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## **The Tri-Mediation Model of persuasion: a case for negative political advertising?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most discussed aspects of the recent (i.e. November 2006) United States Congressional election campaigns was the widespread use of negative advertising. As an example, in the State of Connecticut where the media budgets of incumbent Senator Joe Lieberman and Democratic challenger Ned Lamont reached into the tens of millions of dollars, the proportion spent on negative advertising was estimated at well over 80% (Lender 2006). A content analysis of the political advertising used in three US national elections demonstrated that nearly half the advertising mentioned both candidates, and over 22% of the ads contained direct candidate comparisons in which an attempt was made to cast the opposing candidate in a 'negative' light (Boiney & Paletz 1991). Further, Kaid (1996) reports that in the 1992 US presidential election campaign, nearly 69% of (then) Governor Bill Clinton's ads were 'negative'.

A major difficulty inherent in attempting to estimate and report the degree of negative advertising results from the fact that political advertising researchers differ in their terminology. Some scholars classify any ad that contains disapproving statements about an opponent as 'negative', whereas others differentiate among negative ads, attack ads and negative comparison ads (Pinkleton 1997). Merritt (1984) maintains that only comparative ads that focus more on denigrating the opposing candidate than on bolstering the sponsor should be considered negative. Conversely, Lau and Pomper (2001) argue for a continuous measure of tone that indicates the degree of negativity.

In this paper, we assume the taxonomy of Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991), who suggest that there may be three types of negative political ads: (1) direct attack, (2) direct comparison and (3) implied comparison. Direct attack ads correspond most closely to the Merritt (1984) definition – that is, the primary focus is on denigrating the opponent. Direct comparison ads, in contrast, directly compare two candidates on specific points or attributes, so as to present one in a more favourable and one in a less favourable light. Finally, implied comparison ads are similar to direct comparison ads, however they lead viewers to generate their own arguments (i.e. either in support of the sponsor or against the opponent).

The comparative advertising literature distinguishes between direct and indirect comparison advertising – direct comparison ads refer to specific competitors, whereas indirect comparative ads refer to non-specific, unnamed competitors (e.g. 'the leading brand'; see Miniard *et al.* 2006 for a discussion). Because political advertising typically involves a relatively small

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consideration set (choice between two candidates), indirect comparison advertising is rarely employed. The literature further distinguishes between 'differentiative' and 'associative' comparative ads (Pechmann & Ratneshwar 1991). As the names imply, the former attempt to differentiate the sponsoring brand from a competitive brand, whereas the latter attempt to associate the sponsoring brand with a competitive brand. Because, according to our definition, negative political comparative ads refer to a specific competitor and compare the sponsor to that competitor on specific attributes (i.e. in an attempt to create contrast and highlight differences), they may be categorised as direct and differentiative in nature. Conversely, because implied comparison ads can *also* refer to a specific opponent, they may be characterised as differentiative in nature, but they are not necessarily indirect.

The use of negative comparative political advertising appears to be increasing, but relatively little empirical evidence is available regarding its impact upon voter evaluations, decision-making, choice of candidate and participation in the political process (Pinkleton 1997). One of the ironies of world events is that at a time when America is attempting to convince other nations to embrace democracy as a more ethical form of government, the people of the United States can continue to harbour strong reservations about the ethical nature of their political communications, as well as the campaign practices of American politicians (Banker 1992). Although negative advertising is in fact illegal in many countries, it appears to flourish within the United States. Recognising this fact, members of the United States Congress have proposed spending restrictions on political advertising as well as other campaign finance reform initiatives. These legislators appear intent on renovating a political campaign system that is perceived as contributing to voter apathy, cynicism and alienation, as well as being detrimental to US democratic processes (Pinkleton 1997; Samples 2006).

At the heart of Americans' distaste for modern political campaigns, then, lies a question of the morality of the manner in which political candidates are marketed. Despite the ethical ramifications, however, negative political advertisements and campaigns continue to be employed because the conventional wisdom about them is that they 'work' – that is, they have the consequences intended by their sponsors. A number of research studies not only support this conventional wisdom but also seem to indicate that a moderate level of negative feelings about the political candidates may actually *increase* voter intent to participate in the elective process (e.g. Pinkleton *et al.* 1996). Thus, attempts to restrict or control political campaign financing could curb campaign communications that promote participation and increase voter turnout. In addition, political candidates may be able to use comparative political (negative) advertising to communicate to voters 'true, demonstrable differences between themselves and competing candidates in terms of issue positions, voting records, past experiences, and the like' (Pinkleton 1997, p. 20). From a rhetorical perspective, these advertisements may 'serve a positive societal function by creating alternative rhetorical visions that can contribute to the marketplace of ideas' (Banker 1992, p. 843). Clearly, then, additional research is needed to investigate the effects of political advertising in general, and of negative political advertising in particular.

In this paper we model the effects of positive versus negative (political) advertising on candidate evaluations. We find that positive as well as the different types of 'negative' advertising will lead viewers to formulate specific attitudes towards the brand (sponsor). However, the manner in which these attitudes are formed will be affected by ad type and argument strength. We find that, under certain conditions, negative advertising may indeed lead to more positive evaluations of the sponsoring candidate.

## THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

The majority of research studies in the area of 'negative' advertising have examined the impact of political campaign

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messages, rather than appeals involving goods and services (Sorescu & Gelb 2000). In general, the most prevalent finding regarding the favourable impact of negative advertising is that negativity is memorable (e.g. Faber & Storey 1984; Lang *et al.* 1995; Bradley *et al.* 2008). Researchers have argued that the reason for this negativity bias is that negative information is unexpected (Fiske 1980; Lau 1982; Kellerman 1989), and therefore stands out disproportionately, leading to higher levels of recall. Other researchers have argued that negative advertising elicits greater attention (and hence recall) because it is considered more informative and less ambiguous than positive advertising (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland 1989), and because it appeals to emotion rather than logic (Pechmann & Stewart 1994).

