# Negativity trumps positivity:

# An analysis of tone and topic in Clinton-sponsored

# advertisements during the 2016 presidential election

(KEY: Green = temporary; Black = permanent; Red = transition element; Blue = source).  
Green subsubsection title was used to focus each part on one specific idea.

**I. Introduction**

***Historical Context***

The utilization of strategic advertising in presidential campaigns has been around since the 1960s. Arguably the most notable political advertisement in memory is titled "Daisy Girl.” Lyndon Johnson sponsored the ad against Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election ([Shwartz](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er5h_TXun6o)). The ad opens with a young girl picking petals from a daisy, while a man's voice counts down to zero. The frame zooms into the young girl’s fearful eyes, and cuts to an image of a nuclear explosion. The ad was undeniably powerful, and urged voters to participate in the electoral process by scaring them.

***Importance***

More than 50 years later, it is the year 2016. The United States of America is currently in the midst of an unprecedented presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The media has changed immensely since 1964, but political advertisements are still a useful tool that candidates utilize in their campaigns. Despite media evolution, advertising remains the primary means by which candidates, parties and other ad sponsors directly reach voters (Brader 2006). Moreover, these ads are not just showing up on people’s television screens anymore. They are abundantly available on YouTube and other online media platforms. Over the past decade especially, the volume of political advertising has increased ([Ridout 2014](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/ridout_travis_studyingpoliticalads.pdf)). As of September 2016, Hillary Clinton’s team announced that they have spent almost $70 million on television ads to promote the democratic nominee during her race for the White House ([Miller 2016](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/AttackAds_JH/miller_2016bythenumbers.pdf)).

[Seeking the Truth]

As these numbers continue to rise, it is important and vital for voters to recognize and reflect on how tactics like attack advertisements affect them. In the age of unlimited access to information, it can be conversely difficult for the average citizen to seek the truth. Freedman, Franz and Goldstein say, “Ultimately, if the political diet of most Americans is lacking in crucial information, campaign ads represent the multivitamins of American politics,” (2004).

***The Goal of This Study***

Because of this undeniable reality, this study attempts to analyze the tone and topic of Hillary Clinton-sponsored advertisements during the 2016 presidential election. It is commonplace to hear that campaigns get nastier every year, and this analysis attempts to address this claim empirically. This in-depth analysis will also allow for the modern application of theories of emotion and voter engagement to specific types of political advertising.

## II. Literature Review

***Overview***

Despite the extensive evolution of the media, political advertising remains the primary means by which candidates, parties, and other sponsors communicate directly with voters. The largest expense in typical in a typical campaign for major office is political advertising (Brader, 2006). The overall tone of political advertising is negative more often than not. While positive advertisements do exist, they are rare. Political advertisements usually evoke terms like “mudslinging” or “attack advertising,” because they focus on criticizing the character, record, or positions of the targeted candidate, thus creating doubt in voters’ minds about the ability of the target to govern successfully ([Pinkleton, 2002](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/pinkleton_decisionmaking.pdf)). Some experts suggest that these strategies undermine democracy because they heighten cynicism and contribute to a general feeling of hopelessness among many voters. Other experts claim the opposite: recent studie, s have even found that attack advertising promotes political learning and participation ([Cho, 2015](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/cho_jaeho_attackvsadvocacy.pdf)). This literature review serves to classify, define and investigate these claims in order to illustrate the implications of analyzing Hillary Clinton-sponsored advertisements during the 2016 presidential election.

## *Classifying Political Advertising*

[Importance of Classifying Political Advertisements]

Political advertisements are incredibly strategic and complex. Therefore it is vital to classify them in order to gain helpful data from them.

[Definition of Attack Advertisements]

Attack advertisements are most common in the political sphere, and are usually defined as an advertisement that criticizes an opponents’ political platform, usually by pointing out its faults. According to Wikepdia, these ads will make use of innuendo, based on opposition research,” (“[Attack ads,” 2016](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_ad), p. 23). In his book titled *In defense of negativity: Attack ads in presidential campaigns,* Geer (2006) defines negativity in the context of political advertising. He says negativity, “is simple and straightforward: negativity is any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign. Under this definition there is no gray area,” (p. 213).

[Definition of Advocacy Advertisements]

Advocacy advertisements, although rare in this day and age of politics, are equally important to define. Geer’s definition is as simple as his definition for attack ads. He says that advocacy ads state why a specific candidate is worthy of a vote (Geer, 2006). These ads usually utilize empowering statements, promises to the American people and an overall uplifting message.

[Definition of Contrast Advertisements]

Some of the most successful political advertisements find a balance between attack and advocacy and take the form of contrast advertisements. For example, an ad will begin with a criticism of an opponent’s plan for taxes and end with evidence as to why the sponsored candidate’s plan is better. Geer (2006) explains that there is no middle ground: “An appeal in a campaign either raises doubts about the opposition or states why the candidate is worthy of your vote. There is no middle category,” (p. 53). But, there are some advertisements that both attack and advocate successfully.

