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# Attacking or Self-Promoting? The Influence of Tone of Advertising and Issue Relevance on Candidate Evaluations and the Likelihood of Voting for an Emerging Challenger in Korea

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This experimental study examines the effectiveness of attacking strategy for a challenger candidate, and the moderating role of issue relevance in negative political advertising. Results indicate that the effects of negative advertising on the sponsoring candidate's personal attributes depend on issue relevance. That is, participants gave the highest evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attributes when exposed to positive advertising with low-relevance issues. When it comes to the sponsoring candidate's qualification attributes, participants were more likely to give higher evaluations when issue relevance was high regardless of the tone of the advertising. As would be expected, the emerging challenger encountered unintended consequences in terms of participants' likelihood of voting when employing negative advertising to attack the leading candidate. Participants exposed to negative ads were less likely to vote for the sponsoring candidate than those who were exposed to positive ads.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most distinctive aspects of contemporary political campaigns is the widespread use of negative advertising, especially in the United States and several Asian countries, such as South Korea and Taiwan (e.g., Chuang, 2006; Kim, 2009; Niu, 2007; Park, 2009). Negative political advertising focuses on attacking issue stances or personality traits and is designed to evoke negative images of the sponsor's opponent (e.g., Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Kaid, 2004; Kaid & Boydston, 1987). The main reason for its popularity is that sponsors perceive negative ads to be effective: Negative ads are recalled more easily, in more detail, and with greater accuracy than positive ads because they are more arousing and ego-involving and, by presenting the choice of candidates in stark terms, can make voters feel as if the stakes are high (Bradley, Angelini, & Lee, 2007; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Newhagen & Reeves, 1991). One of the most significant matters concerning the effect of political negative ads is whether they can "improve the evaluations of their sponsors and increase their probability of getting elected, or decrease the evaluations of their sponsors' targets (opponents) and diminish their chances of

being elected” (Lau & Sigelman, 2000, p. 21). In other words, do political attack ads achieve their intended results?

However, studies of the effects of negative advertising have shown inconsistent results. While some studies indicate that negative ads are advantageous to the sponsoring candidates (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), other researchers argue that positive advertising is more likely to be effective in increasing the sponsoring candidates’ favorable images (e.g., Thorson, Christ, & Caywood, 1991). Lau and Sigelman’s (2000) extensive review of research also found mixed results: Some studies found that negative advertising is significantly more effective than advocacy advertising, while others found the opposite.

The controversy may be attributed to different contingent factors, such as voter-related variables. For example, individuals’ involvement has been found to be an important variable in moderating the effect of political campaign messages, including negative political advertising (Faber, Tims, & Schmitt, 1993; Yoon, Pinkleton, & Ko, 2005). It can increase the effects of negative political advertising on voting decisions (Faber et al., 1993). Therefore, individuals’ personal relevance to the issue addressed in the political advertising, which is the issue relevance, needs to be considered as an important factor in facilitating or impeding individuals’ involvement in processing and evaluating the advertisement’s messages. Thus, this study probes the role of issue relevance in the effects of political advertising on individuals’ political attitudes and behaviors.

Given this uncertainty regarding the effects of attacking strategy, this study investigates the effect of negative advertising on candidate evaluations and the likelihood of voting, while taking issue relevance into account to contribute to the literature on political advertising. In particular, this study gives more attention to a challenger candidate’s use of political advertising because challengers are more likely than incumbents to use attack strategies (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2002). Despite challenger candidates’ frequent use of negative advertisements, it is noteworthy that attacking the opponent or incumbent may not be useful for the challenger in some situations, as “unintended consequences,” defined as negative feelings aimed at the sponsor of the ad, may occur (Garramone, 1984, p. 251).

In Korea, one of the most common election issues surrounds the problem of negative advertising; however, relatively few studies have empirically examined this important topic and attack strategies in political advertising outside the United States. Some studies employed surveys to investigate factors influencing candidates to conduct negative campaign (e.g., Kim, 2009; Park, 2009), or used content analysis to compare campaign strategies and types of negative ads in various elections between the United States and Korea (e.g., Tak, Kaid, & Khang, 2007). Therefore, from the perspective of media effects, the 2007 Korean presidential election provided a good opportunity to examine whether a challenger candidate’s use of negative political advertising is effective in Asian context. In addition to the candidate status as a challenger or a leading candidate, the two candidates selected in this study also have some background differences that need to be considered. Candidate A, the challenger, is an emerging politician who ran as one of the presidential candidates in the 2007 Korean presidential election, while candidate B is a well-known politician and the former mayor of Seoul, the capital of South Korea, who ran as the leading presidential candidate.

Considering the growing popularity of negative advertising among challenger politicians and the relative lack of research capturing this trend, the present study aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining the effectiveness of negative political advertising and the role played by

issue relevance in negative political advertisements, particularly when an emerging challenger employs them, on individuals' candidate evaluations and vote intention. This study also adds to the body of research in campaign and strategic communication from outside the Western/U.S. context by focusing on an Asian/South Korea political setting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Challengers and the Strategy of Using Negative Political Advertising

Political advertising is one of the most important strategic tools candidates use to directly communicate with potential voters and persuade probable supporters (Kaid, 2004; Kaid & Boydston, 1987). This tool is even more important for challenger candidates or emerging politicians, since they need people to know about, for instance, who they are and what they are willing to do for the public if they get elected. Given that the candidates can control their messages in campaign advertising, they can highlight a particular issue with a certain advertising tone as they like.

