

# Factors Affecting the Impact of Negatively and Positively Framed Ad Messages

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This article examines the effects of negative and positive framing of ad claims on consumers' choices and attitudes. Propositions about how the extent of processing before choice affects the relative impact of claims-related versus advertising tactics-related cognitions are tested in three experiments. Findings suggest that when processing is limited, claims-related cognitions have a greater impact on choice, which results in the sponsoring brand being chosen more often when the ad claims are negatively framed than when they are positively framed. When respondents engage in more extensive processing before choice, tactics-related cognitions become more accessible and, if perceived to be unfair, result in an attenuation of the advantage of negative framing over positive framing. A different pattern of results is obtained when one examines brand attitudes rather than brand choice.

There is a growing interest in how consumers respond to persuasion attempts by marketers and how perceptions of the appropriateness of various persuasion tactics impact their attitudes and behavior (Friestad and Wright 1994; Wright 1985). The "Persuasion Knowledge Model" proposed by Friestad and Wright (1994) suggests that, over time, consumers develop knowledge about various advertising tactics such as the use of negatively framed claims, fear appeals, and so forth, and about how to respond to these tactics. According to their model, this knowledge, along with knowledge about the marketer and the topic of the persuasion attempt, plays a critical role in determining the effects of advertising and sales presentations on consumers' attitudes and behavior.

The focus of this article is on the effects of negative framing of message claims as an advertising tactic as compared to the effects of positive framing. Two reasons guide this interest. First, the use of negatively framed ads has been on the increase in both political ("Negative Spots Likely to Return in Election '88" 1987) and consumer-product domains ("Mudwrestling" 1992), which

suggests that marketers believe that "going negative works." This belief occurs despite the fact that consumers often consider the use of negative advertising to be unfair and inappropriate. Focusing on negatively framed ads allows us to examine this seeming paradox. Second, there has been considerable research on the effects of negative information (framing effect, Kahneman and Tversky 1979; negativity bias, Fiske 1980; and fear appeals, Rippoe and Rogers 1987) and on examining the boundary conditions of this negativity effect in marketing contexts (Block and Anand-Keller 1995; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990). However, one question that remains to be answered is, How do negatively framed claims affect brand preferences in contexts where consumers' perceptions of the ad tactics may be relevant?

Evidence about the effects of using negative framing as an advertising tactic is mixed. On one hand, there is evidence from the popular press, from a pilot study that we conducted, and from other laboratory research (Klein and Braig 1996) as well as field research (Hill 1989), that suggests that consumers consider the use of negative advertising to be an unfair and inappropriate tactic. Klein and Braig (1996) examined the effects of two types of political attack ads, one focusing on the morality of the opponent and the other focusing on the ability of the opponent. Both types of attack ads seemed to give rise to a backlash effect against the sponsor of the ad. Similar findings were also reported by Hill (1989). These findings suggest that consumers often incorporate their perceptions of the unfairness of negative advertising in constructing their preferences.

In contrast, the use of negative advertising has been on the increase in both political and consumer-product

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domains, which suggests that it has been an effective tactic, at least in certain marketing contexts. A study by Homer and Batra (1994) on political advertising supports this view by demonstrating that a negatively framed ad reduced the favorableness of an audience's attitudes toward the target of the ad. However, this study did not report how this tactic affected attitudes toward the sponsor, and so it is difficult to assess whether tactics-related cognitions caused a backlash (i.e., lowered attitudes toward the sponsor as well).

The present research examines consumers' reactions to negatively and positively framed ad claims with the goal of gaining insights into how, and under what conditions, consumers' perceptions about the appropriateness of persuasion tactics influence their attitudes and choices. For the purposes of this study, negative framing occurs when the claims focus primarily on a comparison brand and highlight the negative consequences of choosing that brand instead of the sponsor. An example is a recent ad for AT&T that stated, "MCI had over twice as many network outages as AT&T" and then highlighted the disadvantages of being with MCI. Positive framing occurs when the claims focus primarily on the ad sponsor and highlight the positive consequences of choosing the sponsor vis-à-vis the comparison brand. In the AT&T example, a positively framed ad would state, "AT&T had less than half as many network outages as MCI" and then would highlight the advantages of being with AT&T. This definition also presupposes that the claims are perceived to be similar in information content and different only in the valence of their framing.

