Enjoyment and appreciation of political advertisements:
How voters' issue involvement and congruence with the sponsor influence their responses and decisions

Abstract

This study investigates how voters derive pleasure and meaning from political advertisements by conducting a 3 (sponsorship) $\times$ 2 (issue) factorial experiment. It examines the impact of the interaction of issue involvement and congruence between sponsorship and voters' party affiliation on enjoyment and appreciation of the advertisement. Voters' real-time emotions (determined by their facial expression) and their attention to the screen (captured via eye-tracking sensor) were executed. Voters' responses to advertisement were examined in association with their subsequent candidate preference. Advertisements by congruent sponsors are enjoyed and appreciated more than those by incongruent sponsors. Negative and mixed emotions and time spent on the screen are more pronounced among those with higher issue involvement when viewing congruent advertisements. Only enjoyment, appreciation, and expression of positive emotions during advertisement exposure are positively associated with voting decision.

Keywords: *political advertisement, sponsorship, enjoyment, appreciation, emotion, eye-tracking*

Political advertising is one of the crucial communication channels between candidates and prospective voters (Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005; Valentino et al., 2004). Over the last few decades there has been an inundation of political commercials disseminated across mediums and platforms – from television to candidates' websites and social media – vying to sway the minds of undecided voters and encourage supporters to cast their votes (Brettel et al., 2015). While a plethora of research has examined the efficacy of political advertisements on a variety of outcomes including candidate evaluations, information recall, vote choice, and likelihood to vote (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Benoit et al., 2007; Broockman & Green, 2014; Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005), understanding political advertising through an entertainment lens particularly as it yields pleasure and meaning among viewers is an area that has received scant attention.

While some studies have linked political content such as talk shows to hedonic (pleasurable) and eudaimonic (meaningful) entertainment experiences as they can serve to both entertain and inform (e.g., Roth et al., 2014), researchers have yet to investigate the nature of political advertisements in eliciting *enjoyment* or *appreciation*, i.e., the feeling of being amused or the experience of being left in a contemplative state of mind respectively (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Wirth et al., 2012). Another common result of watching political commercials is aroused emotions among viewers. Given that emotional component lies in the core of contemporary campaign strategy to drive voters (Coleman & Wu, 2015; Grüning & Schubert, 2022), the extent to which and how such content may induce a range of emotions has implications for campaign professionals (Brader, 2005).

Against the backdrop of enjoyment and appreciation of political advertising, advertisement sponsorship provides critical information that influence viewers' evaluation of both the message and the candidate (Wu & Dahmen, 2010). Specifically, viewers' reactions to political advertisement may hinge on their perceived message consistency with sponsorship (Festinger, 1957). Congruence between the sponsorship of advertisements and viewers' party affiliation can impact emotional and cognitive engagement with the message, which, in other words, is a form of selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). Another layer of congruence resides on issues featured in ads – different levels of voters' issue involvement (i.e., need for orientation) are likely to impact information processing and affect reaction (Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Weaver, 1980).

This study straddles political campaign and entertainment studies, incorporating key concepts derived from both fields to base the foundation of the investigation. They include political advertising as a form of hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment, content-viewer congruence in terms of partisan sponsorship and issue involvement, and voting decision, all of which serve to guide the investigation of voters' processing and reaction toward a common form of political marketing (Kaid, 2012). Specifically, the study examines how audiences of political advertisements may differentially experience enjoyment and appreciation as a result of messages that are either congruent or incongruent between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' political affiliation. Second, as scholarship on political advertising has largely relied on self-reported message evaluations, this study employs advanced measures of participants' facial expression coding to discern real-time emotional reactions as well as eye-tracking device to capture participants' attention to political advertisement. Third, it examines to what extent the aforementioned affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to political advertisements are moderated by issue involvement and associated with voting intention. The findings yielded from this study contribute to a better, more comprehensive understanding about the impact of political advertising, one of the most common forms in political marketing.

Literature Review

Political Advertisements as Entertainment

To understand better voters' processing and reaction toward political advertising, it is imperative to examine the content in a more comprehensive manner, including treating it as a form of entertainment to viewers. While some scholars have examined political talk shows and political messages in association with entertainment-based viewing motivations, such as fun, escapism, relaxation, and thought-provocation (Roth et al., 2014), others emphasize on political commercials' narrative components – as they often incorporate autobiographical stories about candidates that resemble intimate portrayal of featured characters in entertainment (Vafeiadis et al., 2018). During the 2016 campaign season, several catch phrases and themes appearing in Trump-sponsored television advertisements were repurposed and lampooned in *Saturday Night Live*. Other scholars (e.g., Flew & Swift, 2015) also pointed out the influence of entertainment on political engagement. Given these, there appears to be a need to consider political advertising beyond information utility for voters. The literature on entertainment studies is helpful to assist in investigating how such content is linked to hedonic and eudaimonic gratifications.

