Why Negative Political Ads Don’T Work on Gen Y
Andrew Hughes, Australian National University

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Why Negative Political Ads Don’t Work on Gen Y
Andrew Hughes, Research School of Management, Australian National University, Australia

ABSTRACT
This study demonstrates that televised political negative advertising generates high levels of negative emotions and emotional intensity upon Gen Y consumers. These responses are developing negative attitudes towards political advertising and brands that may have far reaching generational societal and political impacts long past the end of the campaign.

INTRODUCTION
Televised political advertising is the workhorse of the political marketing campaign. From the moment of the election date announcement through to the close of polls, television remains the dominant platform for message delivery for politics. Campaigns are traditionally waged on the visual and visceral levels against opponents, with an emphasis on messages that encourage the rejection of opponents through negativity. Conventional trade wisdom indicates that attacking, discrediting and creating fear of the alternative party offerings has been the effective platform for campaigning (Garromone 1984; Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007; Merritt 1984).

However, the rise of the media savvy Generation Y and Generation Z may present an opportunity to return to pitching claims to governance by a positive value proposition, offers of polity and policy. With the rise in social media, ease of access to fact checking of negative claims, and an inoculation to attack rhetoric born of growing up in the internet era, the Gen Y and Gen Z vote may not be vulnerable to the message strategies of the older generations.

This paper studies the emotive reaction of Generation Y voters to political advertising campaigns. It tests the responsiveness and resonance of the campaign messages on a cohort of both potential voters (locals) and non-voters (outsiders) to examine how the content elements of the message result in emotive responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Political Marketing
Political marketing is a combination of rules of thumb, heavily documented statistically designed interventions and folk wisdom. Formally, political marketing is defined by Hughes and Dann (2009) as:

“…a set of activities, processes or political institutions used by political organisations, candidates and individuals to create, communicate, deliver and exchange promises of value with voter-consumers, political party stakeholders and society at large.”

Of interest to this paper is the requirement for political marketers to communicate a promise of value to the voter-consumer, stakeholders and society at large. As such, the literature review examines the value creation in political advertising messages, the process of political advertising delivery and the sub-elements of advertising linked to the political value creation.

Promises of Value
Promises of value within political communications divide on the axis of positive messages to sell of promise of gain in voting for the branded party, and, negative imagery that implies potential for loss involved in the success of opposing political parties (Hughes and Dann 2006). It should also be noted that the value offering is also different in politics, as commercial campaigns can operate entirely without stated or implied identification of loss in their communication of a value offering to targeted markets. Whereas as a commercial product such as funeral insurance may pitch on the out-of-pocket costs to the family, it still emphasizes the personal cost of leaving the loved ones unprotected. In contrast, negative political campaigns can be broader statements of “Don’t risk X” where X is an abstract concept such as the natural environment, industry, or economic conditions (Hughes & Dann 2010).

Political Advertising: Communicating the Promise
Advertising is the dominant method used to create awareness, and subsequently, one of the most costly items in the campaign. In the 2014 US mid-term elections, $1 billion was spent on advertising (Wesleyan 2014). The 2012 United States elections, inclusive of the Presidential election, federal, state and local elections was over $US 3 billion (Fowler and Ridout 2013). Fowler and Ridout (2013) and Ridout, Franz and Fowler (2014) work emphasized the development of targeted television advertising for audience specific reactions - generation of specific short responses rather than long-term relationship building (Goldstein and Ridout 2004). This identifies an increasing problem for political campaigns of needing to operate within a short-term results focus that overemphasizes short term promises tailored to the nearest election result, but one that comes at the expense of brand building and relationship development with key market segments.

At the same time, Blumenthal (1982), Goldstein and Ridout (2004) and Needham (2005) discuss the era of the permanent campaign whereby parties are constantly in a campaign mode, but do their persuasion of undecided voters in the short election campaign period. The perpetual campaign, fatigued by the need to constantly move message and market, often resorts to short term “sales” strategies near elections to create the desired result. As with commercial marketing, aggressive discounting, sales orientations and short termism has a detrimental impact on the value of the brand in the eyes of the consumer. Yet the perceived efficacy of the negative message in downselling an opponent, or discounting cost of adopting the less scary alternative is taken as a marketing truism in much of the political practitioner’s playbook.