We propose that the effects of framing will be moderated by both the allocation of processing resources and the perceived fairness of the advertising tactics. When processing resources are impoverished, the focus is likely to be on the information presented in the message. Under these circumstances, negative framing is likely to be more effective than positive framing in line with the negativity effect (see, e.g., Fiske 1980; Kahneman and Tversky 1979). When the processing is more extensive in nature, people are likely to assess the persuasion tactics as well as the message. If the use of negative framing as an advertising tactic is perceived to be more unfair than positive framing, the advantage of negative framing over positive framing is likely to be attenuated with extensive processing.

## CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL OVERVIEW

In this section, we review literature related to two issues. One issue pertains to how the extent of processing affects cognitions about advertising tactics and claims and thereby affects the construction of preferences. The other issue pertains to the impact of message framing on attitude judgments and choices.

### Extent of Processing and the Impact of Cognitions on Preferences

Gilbert (1989; Gilbert, Pelham, and Krull 1988) proposed and tested the *characterization-correction* model

to explain processes by which attributional judgments are made and to predict what cognitions are likely to be used when the opportunity to engage in elaborate processing is varied. Their model was later tested in a context in which respondents were exposed to information that was false and hence needed to be discounted (Gilbert, Tavorodi, and Malone 1993). According to this model, people tend to engage in a two-stage process when exposed to information that they would normally discount. A characterization stage, which is associated with less effortful processing, results in initial acceptance of the message claims. In this stage, cognitions related to the message claims are likely to be relatively more accessible and hence have an impact on judgments. If people engage in more elaborate processing, they may enter the correction stage, in which they assess other aspects of the message to determine whether the claims should be discounted. If the individual does not engage in the more effortful processing, then the correction stage may not ensue and the claims are likely to be accepted even if the respondent would have otherwise discounted them.

The characterization-correction model suggests that, in the case of negative and positive framing of ad claims, when the extent of processing is low, claims-related cognitions are likely to dominate preferences. Only when the processing is more elaborate are tactics-related cognitions (potentially responsible for the claims being discounted in our context) also likely to impact preferences.

The above predictions implied by the characterization-correction model are consistent with the framework proposed by Greenwald and Leavitt (1984) to capture variations in processing across levels of audience involvement. Their framework consists of four levels of increasingly elaborate processing: preattention, focal attention, comprehension, and elaboration. According to the framework, at lower levels, the processing is mostly restricted to the content of the message, which suggests that preferences are likely to be based primarily on the message claims. Only at higher levels (associated with more elaborate processing) are respondents likely to go beyond simply trying to understand the message claims and think of other factors (e.g., tactics used by the sponsor) that may refute or support the claims.

The proposition relating the extent of processing to the impact of various cognitions has been supported in empirical studies. For example, in a study by Kisielius and Sternthal (1984), respondents read claims pertaining to a new brand of shampoo. The extent of processing was manipulated in this study, which, in turn, was expected to affect the accessibility of claims-related cognitions compared to other non-claims-related cognitions. When respondents did not elaborate on the claims, claims-related cognitions tended to have a bigger persuasive impact. When respondents engaged in more elaborate processes, however, cognitions not related to the claims, which were expected to be less favorable for the advertised brand, tended to have a greater impact, resulting in less favorable evaluations.

## Effects of Negative and Positive Framing at Different Levels of Elaboration

When the respondent's processing is elaborate rather than impoverished, the effectiveness of negative framing is likely to be lower than that of positive framing. This is because (1) consistent with the characterization-correction model, tactics-related cognitions are likely to have a bigger impact on preferences when the processing is more elaborate in nature; and (2) in general, consumers are likely to perceive the tactic of using negative framing as inappropriate and unfair, as demonstrated in previous research in which negatively framed ads were viewed as "mudslinging" (Homer and Batra 1994). However, what happens when the processing is less elaborate in nature, that is, when preferences are likely to be based primarily on the message claims?