Whether negative or positive advertisements have a greater effect on attitude and voting intention has been controversial in political advertising research. Lau (1982) found that negative political advertising is more informative than positive in evaluating candidates. Other studies have shown convincing evidence for the effectiveness of negative advertisements in that negative advertisements receive more attention, are easier to remember, and can lower participants' evaluations of the targeted candidate (Bradley et al., 2007; Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Pinkleton, 1997). They can be effective in persuading voters by reinforcing partisan attitudes and attracting unaffiliated voters (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

Although some studies indicate that negative messages depress citizens' evaluations of targeted candidates because negative messages are more arousing and involving, scholars have been unable to consistently replicate those results. From the mood management perspective, Wegener and Petty's (1994) hedonic contingency hypothesis indicates that people in a positive mood are more likely to process positively framed messages to maintain a positive affect, and avoid messages they find depressing—people select media content to minimize aversions and maximize elation. Bradley, Angelini, and Lee's (2007) study provided evidence that people's reflective aversive emotional systems would be activated as they exposed themselves to negative political advertisements; their bodies would be prepared to move away, and people would show greater appetitive motivational activation as they were exposed to positive political advertisements. Smith and Schaffer (1991) also suggested that people may avoid negative information to avoid the risk of exposure to negative affect. Positive tone can be more persuasive because it can raise individuals' positive affect such as happiness and enjoyment, which could improve message involvement and processing.

Regardless of the effectiveness of political advertisements, political candidates use negative campaign strategies to stain the character of an opponent by emphasizing the target's weakness, such as broken promises or public misstatements (Merritt, 1984; Yoon, et al., 2005). With no office to lose, challengers are more likely to use negative advertising strategies (Lau & Pomper, 2002). Previous research indicates that voting decisions are largely accumulated from previous evaluations of candidates' performance and image, and therefore, incumbents win the election more easily than challengers because of their higher visibility (Abramowitz, 1980; Beth, 1984;

Lau & Pomper, 2002). Challengers have more difficulty obtaining recognition and support; therefore, they are more likely to use a negative campaign strategy to make the case for throwing out the incumbents (Lau & Pomper, 2002).

Kaid and Davison (1986) confirmed that challengers used negative advertising more than incumbents in the 1982 U.S. Senate campaigns. Tinkham and Weave-Lariscy (1995) also showed that even though incumbents had become as likely as challengers to employ negative advertising, challengers put greater emphasis on opponents' characteristics such as voting record and integrity. In addition to the frequency of using negative advertisements, Lau and Pomper (2002) examined the effectiveness of negative campaigning in 143 U.S. Senate elections from 1988 to 1998 and found that negative campaigning is relatively effective for challengers, while positive campaigning is more effective for incumbents. However, the challengers' attack strategy may not actually be effective. Several experimental studies on negative political advertising found unintended effects—not only did respondents show a general disapproval of negative ads, they reported high levels of disapproval with the source of negative ads (e.g., Garramone, 1984; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991). Therefore, negative advertising may be harmful for challengers, especially for emerging candidates because voters are less familiar with them than with incumbents or leading candidates who have been well-known to the public.

Studies on source credibility and persuasion shed light on political advertising sponsorship and candidates' status. They suggest that perceptions of messages' source credibility, including trustworthiness and expertise, influence how the receiver reacts to or interprets that message (e.g., Chaiken & Maheswaren, 1994; Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000). The results in those studies provided a theoretical grounding for understanding the unintended effects of negative advertising on the challengers, especially emerging ones. In political advertising, the candidate who sponsors the commercial can be treated as the source of the message. Voters are more likely to refuse to support a low-credibility candidate who relies on negative political advertising—they might not only tend to maintain their cognitive consistency among their perceptions of the level of source credibility, but also consider that the candidate's use of an attacking strategy results from his or her character flaws (Hill, 1989; Yoon et al., 2005). Compared with challengers, especially emerging ones, incumbents-as-sources are more likely to be evaluated higher on expertise and trustworthiness in that the public is more familiar with them and their background.

As a result, although this study examines whether the effects of negative advertisements may result in more or less favorable attitudes toward the challenger, and further influence voting decisions; it also points to another dimension of distinction between challengers and incumbents, emerging challengers and well-known leading incumbents, which has not been considered much in previous literature. In the context of this study, when the challenger is an emerging candidate and the incumbent is a well-known leading politician, it is possible that positive advertisements sponsored by the emerging challenger cause voters to express better candidate responses (e.g., candidate evaluations and the likelihood of voting). The study, therefore, proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: Participants exposed to the positive political ads sponsored by the emerging challenger will be more likely than those exposed to the negative political ads to have higher evaluations of the sponsoring candidate.
- H2: Participants exposed to the positive political ads sponsored by the emerging challenger will be more likely than those exposed to the negative political ads to have a higher likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate.