Consumer Engagement with Voting
Voting in the political process is surprisingly viewed as a low involvement product based on consumers having a high level of distrust in political brands and political messages, and perceived limited engagement post-purchase decision (Dann & Hughes 2008). As a low involvement, low commitment product, political marketers often focus on the brand switching behaviour of the swinging voters, and tailor message strategies around short term promises of loss or gain (Dann & Hughes 2008). This approach assumes that there will be a fast transformation of voters from low involvement state to high involvement decision making through messages based on arousal states (Bradley, Angelini and Lee 2007; Rossiter and Bellman 2005). As a low involvement product (Rothschild & Ray 1974), political advertising has become largely dependent on generating brand decisions through emotive responses to advertising stimuli. Prior advertising studies on Generation X and Baby Boomers have found negative images tended to create higher levels of arousal and recall than positive images (Cacioppo, Tassinary and Bernston 2007; Lang 1991; Lang et.al. 1996, 1999, 2000).

Politics and Generation Y
As generational change takes effect in the voter blocs, marketers find themselves pitching to a media savvy audience of Gen Y
consumers who have grown up on a diet of media awareness. The consequence of the changing of the guard of the youth vote represents a significant opportunity to re-examine message strategies developed for passive audiences (Boomers, Gen X) who were captive in limited media channels, and with restricted avenues of response against the attitudes of a Generation Y cohort. As young voters have been regarded as having higher levels of cynicism and mistrust in political brands than other voters, the conventional call to action through negative advertising may not be the most effective message strategy for the Generation Y market. The question for this study then is whether negative imagery has a similar impact on the Generation Y cohort, which leads to the formulation of the hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Respondents will have higher levels of arousal for negative messages than for positive messages

**Hypothesis 2:** Negative messages will generate higher overall levels of emotive response than positive messages

Arousal will be measured using Self-Assessment Manikin scale (Russell and Mehrabian 1977; Lang 1985; Rossiter and Bellman 2005). Emotive response in this exercise is measured by the volume and nature of emotions captured from the Geneva Emotion Wheel. Details of the measure are outlined in the methodology.

**INSTRUMENT AND MEASURES**


**Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM)**

The Self-Assessment Manikin is a non-gender specific graphic character that measures the type 1 emotions of pleasure, arousal and dominance (Russell and Mehrabian 1977; Lang 1985; Rossiter and Bellman 2005). Hypothesis 1 is tested using P-A-D element of Arousal, with Pleasure used as a secondary measure of advertising content. The advantage of the SAM measure as a correlating item in the study is the speed of response to non-verbal measures (Lang 1985; Morris 1995). SAM allows for the specific emotional measurement of each advertisement shown to the respondent and can be used across dynamic advertisements studies (Lang 1985; Morris 1995).

**Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW)**

Scherer’s (2005) Geneva Emotion Wheel is the core of the data collection protocol. Using a visual and verbal scale, the GEW measures a range of 20 different type 2 emotions in a quick response method similar to SAM instrument. Figure 1 illustrates the Geneva Emotion Wheel as used in the study. The spokes of the GEW relate each to the family of emotions, with a modified five point scale used to measure level of intensity of that emotion. Further, the wheel is quadrant based on two axis of control (high-low), and the valence running from negative (left) to positive (right). Hypotheses 2 of this study are resolved from the data sourced from the GEW measures.

**Advert selection: pacing & content**

Political advertisements were selected from a range of online sources to represent a broad spectrum of political views. Each advert was rated for pace based on the established metrics of Bolls, Much-
METHODOLOGY
This study used a hybrid methodology of SAM and GEW pictorial research forms. This was chosen based on similar prior studies conducted in the area and the need to capture as quickly and as effectively as possible the emotional response to the stimuli the participants were exposed to. This is one of the major advantages of both the SAM and GEW tools as they allow for rapid collection and measurement of emotional responses as the pictorial tools allow for a more rapid processing and familiarisation of the research instrument, without participants suffering from noticeable survey fatigue. Responses were captured in 5 sessions of 15 respondents. Advertisement presentation order was randomised between groups. Ten minutes was allocated to set up the capture, provide information and instructions. Respondents were shown the first sample advertisement, always numbered 1, and given 60 seconds to complete the first survey page. At the conclusions of the minute mark, a 5 second count in to the next ad would commence, displaying the identification number of the next advert. Respondents were shown 18 political advertisements across the political spectrum and asked to rate the speed of the advert (slow, medium, fast) and the overall tone of the message (positive, neutral, negative) as per the design discussed above. Participants were 71 undergraduate students from a large Australian university who were undertaking second year coursework in a field unrelated to politics or communication. The cohort consisted of 25 male and 33 female respondents, and inclusive of 13 respondents who did not identify a gender. All participants were Generation Y, with the age range from 19 to 32, and a mean age of 22 years. Voting experience was divided with 34 (47.9%) indicating that they had voted in a previous election, and 21 (29.6%) indicating that they were registered as voters for the local state election. Only 32% had prior voting experience with any of the candidates or parties shown in the advertisements.

