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Fact or Fable:
What Makes Negative Political Ads Effective?

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Fact or Fable:
What Makes Negative Political Ads Effective?

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Abstract

In poll after poll, people say they dislike negative political advertising. Despite these findings, research shows that negative campaign ads are effective. Why the disconnect? Using the paradigm of Storybranding, this paper will examine reasons why people say they dislike political ads but typically act positively toward them. The concept of Storybranding claims that each brand has a latent reputation. Good brands know their reputation and tell stories that are in sync with the reputation. Ads that are not in accord with this real or perceived reputation tend to be rejected as untrustworthy. On the other hand, ads that fit with the real or perceived reputation tend to be viewed as credible even if they are not positive. For the purposes of this paper, each politician is understood to be a brand. This brand is created through the words and actions a candidate expresses over time—actions that are often amplified by the media. For this reason, some candidates are seen as moral or amoral; decisive or indecisive; moderate or immoderate. The key idea to remember is that this personal brand is not dictated by the public or by any campaign's message. Instead, this personal brand is an extension of the candidate's deepest personal convictions. Storybranding fits this reality, because it claims that brands have inner layers (what they are at their core) and outer layers (what is said or done publicly that comes from the inner layer). Successful negative political ads are able to capture the truth of these layers, presenting ads that individuals are already disposed to believe, though they may find the form the ad takes intellectually unpalatable.

Keywords: *advertising, negative ads, political campaigns, political engagement, political marketing*

Introduction

Across the Western World, 2016 was a year when political expectations were defied. Brexit in England (Reidy and Suiter 2016). Donald Trump's election in the United States (Hazen et al. 2016). Pundits claiming that people were fooled by deceitful arguments that tricked them into voting against their self-interest (Goldhill 2017, Mallick 2016).

A common explanation for the political upsets of 2016 is that voters were blinded by ads that amplified the negative at the expense of a more well-rounded (and supposedly true) perspective (Wallace 2016, Kumar 2016). The claim is that voters were manipulated by expert marketing run by political interests. The voice of the people was lost.

Through the years, public opinion research finds strong support for the idea that negative advertising in political campaigns should be strongly curtailed, if not disavowed (Green 2004, Eagan 2015, Miller 2016). People tut-tut when an attack is issued, but the practice never seems to die. In fact, in the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, research indicates the negativity reached an all-time high (Pro-Clinton 2016).

So what explains the discrepancy between opinion research and reality? It appears the use of negativity, though distasteful at an intellectual level, connects with people on a visceral level (Purdy 2016). This gives the ads a power and connectivity that overcomes the intellect and sways those among the voting public by presenting messages with which they are disposed to agree.

To guide our consideration, we will employ the ideas of Jim Signorelli, a communication practitioner. His Storybranding paradigm provides insight into how negative ads influence individuals even though individuals may be poorly disposed toward the type of message on offer. Using the paradigm of Storybranding, this paper will examine reasons why people say they dislike political attack ads but then react in such a positive way toward these ads that campaigns cannot dispense with them.

For the purpose of our discussion, we define a negative political ad as one that impugns the proponents of an issue or the reputation/character of a candidate by either direct statement or clear implication. Negative political ads in the context of this paper should not be understood as criticism of political parties or policies. Parties are excluded because they are organizations. Organizations are not individuals. Policies are the aims of the organization and are, therefore, appropriate targets for criticism.

Why We Dislike Negative Ads

Since the beginning of the new century, there has been a good deal of research into the subject of negative political ads and what voters think of them. These studies have been done in the United States and, increasingly, in nations where democratic forms of government exist. Speaking generally, the

research provides a consistent sense across nations that voters do not appreciate negative ads (Lau et al. 2007, Christiansen 2012, Maier 2015).

Hannah Griffin's (2012) study about voter preferences and turnout for elections finds that as the voting public perceives negativity, they tend to turn out for elections in lower numbers. These findings are intuitive and easy to grasp. Ruth Dassonneville (2010), in a study of a Belgian election, provides a good example. In her discussion about negative ads, she points out an array of research that found campaigns in which a candidate personally attacks his or her opponent created a demobilizing effect on the populace.

This, according to Richard Lau et al. (2007), results in a reduction in a sense among citizens that they have the potency to direct their leadership. "The conclusion to be drawn from the literature is clear: Negative campaigning has the potential to do damage to the political system itself, as it tends to reduce feelings of political efficacy, trust in government, and perhaps even satisfaction with government itself" (p. 1184).