## Issue Relevance

One factor that might prove important to the effectiveness of political advertising may be the extent to which people think the issue addressed in an advertisement is relevant to them. Whether the effectiveness of political advertising can be conditioned by issue relevance can be theoretically explained by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This model plays a critical role in predicting advertising effectiveness. It indicates that the persuasion forms or changes attitude by being processed through two different routes. In the central route, there is extensive and effortful information-processing activity, while in the peripheral route, there is little cognitive processing and low-effort information-processing activity. Whether a person uses the central or peripheral routes depends on his or her mental capacity and motivation. People tend to use the central route when they are highly motivated and involved with the information, while they tend to use peripheral routes when they are less motivated and less likely to make effort on processing information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Research has found that high-involvement messages are those with greater personal relevance or personal connections (Krugman, 1965; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Zaichkowsky, 1986). Wegener, Downing, Krosnick and Petty (1995) also suggested that personal relevance is the most important variable that influence individuals' motivation to engage in effortful information process. In other words, individuals have higher motivation to process information more thoughtfully and carefully when they perceive the the issue has greater relevance to and hold significant consequences for some aspects of their lives (Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Previous studies have examined information process by manipulating personal relevance to the messages (e.g., Claypool, Mackie, Garcia-Marques, McIntosh, & Udall, 2004; Curren & Harich, 1994; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). In this sense, when the personal relevance of an issue is high, individuals take a central route to process information. In contrast, when the personal relevance of an issue is low, individuals take a peripheral route. As a result, issue relevance can increase individuals' involvement to the issue in an advertisement and be influential in the effectiveness of political advertisements.

Other research on the concept of involvement also define it as "the extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance" to the viewers (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, p. 1915), the process where individuals connect their personal experiences to the messages (Krugman, 1965), and the degree of importance and relevance as perceived by individuals (Zaichkowsky, 1986).<sup>1</sup> In other words, the higher the issue relevance, the greater the message involvement. Research also found that attitudes have a stronger relationship with behaviors when the attitudes were formed under high personal relevance conditions than low personal relevance conditions (Leippe & Elkin, 1987). For example, attitudes toward politics considered more personally relevant were found to have greater impact on vote choice (Krosnick, 1988; McGraw,

<sup>1</sup>Although this study adopted the definition of issue relevance and issue involvement from previous research that conceptualized these two terms in an interchangeable way (e.g., Darley & Lim, 1992), some of other research defined involvement in a different way (e.g., Muehling, Laczniak, & Andrews, 1993; Yoon et al., 2005). They focus on the information process of an advertisement's message to understand the extent to which people engage in a thoughtful consideration instead of understand to what extent the issue is important or relevant to people. The measurement, therefore, emphasizes the extent to which people pay attention to the advertisement's claims, concentrate on the messages in the stimulus, put thought into evaluating the advertisement's messages and feel the information in the advertisement might be relevant to making an informed decision (e.g., Austin & Pinkleton, 1999; Muehling et al., 1993).

Lodge, & Stroh, 1990). In the context of political advertising, when candidates use different issues in their political advertisements, the relevance of the issues can increase or decrease voters' interest and involvement in the messages. Issue relevance, therefore, is a significant component in political advertising.

In addition to the ELM, the priming effects also sheds light on the role of issue relevance when individuals evaluate political actors and make voting decision. The priming hypothesis posits that the issues presented in the media influence the individuals' criteria to evaluate politicians. Individuals use the most salient and accessible issues in their memory, which are emphasized by the media or campaign agenda, when evaluating political candidates and a president (Higgins, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). More importantly, when individuals are exposed to stimuli they perceived the relevance of the issue is higher, priming effects are more likely to occur due to the increasing accessibility and applicability of a construct in the process of a judgment tasks (Althaus & Kim, 2006; Higgins, 1996). In this sense, the relevance of the issue in the political advertising may operate as priming cues that can influence voters' candidate evaluations and further affect their likelihood of voting for the candidate.<sup>2</sup> Based on this body of knowledge, this study poses the following research hypotheses:

H3: Participants exposed to the political ads with high-relevance issue sponsored by the emerging challenger will be more likely than those exposed to low-relevance issue to have higher evaluations of the sponsoring candidate.

H4: Participants exposed to the political ads with high-relevance issue sponsored by the emerging challenger will be more likely than those exposed to low-relevance issue to have a higher likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate.

### The Interactions of Tone and Issue Relevance

As previous studies have examined potential contingent factors—such as source credibility (Yoon et al., 2005), whether the source of a political advertisement is an independent source or a candidate (Garramone, 1985), involvement (Faber et al., 1993; Yoon et al., 2005), candidate poll ranking (Chou & Lien, 2010), and political identification (Chang, 2003)—to understand inconsistent influences of negative political advertising, this study not only examines the main effect of the tone of political advertising and issue relevance in political advertisements, but also probes how issue relevance interplays with the tone of political advertising in affecting individuals' candidate evaluations and their likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate.

Studies examining message framing effects on persuasion have suggested that negatively framed messages may be more persuasive and effective when individuals have high motivation to process information, and high cognitive elaboration or high involvement in the messages,

<sup>2</sup>The experimental design affords the opportunity to see a cause and effect relationship, in a specific temporal order, which minimizes the possibility of reversed-causal relationship. In addition, priming effect provides support for the causal relationship between issue relevance and individuals' candidate evaluations proposed in the present study (e.g., Althaus & Kim, 2006; Higgins, 1996; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Kim, Han, & Scheufele, 2010). Other existing literature also indicates that issue relevance is an antecedent variable that can influence individuals' media uses, information seeking behaviors, attitudes and other judgmental behaviors because individuals have connection with the issue on a personal basis (e.g., Chew, 1994).

while positively framed messages may be more effective when individuals are less motivated and less involved in the messages (e.g., Maheswaran & Levy, 1990; Shiv, Edell-Britton, & Payne, 2004). Faber et al. (1993) also found that involvement increases the effect of negative political advertising on voting decisions.

However, few studies have comprehensively illuminated the role played by the issue relevance when it comes to individuals' information processing of political advertising, especially with different tones, in influencing individuals' political attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, the study poses the following research questions:

- RQ1: Does issue relevance moderate the effects of the tone of the political advertisement on participants' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate?
- RQ2: Does issue relevance moderate the effects of the tone of the political advertisement on participants' likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate?

