

## **A Deeper Look Into Negative Campaigning. Sociology**

Politicians need to be seen, to be recognized. They want to meet the American people in their living room through the portal of their TV screens to show that they are the best candidates to lead the country into the future. They want to break down the complicated issues of politics and public policy and utilize political campaign ads that bring in visual imagery and appeal to emotion to win the largest and most captivated audience. Politicians believe that campaign ads are valuable because they invest millions of dollars into them. The makers of today's television advertisements want them to remain valuable so they have studied sociology, human biology, and psychological theories. They know that instead of selling a specific item, their job is to sell an idea. Those ideas persuade people, sometimes without them realizing it, to do such things as to buy a certain shampoo or whom to vote for as president. These ads use visual and auditory symbols, biological triggers and even trance inducing techniques to cause their veiled messages to influence an audience's emotions, memories and perspectives in order to shape the decisions people make. Being aware of the methods used by the ads helps the audience better discern the intended message and there by, perhaps, not allow them to be manipulated.

Jay Leno recently did a skit that illustrated that it is not always what is said, but how it is said that matters. He took the beginning and end of a typical TV campaign ad featuring John McCain, but in the middle where the content of the ad would reside, he replaced it with the statement, "John McCain likes to deep fry turkeys in peanut oil." In the first example he uses colorful pictures of McCain, light-hearted music and a cheerful voice-over. It ends with "I'm John McCain and I approve this message." In the second example he uses the same images and words, but this time with black and white pictures, ominous music and a low voice. It even has the oil turn red as if the turkey is being dropped into a vat of blood. This one ends with "I'm Barack Obama and I approve this message." This skit makes it clear that there is more to political ads than the obvious message conveyed by the words. There are certain visual and auditory triggers that can be used to initiate an anticipated or desired response and the average American is receptive to the unspoken language of the ads.

Sociologists that focus on Symbolic Interactionism believe symbols are the foundation of language and that language is the building block, not only of communication, but of an individual's thoughts as well. Language can include both verbal and nonverbal means of conveying messages. Nonverbal communication includes the use of gestures, eye contact, posture and tone of voice as well as symbols. Symbols are social objects that can represent anything that groups of people agree they should represent (Rohall, Milkie, Lucas 31). If advertisers have the ability to create symbols then this can explain why large groups of individuals within a society recognize the same images to mean the same thing. People are inundated with these images day in and day out, not only on TV, but also in every walk of life. Sut Jhally, PhD and author of *The Codes of Advertising* makes the claim that:

The power of advertising doesn't come from the fact that it manipulates us, the power of advertising is based on the monopoly of the cultural space within which we think about ourselves, within which we figure out how society works. That is in some sense ultimate power.

Advertisements have found a way to permeate every aspect of a person's life, from the labels on their clothes to the mouthwash they use in the morning. From the bulletin boards and store signs along the road, to the stadiums they visit to watch the game. It is hard to rest ones eyes anywhere and not see some form of advertisement. But TV advertisement has the additional feature of acting out scenarios of life as if they are the standards of normalcy. As a person buys into this image of life then they begin to look at their own in comparison causing them to change their perception of what defines normal. This can influence their purchases so they can conform to the standard or else feel a sense of anomie. This can be true of political ads. If a person is made to feel that they are the only one against a certain candidate, they are more likely to reconsider their own views.

One of the ads used by Barack Obama during his recent 2008 campaign called "Low Road" uses many of the techniques that are most commonly found in the standard negative ad. This style is widely used because it incorporates symbols that effectively convey a clear message to a wide audience. Obama's ad begins the use of symbols with a black-and-white image of McCain as the narrator says, in a low, accusatory voice, "He's practicing the politics of the past." This split second moment already achieves two things. In this modern day color images are preferred to black and white, which are gray and muted, so the translation is that McCain lacks life and vitality; this, along with the verbal message about the past, brings up impressions of McCain being old-fashioned and outdated. Next, a series of uncomplimentary quotes flash right over his face and bring to mind the mental image of a reject stamp seen in many movies and commercials over the years. The scene changes to another gray picture of McCain, this one where he is happily standing next to George W. Bush along with the words "Same old politics. Same failed policies." Once again this serves as a repetition of the message already conveyed, that of McCain being old and archaic. Then it goes a step further by adding the repeated use of the word "same." This use of repetition is very effective because "the more you hear something – even the same things from the same person- the more you believe it" (Clark 84). Having the previous and unpopular president in the picture links him to the unpopular policies of the last administration. Another technique used is when the words that dissolve on and off the screen are written in a large font with all capital letters. An audience familiar with e-mail etiquette would recognize this as a visual representation of an angry or loud voice and that it is considered rude.

