	1	0.340	0.349	0.555	1	0.085	0.008	0.929
Covariate								
Apathy	1	4.036	4.143	0.044	1	19.106	17.955	0.000
Error	147	0.974			147	1.064		
	$R^2 = .052$				$R^2 = .122$			

TABLE 4 MANCOVA of Credibility and Learning (About the Attacked Candidate)

IV	Credibility				Learning			
	df	MS	F	Sig	df	MS	F	Sig
Praise	1	4.918	5.572	0.020	1	0.501	0.837	0.362
Sponsorship	1	5.178	5.867	0.017	1	0.704	1.177	0.280
Praise X Sponsorship	1	1.308	1.481	0.226	1	0.304	0.508	0.477
Covariate								
Apathy	1	8.210	9.301	0.003	1	5.008	8.370	0.004
Error	141	0.883			141	0.598		
	$R^2 = .142$				$R^2 = .065$			

presents the findings of MANCOVA testing for both credibility and learning about the featured candidate and his opponent. Participants' apathy did affect their processing of positive campaign messages ($\eta^2 = .121$, $F(2, 146) = 10.039$, $p < .001$). Sponsorship of the Web sites was also a significant factor ($\eta^2 = .041$, $F(2, 146) = 3.161$, $p = .045$). Table 4 shows the details of the MANCOVA model: apathy level affected greatly how and to what extent a person learned from the Web sites and whether the Web-based information was deemed credible. It is interesting, however, to discern the higher R^2 for the learning model.

When processing attack campaigns, people's apathy seems to be a crucial factor again ($\eta^2 = .117$, $F(2, 140) = 9.246$, $p < .001$). Web sponsorship ($\eta^2 = .046$, $F(2, 140) = 3.372$, $p = .037$) and whether the sites contain positive information about the featured candidate ($\eta^2 = .042$, $F(2, 140) = 3.080$, $p = .049$) are also important to negative information processing. Contrary to the finding presented in Table 4, the R^2 is greater for the credibility model than for the learning counterpart, suggesting that the nature of campaign information interferes with the model's power. Overall, political apathy appears to exert a significant influence on people's processing of Web-based political messages.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that message orientation—positive or negative—does lead to different liking levels toward the candidates and also predict voting intention. This is exactly why negative campaigns are rampant during elections: they work! The study results also show that negative information about opponents can function well to sponsoring candidates' advantage and risk little backlash. The mixed results about sponsorship's impact on perception of credibility are intriguing: sponsorship only makes a difference to credibility of negative information. The above conclusions indicate that

respondents' Internet literacy is not universally high and they do not always discern the sponsorship of Web sites. This phenomenon echoes Metzger, Flanagin, and Zwarun's (2003) finding and merits attention of campaign policy and regulation experts.

The message orientation and juxtaposition of conflicting campaign messages do not seem to affect respondents' learning. Also, contrary to what was found on political apathy, exposure to negative political messages on the Web does not lead to lower interest in the political process. This lack of impact may be due to short-term exposure; future studies should seek to investigate the influence of long-term or multiple exposures. Because the younger generation is known for political disinterest and inexperience, future study should recruit subjects of varying age groups.

Race and income appear to be the only two demographic factors that affect people's processing of Web-based campaign information. Yet, more research on how these two variables can filter reception of Web messages is needed. Because the platforms of the feature candidate and his opponent are not clearly indicative of their party affiliation, it is hard to detect whether certain issue stances or other factors could have attributed to the differences in favorability rating and voting intention.

The finding that a person's apathetic attitude toward politics affects his or her learning and perception of credibility of political messages on the Web is perhaps not surprising. Nevertheless, this empirical evidence is meaningful and deserves further discussion about treating political apathy as an independent variable in research models, rather than just a dependent variable that is a product of negative campaigning (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Also, the distinct impact of apathetic attitude on credibility and learning across positive and negative messages is intriguing: it affects more on learning of positive message and credibility of negative message. In other words, apathetic people may believe in positive campaigns but do not necessarily remember them; they may not believe in negative campaigns but do remember them. This intertwined effect between orientation of message and political apathy should be examined further.

This experiment of Web-based campaign sites is not perfect. Several limitations of the design might have affected the results. First, the domain names of the six Web sites viewed by participants may not have appeared authentic enough, since they did not have Web addresses that resemble regular campaign sites such as GeorgeWBush.com or JohnKerry.com. Future studies on this topic may need to purchase appropriate domain names to elevate the level of authenticity.

Another limitation of the experiment resides on the confined extent of the negative attacks toward the opponent candidate. To assure comparability for experimental purposes, the sites that attack the opponent appear similar to the sites that support the feature candidate. In other words, the format and style are identical; the only difference is the content.

In reality, however, mudslinging statements or attack ads may be carried out through various eye-catching visuals and presented in multimedia fashion. This limitation might have affected viewers' processing and evaluation of the negative information. Also, the fact that the election does not take place in the viewers' home state might have abated their interest in knowing the candidates and the issues. But this study is only a start to examine the impact of a new campaign format that is bound to attract more researchers' attention.

In conclusion, this study provides direct evidence of Web campaign effectiveness, particularly the impact of negative Web messages on audiences. The orientation of the campaign message does not appear to affect viewers' attitude or knowledge. More importantly, sponsorship of negative information about opponents does not lead to backlash, although that kind of information, if sponsored by an independent organization, is perceived as more credible. Last, income level and racial background are found to correlate with viewers' Web information processing. This study's findings should be instrumental for political communication researchers as well as political marketing practitioners.

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