## METHOD

### Subjects and Design

A  $2 \times 2$  pretest-posttest experiment was conducted. The first factor was the tone of political advertising, with two levels (negative/positive), and the second factor was issue relevance, with two issues (unemployment, for high issue relevance/real estate, for low issue relevance). A convenience sample of 107 Korean young adults participated in the study. Among them, about 43% of the participants were male and 57% were female. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 29 ( $M = 24.49$ ), all of legal voting age.<sup>3</sup> The 107 voluntary participants were randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups and read one political advertisement each. The groups were exposed to different advertisements containing (1) high-relevance issue with negative tone; (2) low-relevance issue with negative tone; (3) high-relevance issue with positive tone; and (4) low-relevance issue with positive tone.

Korean young adults were selected as participants because it is generally expected that young adults have similar direct and indirect experiences concerning public issues, so they are highly likely to have equivalent levels of relevance on public issues. This study selected unemployment as the high-relevance issue to young adults partly because for the past several decades unemployment has been a dominant subject not only in America and Europe but also in Asian politics and society (e.g., Benson & Zhu, 2005; Shaw & Slater, 1988; Shehata, 2010). In addition, most young adults have quite high relevance on unemployment because they directly feel job-related

<sup>3</sup>The participants are comprised of four different statuses of people, including college students (62.4%), graduate students (11.5%), people preparing for getting a job after graduation (17.3%), and people with jobs (8.7%). One might think those people might have different voting experience. However, it is worth noting that in this study, participants who already have jobs are those just graduated instead of working for couple of years; therefore, they have similar voting experience to students and people preparing for getting a job. Nevertheless, acknowledging a possibility that the gender and status proportion in the sample may lead to the bias in the results, the researchers first conducted a *t*-test to understand the mean differences of candidate evaluations and voting intention between male and female before their exposure to political advertising. No significant differences were found. Second, ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences among those different status groups. No significant differences were found as well in their candidate evaluations and voting intention before exposure to stimuli.

pressures such as job hunting and unemployment and some of them may be worried about their college debt and job prospects, while they have relatively low relevance on real estate, which they are less interested in. Therefore, it is expected that the stimuli in the experimental design and the sampling of Korean young adults enable us to examine the role of issue relevance in the effects of political advertising.

### Experimental Stimuli

The text and photos component of the e-mail advertisements contained a high-relevance issue with negative or positive tone or a low-relevance issue with negative or positive tone. Unemployment was selected as the high-relevance issue, and real estate was chosen as the low-relevance one. As mentioned before, the reason for choosing “unemployment” and “real estate” as high- and low-relevance issues is that getting a job is what most Korean young adults directly experience and have much concern about, while they encounter buying a home only indirectly and have little concern about it. Negative tone was defined as advertising that comments unfavorably on or negatively describes “an opponent’s personal traits, characters, records, and policy positions” (Buchanan, 1996, p. 95).

Accordingly, positive tone was defined as advertising with similar political information but focusing on self-promoting comments about the sponsoring candidate. The emerging challenger in the 2007 presidential election was the sponsor of the advertisements, while the well-known leading candidate was the target of the negative advertisements. The negative stimuli contained unfavorable comments about the target candidate’s positions on unemployment and real estate, and negative descriptions of the targeted candidate’s personal traits and records (e.g., “Candidate B claimed he can overcome this economic crisis by providing a million job positions . . . but B is a person who dismissed lots of employees . . . the record shows that B did speculation in real estate.”). The positive stimuli stated, for instance, “Candidate A will make strong regulations against speculation in real estate, which caused a serious economic crisis” and described a policy for making job openings and biographic profiles. A target candidate was presented only in the two negative ads, while a sponsor candidate was presented as either the attacking (in negative ads) or the self-promoting (in positive ads) candidate in all four treatment ads.

### Procedure

This study employed a single-exposure procedure for the experiment as in previous experimental studies on the effect of negative political advertising, (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Yoon et al., 2005), and the experiment was conducted in a real and natural setting (e.g., Chiu, Hsieh, Kao, & Lee, 2007; Clinton & Lapinski, 2004; Kim, 2009). At the beginning, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, that the university’s institutional review board approved the study and that their participation was voluntary.

Then participants were asked to fill out pretest questionnaires with a series of items asking their evaluations of the sponsoring candidate, their likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate, and measures for the control variables. Next, the advertising stimuli were sent to each

group via e-mail. Participants clicked a link to see the one of the advertisements, then completed the posttest questionnaire also asking about their evaluation of the sponsoring candidate and the likelihood of voting for the candidate. Basic demographic questions were included at the end of the posttest questionnaire. Afterward, participants were thanked and informed that the research would be used only for academic purposes.