Two distinct elements in political advertising – announced sponsorship and featured public issue – differentiate from typical entertainment and may induce character attachment or identification, facilitating attitudinal changes among viewers (Green & Brock, 2002; Strange, 2002). Moreover, absorption into a message is likely to engender greater enjoyment, a link that has readily been documented in transportation literature (Green et al., 2004). While research

conceptualizing media *enjoyment* has largely focused on its hedonic appeal such as feelings associated with pleasure, delight, amusement, and diversion (Vorderer et al., 2004; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994), others (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011) extended the enjoyment concept by accounting for counterhedonic experiences that involve gaining insight and meaning from media messages, otherwise termed as *appreciation*. In particular, messages that emphasize fundamental human values and conditions such as compassion, wisdom, courage, and sacrifice have the potential to foster a deeper understanding among viewers.

As *enjoyment* and *appreciation* have been a central focus in the study of entertainment, it is theoretically appropriate and relevant to investigate the ways in which viewers derive pleasure and meaning from political advertising. To date, few researchers have examined the effects of political advertisements through a hedonistic lens (Turner et al., 2013). To fill this gap, the current study empirically tests the extent to which certain content features of political advertisements, namely sponsorship and its consistency with a viewer's party affiliation, have a bearing on message engagement. As perceived sponsorship has implications for persuasion effect (Wu & Dahmen, 2010), announced sponsorship of political advertisements may present a powerful signal that cues viewers to process the content with their existing political inclination, consequently inducing varied affects and cognitive involvements with the advertisement.

Political advertisements are a staple of today's elections in which all modes of information – textual, visual, and auditory – are packaged to generate desirable effects for certain candidates. While the orientation and strategy of creating political advertisements are often emphasized in existing scholarship (Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2010), the sponsorship of them is also important as it plays a crucial role in persuasion (Wu & Dahmen, 2010). For example, when candidates sponsor or "approve" commercials themselves, their credibility and appeal are at the front line for viewers to evaluate. Sponsorship's political orientation also serves as a critical cue for audiences to determine if the presented message is considered congruent with their existing perspectives (Festinger, 1962).

A slew of factors may determine people's sense of congruence with messages. In the political context, party affiliation is a powerful anchor that transmits strong signals for people to filter new information from the media. Research has shown party affiliation to predict selective exposure well (Bakshy et al., 2015; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009), resulting in filter bubbles. Another factor that can affect one's sense of congruence is the stance on concerned issues (Popkin, 2020). Like party affiliation, the advocacy position on issues that concern audiences can determine whether and to what extent the content actually reaches them. Therefore, featured candidates and issues presented in political advertisements have the potential to spur either active or inactive message processing. With the above concepts in mind, the following hypotheses were formed:

H1: Congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation will positively influence enjoyment of a political advertisement.

H2: Congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation will positively influence appreciation of a political advertisement.

Emotions Elicited by Political Advertisements

In addition to enjoyment and appreciation, viewers' emotions can be elicited after their exposure to political advertisements. Emotions can be highly related to the extent of enjoyment and appreciation, but they belong to distinct conceptual constructs and should be examined separately.[i] The existing literature on political campaigns has largely examined affective responses to message by relying on self-reported emotions following message exposure (Bevan

& Krewel, 2015; Kaid & Chanslor, 1995; Turner et al., 2013). Although self-reported measures are readily used to infer emotional reactions, scholars have pointed to key limitations underlying the recollection of affective experiences (Erevelles, 1998). Specifically, self-reported emotions require substantially more cognitive resources as compared to psychophysiological techniques that provide moment-to-moment information on individuals' emotional states and do not depend on their ability to recall and verbalize them (Wilhelm & Grossman 2010). Aside from the methodological differences, researchers have shown discrepancies between self-reported and psychophysiological emotional responses to advertising (Li et al., 2017).