Studies in decision making (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), impression formation (Anderson 1971; Fiske 1980), persuasion (Rippetoe and Rogers 1987), and message framing (Block and Anand-Keller 1995; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990; Meyerowitz and Chaiken 1987) have shown that people assign relatively more weight to information that has negative implications than information that has positive implications. The reasons for this *negativity effect* and a detailed exposition of the literature on negative information is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important to note that these studies were carried out in contexts in which persuasion tactics were not likely to have been a consideration. For example, in the Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990) study, respondents read a message advocating a diagnostic blood test for cholesterol. The sponsor of the message was not specified and hence the issue of persuasion tactics is unlikely to have arisen in the minds of the respondents. Consistent with the literature on the *negativity effect*, the study found that when the processing focused on the message claims, negative framing was more effective than positive framing.

The above studies suggest that negatively framed ads will result in greater choice of the ad sponsor than will positively framed ads when tactics-related cognitions are relatively inaccessible, as occurs when the processing is not elaborate. This advantage of negatively framed ads over positively framed ones is likely to be attenuated, or even reversed, when elaborate processing enhances the accessibility of tactics-related cognitions.

## Varying the Extent of Processing: Attitude Judgments versus Brand Choice

Studies by Billings and Scherer (1988) and Schkade and Johnson (1989) have demonstrated that choice as a response mode involves less extensive processing than does judgment. These studies suggest that when brand choice occurs immediately after ad exposure, the extent of processing that respondents engage in is likely to be limited and focused on the message claims. Since negatively framed message claims are likely to be weighted

more heavily in choice than positively framed claims, more respondents are likely to choose the ad sponsor when the ad is framed negatively than when it is framed positively.

However, when consumers engage in more elaborate processing before making their brand choice, tactics-related cognitions are also likely to be considered and have an influence on choice. Since the tactics-related cognitions are likely to be more negative for negatively framed ads than for positively framed ads, the greater choice of the ad sponsor in the negative conditions is likely to be attenuated. Thus,

**H1a:** When the processing of an ad is less extensive, more respondents will choose the ad sponsor when the ad claims are framed negatively than when they are framed positively.

**H1b:** When the processing of an ad is more extensive, the advantage of negative framing over positive framing is likely to be attenuated and perhaps even reversed. Choice of the ad sponsor will not be higher when the ad claims are framed negatively than when they are framed positively.

What happens when brand attitudes are used to assess the effectiveness of negatively versus positively framed ads? If choice is not preceded by elaborate processing, tactics-related cognitions are likely to be incorporated in attitude judgments because of the extent of processing associated with these judgments. As a consequence, when the extent of processing before choice is low and choice is followed by brand attitude judgments, the pattern of results on attitudes toward the sponsoring brand is likely to be different from that on choice. Attitudes in the negative frame condition are likely to be as favorable as, or less favorable than, those in the positive frame condition. Further, if the extent of processing before choice is high, tactics-related cognitions are likely to be incorporated into choice, as well as subsequent attitude judgments. Hence, instead of a frame by extent of processing interaction on choice (suggested by Hypotheses 1a and 1b), this interaction will be absent for attitudes and the pattern of results will be consistent with Hypothesis 1b irrespective of whether the extent of processing is low or high. Thus,

**H2:** When the ad claims are framed negatively, attitude toward the ad sponsor will be equal to or less favorable than when the ad claims are framed positively. This effect will occur irrespective of the extent of processing.

## Overview of the Experiments

In this article, we report the results of three experiments that examine the effects of the negatively and positively framed ads on brand choice and attitudes and the role of the extent of processing in moderating these effects. In all experiments, consumers chose between airline A and airline B after seeing an ad for airline A. In the ad, airline

A compared its on-time performance with that of airline B by elaborating on either the positive consequences of flying airline A (positive frame) or the negative consequences of flying airline B (negative frame; see Appendix). These claims were reinforced by adding a footnote to the bottom of the ads that stated "J. D. Power and Associates on-time performance index based on a survey of 6,800 fliers (100 represents the average, higher numbers are better):

A: 110

B: 94

(J. D. Power and Associates is an independent marketing information firm based in Agoura Hills, California)."

After seeing the ad for airline A, respondents received additional information on a second attribute: "J. D. Power and Associates reported the following in-flight amenities' indices (which includes comfort, quality of the food, etc.) for airlines B and A.

B: 107

A: 97."