Next, a silent white light flashes across the screen and the underlying music changes from eerie and somber to a happy, patriotic sound just as Barack Obama's face, in soft, warm browns, comes onto the screen. Use of color affects emotions and meanings. The American Psychological Association published findings that said, "Psychologists have documented that 'living color' does more than appeal to the senses. It also boosts memory" (Morton). The soft, warm browns of the image have a calming effect much like the color blue used to highlight the words "Barack Obama supports a \$1000 middle class tax cut" in the lower screen. Dark blue in particular is seen as dignified and authoritative and the fact that it is used as a border to the upper and lowercase letters is seen as professional and non-threatening. These words don't interfere with the moving color images of Obama, instead they frame them with clean lines. The words stretch and grow at the pace of the music, drawing the viewer's eye to them. This drives the message deeper into the viewers mind and memory.

Music taps into memory and emotions as well. “Music is used often in advertising to enrich the key message and may be the single most stimulation component in a commercial” (Hecker, 1984). Multiple studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between well-linked music and visual images to memory recall. Many people will attest to the fact that listening to an old song on the radio can bring to mind something they haven’t thought of in years. More often than not, this memory has an emotional component that is associated with the music as well. During the course of this political advertisement the shift in music plays a key role in setting the tone for its ultimate message. As stated above, the music starts out eerie and somber, a simple piano piece consisting of the repetition of three main notes, similar to what one might expect to find on the X-files TV series. The music then changes to a symphony playing a light, happy, patriotic song, which increasingly goes up in pitch to raise its emotional impact. All of this occurs just as the shift is made from grayed out images of McCain to soft warm color images of Obama. The emotional associations trying to be conveyed are clear, as is the symbolism behind the emotions. If the audience associates the tension of the first piece of music with McCain and the second lighthearted music with Obama, then auditory symbols have been created which can impact a person’s view of each candidate.

The ad goes on to detail specific plans of Obama’s campaign and then ends with Barack walking happily with a factory worker as the words “That’s change we can believe in” are spoken by the narrator in a happy, lighthearted voice. Obama walking with the hardhat wearing worker, shows that he is in touch with the average working-class American. The word “change” implies promises for a better future and has been repeated so often in Obama’s campaign that it has become a symbol in and of itself. But “it is not enough simply to identify and give meaning to (symbols), we must also process that information in the context of other meanings” (Rohall, Milkie, Lucas 32). If a person was already sympathetic to Obama’s campaign promises then this ad becomes increasingly effective because it feeds into the biases and perceptions of that audience. If a person is undecided then it could persuade them, by changing previously neutral emotions. This helps the campaign because of a second theory of Symbolic Interactionists, which is that people put their perceptions into action. The viewer can use the input they received from the ad as a guide for their future behavior, more specifically the manner in which they will vote. The information received through the interpretations of symbols “tells us how to think, feel or act” ((Rohall, Milkie, Lucas 33). This is the basis for the Thomas theorem which basically means that a person’s perception of reality can manipulate their actions, “as long as we think that our understanding is real, we will act on it.” This can result in a vote for Obama.

The concept of using sensory input to change a person’s emotions, and thus actions, is not new. When we look at the influence that TV ads have on the human brain we discover some interesting facts. The biological viewpoint often refers to synapses and neurological functions and when ads attempt to alter our emotions, especially when they use fear tactics to attempt to direct people towards or away from certain actions, then they are tapping into the most primitive parts of the human brain. The ad put out by George W. Bush during the 2004 presidential elections called “Wolves” attempts to do just this. It strikes the audience immediately with an ominous sound that might come out of a horror movie or slasher film just as an image of a misty forest flashes quickly onto the screen. Over a low musical score that is once again reminiscent of the X files theme song, a narrator with a voice full of concern says, “In an increasingly dangerous world, even after the first terrorist attack on America...” The camera angle brings the

viewer into the forest moving through the actual underbrush as if in the position of a stalker. Images of wolves hiding in the brush ready to pounce flash quickly on the screen. The narrator pauses only briefly and then says, “John Kerry and the liberals in Congress voted to slash America’s intelligence operations by six billion dollars.” The camera zooms out to the misty treetops and the low breathy voice of the female narrator, almost seductive and definitely threatening continues with “cuts so deep it would have weakened America’s defenses.” The video image changes to a pack of wolves lying in wait in a clearing as the narrator continues, “And weakness attracts those that are waiting...” the wolves get up and start running toward the viewer, “to do America harm” (Stanford U.).