Negative ads may also be perceived as more useful and informative than positive ads (Surlin & Gordon 1977; Garramone *et al.* 1990), because research has demonstrated that negative information may be assigned a greater weight than positive information when forming evaluations of social stimuli (Anderson 1965; Jordan 1965; Hodges 1974; Kanouse 1984), or when forming evaluations of individuals and assessing likeability (Kellerman 1984; Kaid & Boydston 1987). At a more general level, findings confirm that negative attribute information is viewed as more credible than positive attribute information, and therefore influences attitudes and evaluations to a greater extent than does the same level of positive information in various information processing tasks (Leventhal & Singer 1964; Hamilton & Huffman 1971; Hamilton & Zanna 1972; Fiske 1980; Ito *et al.* 1998). Further, research demonstrates that individuals are more confident of their evaluations based on negative information than those based on positive information (Levin & Schmidt 1969; Hodges 1974; Fiske 1980).

Within a political context, research evidence also indicates that negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information in driving perceptions, and in forming evaluations of political candidates (Lau 1982, 1985). Hill (1989) found that participants reported significantly more favourable global and emotional attitudes towards comparative and negative political advertising than towards positive political advertising. In addition, audiences have rated candidates as being less qualified, honest, serious, sincere, successful and fiscally responsible after exposure to negative political advertising (Kaid & Boydston 1987). Evaluations of the targeted candidate appear to worsen in greater proportion than evaluations of the sponsoring candidate among persons exposed to negative issue advertising (Shapiro & Rieger 1992).

The principal drawback associated with negative advertising is that it may create perceptions of unfairness or undesirability, resulting in backlash against the sponsor. Once again, the preponderance of evidence is derived from the political arena (Sorescu & Gelb 2000). Research on negative political advertising indicates that voters dislike negative ads and consider them uninformative, unethical and deceptive (Merritt 1984; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland 1989; Pinkleton 1997). Garramone (1984), and Roddy and Garramone (1988) found that evaluations of the sponsor of negative advertising may worsen more than evaluations of the target, and Merritt (1984) concluded that negative advertising resulted in negative affect towards both the target and the ad sponsor. In a more recent study, Bradley *et al.* (2008) examined psychophysiological (i.e. eyeblink startle reflex) responses to negative political ads, and found that these types of communication elicit automatic activation in the aversive motivational system among viewers. In sum, findings in the literature appear mixed, and demonstrate a clear lack of unanimity on the trade-offs associated with negativity (Sorescu & Gelb 2000).

One explanation for conflicting findings is that some researchers used ads that were more negative than those used by others (Sorescu & Gelb 2000). Degree of negativity matters (Lau & Pomper 2001) and, as mentioned earlier, that degree of negativity may be a function of ad type (i.e. as in the Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) taxonomy). However, the subject or basis for the negativity may also play a role. Some negative political messages concern issues, whereas others concern the personal image or character of the candidate (Kaid & Johnston 1991). Research suggests that both positive and negative issue commercials produce more favourable attitudes towards the ad and its sponsoring candidate than do image commercials

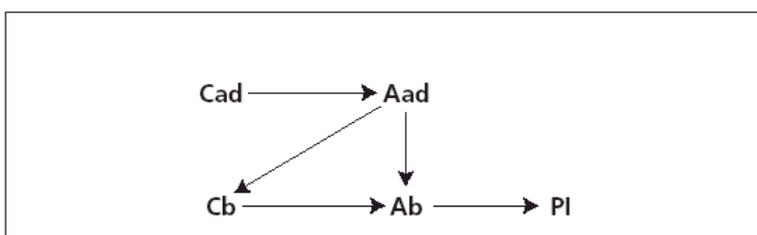
(Thorson *et al.* 1991). In addition, negative issue ads are generally considered to be fair by the public, and hence elicit more favourable responses than negative image ads, which result in the most backlash (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland 1989; Shapiro & Rieger 1992).

The authors also argue that findings may vary across negative political comparison ads versus differentiative comparative advertisements involving physical products due to the nature of the attributes that typically serve as the basis of comparison. For example, a consumer packaged goods manufacturer might advertise the fact that the company's brand (Brand X) 'gets clothes 40% cleaner' than Brand Y. The two brands are compared along a 'cleaning ability' continuous rating scale anchored by zero (Grewal *et al.* 1997). Similarly, one brand might advertise a unique selling proposition (e.g. Wisk gets rid of 'ring around the collar'), implying an attribute that other brands do not possess.

Negative political ads, on the other hand, frequently employ attributes involving a semantic differential. For example, rather than conveying the fact that an opponent favours gun control to a greater or lesser *degree*, a political candidate might emphasise the fact that he/she voted *for* gun control on a particular piece of legislation, while his/her opponent voted *against* it. The polarising nature of these attributes means that if a viewer is favourably disposed towards one anchor of the semantic differential, he/she is likely to be unfavourably disposed towards the other, and therefore both positive and negative thoughts about the sponsor (brand) *as well as* the opponent (competitive brand) are likely to be generated. All these types of thoughts, in turn, will have an impact upon the sponsoring candidate's evaluations. In the following section(s), we address the manner in which the impact of these thoughts can be modelled.

## MODEL SPECIFICATION

A number of different models have been developed in an attempt to describe and predict the persuasive impact of marketing communications. Because one of the most widely employed measures of persuasive impact is change in brand attitude (Ab), these models typically focus on describing the specific types of cognitive and affective responses to advertising that both lead to and result from brand attitude formation. The five types of responses most often studied in the ad effects literature are ad affective responses, ad cognitions (Cad), attitude towards the ad (Aad), brand cognitions (Cb) and purchase intention. The latter four constructs, as well as brand attitude, are incorporated in the traditional 'Dual Mediation' Model (DMM), which has been well supported within the ad effects literature (e.g. Homer 1990; Brown & Stayman 1992; MacKenzie & Spreng 1992) (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Dual Mediation Model**

The DMM is theoretically grounded in Petty *et al.*'s (1983) notion of 'elaboration likelihood' (i.e. the likelihood of generating thoughts in response to a particular stimulus). The degree of elaboration determines the relative strength of DMM paths – that is, which linkages are likely to predominate in any given stimulus exposure situation. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) predicts that motivation and ability influence the likelihood of message elaboration, and that increased elaboration enhances persuasion when the message is strong (i.e. primarily evokes support arguments) and diminishes persuasion when the