This information was provided to ensure that airline A (the ad sponsor) was not dominant, which could have resulted in ceiling effects on the dependent measures. A pretest indicated that the two attributes, "on-time performance" and "in-flight amenities," were equally important to respondents in their choice of airlines. In a second pretest, respondents read both versions of the ad and indicated how similar they were on information content and on the valence of the claims. Fourteen out of the 15 pretest respondents rated the two versions of the ad as being similar on information content and different on the valence of the claims, which suggests that the two versions had the desired characteristics.

Experiment 1 examined the effects of framing when brand choice followed immediately after exposure to the ad and the information on in-flight amenities. In experiment 2, in addition to manipulating the framing of the ad, processing elaboration was manipulated with one group of respondents who made their choice immediately after ad exposure (less elaboration) and a second group who reported their cognitive responses to the ad before making a brand choice (more elaboration). Experiment 3 manipulated an additional factor—the perceived unfairness of the advertising claims.

Respondents were recruited from university classes. Across experiments, respondents first read the instructions that were provided on the cover page that stated that they would read an excerpt from an ad that had appeared recently in a leading newspaper and then be asked some questions (which were not specified). Respondents then read the advertisement for airline A and completed a series of measures.

## EXPERIMENT 1

The primary purpose of this experiment was to examine the effects of negatively and positively framed ad claims on choice and brand attitudes. Choice was expected to be based primarily on the message claims, because, as a

response mode, choice has been found to be associated with less elaborate processing than have attitude judgments (Billings and Scherer 1988; Schkade and Johnson 1989; Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988). Hence, more respondents were expected to choose the ad sponsor in the negatively framed condition than in the positively framed condition (Hypothesis 1a). However, when forming brand attitudes, which occurred after making a choice, tactics-related cognitions were expected to have an impact, since attitude formation requires more elaborate processing than does choice. As a consequence, the results for brand attitudes were expected to be different from those for choice. Attitudes in the negative condition were expected to be less favorable than or equally favorable to those in the positive condition (Hypothesis 2). Experiment 1 used a single-factor (message framing, with two levels—negative and positive), between-subjects design.

## Procedure

Forty-two respondents were randomly assigned to one of two framing conditions. Each respondent was given a booklet that contained the instructions, the ad for airline A (which contained the framing manipulation), followed by the page with the in-flight amenities indices for airlines A and B. After reading the additional information on in-flight amenities, respondents chose between the ad sponsor (airline A) and the comparison brand (airline B). Next, they gave their brand attribute evaluations, followed by their ad evaluations and finally by their attitudes toward airline A and airline B.

## Measures

Choice was measured by asking respondents the following question: "If you were planning to fly and found that the two airlines have similar deals on their tickets, which airline would you choose to fly, A or B?" Respondents then rated the airlines on four attributes—baggage handling, on-time performance, in-flight amenities, and safety—on a seven-point scale anchored by "A much worse than B" (−3) and "A much better than B" (+3). The midpoint of the scale (0) was labeled "A the same as B." Attitude toward the ad ( $A_{Ad}$ ) was measured by asking respondents to indicate their overall evaluation of the ad on three seven-point items anchored by "bad/good," "unappealing/appealing," and "not likable/likable." Cronbach's alpha for the three items measuring attitude toward the ad was 0.85, which indicates that the items were highly correlated, so they were averaged to form  $A_{Ad}$ . The pattern of results for  $A_{Ad}$  was very similar to that for attitude toward the sponsoring brand ( $A_{Br-A}$ ) in this and subsequent experiments and, therefore, will not be discussed further.

The framing manipulation was assessed by having respondents rate the ad on two seven-point scales anchored by "not at all negative/very negative" and "not at all positive/very positive." Because Cronbach's alpha for these two measures (after reverse scaling the latter) was

not high (0.59), they were analyzed separately. Attitudes toward airline A and airline B were measured by having respondents indicate their overall evaluation of each brand on five seven-point items anchored by "bad/good," "low quality/high quality," "not likable/likable," "unpleasant/pleasant," and "unappealing/appealing." Cronbach's alpha for these measures was 0.91 for airline A and 0.90 for airline B, so the responses to these five items were averaged to form the attitude toward airline A ( $A_{Br-A}$ ) and the attitude toward airline B ( $A_{Br-B}$ ). Two additional measures were collected: familiarity with and knowledge about the features that are important in choosing between airlines. Respondents indicated how familiar and how knowledgeable they were on two seven-point scales anchored by "not at all familiar/very familiar" and "not at all knowledgeable/very knowledgeable." However, these measures did not covary significantly with any of the dependent measures and hence will not be discussed further.