Henrik Christiansen (2012), in a study of European democracies, provides some potential context for the findings of Griffin and Lau. He reports that voters say they dislike negative ads, but rather than correlate that view with turnout, he examines the underlying attitudes of voters. Traditionally, he writes, it is assumed that citizens in democratic nations should be so-called ideal citizens—people who are positively oriented toward the government and who have faith that government can solve problems. It is this group that is considered the ideal, and it is this group that researchers use as their foil for judging the results of negative ads.

But he says there are three other citizen types that are worth understanding. There is another group that is less engaged and less confident in their ability to see problems solved through government. However, this group also has a general trust toward the government and is typically content to let the politicians run things. Christiansen says, "Even though this group is fairly detached from the political sphere, they are quite happy to leave the dirty work to the politicians, who they hold in rather high esteem" (p. 11).

A third group is the watchdogs, people who are basically dissatisfied with the government and the way it functions. This group, though, has a strong sense of their ability to impact political issues, and they have a high sense of political interest. The fourth group is citizens who have negative attitudes across the board.

> They have the lowest degree of political trust, satisfaction with democracy and political interest, and even if the degree of internal political efficacy is slightly higher than the (second) group of citizens, it is still below average. This group on all counts resemble the alienated and confused, politically disenchanted citizens. Here, the critical attitudes have developed into an excessive skepticism (p. 11).

Christiansen's work provides important structure for this area. It is instinctual to desire high voter turnout, substantive public discourse about

important issues, and increasing public engagement in self-government. But Christiansen shows that the voting public can be negatively disposed toward a government or its policies and yet remain positive and engaged.

> It would seem that the debate on whether citizens are growing critical or disenchanted is to some extent misguided. The results (of this study) suggest that there are separate groups of citizens who coexist side by side, even if their relative sizes differ within populations. The results also have a number of important consequences for how we ought to judge political participation, and, in particular, the transformations in political activities that have occurred in recent decades. The declining rates of participation in party activism have caused much worry among scholars. The results obtained here suggest that the root cause of this development is not necessarily tied to a growing skepticism towards the political system (pp. 19-20).

The underlying meaning, often unspoken or not grasped, is that there is a perception that negative ads turn away voters, depress turnout and drive citizens away from the political process. But if political parties exist to win elections and shape policy, where is the sense in giving people what they do *not* want? No party desires to turn off the public. Dassonneville (2010) reports in her study that negative attacks seem not to depress turnout for the candidate who is attacked. From this it can be understood that supporters of a candidate under attack remain in support of the candidate. However, negative ads seem to add to the support obtained by the candidate who uses negative ads.

If Dassonneville's study is correct, there must be something else at work. Perhaps it is worth considering that political parties know something researchers do not—voters *perceive* they dislike negative ads but *respond* favorably when presented with an ad that corresponds with their feelings and thoughts. To explain how this can happen, we now turn to an explanation of Jim Signorelli's Storybranding paradigm.

The Power of Story (branding)

There is a growing body of research that studies political candidates as brands (Collier and Dunn 2014, Murphy 2016). This area of research, which will be considered in the following section of this paper, spans a number of nations where representative governments exist. First, however, it is necessary to introduce the concepts of Jim Signorelli's Storybranding paradigm as we attempt to unravel the reasons why negative political ads proliferate.

Storybranding is a story-based marketing paradigm that explains how brands overcome obstacles in order to create a strong affiliation with prospects (Signorelli 2014). The goal of Storybranding is to create long-lasting relationships that result in a prospect affiliating himself or herself with the brand to the point that they identify with it to the exclusion of other brands.

One of the key differences between Storybranding and traditional marketing is that Storybranding is a brand-first process instead of a customer-first process. Before a brand begins to tell its story, Signorelli says it is important that a brand first know what it *is* instead of finding a customer base and trying to adjust the brand to suit the prospect.

Signorelli posits that every brand (just like every political candidate) has a personal story that consists of the brand's origin, its development and its vision. This sense of knowing "from whence we came" leads to an understanding of what is at the soul of the brand. This soul is called the brand's inner layer. The inner layer of the brand consists of the feelings, attitudes or convictions of the brand.

In the case of a political candidate who is challenging for office, this inner layer could consist of concepts such as making the nation great again; or returning the nation to its founding ideas; or making a fresh start. These can sometimes be seen in campaign slogans such as Brexit's "Take Back Control" (Todd 2017) or Barack Obama's 2008 campaign slogan "Yes We Can" (Mettler 2017). The important thing here, according to Signorelli (2014), is to "… reveal meaning without committing the error of defining it" (p. 34). One of the keys to this marketing paradigm is that the prospect defines this meaning for themselves—the brand does not. Again, it is important to remember that this layer of messaging should show the prospect what the brand *is* at the soul level. It may help to point out that this aspect of Storybranding has an adjunct in communication theory, where it is known as heuristic thinking—mental shortcuts we use to make simple sense out of large ideas or complicated concepts (Cialdini 2001).