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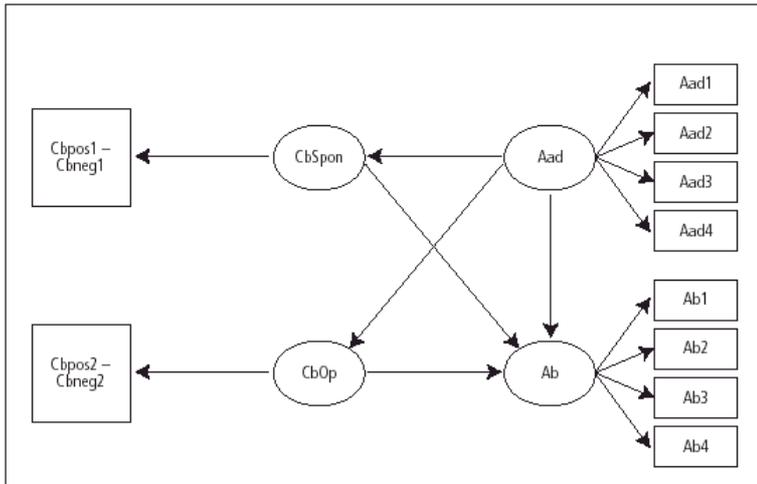
message is weak (i.e. primarily evokes counter-arguments) (Cacioppo & Petty 1979; Petty *et al.* 1981; Petty & Wegener 1999; Ito 2002). An argument is judged to be strong if it elicits the positive brand cognitions desired by the message communicator (Petty & Cacioppo 1986, pp. 31–32; Petty *et al.* 1995). Thus a 'weak' message typically cannot elicit more positive than negative brand-related cognitions, nor can a 'strong' message result in a preponderance of negative (vs positive) brand cognitions. Because a preponderance of positive (negative) brand cognitions would tend to bolster (weaken) brand evaluations, the valence of the relationship between brand cognitions (net positive or negative) and brand attitude (i.e.  $Cb \rightarrow Ab$ ) is predicted to be positive (Coulter & Punj 1999).

However, the notion that argument quality is the primary driver of message acceptance becomes somewhat obfuscated in the case of negative advertising. Here the primary goal of a 'strong' message may be not so much to elicit *positive* cognitions regarding the brand in question but rather *negative* cognitions regarding a competing brand. In fact, as noted earlier, direct 'attack' ads often do not even mention the ad's sponsor; instead the entire message content may be targeted towards the competitor (Merritt 1984). The inherent assumption behind such an attack ad is that denigration of an opponent (competing brand) will result in an improved attitude towards the sponsor, at least in a relative sense (Miniard *et al.* 1993). But such an assumption cannot be tested within the Dual Mediation framework, unless thoughts about competing brands are incorporated into the specification. Thus, an examination of negative advertising requires not only a refinement of the brand cognitions (Cb) construct to include other types of thoughts, but also a re-examination of the notion of argument quality in the context of both sponsoring and competing brand. In order to successfully integrate dual-process (DMM) theory with negative appeals, we must first respecify the Dual Mediation Model framework. That respecification is described next.

### THE TRI-MEDIATION SPECIFICATION

First, we exclude both purchase intention and ad cognitions from the DMM model specification. The former is excluded because it is a consequent rather than an antecedent of Ab, and the primary concern of this paper is with the processes that impact persuasion and attitude change. The latter is excluded because its indirect effects on Ab are entirely mediated by (and thus captured within) the Aad latent construct.<sup>1</sup>

Because cognitive responses to a political advertisement can be directed towards either the sponsor or the opponent, and because these constructs may act independently in terms of their influence on brand (sponsor) attitudes, we refine the brand cognitions construct to include both sponsor (i.e. CbSpon) and competitor/opponent (i.e. CbOp) components (Meirick 2002). Our modified version of the DMM results in three levels of mediation, and hence is hereafter referred to as the Tri-Mediation Model or 'TMM'. The TMM is depicted in Figure 2, and is used as the base model in our study. Because the elicitation of *negative* brand cognitions directed towards the sponsor's opponent is predicted to cause a *positive* attitude towards the ad's sponsor, we expect that the valence of the  $CbOp \rightarrow Ab$  relationship will be negative.



**Figure 2: Tri-Mediation Model**

## HYPOTHESES

As noted earlier, the DMM/TMM models are theoretically grounded in Petty *et al.*'s (1983) notion of 'elaboration likelihood'. The degree of elaboration determines the relative strength of DMM/TMM paths – that is, which linkages are likely to predominate in any given stimulus exposure situation. When elaboration likelihood is high, viewers of a persuasive communication are prone to generate a relatively large number of ad- and brand-related thoughts, and to engage in more effortful (i.e. 'central') processing of the ad's message content. Thus the Aad→Cb and Cb→Ab paths should predominate. Conversely, when elaboration likelihood is low, few resources are made available for message processing, and brand attitudes are more likely to be formed by means of heuristics (Eagly & Chaiken 1993), affect transfer (Lutz 1985) or other less effortful (i.e. 'peripheral') message processing. Thus, in the latter instance the Aad→Ab linkage should predominate. With its inclusion of an ad attitude–brand cognition linkage, the DMM extended early elaboration likelihood theory to include the possibility that a peripheral cue (Aad) could also have an impact on the central route to persuasion by fostering message acceptance (MacKenzie *et al.* 1986). Thus the DMM was instrumental in demonstrating how central and peripheral processes are interrelated.

Given equally 'likeable' ads – i.e. resulting in equivalent ad attitudes (Aad) – and the high elaboration likelihood associated with an involved audience, whether positive or negative political ads are more effective in generating positive brand attitudes will depend upon: (1) the relative number(s) of positive and negative thoughts generated about both the sponsor of the ad and his/her opponent, and (2) the relative salience of those thoughts in affecting brand attitudes. The relative number of cognitions is reflected in construct means, whereas salience is reflected in path strength.