In light of research suggesting that consistency between message sponsorship and party affiliation is related to viewers' enjoyment and appreciation of political advertisements, it is anticipated that the degree to which positive, negative, and mixed (combination of positive and negative) emotions are experienced by viewers should also vary. Taking into consideration that hedonic media experiences are inherently positive in nature and associated with feelings of pleasure, joy, and amusement (Zillmann & Bryant, 1994), positive affective states should be elicited if message congruence is activated. Although appreciation, on the other hand, may involve positive emotions, existing research also links this experience to states of tenderness and elevation, the latter of which involves mixed affect (Oliver et al., 2012; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016). Even though positive emotion was found to increase with enjoyment of self-transcendent content (Clayton et al., 2021), Mercier et al. (2019) used physiological measures and found that arousal, rather than valenced emotion, results in higher appreciation of videogame. Specifically, elevation has been argued to be associated with emotions such as awe, sadness, and anxiety (Silvers & Haidt, 2008). Given the existing literature's limited guidance and that emotions experienced during message exposure via psychophysiological measures have been less frequently employed in the context of political advertisements, the following question is raised:

RQ1: How does congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation influence a) positive, b) negative, and c) mixed emotions elicited while viewing a political advertisement?

Congruence with Political Advertisement

As political advertisements have the potential to evoke a range of emotional responses among viewers, there is extensive support for how emotional states can be linked to different levels of message processing (Sinclair & Mark, 1992; Stavraki et al., 2021). Similarly, scholars have emphasized the association between affect and cognition by positing that people prefer attitude-consistent messages to protect their existing predispositions and maintain favorable self-concepts (see Klapper, 1960). With the rise in media offerings due to advances in technologies, political information has become increasingly prevalent but highly siloed. Given the influx of political messages, researchers continue to empirically corroborate people's preference for attitude-consistent over counterattitudinal content regardless of the political issue featured and the media use context (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011).

Even though selective *exposure* to media content has been the primary avenue for studies in evaluating campaign effects, this study aims to gauge the level of viewers' selective *attention* toward political advertisements because attention is more accurate than exposure or other measures (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). Attention is defined here as the measurement of a person's gaze through eye-tracking movement at a given point in time and is prerequisite for reception of content conveyed by a medium. While researchers may resort to other proxies for measuring attention – e.g., Zheng and colleagues (2014) used cardiac-somatic responses as

indicators of attention to advertisements by different political camps, eye-tracking is a more direct, precise observation of viewers' attention to media content (Bucher & Schumacher, 2006; Sülflow et al., 2019). It is expected that congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation – which, based on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), induces inviting cue to attend to the content – should likely evoke greater attention among viewers. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation will positively influence attention to political advertisement.

An important antecedent to consider in whether congruence between sponsorship of a political advertisement and viewers' party affiliation may affect responses to such content is prior knowledge about the candidate or issue being presented. In other words, those who do not know or harbor little information about a featured candidate or issue arguably have a greater need to learn information in contrast with others who already feel they are sufficiently informed (Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Weaver, 1980). In turn, viewers with a stronger need for orientation are subject to greater influence of an advertising message. Given that a key dimension of the need for orientation concept is associated with relevance or involvement pertaining to an issue, those who find issues to be personally significant and are especially lacking adequate information would be more likely to monitor changes in these issues and seek out information about the topics accordingly (Weaver, 1977). Whereas Matthes (2005) reveals that need for orientation is not linked to emotional responses on an aggregate level, it is possible that issue involvement – one of the key components that constitute need for orientation – plays a role in triggering valenced emotions on an individual level. From the elaboration likelihood modeling (ELM) perspective, message relevance serves as an antecedent of message elaboration such that those who find a message to be more pertinent to their own interests are more motivated to attend to and process such information (Petty et al., 1983).

Therefore, in light of the conceptual link between issue involvement and message engagement, it is anticipated that viewers' involvement with an issue should likely influence their responses to political advertisements that vary by congruence between sponsorship and party affiliation, particularly if the topic is of high importance. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Issue involvement moderates the effect of congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation on a) enjoyment, b) appreciation, c) emotions elicited, and d) attention to a political advertisement.

Voting Decision

A significant body of existing research links voting intention or candidate preference to the agendas voters consider most important (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). In other words, voting decision is often considered issue-based, and candidates' platform on issues is therefore crucial in shaping voting outcomes. Priming theory, however, builds on agenda-setting effects, arguing that the prominently covered agendas in the media will prioritize voters' views of these agendas and influence their criteria with which to evaluate political candidates, subsequently affecting their voting decisions (Iyengar & Simon, 1993).