The next layer is the brand's outer layer. This is the place where the brand tells the prospect what the functions and benefits of the brand are. To put this another way, this is where the brand tells the prospect what it can *do* for them. In the case of Brexit, many of the ads based on the idea of taking back control focused on the return of large sums of money to Britain that were then going to the EU, so that money could be used to save the National Health Service. Among the other things the Brexit brand would do for Britons was return complete sovereignty to the people (Travis 2016). The important consideration for the brand at this stage is that the outer layer actions/promises of the brand are consistent with the feelings, convictions and attitudes of the inner layer.

At this point in the process the brand begins to look at the prospect, and the brand has to consider how to overcome four obstacles. These four obstacles are awareness, comprehension, association and affiliation (Signorelli 2014). When brands are developing, it is important that the prospect know who or what they are—awareness. The second part, comprehension, is where the prospect has to know what the brand does. In a political setting, this includes some understanding of where the candidate is on the political spectrum and what some of his or her policy prescriptions are.

The third level is association. This is where the brand starts to mean something to the prospect. At this level the things the brand stands for start to have some personal connection to the prospect. A good way to consider this is

that people begin to "date the brand," but they are not yet engaged to it. In politics, this is the point at which the prospect begins to consider what a world with a particular candidate or policy in place might look like.

The final step is affiliation with the brand. This is the point where the soul of the brand connects to the soul of prospect and the prospect starts to define for himself or herself the human values and beliefs of the brand. This is the point where the prospect identifies with the brand and becomes loyal to it. One example of this can be seen in a widely reported quote from Donald Trump in early 2016 when he told reporters, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and I wouldn't lose any voters" (Diamond 2016, para. 2). This was an acknowledgement from the candidate that he had a core of voters who had reached affiliation with him—and no matter what he did, these people so identified with him that he could never lose them.

Signorelli (2014) says the best brands are those that address all these obstacles and overcome them. Until this happens, "… the brand will remain vulnerable to the advances and story of a competing brand … as resonance with a brand increases, resistance to it decreases" (pp. 43, 194).

> Clothing stories in truth is a powerful way to get people to open the doors of their mind to the truth you carry. The purpose of stories is to make your truth real for others. Stories do not point a finger at us while telling us how to think and feel. Rather, they invite us to think and feel for ourselves (p. 23).

Values, beliefs and attitudes are transmitted through the things that are said, through the stories that are told in speeches and via ads. The power in these stories is not in what they sell or in what they tell people to believe, it is in what people themselves see and understand when they hear the stories. In communication, these are called associative meanings, which is meaning that is connoted to a brand by a prospect. The brand does not make this meaning and cannot control it. Associative meanings have to be made by influence (and by stories) but they cannot be forced or demanded (Frey 2004).

The power in Storybranding is that the prospect is not sold by the brand, but the prospect essentially converts themselves by allowing the inner layer meanings of the brand to connect with the feelings, opinions, convictions, senses, or expectations that are latent within the soul of the prospect. As Signorelli (2014) points out, "Successful brands promote their product claims by wrapping them in the clothing of the bigger causes they support. These are life causes their audience can identify with … people do not form relationships with any branded object's positioning. They form relationships with what the brand means to them in human terms" (pp. 26, 173).

Candidates as Brands

In the book *All Marketers are Liars*, Seth Godin (2009) writes:

> Great stories agree with our worldview. The best stories don't teach people anything new, the best stories already agree with what the audience already believes and makes the members of the audience feel smart and secure, reminding them that they were right in the first place (p. 13).

This quote sums up the goal of political candidates as a brand. It is not the purpose of any candidate to teach people new things. Instead, candidates—in accord with the Storybranding technique—strive to remind people of what they believe. In addition, scholars in democratic nations are coming to realize that there is now a nexus between how people view consumer products and how people view political candidates.

In a study of Indian politics and campaigns, Saikat Banerjee and Bibek Chaudhuri (2016) found the main parties and candidates contained all the attributes of a brand—things like a clear statement of brand functions and benefits and, most importantly, the development of a sense of trust.