## Dependent Measures

**Candidate evaluations.** The evaluations of the sponsoring candidate were measured on a 7-point scale in the pretest and posttest. Subjects were asked to indicate their assessment of 10 character traits including leadership, sincere, honest, prudent, competent, knowledgeable, friendly, believable, active, and intelligent (1 = *positive image*; 7 = *negative image*). The score was reverse-coded so that the higher score indicates a better evaluation of the sponsoring candidate's image. The character traits were selected from those commonly used in the literature of political advertising on candidates' images and evaluations (e.g., Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Rudd, 1989).<sup>4</sup> Candidate evaluations were measured by subtracting pretest ratings of candidate characteristics from posttest ratings ( $M_{leadership} = -.34$ ,  $SD_{leadership} = 1.34$ ;  $M_{sincere} = -.20$ ,  $SD_{sincere} = 1.34$ ;  $M_{honest} = -.16$ ,  $SD_{honest} = 1.26$ ;  $M_{prudent} = -.18$ ,  $SD_{prudent} = 1.15$ ;  $M_{competent} = -.18$ ,  $SD_{competent} = 1.55$ ;  $M_{knowledgeable} = -.26$ ,  $SD_{knowledgeable} = 1.15$ ;  $M_{friendly} = -.08$ ,  $SD_{friendly} = 1.37$ ;  $M_{believable} = -.29$ ,  $SD_{believable} = 1.34$ ;  $M_{active} = .02$ ,  $SD_{active} = 1.31$ ;  $M_{intelligent} = -.04$ ,  $SD_{intelligent} = 1.16$ ).

**Likelihood of voting.** The likelihood of voting was measured by asking participants to score their intention of voting for the sponsoring candidate on a scale from 1 = *very unlikely* to 7 = *very likely*. The likelihood of voting was measured by subtracting pretest scores of voting intention for a candidate from posttest scores of voting intention ( $M = .27$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ).

## Control Variables

**Political ideology.** Political ideology has been found to influence individuals' political attitudes and voting behaviors (e.g., Dardis, Shen, & Edwards, 2008). It can also affect how individuals process political advertising (Chang, 2003; Lemert, Wanta, & Lee, 1999). As maintained by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), party affiliation can modify the effects of negative campaigns on individuals' likelihood of voting in the election and their vote choice. Therefore, to take this confounding variable into account, participants were asked to identify their political ideology on a scale from 1 = *very liberal* to 6 = *very conservative* ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

<sup>4</sup>The measurement of evaluations of the sponsoring candidate in this study includes fundamental attributes that were identified in previous literature, such as leadership (e.g., Kinder, 1986), competence (e.g., Bean, 1993), intelligence (e.g., King, 1997), powerfulness (e.g., Bean, 1993), credibility and morality (Benoit & McHale, 2004). The two dimensions of candidate characters, personal attributes and qualification attributes, obtained from the factor analysis in this study also represent the most common types of candidates' images that have been tested in previous research (e.g., Graber, 1972; Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999).

*Political interest.* Political interest is an established behavioral determinant. It also has significant impact on individuals' political attitudes and voting behaviors (e.g., Drew & Weaver, 2006). In addition, the magnitude of media priming effects on public opinion has been found to be contingent upon political interest (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). Therefore, to measure political interest as a covariate, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they are interested in politics from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much* ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ).

## Other Measures

*Demographic and other measures.* Participants' demographics such as gender and age were included at the end of the pretest questionnaire. Chi-square tests showed no significant differences among the four groups in terms of gender and age, indicating that participants assigned to the four conditions were equivalent. In addition, for a manipulation check, individuals' awareness of the sponsoring candidate was measured on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*.

The two items, based on previous literature (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1979), assessing participants' personal relevance to each of the issues on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*, including to what extent they are involved in each of the issues, and to what extent they think each of the issues is important to them, were averaged ( $r_{unemployment} = .578$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r_{real\ estate} = .547$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{unemployment} = 6.39$ ,  $SD_{unemployment} = .86$ ;  $M_{real\ estate} = 4.62$ ,  $SD_{real\ estate} = 1.38$ ). Their perceptions of how negative each advertisement was were measured on a 7-point scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*.

## Data Analysis

The factor analysis with principal component solution has been used in the literature to identify the underlying dimensions of the candidates' images (e.g., Johns & Shephard, 2007; Kaid & Boydston, 1987). Ten items of individuals' evaluations toward the candidates' images, therefore, were factor analyzed.<sup>5</sup> To test the hypotheses and examine research questions, this study conducted a set of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA); control variables including political ideology and political interest were entered. Separate analyses for each dependent variable—that is, the evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attributes, the evaluations of the

<sup>5</sup>Factor analysis can simplify a particular domain of variables, and generate variates to identify factor dimensions and underlying constructs without a substantial loss of information (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999; Gorsuch, 1983; Kerlinger, 1973). Principle component analysis is one of the extraction methods of factor analyzing a correlation matrix that is widely used to extract the initial set of factors (Fabrigar et al., 1999; Kerlinger, 1973).

Kaid and Boydston (1987) adopted principal components solution using equimax rotation to factor analyze the scales which made up the image evaluation measure. The analysis uncovered two factors in the measure indicating the two basic dimensions of candidate images in respondents mind before viewing the ads. The first dimension includes evaluative adjectives such as qualified, honest, successful, and the second dimension consisted appearance or demeanor items such as serious, handsome, and calm. Johns and Shephard's (2007) research on candidate image and electorate preference also employed factor analysis with principal components solution and oblique rotation. The analysis revealed that the first three candidate images, including competence, intelligence, and leadership load on a factor that they name it "strength" and the other four candidate images likeableness, attractiveness, honesty, and caring load on another factor that they called it "warmth." Similarly, the results also indicate that individuals make their judgment on the basis of the two dimensions of candidate images found in the study.

sponsoring candidate's qualification attributes, and the likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate—were performed.