Of those few studies in the marketing literature that have broken down the brand cognitions construct into positive and negative components within the context of the DMM (e.g. MacKenzie & Spreng 1992), at least one has found a stronger and more salient *negative* component (Coulter & Punj 2004). The reason for this finding is unclear, however. The authors speculate that it may be linked to approach versus avoidance outcomes. Over 50 years of psychological research has demonstrated that behaviours that avoid negative outcomes are more difficult to extinguish than those that reinforce positive outcomes (see Eagly & Chaiken 1993, pp. 392–412, for a discussion). Perhaps the desire to avoid a less-than-desirable outcome causes consumers to attach greater importance to their negative thoughts. If our findings do indeed support this supposition, then the next question becomes: What type of negative appeal might work best in a political advertising context,

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and *why*? We address this question across strong/weak argument types.

### Strong argument

As noted earlier, direct attack ads focus primarily on denigrating the sponsor's opponent. Thus we expect that the primary outcome of a 'successful' (i.e. strong argument) direct attack ad would be the generation of a large number of negative cognitions regarding the competitor (i.e. CbOp). We expect that this number should be greater than for either of the other types of negative ads. Negative comparison ads (both direct and implied) should also result in the elicitation of negative brand cognitions directed towards the sponsor's opponent (CbOp); however, because research has demonstrated that comparative ads create a greater number of relative brand impressions than do non-comparative ads (Manning *et al.* 2001), we expect that the negative CbOp should be coupled with an even *greater* number of positive brand cognitions directed towards the ad's sponsor (i.e. CbSpon). Further, because multiple points of view are either suggested or implied, the salience of these cognitions may be increased relative to the direct attack ad. Increased salience would be reflected in the strength of the CbSpon→Ab path.

Regarding the CbOp→Ab path relationship, research has shown that only a very small percentage of subjects adopt a relative encoding frame when processing a non-comparative ad (Miniard *et al.* 1998). Thus we have no reason to expect that the salience of the CbOp cognitions (i.e. the relative degree to which they impact brand evaluations) would be any greater for direct attack ads than they would be for direct or implied comparison ads. Because *both* the CbSpon mean *and* the CbSpon→Ab path relationship are expected to be greater for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads, but only the CbOp mean is expected to be comparatively greater for the latter, we expect that brand attitude may be more positive for the negative comparison ads. Under 'strong' message argument conditions, we hypothesise:

**H1:** The mean level of (negative) CbOp will be greater for direct attack ads than for negative comparison ads.

**H2:** The mean level of (positive) CbSpon will be greater for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads.

**H3:** The strength of the CbSpon→Ab path relationship will be greater (more positive) for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads.

**H4:** Mean Ab will be greater for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads.

### Weak argument

By definition a 'weak' direct attack ad would be one where an attempt is made to foster a large number of negative cognitions regarding the sponsor's opponent, but the message is not 'convincing'. The weakness of the message could result not only in fewer negative CbOp but also in 'backlash' effects, which might manifest as either negative thoughts about the ad's sponsor (i.e. counter-arguments) or a (less) negative CbOp→Ab path relationship. In the latter instance, the weak nature of the direct attack advertising message is predicted to reduce the salience of any negative thoughts about the competitor that do occur. In effect, they become less important, or are given less credence, in forming sponsor attitudes. Thus, not only is the strength of the path reduced but evaluation of the sponsor (Ab) would also be diminished.

In the case of negative (direct or implied) comparison ads, a 'weak' message argument would fail to make convincing claims in comparing the two candidates on specific points or attributes. Relative to non-comparison direct attack ads, we expect that the level of support (counter-)arguments should decrease (increase) with regard to the sponsor (CbSpon), and that the level of support (counter-)arguments should increase (decrease) with regard to the opponent (CbOp) (Manning *et al.* 2001). The net impact of both of these effects would be a much weaker brand attitude. Because in the case of the direct attack ads only the strength of the CbOp→Ab path is reduced, whereas in the case of comparison ads *both* (positive) CbSpon and (negative) CbOp are reduced, we expect that attitude towards the sponsor will be greater in the former case. We expect that for 'weak'

message argument ads:

**H5:** The strength of the CbOp→Ab path relationship will be greater for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads.

**H6:** Mean Ab will be greater for direct attack ads than for negative comparison ads.

## METHOD

### Stimuli

Variations of a political print ad were developed for a fictitious United States Democratic 2008 Congressional candidate, Florence McGrath.<sup>2</sup> Subjects were told that Ms McGrath was a local (state) candidate running for national election against another fictitious Democratic 2008 Congressional candidate, Rebecca Shwartz. Two of the ad variations were strong and weak 'positive' advertisements; the remaining four were strong and weak 'negative' advertisements. The target of the negative ads was Rebecca Shwartz.<sup>3</sup> All the ads contained the identical headline ('Florence for Congress') and illustration (of the sponsor).

In order to develop the ads, we first constructed two lists of six attributes concerning Ms McGrath's record or stance on various topics – one list was for the strong message argument ads (see Figure 3), and one list was for the weak message argument ads. All the topics were fictitious in nature. Consistent with prior research in this area (Coulter & Punj 2004), argument strength (strong versus weak) was manipulated by varying the importance and/or discernibility of the attributes (i.e. topics). Thus the attributes contained in the strong message argument ads (e.g. 'voted to appropriate body armor funding for our troops', 'supported a college tuition tax deduction') were made to appear of greater importance than those contained in the weak message argument ads (e.g. 'missed a small number of State Senate votes', 'will support cleaning up the Potomac').

<b>Florence McGrath:</b>	<b>Her opponent, Rebecca Shwartz:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Voted to appropriate body armor funding for our troops</li><li>• Supported college tuition tax deduction</li><li>• Drafted environmental clean-up bill</li><li>• Chaired State ethics committee</li><li>• Reduced campaign lobbyists' contributions</li><li>• Eliminated State budget deficit</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Voted against body armor funding</li><li>• Does not favor college tuition tax deduction</li><li>• Has no record on the environment</li><li>• Investigated by the State ethics committee</li><li>• Accepted thousands of dollars in business lobbyist contributions</li><li>• Favors additional government spending</li></ul>

**Figure 3: Negative comparison/strong ad**

Ad type was further manipulated by including/excluding various portions of the lists. The negative direct comparison ads stated candidate McGrath's position on each of the attributes, as well as her fictitious opponent's position on each of the attributes (i.e. all the featured ad claims were given a comparative format) (see Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> The positive ads stated only Ms McGrath's 'position' on each of the attributes (i.e. contained only the left-hand column of Figure 3). Finally, the negative direct attack ads denigrated the opponent's position on each of the attributes but did not mention Ms McGrath's position (i.e. contained only the right-hand column of Figure 3). The last type of negative advertisement, implied comparison ads, would have required some

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type of subtle wording changes in terms of how the lists were presented – for example, they might have stated, 'Unlike her opponent, Florence McGrath voted to ...' (Merritt 1984). Therefore in order to maintain the consistency of the manipulations, and because our hypotheses were invariant across direct versus implied comparison ads, only the direct form of comparison ads were developed and tested.