> Political parties are based on an ideology that elaborates a set of attitudes that influences an individual's behavior and preferences in a politically related context. The candidate or political party brand meaning formed in voter's minds is an important factor in voter preference … (and) an effective campaign should aim at building political trust (pp. 564, 572).

This fits well with Signorelli. He notes that trust is a critical element in reaching full affiliation with a prospect. When a prospect feels trust toward a person or a brand, a bit of oxytocin is released (MacGill 2015). This chemical is known in psychological circles to increase pro-social behaviors, such as trust, when it is released.

> If there is any truth to the effects of oxytocin, what does this suggest for advertising effectiveness? One might surmise that cold, hard facts or opinions alone are not going to do much to create a bond with consumers. My guess is that very little oxytocin gets released when an ad claims superlatives for its product, like "the best, the fastest, or the least expensive." Comparatively, it's easy to surmise that emotionally charged beliefs that are shared with consumers can do more to create loyalty (Signorelli 2014: 239).

If voters considering a candidate hear the candidate's stories and are touched emotionally, the oxytocin that is released creates a feeling of trust. This trust becomes a hermeneutical grid the voter uses as they take in the candidate's other stories. The more these connect with the soul of the voter, the stronger the affiliation with the candidate becomes.

Two Mexican researchers—without realizing it—have found politicians there are essentially using the Storybranding process as they brand themselves. Francisco Guzman and Vincenta Sierra (2009) write:

> Voters' simplification processes have shifted focus from the parties to the candidates. While a political party is an important brand attribute, a candidate, above his or her own ideology or party affiliation, has become a brand – a brand that voters follow. A brand that has its own traits and values and, like any other brand, fights for a space in consumers' minds. A brand that has an image built around three pillars – the physical attributes of the candidate, the candidate's personality and the benefits the candidate promises to the electorate (p. 208).

As a result, the candidate has to ensure his or her own brand is clear to potential prospects. They say the first thing a candidate has to do is work on making known the "brand image," which consists of brand attributes and brand benefits (p. 210). This fits Signorelli's awareness and comprehension levels. Next, they write that the "brand personality" has to be clear (p. 210). This includes a sense of oneness and identity and a relation to the candidate in state of mind. These areas match Signorelli's concepts of brand association and, the ultimate, brand affiliation (Signorelli 2014).

Like Storybranding, Guzman and Sierra (2009) state that a political brand successfully shaped is doing nothing less than transmitting political goals in human terms:

> There is much to gain by supplementing brand personality traits with human personality traits. Furthermore, given that the brands studied in our research are human beings, using the additional human personality traits to complement the brand image framework helps to broaden and strengthen the analysis (p. 211).

A short article published in the United States illustrates the need to brand candidates in this day of increasing political sophistication. Shermichael Singleton and Andrew Honeycutt (2012) argue that political ideologies—and the elements that attach to them—have become very complex. There are many nuances in the way party platforms are interpreted, and having to address all of these things would made a candidate confusing to a public used to clear statements of benefit and purpose. Creating a marketable candidate has become the goal. These candidate statements encompass complex ideas and shades of gray, making simple and understandable images for people to grasp.

Similar ideas can be found in research done about elections and politics in Pakistan (Ahmed et al. 2011) and Egypt (Farrag and Shamma 2014). In the case of Egypt, the researchers found there was a different marketing angle taken during their parliamentary elections of 2011 for messages disseminated to educated and to less educated audiences. They found that Islamic beliefs and ideologies were marketed more directly to illiterate segments of the society

rather than the educated ones. The candidates also seemed to grasp some of the elements of trying to connect to voters emotionally.

> A clear contradiction with many studies in (the) previous literature was the exclusion of the candidate's stand on economic, social and foreign policy issues, which represents the rationale for the candidate's platform. Therefore, we can conclude that the base of Egyptian voter's behavioral intentions was rather emotional than rational, especially that the most important factor influencing voter's behavior was the candidate's image followed by personal (life) events and religious beliefs, which are all considered emotional rather than rational factors (p. 65).

This move to connect to prospects emotionally via story is due to an increasingly sophisticated media climate. It is harder to differentiate oneself based on benefits alone, since many of these benefits are also promised by competing parties.

> As brands mature, competitors will start to steal market share with substitutes. Whenever this happens, it is especially important to start associating your brand with a cause or value that will resonate with your target (audience). Before it's too late, define yours (Signorelli 2014: 252).