## RESULTS

The results from *t*-tests for the stimuli test showed significant differences in the perception of the tone of political advertising among the subjects. Negative advertisements were perceived as more negative ( $t = 7.352$ ,  $df = 105$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and more attacking ( $t = 7.939$ ,  $df = 105$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than positive advertisements. Participants also assessed the advertising with the high-relevance issue and the low-relevance issue. Those who were exposed to the high-relevance issue believed the issue to be more personally important and showed greater involvement than those exposed to the low-relevance issue ( $t = 12.039$ ,  $df = 106$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, the manipulation was successful. In addition, participants showed significantly higher knowledge and awareness of the targeted candidate, the well-known leading candidate, than of the sponsoring candidate, the emerging challenger in this study ( $t = 6.975$ ,  $df = 106$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Ten items of candidate evaluation in the pretest were factor analyzed (Table 1). Principal component solution and Varimax rotation were used to find image groupings. Two dimensions of candidate characters emerged: (1) personal attributes representing niceness, trust, or relationship-oriented factors (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) including honesty, prudence, sincerity, believability, knowledge, friendly, intelligence, and (2) qualification attributes representing strength or power (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ,  $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) including competence, leadership, and activeness.

TABLE 1  
Factor Analysis of the Evaluations of Sponsoring Candidate Images

Items	Factor Loadings	
	Personal Attribute I	Qualification Attribute II
Honesty	<b>.878</b>	.099
Prudence	<b>.790</b>	.199
Sincerity	<b>.772</b>	.277
Believability	<b>.759</b>	.190
Knowledge	<b>.746</b>	.328
Friendly	<b>.731</b>	-.074
Intelligence	<b>.719</b>	.279
Competence	-.052	<b>.854</b>
Leadership	.276	<b>.740</b>
Activeness	.286	<b>.689</b>
Eigenvalues	4.34	2.11
% Variance	43.37%	21.06%

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Primary loading of a variable on a factor is indicated by **boldface type**.

$N = 107$ .

## Tone of Ads, Candidate Evaluations, and Likelihood of Voting

To test H1, regarding the effect of the tone of the political advertising sponsored by the emerging challenger on individuals' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate the pretest score mean was subtracted from the posttest score mean to create change scores. Next, the change-scores were combined according to the two attributes of candidate character revealed by the factor analysis. The first is personal attribute, including honesty, prudence, knowledge, believability, intelligence, sincerity, and friendly, and the second is qualification attribute, including competence, leadership, and activeness.

The first hypothesis, stating that participants exposed to the positive political ads sponsored by the emerging challenger are more likely than those exposed to the negative political ads to have higher evaluations of the sponsoring candidate, was not supported. As Table 2 and Table 3 show, there was no significant main effect tone of ads on individuals' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate on either their personal attribute ( $F(1, 104) = 1.771, p = .186$ ) or their qualification attribute ( $F(1, 104) = .186, p = .667$ ). The participants in the negative advertising conditions did not differ significantly in their evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's image on either attribute from those in the positive advertising conditions.

The second hypothesis hypothesized that participants exposed to the positive political ads sponsored by the emerging challenger are more likely than those exposed to the negative political ads to have a higher likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate. This hypothesis was supported. The pretest score mean was subtracted from the posttest score mean to create change scores. As Table 4 shows, the main effect of the tone of political advertising on individuals' likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate was substantiated ( $F(1, 104) = 4.629, p < .05$ ). The means for each group were .24 for negative advertising and 1.18 for positive advertising. In other words, participants exposed to the positive advertisement were more likely to vote for the sponsoring candidate, the emerging challenger, than those who were exposed to the negative advertisement.

TABLE 2  
Evaluation of the Sponsoring Candidate's Personal Attributes by Ad Tone and Issue Relevance

Source	Sum of Square	df	Mean of Square	F	Significance
Main Effects					
Tone of Ads	1.869	1	1.869	1.771	.186
Issue Relevance	1.328	1	1.328	1.259	.265
Interaction	4.357	1	4.357	4.128	.045
Dependent Variable	Tone of Ads	Issues	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Evaluations of Candidate Characters (Personal Attributes)	Negative	Unemployment	.0043	1.18208	33
		Real Estate	-.6429	1.21685	28
	Positive	Unemployment	-.1364	.79169	22
		Real Estate	.0476	.64119	24

Note:  $N = 107$ . **Higher** number indicates higher evaluations toward the sponsoring candidate's images of personal attributes. Political ideology and political interest were entered as covariates.

TABLE 3  
The Evaluation of the Sponsoring Candidate's Qualification Attributes by Ad Tone and Issue Relevance

<i>Source</i>	<i>Sum of Square</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean of Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<b>Main Effects</b>					
Tone of Ads	.265	1	.265	.186	.667
Issue Relevance	5.383	1	5.383	3.779	.055
Interaction	.680	1	.680	.477	.491
<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Tone of Ads</i>	<i>Issues</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
Evaluations of Candidate	Negative	Unemployment	.0707	1.37376	33
Characters (Qualification		Real Estate	-.5119	1.48374	28
Attributes)	Positive	Unemployment	.0455	.95005	22
		Real Estate	-.2222	.64954	24

Note:  $N = 107$ . **Higher** number indicates higher evaluations toward the sponsoring candidate's images of qualification attributes. Political ideology and political interest were entered as covariates.

### Issue Relevance, Candidate Evaluations, and Likelihood of Voting

The third hypothesis examined the relationship between issue relevance and individuals' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate. Table 2 shows that subjects in the high-issue-relevance condition did not significantly differ in their evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's image of personal attribute from those in the low-issue-relevance condition ( $F(1, 104) = 1.259, p = .265$ ). However, Table 3 shows a marginal significant main effect of issue relevance on individuals' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's qualification attribute ( $F(1, 104) = 3.779, p = .055$ ).