This ad is effective because it keeps the message very “simple and specific, with a vivid detail that sticks in the mind” (Clark 85) and its main purpose is to appeal to a human’s instincts for survival and the fight or flight mentality. Ads like these reach us at our very core because “all the information we gather about the world comes in through our sensory reptilian and limbic brains” which reside in the “irrational and nonspeaking right hemisphere.” This means, “we feel before we even have a chance to think” (Hartmann 58-60). It may sound obvious to say that feelings are the result of emotions, but it may be less known that emotions are a physical biological response, one that humans share with, not just other mammals, but with birds and reptiles as well. That helps to explain why emotions cause an involuntary response from the sympathetic nervous system, such as a rapid heart rate and a tensing of the muscles. Emotions are vital to survival; they help a person to create “a rapid, automatic summary that initiates appropriate actions” (Eagleman 58).

Tapping into our emotions is one way to drive an ads message deeper into our memory. David Eagleman, author of the article “10 unsolved mysteries of the Brain” states “when you learn a new fact... there are physical changes in the structure of your brain” (Eagleman 56). Memory is dependent on the neurons and syntax changes that strengthen the connections between brain cells and is stored in many different regions of the brain. A scientist, James Brewer used fMRI’s to try to find out which parts of the brain were “responsible for encoding memories of pictures. They showed 96 pictures of indoor and outdoor scenes to participants while scanning their brains.” Later they were examined for their recall ability. It was found that the right prefrontal cortex and the parahippocampal cortex are the areas most responsible for storing images, whereas emotional memories’ storage is largely the result of the amygdala stimulating the hippocampus and cerebral cortex (Huffman pg 269). As ads use different methods to tap into different areas of the brain, they inject their messages that much deeper.

These methods also provide connections between the visual images and the emotions. These connections create associations because memory “encodes the relationships between things more than the detail of the things themselves” (Eagleman 56). The images in this ad are supposed to be representing the potential dangers of terrorists but actually the ads intent is to link Kerry to the enemy. People’s minds are seeing and hearing John Kerry’s name at the same time as they are feeling fear and anxiety at the visual images of the wolves. Because brains tend to categorize memories by emotion then people who see this ad will always, in their gut, equate a vote for Kerry with a lack of safety for themselves, their country, and their families. These voters may not even know why. What they don’t realize is that they are responding to the simultaneous stimuli of fearful sounds, visual images and words such as “slash,” “cut,” “weakness” and

“harm.” By creating these associations the ads have managed to alter one’s perceptions. The viewer is left with the image of a pack of wolves running towards them, and through the use of their visual and auditory senses has emotionally linked this threat with John Kerry’s name. Their brain will then direct them to avoid Kerry in any way possible. The only action in their control is to vote against him. That is exactly the objective of John Kerry’s opponent.

Cognitive Psychology takes these subjects a step farther. While not discounting the biological effects and physical responses of an individual that can come from external stimuli, this discipline looks at the influences within the unconscious mind. Jean Kilbourne, Media Critic and creator of the documentary *Killing Us Softly*, which is about the negative effects of ads on women’s issues, says, “I think it’s true when (people) say they tune advertising out, that most people don’t pay conscious attention to advertising. The mistake is that they believe they aren’t influenced by advertisements. In fact people are extremely influenced when they are most zoned out.” Today’s ad writers are becoming more and more sophisticated, as can be seen in the following negative ad approved by John McCain. This ad, directed towards Barack Obama during the 2008 campaign is called “Special” and it uses what is described by Thom Hartmann as a “learning trance.”