Attributes and manners of political candidates portrayed in the media (Mutz, 2015) have also been found to influence candidate evaluation and voting preference (Wu & Coleman, 2014). The valence of campaign messages – either positive or negative emotions aroused in audiences – and its impact on electoral decision-making has also generated a large number of empirical studies. However, results yielded from two decades of literature are not entirely consistent

(Iyengar & Ansolabehere, 1997; Malloy & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2016), although a larger number of studies have supported the hypothesis of negative message's impact on voting decision, that is, attack ads and smear campaigns work. What is lacking in the existing literature is a direct measure of viewers' attention toward specific campaign messages – for example, political advertisements. In an effort to examine the potential relationship between viewers' experiences with political commercials and evaluations of candidates reflected in their voting intentions, the following research question is addressed:

$RQ2$: Are viewers' a) enjoyment, b) appreciation, c) emotions elicited, and d) attention to a political advertisement, associated with their voting decision?

Method

Design

This study executed a 3 (sponsorship) × 2 (issue) factorial lab experiment. Eligible voters were recruited and randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions that manipulate advertisement sponsorship – the between-subjects factor: 1) ad sponsored by a Democratic candidate, 2) ad sponsored by a Republican candidate, and 3) ad sponsored by a non-partisan organization. Those participants who identified with either political party were exposed to ads sponsored by their party are considered being in the congruent situation; otherwise, they are considered being in the incongruent situation. The featured issues – the within-subjects factor – in the advertisements focus on either immigration or the economy, two issues that generated a high level of concerns among voters in the 2016 U.S. election cycle.

Participants

The study – approved by the Institutional Review Board at a large private university in the northeast U.S. – recruited 97 adult participants who are either faculty or staff and must be eligible voters from various units on campus. These participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 years ($M = 32.68$, $SD = 15.10$) and included 32% males, 67% females, and 1% indicating other for gender identity. Among the 97 participants, 72.2% identified themselves as Democrat, 19.6% as Independent, and 8.2% as Republican; their average political inclination score is 2.75 ($SD = 1.29$) on a scale from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 7 (*extremely conservative*).

Procedure

The data were collected over a three-week period leading up to the 2016 Election Day. In the first portion of the study, participants were asked to complete a 10-minute online questionnaire via Qualtrics that assessed their demographic characteristics, eligibility to vote in the U.S., political attitudes, and views on particular social issues. The inclusion criterion for the second part of the study is that participants must be registered voters for the upcoming election. After passing the requirement, participants were then invited to take part in a 15-minute lab session in which they viewed a set of political advertisements. The experimental room resembled a living area with a sofa, coffee table, and television; the ambiance was intended to uphold the ecological validity and to ensure that reactions to the electoral advertisements viewed on a laptop occurred in a naturalistic environment. The researcher assisted each participant in seat adjustment and calibrating their eyes to the screen using a remote eye tracking sensor connected to the laptop. Following the eye calibration process, the participant was given instructions to view two political advertisements and to respond to a series of questions about their feelings and perceptions after each advertisement via Qualtrics. After ensuring that the participant had no questions about the study procedures, the researcher left the room. Upon exiting the room, participants were debriefed, compensated, and asked to not disclose their session experiences to prevent potential contamination of future participants.

Apparatus

All participants used a 15" Lenovo laptop to view the stimuli. The laptop has a built-in webcam and is installed with iMotions biometric software (iMotions, 2016) that allows the researcher to collect participants' facial expressions. Specifically, the Affectiva AFFDEX detects real-time emotions using automated computer algorithms that record facial expressions via the webcam. In addition, the iMotions platform enables the recording of eye positions and movements using the Tobii X2-30 remote eye tracking sensor attached to the base of the laptop screen. The participants experienced diminutive intrusion or discomfort in the sessions.

Stimuli

Real political advertisements during the 2016 U.S. election cycle were reviewed by two graduate assistants from a large sample of advertisements available on YouTube and broadcast in the weeks leading up to the Election Day on the basis of *sponsorship* (i.e., sponsored by either the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, by the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, or by a non-partisan organization) and *issue.* A pilot study of prominent issues featured in the campaign cycle found climate change, national security, gun control, economy, racial equity, immigration, healthcare, education, foreign policy, and veterans. To ensure consistency in video format, emotional tone, candidate presence, and duration (approximately 30 seconds in length), six political commercials that feature either immigration or the economy and meet the four aforementioned goals were selected as stimuli in the study. These video stimuli vary across the three sponsors and focus on either issue (immigration or the economy) in the advertisement's narrative. These two issues served as two message instantiations per experimental condition; they were chosen because of their prominence in the 2016 election cycle and availability across the three distinct sponsorships. These video stimuli vary across the three sponsors and focus on either issue (immigration or the economy) in the advertisement's narrative. In the control, non-partisan organization-sponsored advertisements, no criticism or praise on either candidate was conveyed, no electoral action was called for, only either focused issue was narrated to alert voters' attention.