That is, whether the issues are high-relevance or low-relevance did not affect individuals' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attributes. However, when it comes to the qualification attributes, ads with high-relevance issues may increase individuals' favorable attitude toward the sponsoring candidate. Therefore, the third hypothesis, stating that participants exposed to the political ads with high-relevance issue sponsored by the emerging challenger will be more likely than those exposed to low-relevance issue to have higher evaluations of the sponsoring candidate is partially supported.

To answer H4, concerning how issue relevance in the political advertisement influences participations' likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate, Table 4 shows that there is no significant main effect of issue relevance on individuals' likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate ( $F(1, 104) = 1.508, p = .222$ ).

### Tone of Ads, Issue Relevance, Candidate Evaluations, and Likelihood of Voting

The first research question tapped into the moderating effect of issue relevance on the influence of the tone of advertisements on the evaluations of the sponsoring candidate. Table 2 illustrates an interaction effect of the tone of political advertising and the issue relevance on individuals' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attribute ( $F(1, 104) = 4.128, p < .05$ ). To visualize this interaction effect, Figure 1 shows that among those who were exposed to the positive ads, higher evaluations were given when the ads include a low-relevance issue rather than

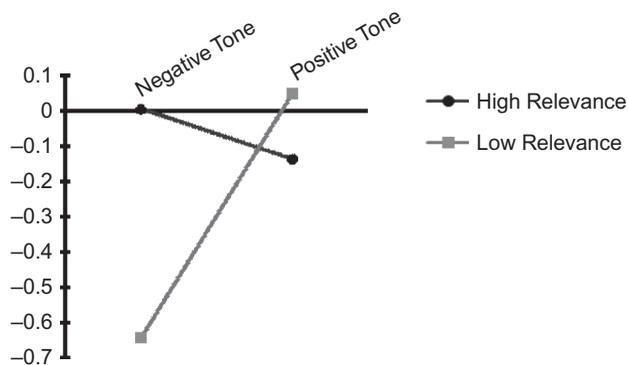
TABLE 4  
The Likelihood of Voting for the Sponsoring Candidate by Advertising Tone and Issue Relevance

Source	Sum of Square	df	Mean of Square	F	Significance
<b>Main Effects</b>					
Tone of Ads	5.578	1	5.578	4.629	.034
Issue Relevance	1.817	1	1.817	1.508	.222
Interaction	.003	1	.003	.003	.960

Dependent Variable	Tone of Ads	Issues	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
The likelihood of Voting for the sponsoring candidate	Negative	Unemployment	.2727	1.03901	33
		Real Estate	-.0357	1.45251	28
	Positive	Unemployment	.7273	.82703	22
		Real Estate	.4583	.88363	24

Note:  $N = 107$ . **Higher** number indicates higher likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate. Political ideology and political interest were entered as covariates.



Note:  $N = 107$ . **Higher** number indicates higher evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's images of personal attributes.

FIGURE 1 Interaction between the Tone of the Advertising and Issue Relevance on the Evaluations of the Sponsoring Candidate's Personal Attribute.

a high-relevance issue, while among those who were exposed to the negative ads, they tend to give higher evaluations when the ads with a high-relevance issue. Results demonstrate that participants exposed to the positive ads with a low-relevance issue gave the highest evaluations of the sponsoring candidate on the personal attribute. The effect of the ad's tone on subjects' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attributes depends on the level of issue relevance.

However, Table 3 shows no significant interaction effect of the tone of ads and issue relevance on the evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's qualification attribute ( $F(1, 104) = .477$ ,  $p = .491$ ).

To answer RQ2 regarding the interaction effect of the tone of ads and issue relevance on the likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate, Table 4 shows no significant interaction effect as well ( $F(1, 104) = .003, p = .960$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this study was to investigate whether negative advertising is effective for sponsoring candidates, especially for challengers who are emerging and little-known, in a political campaign and to examine how issue relevance would moderate the effect of the tone of political advertising on individuals' attitudes and behaviors. In this experiment, the direct effect of the tone of political advertising on participants' likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate was demonstrated. That is, individuals had a greater voting intention for the sponsoring candidate, especially the challenger who was not as well-known, when they were exposed to a positive political advertisement. This finding indicates that negative advertising is not as effective for the sponsoring candidate in attracting votes as some previous research suggests, particularly for newly emerging challengers (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

In other words, the result is consistent with the idea that less familiar challengers are more likely to have unintended consequences from using negative advertising, possibly because people have lower awareness about newly emerging candidates and tend to evaluate them as having lower expertise and trustworthiness. When the challenger's advertising was assessed as more negative and attacking, it became less persuasive, leading to the decline of the likelihood of voting for the sponsoring candidate.

In terms of the evaluations of the sponsoring candidate, the issue relevance interacted with the effect of the tone of the advertising when participants evaluated the sponsoring candidate's personal attribute. Those who were exposed to positive advertising on a low-relevance issue gave the highest evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attribute, encompassing honesty, prudence, believability, knowledge, intelligence, sincerity and friendly. This result indicates that people tend to give higher evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attribute when they are exposed to positively framed messages with a low-relevance issue.

In addition, the elaboration likelihood model suggests that when the issue is highly relevant, people use central-route and greater cognitive processing; therefore, resistance to the message is more likely to be generated. In contrast, low-relevance issue processing by the peripheral route is more persuasive when people spend less effort on processing the information with lower involvement and motivation (Petty et al., 1983). Accordingly, in this study, messages combined with positive tone and lower level of issue relevance can increase the persuasive function of the advertising by increasing people's positive evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's personal attributes.