*The Psychology of Political Advertising*

[Functional Theory of Emotion]

The functional theory of emotion says that emotions work as “as an adaptive system to help humans deal with changes in the environment,” ([Cho, 2015](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/cho_jaeho_attackvsadvocacy.pdf), p. 24). For example, when someone experiences a change in their environment, their first reaction is likely to be assessing how that change is significant to their lives. Once they have made this assessment, they enter what is known as the “action state,” which encompasses both approach and avoidance. Finally, whatever “action” (i.e. approach or avoidance) a person chooses results in a sense of awareness. This entire process is what makes up emotional experiences. Cho says, “In sum, the emotional system is expected to facilitate the interaction between an organism and an internal or environmental stimulus,” ([p. 34](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/cho_jaeho_attackvsadvocacy.pdf)). This process can easily be applied to voter exposure to political advertising.

[Psychological Effects of Attack Ads]

In fact, the functional theory of emotion illuminates an important way of thinking about attack ads in political advertising. As an external stimulus, they provoke emotion from their audience. Negative ads elicit negative emotions, which lead to cognitive and behavioral responses. Cho adds that the reason is twofold: voters feel threatened by ads that attack candidate they support. Interestingly enough, voters often have similar feelings of threat when a negative advertisement attacks the candidate they oppose because the ad proves that a candidate’s policy and/or character is a threat itself ([2015](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/cho_jaeho_attackvsadvocacy.pdf)).

[Psychological Effects of Advocacy Ads]

Advocacy advertisements, on the other hand, are far less likely to elicit a strong emotional response form voters. Based on empirical evidence, several experts in numerous studies agree that in cases where voters oppose what is being advocated for in an ad, they might feel threatened. But, that sense of threat nowhere near as strong as the feelings provoked by advertisements that attack the candidate or policies that they support ([Cho, 2015](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/cho_jaeho_attackvsadvocacy.pdf)). Furthermore, scholars generally attribute the reason for the greater effectiveness of attack advertising over advocacy advertising to the fact that people are more motivated by stronger feelings of emotion ([Pinkleton, 2002](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/pinkleton_decisionmaking.pdf)). In general, negative advertisements are psychologically more stimulating than positive ones, and generate more action. Consistent with the functional theory of emotion, this research suggests that negative emotions are more persistent and become a stronger motivating force than positive emotions. For this reason, the majority of empirical research surrounding political advertising focuses on the impact of attack ads that elicit a negative emotional response from voters.

Empirical Implications and Opportunities

[Research questions in past elections ]

By looking to psychological theories for guidance, experts have expanded on theories of voter engagement by using data from political advertising in the past. Many experts have examined the impact of exposure to advertising on voter choice, political participation and attitudes toward the political system in general. In analyses of past elections, they have asked questions like: do attack ads make people less or more likely to vote? Do the motivate them to make a decision? Or do they just complicate things? The data collected in this paper will allow other researchers to answer these questions about political advertisements in the 2016 presidential election.

[Data collection methods]

The Kanter Archive at Oklahoma, for example, has given researchers the opportunity to watch political advertisements and code them on a variety of factors. Geer did this in 2006 with much success He employed a measure of the number of negative ads minus the number of positive ads at the election level to produce a proportional variable of advertising tone (Geer, 2006). In a 2014 study in the *Journal of Political Marketing*, coders classified each ad on several characteristics, including its tone. Coders labeled an ad positive if it mentioned only a sponsor or favored candidate, negative if it mentioned only the opponent, and contrast if it mentioned both. They also marked whether each ad talked about policy issues, the characteristics of the candidates (i.e. fitness for office, background, etc.) or both ([Ridout, 2014](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/ridout_travis_studyingpoliticalads.pdf)). These two examples of data collection methods make it possible for important research questions to get answered.

[Opportunities for new research questions ]

In recent decades, political campaign strategies have started to focus more on Internet platforms and mobile communications. Researchers are starting to examine political advertisements through more modern and tech-savvy lenses. As electoral politics has migrated to the Internet, the study of political videos distributed online is becoming increasingly popular ([Dowling, 2014](file:///Users/byunglee/Documents/elon/commCourses/coursesActive/com495/lecture_theory/notes2016/03_litReview/dowling_politicalscience.pdf)). Voters can now instantly share and offer their own commentary on political advertising on online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. This phenomenon opens the door for endless research possibilities. The analysis that this paper will compile will attempt to provide researchers with the data they need to investigate these new and interesting research questions.

***Research Questions***

As a framework for analysis of Hillary Clinton-sponsored political advertisements in the 2016 presidential election, the author asked the following research questions:

**RQ1.** Is the tone of each advertisement attack, advocacy, or contrast?

**RQ2.** Is the topic of each advertisement personal character, future policy, or past

achievement?

**RQ3.** What type of content was addressed in the advertisement (i.e. rights, economy,

immigration, environment, healthcare, education, foreign policy, leadership and/or

others)?

**RQ4.** Did Clinton’s advertising strategy change over time?

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