Why We Respond Positively to Negative Ads

The studies are fairly clear and consistent. When shown negative ads, most people say they dislike them. The implication is that if people dislike them, or become wearied by them, then they will withdraw from the political sphere and the society will suffer (El-Erian 2015). Despite this, during a bitter US 2016 presidential election, total turnout was at recent levels—60 percent—and higher than any presidential election that took place from the early 1970s to the early 2000s, a time when there were fewer negative ads (US Election Project 2017). According to Dassonneville (2010), nations like Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United States have approximately the same level of negativity in political ads; roughly 35 percent of all ads are classified as negative.

So where is the disconnect? The disconnect comes from failing to understand the power of stories to overcome intellectual reservations. Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker (2014) are part of a growing number of researchers who are studying the role emotions play in the political process. They say the area of political science has not taken into account a key element into how meaning is truly made.

> Emotions have long been portrayed as either irrational responses or purely personal experiences that have no relevance to public life. Political decisions were meant to be free of passion, for giving in to impulsive

urges would inevitably lead to irrational acts of violence and harm. It is not surprising, then, that until recently international relations scholarship has largely structured itself, implicitly or explicitly, around rational actor models. This remained the case even at a time when other disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and feminist philosophy, had long started to examine emotions (p. 494).

The rational actor models exist throughout the research reviewed for this paper. Typically, individuals are shown ads and asked to respond with a sense of how they feel or think about the ad. What is missing in these studies is a key element—asking whether the respondent agrees with the content of the message. It is not so much the feeling about the ad that provides a sense of the effect of it, but the level of agreement with the content of the ad that that tells the true story about the effectiveness of negative ads.

This is due to the power of story. When a candidate communicates his or her inner layer opinions, feelings and ideas and these connect to the prospect's inner layer, then the candidate has made a connection that is not easily broken. This connection can even be maintained in spite of intellectual reservations. To provide an example of this, in polls leading up to the Brexit vote and the US presidential election, the Remain group and Hillary Clinton were winning (Saiidi 2016, Mercer et al. 2016). But when the election took place, the polls were incorrect. A variety of explanations were offered to explain the shortcoming. However, is it not plausible that the ideas, opinions and aspirations that were set forth in the negative ads agreed with the feelings and emotions of the voting public? This agreement—which is, at minimum, a strong brand association in Signorelli's terms—proved stronger than the opposing intellectual argument. As Jacob Neiheisel (2016) points out, our politics has sorted itself into strongly ideological lines. There are a number of individuals who are "*operationally* liberal and express support for liberal policy positions, (but) in *symbolic* terms (are) much more conservative in nature and reluctant to hew to the liberal label" (p. 418). These types of tendencies create conflicted voters who have to decide whether the head or the heart prevails.

The polling process was not wrong. The polls simply reflected the intellectual side of the voters, not the emotional one.

Conclusion

Voters in democratic systems like to imagine their political discourse has a sense of moral excellence about it; in short, we like to imagine we are electing people who are morally sound and who speak to high-minded and large-hearted ideals. But, in reality, we do not tend to make decisions based on a fair hearing of each candidate's position, giving them the benefit of good intention at points where we may disagree with their views. Our feelings interfere. It is at this point that we can become susceptible to a negative message.

If we distrust a candidate's motives or policy prescriptions, a negative message can strike a responsive chord within us. If this is true of enough voters, a negative ad can have great impact even if it is heavy-handed or, to some degree, inaccurate (Jackson 2007). This is the enigma of negative political advertising—we want to think well of ourselves and our national political discourse, but we cannot help falling for a negative message if it fits with and coheres with our personal biases.

In reviewing research about why people dislike negative ads, we should remember that the success or failure of an ad is judged at the poll. In collecting data for this paper, the writer found no example where a negative ad was considered impactful for a losing campaign. The popular vote connects directly to the facets of Signorelli's Storybranding paradigm—the brand (i.e., candidate) sets forth ideas and hopes that the prospect (i.e., voter) may resonate with. This creates an emotional bond that is strong and that can override our intellect if there is a conflict between a core conviction and some of our publicly expressed beliefs. This harmonizes the divide that has bedeviled researchers in this area. It is a fact—held intellectually—that people dislike negative political ads. But it is a fable—driven by our deeply held feelings and opinions—that we do not respond to them.

Whatever intellectual opinion people hold about negative political ads, there is one truth that is large and undeniable—these ads obtain results when they fit with the concepts outlined in this study. Successful ads of this type create their meaning from pieces of concern, worry or doubt that exist within the public mind. They reflect meaning, connect to feelings and then give form to those feelings through the impulses of the voter who receives the ad. It seems clear that successful negative ads, viewed through the prism of Signorelli's paradigm, reflect things that are instead of creating things that are not—as many scholars and pundits mistakenly believe.

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