It is interesting that when it comes to the evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's qualification attributes, including competence, activeness, and leadership, people exposed to the high-relevance issue in the political ads gave higher evaluations of the sponsoring candidate, regardless of whether the advertising was positive or negative. This may be because the advertisements sponsored by a challenger addressing highly relevant issues speak directly to people's concerns and create a desire for more information from the challenger, which intensifies individuals' positive attitudes toward the challenger's competence and qualification. In this regard,

issue relevance can moderate the effect of the tone of the advertising on evaluations of the candidate's personal attribute, and it also exerts a main influence on evaluations of the candidates' qualification attribute. It is noteworthy that these findings can be influenced by a potential factor: a candidates' status. Even though previous literature indicated that challengers are more likely to use negative advertising, the evidence in this study suggests that it may lead to unintended consequences when the sponsoring candidate is an emerging challenger, and issue relevance must be considered as a significant contingent factor in influencing the relationships.

From these results emerge clear implications for political campaign advertising. First, the findings provide evidence that political advertising with positive messages plays an important role in increasing people's intention to vote for the emerging challenger. When voters are less aware of the emerging challenger than of the well-known leading incumbent, negative advertising sponsored by the challenger may lead to activating aversive emotion and refusal to support him or her. Second, to initiate positive attitudes, challengers can employ advertising with positive tone and low-relevance issues to get higher evaluations of their images of personal attribute. To further increase evaluations on the qualification attribute, challengers need to address higher-relevance issues to directly speak to people's concerns.

These results should be interpreted with caution because of some limitations in the study. First, the findings might lack external validity because the advertising stimuli were sent to each group via e-mail. Future research can employ stronger control of the experimental procedure. Although the experiment has been administered not in a lab setting, but in a real and natural setting with a possible time lapse, which could have confounded the results, we instructed participants to complete the whole procedure, including pretest, exposure to stimuli, and posttest without intermission or exposure to other media content to avoid the potential problem. Since participants voluntarily took part in this study, it should ease the concerns about the confounding results due to different setting administered. In addition, the natural settings can allow researchers to understand participants' responses to stimuli in their real lives (e.g., Kim, 2009). Future studies, however, could overcome the limitation by conducting the experiment administered and controlled in the lab setting.

Another important limitation lies with the relatively small sample and that most of the participants were relatively young, well-educated, and prosperous college students, who have been found to participate less in public affairs than older individuals (Garramone, 1985). Although they provide acceptable samples for examining the effects of political advertising because their political views and dispositions are less entrenched (Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002), and unemployment is one of the most important issues college students worry about, the results necessitate a careful interpretation. In addition, it would be valuable for future research to use samples with greater geographical diversity so that cross-culture comparison can be conducted, not only on the negative advertising strategies but also on the effect of negative advertising and the moderating factors in influencing individuals' political attitudes and behaviors.

In terms of the measurement for candidate evaluations, the 10 items adopted in this study were chosen from previous research to identify fundamental attributes; however, the measurement might not be able to cover the spectrum of candidates' traits and explore other dimensions (e.g., problem-solving capacities and "nonpolitical" traits such as sympathy). As a result, future research may develop a more comprehensive measurement for candidate evaluations so that the effects of negative political advertising on candidate evaluations can be fully understood.

Furthermore, additional potential factors that may affect how individuals process negative advertisements need to be considered for a better elaborated relationship between the effects of negative advertising and individuals' candidate evaluations and voting intention. As Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006) indicated, individuals' political sophistication and adoption of heuristic cues to cope with an information-rich world in politics can influence their political decision-making. Lau, Andersen & Redlawsk (2008) further developed a multilevel examination that includes system-level and individual-level factors, such as long-term political orientation, political motivation, political expertise, political heuristics, and exogenous campaign factors, to understand voters' decision-making process for correct voting. Although this study mainly focused on examining the effect of negative political advertising and the moderating role of issue relevance in affecting individuals' political attitudes and behaviors by employing an experimental design with a short time-span to isolate the influences from other variables, it is possible for future research to conduct an overall test of the effect of negative ads such as a path model by integrating potential individual-level and systematic-level factors to gain a more well-rounded understanding of the entire information process on negative political advertising.

In this sense, future research can address how stable are the effects of political advertising by conducting a longer time-span with different exposure procedures (e.g., double- or several-exposure) and message stimuli (e.g., different types of negative political ads, such as direct comparison ads and implied comparison ads, or multiple-message stimuli) to explore the effects of negative political advertising in a more realistic situation.

In spite of these limitations, this study is significant in terms of its non-Western context, since most of the research on negative political advertising has been conducted in the West. With the widespread use of negative campaign in Asian countries, it is necessary to understand attacking strategies in different cultural and political settings. Furthermore, this study provides substantial understanding of the effectiveness of negative advertising for a sponsoring candidate who is an emerging challenger. It also points to a complex process in which candidate status, issue relevance, and the tone of ads all bear on the effect of political advertising. This study indicates that issue relevance serves as a significant factor influencing evaluations of the sponsoring candidate's qualification regardless of the tone of the advertising. It is also a contingent factor moderating the influence of the tone of the advertising on individuals' evaluation of the candidate's personal attributes. Therefore, a combination of the tone of the advertising and issue relevance can lead to a stronger campaign strategy in terms of the political advertising effects in forming individuals' attitudes toward an emerging challenger in a political campaign.

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