A pretest was performed to test the perception toward either political candidate after viewing each of the six advertisements. Recruited from a large introductory communication course at the university, 436 undergraduate students reported their impressions of how each of the three advertisements on either issue presented the Democratic candidate and the Republican candidate. These advertisements were counterbalanced to prevent order effects. Findings of the first issue advertisements sponsored by three entities confirmed that participants formed different perceptions toward Clinton ($F = 399.97$, $p < .001$) and Trump ($F = 63.91$, $p < .001$). Participants who viewed the first issue advertisements sponsored by Clinton evaluated her in a more positive way ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.29$) as compared to those who viewed the advertisements sponsored by Trump ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.07$) and the non-partisan organization ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.23$). Likewise, participants evaluated Trump less positively after viewing advertisements sponsored by Clinton ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.07$), by Trump ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.94$) and by the non-partisan organization ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.52$). In a similar vein, participants who viewed the second issue advertisements sponsored by the three entities also formed different perceptions toward Clinton ($F = 466.45$, $p < .001$) and Trump ($F = 512.53$, $p < .001$). For perceptions toward Clinton, the mean scores for Clinton-, Trump-, and non-partisan-sponsored advertisements were ($M = 6.912$, $SD = 1.33$; $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.11$; $M = 4.15$, $SD = .98$); for perceptions toward Trump, the mean scores were ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.25$; $M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.56$; $M = 3.84$, $SD = .97$), respectively.

Measures

Party Congruence. Participants reported in the pre-test about their party affiliation. *Party congruence* was categorized in either congruent situation where participants viewed political advertisements on either issue sponsored by the same party or incongruent situation where participants viewed political advertisements sponsored by the other party or non-partisan organization.

Issue involvement. Prior to the lab session, participants reported the degree to which they perceived the issues of immigration and the economy to be important, sought out these issues in the news, and talked with others about these issues. Issue involvement was measured using four items anchored by 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*a lot*). Items included: *I attend to news stories about this issue*, *I am directly involved with this issue*, *I talk with others about this issue*, and *This is an important issue the country is facing* (Immigration: $\alpha = .75$, $M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.30$; Economy: $\alpha = .75$, $M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.19$).

Enjoyment. Perceptions of the political advertisement as fun and entertaining were measured by five items ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) adapted from Oliver and Bartsch (2010). Items consisted of: *I enjoyed this video*, *It was fun for me to watch this video*, *I had a good time watching this video*, *This video was entertaining*, and *I liked this video* ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.34$).

Appreciation. The degree to which participants found the political advertisement to be meaningful and thought-provoking was measured by five items anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*) adapted from Oliver and Bartsch (2010). Items included: *I appreciated this video*, *I found this video to be meaningful*, *I was moved by this video*, *This video was thought-provoking*, and *Watching this video made me wiser* ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.47$).

Emotions. The iMotions's AFFDEX module was used to generate data representing discrete emotions of facial expression made by the participants – anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, and contempt (Ekman & Friesen, 1978; iMotions, 2016) during their exposure to the political ads. The valence of these expressions was then classified as either positive or negative (dimensional emotion). Factors increasing the likelihood of detecting positive valenced emotions include smiling and raising cheeks. In contrast, factors increasing the likelihood of discerning negative valenced emotions include raising the inner brow, furrowing the brow, wrinkling the nose, raising the upper lip and chin, depressing the lip corner, and pressing or sucking the lip. Employing the standard threshold of 50% likelihood, all values above this threshold indicate a moderately strong display of facial response and were included in the frequency or total count of positive or negative emotions displayed. Specifically, the number of times action units associated with emotions such as joy were detected accounted for *positive emotions* ($M = 57.77$, $SD = 130.03$), and the number of times action units associated with emotions such as anger, disgust, fear, sadness, surprise, and contempt were detected accounted for negative emotions ($M = 113.86$, $SD = 232.02$). Mixed emotions ($M = 85.81$, $SD = 134.40$) were computed by taking the average frequency of positive and negative emotions identified.

Attention. Visual attention was recorded using the Tobii X2-30 remote eye tracking sensor and the iMotions screen-based eye tracking module. As the political advertisements were viewed in full screen mode, the percentage of time participants had their eyes fixated on the screen during the course of the advertisement served as the measure of time spent on the screen ($M = 47.65$, $SD = 20.09$).

Voting intention. After viewing the political advertisement, participants were asked to report the candidate they would vote for if the election were held today. Among the participants, most of them reported they would vote for Hillary Clinton (80.4%) followed by Donald Trump

(8.2%), with 6.2% indicating other and 5.2% being undecided, which reflects the state's voting pattern.