### **Subjects and procedure**

A total of 359 undergraduate liberal arts students from a major US university took part in our study. Study participants received extra course credit. Upon arrival at the experimental site, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the six ad type/argument strength conditions. After receiving initial instructions and viewing one of the target ads, subjects filled out a written questionnaire designed to assess their reactions to those ads.

## **DATA AND MEASUREMENT**

### **Independent and Dependent Variables**

The two indicators used to measure the CbSpon and CbOp structural variables were derived from a verbal protocol in which subjects were asked to write down all thoughts that occurred to them during exposure to the advertisement. These protocols were subsequently independently coded by two judges who were unfamiliar with the study objectives as either: (1) positive (Cbpos1) or negative (Cbneg1) brand cognitive statements related to the sponsor, (2) positive (Cbpos2) or negative (Cbneg2) brand cognitive statements related to the opponent, or (3) other (non-ad or non-candidate-related) thoughts. 'Proportional reduction in loss' measures of inter-coder reliability (Rust & Cooil 1994) were 0.85, 0.87, 0.78 and 0.83 for the four brand-related cognitive categories, respectively, and 0.92 for the other thought category. For the final classification, disagreement between the judges was resolved by discussion until a consensus was reached. The CbSpon measure was formed by subtracting negative sponsor statements from positive sponsor statements; similarly, the CbOp measure was formed by subtracting negative from positive opponent statements (MacKenzie *et al.* 1986).

Both ad and brand (sponsor) attitudes were measured by four 7-point semantic differential items: like/dislike, good/bad, positive/negative and favourable/unfavourable (Mitchell & Olson 1981; Batra & Ray 1986; MacKenzie *et al.* 1986; Edell & Burke 1987). The scales formed by the unweighted sums of the four items used to form the ad and brand attitude scales had Cronbach alphas of 0.89 and 0.91, respectively.

### **Manipulation Checks**

Subjects indicated how strong the overall message arguments were on two 7-point semantic differential scale items anchored by 'believable/not believable' and 'convincing/not convincing' (Petty *et al.* 1983). Argument strength would be successfully manipulated if ad claims were significantly more believable and convincing for subjects exposed to the strong message ad than for subjects exposed to the weak message ad. In addition, subjects indicated how 'negative' each of the ads was using two 7-point Likert-type scale items anchored by 'not at all negative' and 'very negative'. Ad type would be successfully manipulated if the direct attack ads and direct comparison ads were deemed to be significantly more negative than the positive ads.

## **RESULTS**

### **Manipulation Checks**

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ANOVA results and subsequent Scheffé ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) comparisons revealed that ad message claims were significantly more believable [ $F(1,348) = 5.03, p \leq 0.05$ ] and convincing [ $F(1,347) = 4.86, p \leq 0.05$ ] for subjects exposed to the strong message ads ( $\bar{x} = 3.79$  believable;  $\bar{x} = 3.82$  convincing) than for subjects exposed to the weak message ads ( $\bar{x} = 2.68$  believable;  $\bar{x} = 2.49$  convincing). There was no ad type main effect, and no argument strength  $\times$  ad type interaction. Thus argument strength appears to have been successfully manipulated.

ANOVA results and subsequent Scheffé ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) comparisons revealed that subjects rated the message as significantly more negative [ $F(2,350) = 9.16, p \leq 0.001$ ] in the direct attack ad conditions ( $\bar{x} = 4.97$ ) and direct comparison conditions ( $\bar{x} = 3.33$ ) than in the positive attribute conditions ( $\bar{x} = 2.09$ ). There was no argument strength main effect, and no ad type  $\times$  argument strength interaction. Thus ad type appears to have been successfully manipulated.

A comparison of Aad means across groups revealed a significantly greater [ $F(1,348) = 4.92, p \leq 0.05$ ] Aad mean for the strong message ads ( $\bar{x} = 4.93$ ) than for the weak message ads ( $\bar{x} = 2.47$ ), but no significant differences ( $p > 0.05$ ) across ad types and no argument strength  $\times$  ad type interaction. Thus Aad was not expected to account for hypothesis test results.

### Examination of the Base Model

In order to explain the variation in model paths and construct means/intercepts, we employed AMOS 6 (Arbuckle 2005) for all structural equation modelling analysis. Consistent with prior research in this area (e.g. MacKenzie & Spreng 1992), each of the four ad- and brand-related items used to create the aforementioned ad and brand (sponsor) attitude scales was used as a separate Aad or Ab indicator. In order to set the metric and ensure model identification, we constrained the value of the first (or only) indicator loading for each of the latent constructs equal to 1 (Kenny 1979; Steenkamp & Baumgartner 1998).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) involving the measurement model revealed that all indicator loadings were significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) and within an acceptable range (0.58–0.93). The CFA provided a good fit to the data [ $\chi^2(29) = 37.53, p = 0.426$ , RMSEA = 0.03, CFI = 0.97], and no modification indices of substantive magnitude emerged for the lambda matrices, implying acceptable fit of the measurement model.