## Results and Discussion

*Manipulation Checks.* The two measures that were used to assess how negative and how positive the ad copy was perceived to be were analyzed in a single-factor MANOVA with message framing as the independent variable. The MANOVA revealed a significant effect of framing (Wilks's lambda = .51,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, respondents rated the ad as being more negative ( $\bar{X} = 4.76$ ) when it was negatively framed than when it was positively framed ( $\bar{X} = 2.42$ ;  $F(1, 40) = 43.18$ ,  $p < .0001$ ;  $\eta = .70$ ) and less positive in the former ( $\bar{X} = 3.74$ ) than in the latter condition ( $\bar{X} = 4.79$ ;  $F(1, 36) = 9.76$ ,  $p < 0.004$ ;  $\eta = 0.46$ ).

Evaluation of the on-time performance attribute was analyzed to determine whether both the negatively and positively framed ads communicated the same information. Respondents' ratings were not different across the two conditions ( $F < 1$ ). Also, the ratings on the non-framed attribute (in-flight amenities) and on the nonmentioned attributes (baggage handling and safety) did not differ across conditions (in this and subsequent experiments) and hence will not be discussed further. These manipulation checks on the valence of the ads and information conveyed suggest that the framing manipulation was successful.

*Choice and Brand Attitudes.* A test of proportions yielded a significant effect of framing on the proportion of respondents who chose the sponsor ( $z = 1.97$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Eighty-one percent of those seeing the negatively framed ad chose airline A compared with 52.4 percent selecting it in the positively framed condition. Hence, Hypothesis 1a was supported. Further, the mean attitude toward the sponsoring airline A ( $A_{Br-A}$ ) was less favorable when the ad was negatively framed ( $\bar{X} = 4.16$ ) than when it was positively framed ( $\bar{X} = 4.60$ ;  $F(1, 40) = 3.77$ ,  $p = .06$ ). Hence Hypothesis 2 was also supported.

The results of experiment 1 support our conceptualiza-

tion. Brand choice for the sponsor was higher when the message was framed negatively than when it was framed positively, whereas attitude toward the sponsor was less favorable when the message was framed negatively than when it was framed positively. This reversal of preferences between choice and brand attitude judgments is consistent with the idea that attitude judgments are associated with more elaborate processing than choice (Billings and Scherer 1988; Schkade and Johnson 1989).

## EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 examines whether the choice of the ad sponsor would continue to be higher for negatively framed compared to positively framed ad claims if more elaborate processing occurred before choice. Hypothesis 1b stated that choice proportions for the sponsor would not be higher in the negative frame condition than in the positive frame condition when more elaborate processing occurred before choice.

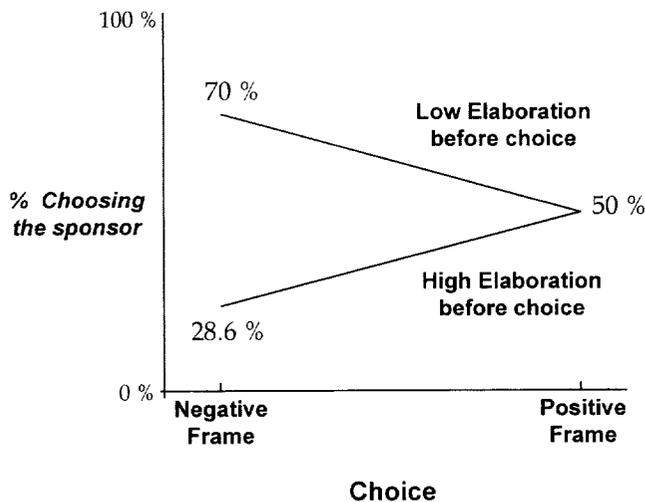
Experiment 2 used a two-factor between-subjects design with framing (negative vs. positive) and degree of elaboration (low vs. high) as the two factors. Seventy-nine respondents from the same population as in experiment 1 were randomly assigned to one of the four cells of the design. The framing manipulation was the same one used in experiment 1.