Results

Enjoyment. To test H1 and H4a, a 2 (sponsorship and party affiliation congruence: incongruent, congruent) × 2 (issue involvement: lower, higher) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to examine the effects of consistency between party sponsorship and affiliation and issue involvement on enjoyment of the political advertisement, controlling for the respondent's gender, education, ethnicity, party affiliation, and political inclination. Because this experimental study only includes a small number of participants (compared to a large, population-based survey) from the same geographic locale who may not necessarily represent sufficient variance in the level of involvement in the two issues, a median split was performed for issue involvement such that those scoring less than 4.38 were categorized as having lower issue involvement and those scoring higher than 4.38 were categorized as having higher issue involvement. The analysis yielded a significant main effect for congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation such that advertisements sponsored by a candidate aligned with the participant's party affiliation were deemed more enjoyable ($M = 5.09$, $SE = .23$) as compared to those with inconsistent sponsors ($M = 2.98$, $SE = .13$), $F(1, 83) = 62.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .43$. Thus, findings show support for H1, but not H4a.

Appreciation. Similarly, to test H2 and H4b, an ANCOVA was conducted to test the effects of congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation and issue involvement on appreciation of the political advertisement, including the same set of covariates. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation, indicating that advertisements sponsored by candidates affiliated with the participant's political party were appreciated more ($M = 5.04$, $SE = .26$) than those with unaffiliated sponsors ($M = 2.84$, $SE = .15$), $F(1, 83) = 52.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .39$. Therefore, findings show support for H2, but not H4b.

Emotions. To address RQ1 and test H4c, a series of ANCOVAs were performed to test the effects of congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation and issue involvement on the spectrum of positive, negative, and mixed emotions participants elicited while viewing the political advertisements, including the same set of covariates. Findings below overall show partial support for H4c as they yield significant moderating effects of issue involvement for negative and mixed emotions.

Positive emotions. The analysis yielded neither significant main effects of congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation, $F(1, 83) = .01$, $p = .91$, $\eta^2_p < .001$, nor issue involvement, $F(1, 83) = 2.05$, $p = .16$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, as well as their interaction, $F(1, 83) = 1.13$, $p = .29$, $\eta^2_p = .01$, on frequency of showing positive emotions.

Negative emotions. For negative emotions, however, a significant main effect for issue involvement emerged such that participants with higher issue involvement ($M = 181.74$, $SE = 42.35$) showed more frequent incidences of negative emotions during the advertisements as compared to those with lower issue involvement ($M = 65.35$, $SE = 36.62$), $F(1, 83) = 4.07$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .05$. Findings also revealed an interaction effect of congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation and issue involvement approaching significance, $F(1, 83) = 3.41$, $p = .07$, $\eta^2_p = .04$ (see Table 1 for means). Figure 1 illustrates that among those who viewed congruent advertisements, negative emotions were more frequently elicited among those high in issue involvement as compared to those low in issue involvement.

[Table 1 here.]

[Figure 1 here.]

Mixed emotions. Similar patterns in the interaction between congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation and issue involvement was found for mixed emotions, $F(1, 83) = 4.54$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .05$ (see Table 2 for means). Figure 2 reveals that for participants who viewed political advertisements featuring sponsors affiliated with their party affiliation, mixed emotions were more frequently elicited among those high in issue involvement as compared to those low in issue involvement.

[Table 2 here.]

[Figure 2 here.]

Attention. To test H3 and H4d, an ANCOVA was performed to test the effects of congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation and issue involvement on participants' percentage of time spent looking at the screen during the political advertisement, including the same set of covariates. The analysis indicated a significant main effect for congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation such that participants spent a greater percentage of time on the screen when viewing advertisements sponsored by candidates aligned with their party affiliation ($M = 55.62$, $SE = 4.06$) as compared to those with inconsistent sponsors ($M = 45.34$, $SE = 2.29$), $F(1, 83) = 4.56$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .05$. Thus, findings show support for H3. Additionally, the analysis yielded an interaction effect of congruence between party sponsorship and affiliation and issue involvement approaching significance, $F(1, 83) = 2.62$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2_p = .03$ (see Table 3 for means). Figure 3 illustrates that the greatest percentage of time spent on the screen was among those high in issue involvement who viewed advertisements sponsored by candidates affiliated with their identified political party. These findings support H4d.

[Table 3 here.]

[Figure 3 here.]