Next, we simultaneously estimated the measurement and structural models with subjects pooled across treatment groups. Once again, our overall ('Across Groups') model provided a relatively good fit to the data [ $\chi^2(31) = 107.36, p = 0.391$ , RMSEA = 0.04, GFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96], demonstrating that the model is statistically plausible and can reasonably reproduce the correlation matrix (Bagozzi & Yi 1988) (see Table 1). All (non-standardised) indicator loadings fell within an acceptable range (0.57–1.14) and were statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) (see Table 2). Examination of the structural path parameter estimates revealed that all the proposed path relationships were significant (see Table 3). When compared to the traditional Dual Mediation specification [ $\chi^2(25) = 216, p = 0.092$ , RMSEA = 0.05, GFI = 0.89, CFI = 0.91], our Tri-Mediation Model was found to provide a superior fit to the data.

Indicator	Aad1	Aad2	Aad3	Aad4	Ab1	Ab2	Ab3	Ab4	CbSpon	CbOp
Aad1	1.00									
Aad2	0.51	1.00								
Aad3	0.53	0.52	1.00							
Aad4	0.45	0.40	0.54	1.00						
Ab1	0.19	0.33	0.20	0.26	1.00					
Ab2	0.24	0.25	0.24	0.19	0.36	1.00				
Ab3	0.21	0.19	0.18	0.22	0.47	0.41	1.00			
Ab4	0.24	0.27	0.24	0.24	0.40	0.37	0.43	1.00		
CbSpon	0.07	0.16	0.18	0.09	0.13	0.14	0.15	0.18	1.00	
CbOp	-0.16	-0.14	-0.17	0.07	-0.38	-0.29	-0.25	-0.29	-0.31	1.00

Key  
Aad Attitude towards the ad  
Ab Attitude towards the brand  
CbSpon Thoughts about the sponsor of the ad  
CbOp Thoughts about the sponsor's competitor  
All correlations are significant at  $p < 0.05$ ; those  $> 0.13$  are significant at  $p < 0.01$

**Table 1: Pooled sample correlation matrix (N = 359)**

Indicator	Mean	SE	CR*	Loading	SE	CR*
CbSpon	0.90	0.027	33.33	1.00	—	—
CbOp	1.02	0.023	44.34	1.00	—	—
Aad1	3.54	0.109	32.47	1.00	—	—
Aad2	3.26	0.102	31.96	0.96	0.098	9.79
Aad3	3.77	0.121	31.15	1.14	0.097	11.75
Aad4	3.28	0.109	30.09	1.09	0.125	8.72
Ab1	3.06	0.090	33.98	1.00	—	—
Ab2	3.07	0.131	23.43	0.57	0.068	8.38
Ab3	3.39	0.092	36.84	0.63	0.174	3.62
Ab4	3.44	0.194	17.73	0.64	0.088	7.27

\* CR = critical ratio [critical ratios  $> 2.00$  are significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ ]

**Table 2: Measurement model pooled sample (N = 359) non-standardised parameter estimates**

Parameter	Strength of arguments and ad type						
	Strong argument				Weak argument		
	Overall (N = 359)	Attack (N = 59)	Comparison (N = 59)	Positive (N = 61)	Attack (N = 58)	Comparison (N = 60)	Positive (N = 62)
Aad	0.29	0.40	0.34	0.36	0.24	0.21	0.25
SE	0.07	0.05	0.11	0.13	0.09	0.10	0.07
Ab	0.45	0.94	0.55	0.40	0.15	0.41	0.27
SE	0.16	0.15	0.22	0.14	0.07	0.12	0.09
CbSpon	1.07	0.60	1.26	1.29	0.51	1.03	1.20
SE	0.08	0.06	0.11	0.12	0.08	0.07	0.04
CbOp	-1.24	-1.85	-1.11	-0.94	-0.76	-1.44	-1.39
SE	0.10	0.15	0.12	0.13	0.06	0.09	0.07
Aad-CbSpon	0.49	0.42	0.57	0.59	0.40	0.48	0.51
SE	0.09	0.03	0.04	0.12	0.11	0.05	0.13
Aad-CbOp	-0.28	-0.17	-0.36	-0.35	-0.21	-0.32	-0.31
SE	0.07	0.04	0.13	0.09	0.03	0.08	0.07
CbSpon-Ab	0.27	0.21	0.53	0.26	0.23	0.17	0.18
SE	0.11	0.04	0.07	0.12	0.05	0.10	0.09
CbOp-Ab	-0.17	-0.19	-0.11	-0.14	-0.12	-0.30	-0.18
SE	0.07	0.02	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.09	0.05
Aad-Ab	0.27	0.39	0.24	0.20	0.38	0.25	0.22
SE	0.08	0.11	0.08	0.09	0.13	0.10	0.04

SE = standard error  
All pooled sample path estimates are significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

**Table 3: Non-standardised structural parameter estimates overall pooled sample and individual groups**

A comparison of path strengths and latent construct means/intercepts across processing motivation x argument strength subsamples required that the measurement models be equivalent for each group. Measurement parameters for the six groups were compared by first estimating the base model simultaneously for each subsample [ $\chi^2(186) = 337.51, p = 0.208$ ], then estimating the same base model while constraining the (previously *unconstrained*) measurement parameters to be equal across groups [ $\chi^2(216) = 398.53, p = 0.146$ ]. The  $\chi^2_{diff}(30) = 61.02$  was not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that the measurement structures were essentially equivalent.

In order to compare construct means or intercepts across groups, we also needed to test for the invariance of item intercepts (i.e. 'scalar' invariance; Steenkamp & Baumgartner 1998). Item intercepts for the six groups were compared by first estimating the base model simultaneously for each group with measurement parameters constrained [ $\chi^2(216) = 398.53, p = 0.146$ ], then estimating the same model while individually constraining first the CbSpon item intercepts, then the CbOp and Ab item intercepts (i.e. one at a time across the six groups; for example, CbSpon (Group 1) = CbSpon (Group 2) = CbSpon (Group 3), etc.). In each case the  $\chi^2_{diff}(df = 5)$  was non-significant, and the RMSEA, CAIC, NNFI and TLI indices indicated no substantial deterioration in model fit (Byrne *et al.* 1989; Meredith 1993). Thus the latent means could be meaningfully compared across groups.