RESULTS
The results of the study do not support this hypothesis. Advert 10, perceived to be the most negative advert in the study evoked a neutral response in the pleasure score (mean 6.38, SD=1.8) and similarly neutral position in Arousal (mean 6.52, SD=1.77). In contrast, Advert02, which was seen to be relatively negative with a wider range of reactions (mean 4.14, SD 2.05), also created the most excited in Arousal (4.43, SD=1.99) and the most happiness on the Pleasure score (3.81, SD=1.67). Negative adverts did not evoke the expected responses – adverts with the highest sadness ratings in the Pleasure score (Adverts 06, 04, 10, 16) also evoked some of the calmest responses in the Arousal score. However, adverts with high happiness levels (Adverts 02, 18 11) were not consistent in their responses. Even with Arousal, the most evocative adverts (02, 08, 05) did sit towards the Happiness end of the Pleasure spectrum. Negative advertising did not resonate with the Gen Y audience according to theoretical expectations, and this opens an area of future research and study.

Arousal in this exercise is measured by the volume and nature of emotions captured from the Geneva Emotion Wheel. Two measures are reported to examine Hypothesis 2 – Emotive Intensity and Normalised Emotive Response. Emotive Intensity is the sum of responses in the Geneva Emotion Wheel, where adverts have a greater emotive resonance; more items of the Geneva Emotion Wheel will be recorded by the respondents. Results from the study are outlined in Table 5. As illustrated by Table 1, Positive advertisements had greater emotional intensity, with the highest emotive intensity occurring in Advert 13 (338), Advert 11 (338) and Advert 02 (312). Notably, Adverts 11 and 13 are rated as highly positive by the re-

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### Table 1: Reactions to Advertising (Summary)

#### SAM Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advert</th>
<th>Content (negative to positive)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Pleasure (happy to sad)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Arousal (excited to calm)</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>4.14</td>
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#### GEW Findings (Summary)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ad number</th>
<th>Emotive Intensity (n total responses to GEW)</th>
<th>Pleasure (happy to sad)</th>
<th>Arousal (excited to calm)</th>
<th>Speed (slow to fast)</th>
<th>Content (negative to positive)</th>
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spondents, whereas Advert 2 is towards the negative end of the neutrality rating. Similarly, Adverts with Pleasure scores rated towards Happiness have higher emotive response rates (Advert 02, Advert 18, advert 11) than those rated for Sadness (Advert 06, Advert 04, Advert 10). Finally, Arousal did not reflect emotive response levels with the most exciting advert (Advert 02, Advert 08, Advert 05) not having the highest emotive responses.

Similarly, there is no consistency between the emotive response level, and the content of the advertisement as perceived by the respondents. Given the unexpected reaction of the respondents to the advertising stimulus, further examination of the 3 most negative and positive adverts was undertaken, to look specifically at the emotion generated by the adverts. For consistency, each GEW outcome was converted to a normalized score, enabling graphing on a consistent base line. Advert 10 evoked a strong Irritation-Anger (n 37, mean 3.4, SD1.14) followed by Disgust-Repulsion reaction (n 29, mean 3, SD 1.26) as the strongest response with Irritation-Anger (n 31, mean 2.8, SD1.17) as the next most powerful reaction. This may indicate the effective delivery of a negative message, but the continued rejection of the negative advertising platform. Finally, Advert 16 evoked a strong Irritation-Anger (n 29, mean 3.31, SD 1.16) response, followed by a Worry-Fear (n 24, mean 2.54, SD 1.21). With only two of the three adverts creating Worry-Fear results, and all three having a high level of Irritation-Anger, the Generation Y cohort did react negatively to a negative message. By way of contrast, the top three positive advertisements were examined using a similar normalisation process. Advert 11 had a strong engagement with the audience with a high Involvement-Interest measure (n 37, mean 2.8 SD 1.08), and a positive Happiness-Joy measure (n 35, mean 2.7, SD 1.08).