Voting Intention

To address RQ2, a linear regression was performed to examine whether the enjoyment and appreciation of the advertisement, positive, negative, and mixed emotions elicited while viewing the advertisement, and attention to the advertisement were associated with voting inclination for the featured candidate. The analysis revealed that appreciation of the advertisement was most strongly related to voting for the featured candidate ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$), followed by enjoyment of the advertisement ($\beta = .28$, $p < .05$) and frequency of positive emotions elicited during the advertisement ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). The overall regression model indicates that 75% of variance can be explained ($R^2 = .75$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study set out to investigate the degree to which congruence between sponsorship of a political advertisement and viewers' party affiliation, taking into consideration the potential moderating role of issue involvement, influenced a host of affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. In general, viewers expressed stronger enjoyment and appreciation of political advertisements, as well as spent a greater percentage of time looking at the screen, when such content was sponsored by candidates aligned with their political affiliation. Strikingly, the perceived importance of the issue featured in the advertisement further bolstered the impact of congruence between sponsorship and party affiliation on real-time emotions elicited and visual attention given during exposure to consistent messages. In particular, those who were highly involved with the issue displayed more frequent counts of negative and mixed emotions and fixated their eyes for a longer duration of time on the screen, as compared to those who deemed the issue minimally important. Lastly, the data support the notion that appreciation

of a political advertisement was most strongly associated with viewers' preference to vote for the featured candidate, followed by enjoyment of the advertisement and frequency of positive emotions elicited during message exposure.

Findings from this research invaluably underscore the importance of examining hedonic (Zillmann & Bryant, 1994) and counterhedonic media experiences (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) in the context of political advertising – a domain that has remained underexplored. Whereas scholars examining the impact of political commercials have focused predominantly on outcomes associated with the evaluation of candidates, information recall, likelihood to vote, and voting decision (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Kaid, 2012; Van Steenburg, 2015), understanding the degree to which pleasure and meaning are derived from consuming political advertisements has been relegated to the periphery of political communication research. This research attempts to fill this gap as political commercials arguably have implications for cognition and behavioral motivations (Brader, 2005). Specifically, hedonic and counterhedonic mediated experiences that stimulate positive and mixed emotional responses respectively are especially relevant to the processing of political content. The findings highlight the theoretical significance of holistic experiences of appreciation and – to a lesser extent – enjoyment of political advertisements, as well as real-time positive emotions during the exposure in facilitating voting preferences for featured candidates. In other words, this study suggests that voting decision is associated more with voters' entrenched inclination than their peripheral experiences of simply "feeling good" from watching political advertisements. Therefore, the study findings may shed light on voters' presumed lack of understanding about political advertising (Nelson et al., 2021) and point to the potential of more meaningful messages to sway or reinforce the opinions of prospective voters. Scholars should certainly consider expanding this line of research to further delineate the roles of enjoyment and appreciation of political messages in motivating electoral action or willingness to share or express opinions on social media.

Additionally, congruence between message sponsorship and party affiliation not only elevates amusement or thought-provoking experience among viewers but also influences the extent to which they attend to the screen. This higher level of introspection that extends outside of mere pleasure associated with political advertising is particularly insightful. Furthermore, more visual attention to congruent messages further confirms greater affective and cognitive engagement associated with experiences such as appreciation. This very finding echoes the recurring practice of meticulously orchestrated, targeted political messaging at the expense of sound democracy, which thrives on awareness in and exchange of different perspectives. More and more electorates now can opt to avoid the other side of the political spectrum and to glide through the partisan spiral by becoming more insular. Reaching out to the other side by political campaigners via the entertainment route could be an alternative pathway.

The present study also corroborates the vital role of issue involvement when considering the impact of political advertisements on viewers. Formerly noted, an aspect driving one's yearning to orient themselves around a candidate or issue is associated with its personal relevance or significance (Weaver, 1977). The moderating influence of issue involvement was especially robust among those who watched political advertisements in which the sponsorship was consistent with viewers' party affiliation for both real-time negative and mixed emotions and attention paid to the screen. The link between greater message elaboration and negatively valenced and mixed emotions supported by past empirical studies (Oliver et al., 2012; Sinclair & Mark, 1992; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016) help inform these patterns of

results. This was further confirmed by the main effect of issue involvement on negative emotions, indicating that individuals with greater personal investment in the featured issue elicited more incidences of negative emotions during the advertisement. Therefore, future investigations should account for message features (e.g., the facets of the issue being conveyed), as topic relevance has important implications for higher levels of voters' affective responses and allocation of attention.