This style of commercial relies heavily on many of the elements that work well in creating a type of trance most people voluntarily put themselves into, that of the “movie trance.” In a movie theater the audience turns themselves completely over to the multimedia experience. Each of their major sensory receptors, visual, auditory and kinesthetic are stimulated, tapping into the main ways people learn new information. Using certain techniques, an audience’s complete attention can be captured and maintained, increasing the likelihood that the intended message will be received. This is the basic definition of a trance. The most effective step to accomplish a trance on an audience is to tell a story. “Build into the story visual and auditory metaphors and elements, each designed to evoke emotional responses. Embed into the most emotional parts of the stories the information you want remembered.” The pacing of the images and the story are vital, you want to have “viewers move to your beat, thus amplifying the learning trance” (Hartmann 106).

The creators of McCain’s ad use this persuasion method effectively. The ad tells the story of Obama’s quick rise to popularity, then shifts to crises that are plaguing America and goes on to say “Barack Obama lacks the experience America needs and it shows.” The ad cites an example of a mistake he would make and then repeats the adage that he isn’t ready to lead just yet. This tells us that being a good speech giver does not replace the skills of good leadership through tough times. It even ends with the words “The fact is Barack Obama is not ready... yet.” This leaves the story open-ended, implying that perhaps in the future he will be ready, but what America needs now is someone who already has the experience.

Visually, the ad starts off with images of Barack in front of large crowds, which change in a rapid succession, transitioned by white flashes of light and the sound of a camera flash. This draws the viewer’s eye to the screen and keeps it riveted. One emotional response could even result in the viewer feeling assaulted by the paparazzi themselves and cause them to want to shy away from the onslaught. Even though the images may seem positive, they are now attached to a negative emotion. Then the scene slows down and focuses on a still picture of Obama looking

angry, which almost resembles a mug shot. But the ad goes on to alternate between the quick flashing images, this time of closed businesses, soldiers, sad-looking low-income citizens, foreclosed houses, and gas pumps, and paused still images of Barack. In the final shot of him, Barack looks to be on the verge of tears, sad and confused. This is enhanced by the words, “not ready” that materialize on the screen (Stanford). Repeatedly changing the images and the pacing, interspersed with written words that appear and disappear off the screen and then under it all playing a slow, mellow music along with a narrators voice that is quiet, steady and concerned, the makers of the ad force the viewer to concentrate deeply in order to focus their attention. This can create confusion, which “might be just the point of the ad – to suggest that the subject is just as confused as the ad is confusing” (Hartmann 106). By monopolizing the senses it causes the viewer to hyper-focus on the message, driving it deeper into their minds and without knowing it, they have learned to lose confidence in Obama.

Each of these ads attempts to stimulate the viewers’ senses in order to invoke emotions. The hopes are that this will, in turn, affect the audience’s behaviors. Unfortunately, the news media is a big driving force behind negative campaigns further permeation into our society. Politicians know that repetition plays a key factor in something being remembered. This means that when negative ads are given attention by the mass media, even if they are saying the ads are deceptive, the very repetition of the ads message gives them strength and memorability. This is why politicians focus so much of their language into phrases that can be most easily used as sound bites. They recognize that the media are looking for excerpts to be quoted so candidates tailor their messages into ready-made clips to ensure a form of free advertising. And because “journalists relish the battle and revel in the attacks” (Geer), this means that politicians’ snappy retorts are repeated and debated endlessly. This is an encouragement for candidates to use negative ads that will spark debate because controversy is a powerful tool for publicity. And free publicity is the most effective way to reach the most people. As a result an interdependence has been formed between the media, advertisers and science.

The fact is that while Scientists are studying Advertisements, the creators of ads are studying modern science. They want to use the latest information on human biology, individual’s psyche, and peer influence on spending habits to increase their consumerism and thus, their profit margin. The overarching data suggests that TV advertisements affect people on every level possible. What should someone do with this knowledge? Perhaps a quote in the film *The Ad and the Ego* by Umberto Eco sums it up nicely, “A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection – not an invitation for hypnosis.” Being aware of the techniques used by advertisers helps consumers make more informed decisions at the store and at the polls. A politicians’ goal is for voters to recognize and select his or her name on the ballot, some might believe, by any means necessary. Because negative campaign ads can influence unconscious thoughts towards a deliberate action, being aware of the methods used by the ads helps the audience better discern the intended message. This can help citizens avoid being manipulated. With any luck voters will seek additional information so they can make informed decisions that they believe will contribute to a more positive future.

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