Similarly, Advert 13 also brought a resounding Involvement-Interest score (n 4, mean 3.7 SD 1.019) and, surprisingly for a positive advert, a powerful Pity-Compassion (n 30, mean 3.4, SD 1.27). Finally, Advert 18 continued the engagement trend with a strong Involvement-Interest (n 34, mean 3.2, SD 1.18) score, and a positive Happiness-Joy measure (n 30, mean 3.1, SD 1.07). Overall, the engagement levels with the positive adverts are very high, and the Involvement-Interest score was consistently either the top or second rate item across the positive advert spectrum. Finally, across all advertisements, the most consistent emotional reaction from the Generation Y cohort was Involvement-Interest (Figure X). From the study, Generation Y respondents are engaged in politics, are interested by political content, and want access to political content – however, they are rejecting the negative messaging strategy, and the so-called “disengagement of the youth” may come from the lack of resonance the attack adverts are finding with an audience seeking substance over bite.

KEY FINDINGS

Implications for Political Advertising Practitioners

There is growing evidence (Bradley, Angelini and Lee 2007) that negative advertising is not as effective in generating an emotional response that creates a behavioural response in favour of the sponsored brand as practitioners are led to believe. The results are notable as they demonstrate that emotional responses to political advertising are far higher for positive advertisements than for negative advertisements. This is especially so for slow paced positive advertisements. This would suggest that Gen Y voters have more resource capacity to process these advertisements than they would for fast paced advertisements that might reach their capacity for message processing (Lang 2000). This would mean that a Gen Y voter would have more likelihood of recalling the advertisement in a positive way and developing a more positive attitude towards the sponsoring brand, and their advertisements, than a negative advertisement. These results do suggest that brands that want to be successful in creating memorable and highly effective emotionally responsive advertisements with Gen Y need to use negative messages only sparingly in a campaign. This research also supported that structural elements can influence emotional responses to political advertisements. Fast paced messages, as predicted by Lang (2000) and confirmed by Bradley, Angelini and Lee (2007), do indeed make voters feel more negative emotionally, even where the advertisement is positive. As Gen Y is only in the early stages of political brand experience it is highly questionable whether fast paced messages have any place in a brand’s political communication strategy if they actually want to influence these voter’s behaviour.

Implication for Governance

As practitioners, reformers and interested parties discuss campaign spending limits, campaign financial reforms and donation declarations, an unusual area of reform may be possible for political marketers. Whereas campaign finance reforms in some democracies are limiting spending on advertising in campaigns, there are no limits proposed on the nature of the advertisement content. If so desired, parties currently can spend their entire political advertising budget on negative messaging. Perhaps the time has come to open the debate on message limitation whereby political campaign messages, both political party and lobbyist-run support campaigns are limited to a 30% public funding cap on negative messaging. Forcing political parties into 70% advertising spend on positive messages, that are promises of polity and policy, and limiting attack adverts, may be the true reform needed to reengage the electorate with the elected. Losing future generations engagement with politics risks the sustainability of the current political system itself. Democracy can and always should allow for freedom of speech, but if this speech comes with a price that will be paid by future generations then it is no longer free and no longer speech that builds a more positive polity for all.

Generation Y: Engagement over Politics

There is much debate on what is causing cynicism and apathy towards the political process by young voters. Whilst prior research has found that levels of cynicism are increasing, the increasing rates of young voters failing to enrol or register to vote is the most telling statistic that young consumers are no longer engaging with democracy in most Western systems. However, across the entirety of the advertising data set, Involvement-Interest was the highest consistent emotional response. This is a generational cohort who want to be heard, want to be part of the process, and the negative advertising message strategy is not meeting their needs, nor addressing their desire for engagement. Engagement will require political marketers to stand for something, to offer a positive value promise, and that may be a bridge too far in the present attack-focused campaign environment.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this study are that whilst negative commercials generate far higher arousal and recall levels over positive ads, the value of this is questionable if it is leading consumers to feel negative emotions connected to a brand. Fast paced political messages also need to be aware that viewers only have a limited capacity for processing televised messages (Lang 2000), and presenting too much information, especially complex information or dense infor-
mation messages due to the high number of cuts, will mean that they will not process the information in the message regardless of how arousal or interesting the message might be.

The findings from this study indicate that it would be better for political brands to focus on slow paced positive messages that generate greater likability and positive emotions, to increase the chances of being elected and to develop more favourable attitudes towards both the brand and the advertisement.

REFERENCES