## HYPOTHESIS TESTS

The multiple group model with measurement structures constrained [ $\chi^2(216) = 398.53, p = 0.146$ ] was used as the basis of comparison for all hypothesis tests (Kenny 1979; Steenkamp & Baumgartner 1998). This model was compared to a series of models in which *additional* specific parameter(s) were constrained. In each case, the parameter of interest was constrained to be equal across the two groups hypothesised to differ. Hypotheses were confirmed if: (1) the additional constraint model

demonstrated a significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) poorer fit [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) > 3.84$ ] than the original model, and (2) examination of the structural parameter estimates revealed that this difference was in the predicted direction.

### Strong Argument Ads

In terms of the strong argument ads, analysis revealed that the CbOp mean was significantly more negative for the direct attack ad than for the direct comparison ad [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 10.26, p < 0.01$ ]. Thus H1 is supported. As expected, the CbOp mean was also significantly more negative for the direct attack ad than for the positive ad [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 9.16, p < 0.01$ ] (see Tables 3 and 4). Analysis further revealed that the CbSpon mean was significantly greater [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 11.34, p < 0.01$ ] and the CbSpon→Ab path relationship was significantly stronger [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 5.52, p < 0.05$ ] for the direct comparison ad than for the direct attack ad (see Tables 3 and 4). Thus H2 and H3 are supported. Although the CbSpon mean was significantly greater [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 7.43, p < 0.05$ ] for the positive ad than for the direct attack ad, the CbSpon→Ab path relationship was *not* significantly stronger [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 1.66, p > 0.05$ ] (see Tables 3 and 4). Contrary to expectations, a comparison of attitudes towards the sponsor across the three ad types revealed that mean Ab was significantly greater for the direct attack ad than for either the direct comparison ad [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 9.64, p < 0.01$ ] or the positive ad [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 7.76, p < 0.05$ ]. Thus H4 is not supported.

Hypotheses	Parameter	Constraint	Df	$\chi^2$	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}$	p-value
H1	CbOp	A = B	217	408.79	(1) = 10.26	≤0.01
	CbOp	A = C	217	407.69	(1) = 9.16	≤0.01
H2	CbSpon	A = B	217	409.87	(1) = 11.34	≤0.01
	CbSpon	A = C	217	405.96	(1) = 7.43	≤0.05
H3	CbSpon→Ab	A = B	217	404.05	(1) = 5.52	≤0.05
	CbSpon→Ab	A = C	217	400.19	(1) = 1.66	>0.05
H4	Ab	A = B	217	408.17	(1) = 9.64	≤0.01
	Ab	A = C	217	406.29	(1) = 7.76	≤0.05
H5	CbOp→Ab	D = E	217	404.40	(1) = 5.87	≤0.05
	CbOp→Ab	E = F	217	410.90	(1) = 12.37	≤0.01
H6	Ab	D = E	217	406.92	(1) = 8.39	≤0.01
	Ab	D = F	217	413.46	(1) = 14.93	≤0.01
	Ab	E = F	217	404.52	(1) = 5.99	≤0.05

A Strong argument, direct attack ad  
 B Strong argument, direct comparison ad  
 C Strong argument, positive ad  
 D Weak argument, direct attack ad  
 E Weak argument, direct comparison ad  
 F Weak argument, positive ad  
 Note: The multiple group model with measurement structures constrained [ $\chi^2(216) = 398.53, p = 0.146$ ] is used as the Initial basis of comparison for hypothesis tests.

**Table 4: Hypothesis and additional comparison test results**

### Weak argument ads

Analysis revealed that the CbOp→Ab relationship was significantly stronger [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 5.87, p < 0.05$ ] and that the Ab mean was significantly greater [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 8.39, p < 0.01$ ] for the direct comparison ad than for the direct attack ad (see Tables 3 and 4). Thus H5 is supported, but H6 is not. Analysis further revealed that the Ab mean was significantly greater for the positive ad than for the direct attack ad [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 14.93, p < 0.01$ ], and that it was greater for the direct comparison ad than for the positive ad [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 5.99, p < 0.05$ ]. Finally, the CbOp→Ab relationship was stronger (more negative) for the direct

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comparison ad than for the positive ad [ $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 12.37, p < 0.01$ ].

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, we model the effects of positive versus negative (political) advertising on brand attitude, and find that the manner in which these attitudes are formed is affected by ad type and argument strength. The negative valence of the CbOp→Ab relationship indicates that *negative* thoughts about the ad sponsor's opponent or competitor can indeed have a *positive* effect upon attitude towards the sponsor. Our results indicate that if the message is strong, direct attack ads may be superior to either direct comparison ads or positive ads in generating favourable attitudes towards the sponsor. The reason for their effectiveness appears to lie in their ability to trigger the generation of a proportionately larger number of (negative) cognitions regarding the sponsor's opponent. The relatively greater number of negative competitor thoughts (CbOp) that are generated in response to viewing a direct attack ad seem to outweigh the more positive responses that occur when viewing either a direct comparison ad or a positive ad. More specifically and contrary to our hypothesis, the negative CbOp outweigh *both*: (1) the relatively greater number of positive thoughts generated in regard to the sponsor (CbSpon), and (2) the relatively greater salience of those thoughts (CbSpon→Ab) in forming a sponsor evaluation.

If the advertising message is weak, then direct comparison ads appear to be superior to either positive ads or direct attack ads in generating positive attitudes towards the sponsor. This finding is apparently the result of a relatively weaker (less negative) CbOp→Ab relationship in the latter two instances. Apparently, the salience of negative thoughts about the opponent (or competitor) is reduced if the viewer perceives that the advertising message is weak. These negative thoughts then are given less credence or importance in forming sponsor evaluations. The authors speculate that CbOp salience may be reduced less in direct comparison ads than in positive or direct attack ads because the viewer recognises that, even though the arguments are weak, *both* sides of each issue (or at least two different perspectives) are presented. Presenting a two-sided message has been found to effectively increase source credibility (Settle & Golden 1974), which could impact the salience of arguments that are made. Somewhat unexpectedly, the reduced salience of CbOp is enough to outweigh *both*: (1) the reduction in positive thoughts about the sponsor, *and* (2) the reduction in negative thoughts about the opponent that occur in the case of negative comparison ads. Thus, negative comparison ads are found to create more positive brand attitudes under weak message argument conditions.