Methodologically, this study employed psychophysiological techniques with non-obtrusive biometric instruments to tap into real-time emotions experienced during message exposure, as well as visual attention given to messages on the screen. These advanced and more precise assessments of viewers' responses to political advertisements as compared to traditional methods that rely on self-reported recollection of experiences (Erevelles, 1998; Wilhelm & Grossman 2010) contribute to a better understanding of voters' responses to political advertisements.. Given the sensitive nature of political content, the psychophysiological measures help to abate participants' potential biases of their perceived social desirability and ensure more accurate assessments of their unconscious reactions to mediated messages. Alternatively, there may be response bias in the self-reported measures such that individuals give more positive enjoyment and appreciation ratings for their preferred candidate. This may explain why emotions recorded through facial action coding produced different results in comparison to their corresponding self-reported measures. Hence, future research should consider incorporating biometric tools to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the affective, cognitive, and behavioral effects of political messages.

One potential limitation of this study lies in its external validity. Given the study's geographic location, its political climate and recruited participants lean heavily toward one side of the political spectrum. Future experimental research should increase the level of its finding's generalizability (Findley et al., 2021; Hartman, 2021) by replicating it with more diverse participants from diverse locations, particularly in terms of their different partisan inclinations. In addition, as in other lab experiments, this study cannot completely rule out the interference of the particular viewing experience (or distraction, and environment) on the research outcome. Despite the researcher's efforts to standardize the viewing experience for all (e.g., full-screen ad viewing and living room setting), this study could not completely simulate the natural environment of viewing political commercials. The extreme difficulty to produce effective political stimuli that embody both exclusivity of the manipulated variables in the stimuli as well as external validity to the specific political context cannot be overstated. Even though the researcher strived to achieve the consistency in video format, emotional tone, candidate presence, and duration of the six ads and ecological validity is upheld by using real advertisements aired during the campaign season, internal validity would be improved if future researchers can use new technologies to produce original media materials that systematically control for each of these message elements to reduce confounds.

The present study could be the first to examine how pleasure and meaning attained from political advertisements could result in affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagements among prospective voters. In light of the nature of message sponsorship, party affiliation, and issue involvement, the study elucidate understanding of message consistency and topic relevance by applying enjoyment and appreciation to the processing of political campaign messages. It is, perhaps, important to point out the heightened partisan vitriol and populist themes brought up by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election when this study was conducted, which could have induced the entertainment function of campaign commercials

among the electorate. In an effort to bridge political communication and entertainment scholarships, this research invaluably supports the entertainment function of political advertisements and the potential of hedonic and counterhedonic experiences in impacting voting preference.

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Table 1

Negative Emotions: Congruence Between Ad Sponsorship and Viewers' Party Affiliation × Issue Involvement

		Issue Involvement	
Ad Sponsorship and Party Affiliation		Lower	Higher
Incongruent	*M*	109.61_{aA}	123.40_{aA}
	SE	40.58	39.22
Congruent	*M*	21.09_{aA}	240.07_{bA}
	SE	60.33	76.73

Note. Using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower-case subscript in common differ at $p < .07$; within columns, means with no upper-case subscript in common differ at $p < .05$.

Table 2

Mixed Emotions: Congruence Between Ad Sponsorship and Viewers' Party Affiliation × Issue Involvement

Ad Sponsorship and Party Affiliation		Issue Involvement	
		Lower	Higher
Incongruent	M	104.66_{aA}	72.21_{aA}
	SE	23.21	22.43
Congruent	M	42.18_{aA}	145.16_{bA}
	SE	34.50	43.87

Note. Using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower-case subscript in common differ at $p < .05$; within columns, means with no upper-case subscript in common differ at $p < .05$.

Table 3

Percentage of Time Spent on Screen: Congruence Between Ad Sponsorship and Viewers' Party Affiliation × Issue Involvement

		Issue Involvement	
Ad Sponsorship and Party Affiliation		Lower	Higher
Incongruent	M	47.05_{aA}	43.64_{aB}
	SE	3.37	3.26
Congruent	M	49.86_{aA}	61.38_{aA}
	SE	5.01	6.37

Note. Using Holm's sequential bonferroni post hoc comparisons, within rows, means with no lower-case subscript in common differ at $p < .05$; within columns, means with no upper-case subscript in common differ at $p < .05$.

Figure 1

Interaction effect of congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation and issue involvement on negative emotions

Figure 2
Interaction effect of congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation and issue involvement on mixed emotions

Figure 3

Interaction effect of congruence between advertisement sponsorship and viewers' party affiliation and issue involvement on percentage of time spent on the screen

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[i] Emotion and enjoyment/appreciation are separate variables and can be positively related. But their relationship, although confirmed in other contexts, is not focused in this study on political advertisement.