

Is Bigger Really Better?

An Experimental Study of Presence and Online Political Advertising

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Abstract

A pilot study was conducted to explore the relationship between presence and online political advertising. Ten college students watched online political advertisements and ten watched political advertisements on a 24-inch TV. Results indicated that viewers of online political ads experienced a greater sense of presence than those watching the ads on TV and greater political affect than viewers of TV ads. Findings suggest political candidates should increase usage of online political ads.

Keywords--- presence, political advertising.

Political communication researchers have long identified the importance of an emotional connection that must be made between candidates and voters to gain political support. Ever since the first televised presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 the “winning” candidate has usually been the one that has been able to make a better emotional connection with the viewing audience [1]. This suggests that the media are the conduit for a para-social relationship that exists between political candidates and the public. Beyond debates, candidates focus particular efforts on reaching voters through commercials. Voters may develop strong affect (positive or negative) for political candidates, despite the fact that most members of the public rarely meet or personally get to know a candidate in any way other than via a mediated experience.

Communication scholars within the growing field of presence research have documented the mediated perceptions and the resulting psychological processes in which a para-social relationship is formed even when such a relationship is rationally inappropriate or illogical. Research has found that individuals experiencing such para-social relationships are affected by the communication styles of social actors in mass media and by interpersonal distance cues [2].

This study attempts to explore the para-social relationship and experience of presence within online political advertising. Sitting in front of a 17 inch computer monitor, individuals may experience a sense of presence as they watch online political advertisements. Researchers studying the phenomenon of presence have found in a variety of contexts that size and quality of visual image is directly correlated to the intensity of viewers’ presence-related responses [3]. In addition, experiments suggest that the psychological immersion

experienced through computer interactivity is equal in its effects on the brain as real-life human interaction [4]. While a 17 inch computer monitor may not be as large as a big screen TV, looking at the screen from the seat of one’s desk chair can place that political advertisement fully within the viewer’s visual frame.

During the 2004 presidential campaign more than 40 percent of online users used the Internet to find political material about the election—more than 50 percent higher than in 2004. Young adults, whose political socialization has been directly impacted by the Internet, are particularly heavy users of the Internet for politics [5].

Twenty college students participated in a pilot study to test these two research questions. RQ1: Do viewers of online political advertisements experience a greater sense of presence when watching political advertisements on a desktop computer monitor? RQ2: Does candidate affect increase after watching online political advertisements in which viewers experience a greater sense of presence? Half of the participants watched online political advertisements while the other half watched televised political advertisements (24 inch). Results indicate that men experience a greater sense of presence than female participants when viewing online political advertisements. Candidate affect was also greater for respondents watching online political advertisements, although this was only partially supported. Overall, results suggest that candidates should consider increasing their use of online political advertising.

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