Our results provide evidence that negative political advertising appeals may indeed be superior to positive appeals. Further, under strong message argument conditions, direct attack ads – which researchers often consider the *least* constructive form of negative advertising (Lau & Pomper 2001) – appear to have the greatest beneficial impact on brand (sponsor) evaluations. Of course, the generalisability of our findings may be limited, in that we utilise two very specific forms of negative advertising. Our manipulations involve advertising appeals that focus upon specific attributes or topics (e.g. rather than candidate image), and all the featured ad claims are given a comparative format. Thus, we are unable to conclude that direct attack ads may work best in all circumstances. It does appear likely, however, that political campaign strategists can use negative comparative advertising effectively to communicate concrete, demonstrable differences between competing candidates on such key topics as issue positions, legislative voting records and past experiences (Pinkleton 1997). Future research efforts might be directed towards an examination of positive versus negative advertising involving less 'intense' comparative ad conditions (Donthu 1992). In addition, one might investigate the relative effectiveness of positive versus negative advertisements involving *image* ad appeals.

The external validity of study findings is also limited to subjects under high elaboration likelihood conditions. Because the

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strength of DMM/TMM paths should vary under high versus low involvement, and because a large proportion of ad viewing occurs in low-involvement contexts, the author suggests that future research efforts might compare the efficacy of positive versus negative appeals across varying degrees of elaboration likelihood. In addition, the message manipulations utilised in this study involved fictitious political candidates. Because backlash effects could be expected to be greater for sponsoring candidates with whom the viewer is familiar (Sorescu & Gelb 2000), it might be the case that the negative CbOp generated in response to direct attack ads would not outweigh the negative thoughts generated in regard to the sponsor (CbSpon) for 'real life' candidates. Thus, the effectiveness of direct attack ads under strong message argument conditions could be compromised.

Our use of student subjects could also represent an external validity issue. Students are not fully representative of the general electorate – they tend to be both younger and more educated than the general voting population. In addition, although the percentage turnout of young voters may be increasing, historically they tend to be less involved in various forms of political participation (e.g. voting, candidate lobbying) than other groups of eligible voters (Garramone 1985). However, numerous studies in this area support the use of students as participants in political advertising research; in fact when findings are considered as an indication of the effects of comparative political advertising on political *novices* who have not yet formed candidate evaluations, external validity is increased substantially (Roddy & Garramone 1988; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland 1991; Shapiro & Rieger 1992; Pinkleton 1997).

A final possible limitation of our study involves its focus upon candidate attitudes rather than actual voting intentions or behaviour. A plethora of studies have demonstrated that although attitudes may be useful in predicting behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980), the relationship is less than perfect and subject to numerous constraints (see Petty *et al.* 1991, pp. 264–266, for a discussion). Because we employed *fictitious* candidates in our study manipulations (and participants could have preconceived voting predispositions towards *actual* candidates), it was assumed that the attitude → behaviour relationship might be weak. Nevertheless, research results indicate a stronger relationship between attitude and individual voting behaviour after exposure to a negative ad than after exposure to a positive ad (Shapiro & Rieger 1992). In addition, as noted earlier, negative information (advertising) may be more memorable than positive information; because research has demonstrated that the strength of the attitude → behaviour relationship is a (partial) function of the accessibility of those attitudes from memory (Fazio & Williams 1986), one can conclude that negative political advertising will have a significant impact on voting behaviour (Pinkleton 1997).

In terms of the comparative advertising literature, researchers have long argued for the need for relative measures when assessing comparative advertising effects (e.g. Miniard *et al.* 1993). Because our Tri-Mediation Model of Persuasion effectively incorporates thoughts about the advertising sponsor's competitor into overall sponsor evaluations, we are able, in effect, to utilise a *non*-relative measure of advertising effectiveness (*Ab*) to assess the *relative* nature of a negative political ad. Such a framework might be utilised to model the effects of (direct) comparative advertising in general, although the valence of the CbOp→*Ab* path might vary depending upon whether the message was differentiative or associative in nature (Pechmann & Ratneshwar 1991). In addition, the CbOp construct might need to be further refined to reflect positioning against a specific competitor (direct comparison) versus positioning against the entire market (indirect comparison). In either case, because comparative advertising has become such a ubiquitous form of persuasive communication (Pechmann & Stewart 1994), our model provides an important breakthrough.

Finally in terms of the general persuasion modelling literature, we have refined the notion of argument quality as defined by the Elaboration Likelihood Model. We redefine a 'strong' argument to be one that elicits *either*: (1) the positive brand cognitions

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desired by the message communicator (i.e. regarding the sponsor, as in the case of positive or negative comparison ads), or (2) the negative brand cognitions desired by the message communicator (i.e. regarding the opponent, as in the case of negative attack ads). In addition (as an outcome associated with backlash effects), our theoretical model allows for the possibility that a 'weak' message could elicit more positive than negative brand-related cognitions (regarding the opponent). We demonstrate that a peripheral cue (Aad) can have an impact on the central route to persuasion by fostering message acceptance not only in regard to the sponsor (MacKenzie *et al.* 1986) but also in regard to the competitor (opponent). As noted earlier, our model is tested under high-involvement conditions. Because direct affect transfer (i.e. Aad→Ab) is presumed to predominate under conditions of *low* elaboration likelihood, we speculate that the DMM and TMM may provide similar levels of fit under these conditions. In conclusion, the *Tri-Mediation Model* of persuasion provides significant insights into the nature of cognitive processing resulting from exposure to negative advertising.

## ENDNOTES

1. We tested the effect of Cad on Ab controlling for Aad, and found the effect to be non-significant (see Baron & Kenny (1986) for a comprehensive discussion of mediation testing procedures).
2. Because our hypotheses were predicated upon the high elaboration-likelihood associated with an involved audience, and because print media tend to result in higher levels of viewer involvement than television (Belch & Belch 2001), we chose the former as our medium.
3. Candidate names might be expected to vary in terms of voter appeal; however, such a peripheral cue was expected to have minimal influence upon attitude towards the sponsor under high-involvement conditions.
4. Researchers have characterised comparative ads along a continuum of 'intensity' (Donthu 1992); our format corresponds to a 'high intensity' comparative ad condition.

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