### Procedure

Each respondent was given a booklet that contained the instructions, the ad for airline A (which contained the framing manipulation), and the manipulation of processing elaboration. Processing elaboration was manipulated by having respondents in the high-elaboration condition report their cognitive responses immediately after exposure to airline A's ad and before they received the information on in-flight amenities or made their choice. Those in the low-elaboration condition did not report their cognitive responses until after having made their choice and having reported their brand and ad attitudes. The instructions for reporting cognitive responses were similar to those used in the literature (see, e.g., Edell and Keller 1989): "We are interested in the reactions you had while reading the ad excerpt. Please describe as completely as possible what thoughts and feelings went through your mind while you read the excerpt." This procedure of manipulating processing elaboration was selected because it did not direct respondents to focus on any particular aspect of the ad or the brands. In addition, by obtaining respondents' cognitive responses, we were able to examine the nature of thoughts reported and the extent to which these thoughts focused on the claims or on the tactics used by the sponsor.

Measures used in experiment 2 were identical to those used in experiment 1. In addition, respondents were asked to rate the fairness of the advertising tactics used by airline A (the sponsor) on a seven-point scale anchored by "un-

FIGURE 1  
EXPERIMENT 2



fair/fair.” The remaining procedure was similar to that in experiment 1, except that  $A_{Br-A}$  preceded  $A_{Ad}$ .

## Results

**Manipulation Checks.** As in experiment 1, the results on the valence of the claims and attribute beliefs suggested that the framing manipulation was successful (negativity of claims:  $F(1, 75) = 21.42, p < .0005; \eta = .45; \bar{X} = 5.05$  and  $\bar{X} = 3.68$  in the negative and positive frame conditions, respectively; positivity of claims:  $F(1, 75) = 15.60, p < .005; \eta = .38; \bar{X} = 3.29$  and  $\bar{X} = 4.24$  in the negative and positive frame conditions, respectively).

Central to our conceptualization is the notion that respondents perceive the tactics used by airline A (the sponsor) as being less fair in the negative frame condition than in the positive frame condition. The following results were consistent with this notion: respondents rated the advertising tactics to be less fair when the ad was framed negatively than when it was framed positively ( $F(1, 75) = 11.80, p < .001; \eta = .34; \bar{X} = 3.05$  and  $\bar{X} = 4.08$ , respectively).

**Choice.** As depicted in Figure 1, the interaction between framing and extent of processing was significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.48, p = .06$ ). It is consistent with Hypothesis 1b that, when elaborate processing occurred before choice, only 28.6 percent of the respondents in the negative frame condition chose airline A, while 50 percent of respondents in the positive frame condition chose airline A. In order to reject Hypothesis 1b, the percentage choosing airline A in the negative frame, high-elaboration condition would have had to exceed 63.25 percent (Type II error = .20). The actual proportion, 28.6 percent, was significantly lower than the 63.25 percent required ( $z = 2.22, p < .05$ ). Hence, Hypothesis 1b was supported.

The pattern of results in the low-elaboration condition

was consistent with that obtained in experiment 1 (in other words, with Hypothesis 1a). Choice of the sponsor (airline A) was higher (70 percent) in the negative frame, low-elaboration condition than in the positive frame, low-elaboration condition (50 percent). The difference, while only marginally significant ( $z = 1.26, p < .10$ ), is directionally consistent with the findings in experiment 1. Further, it is consistent with our conceptualization that, within the negative frame condition, choice proportions were higher when the extent of processing was low (70 percent) than when it was high (28.6 percent;  $z = 2.65, p < .01$ ).

**Brand Attitudes.** Consistent with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant main effect of framing on  $A_{Br-A}$  ( $F(1, 74) = 4.83, p < .05$ ), with  $A_{Br-A}$  being less favorable in the negative frame condition ( $\bar{X} = 4.27$ ) than in the positive frame condition ( $\bar{X} = 4.75$ ). Further, the interaction between framing and elaboration was not significant ( $F < 1$ ).

**Cognitive Responses.** The cognitive responses gave us an opportunity to examine the processing differences that may have led to choice differences between elaboration conditions in experiment 2. The cognitive responses were coded by three independent judges on the basis of the valence (positive, negative, or neutral) and the focus of the thought (brand or ad). There was agreement among two or more judges on 91 percent of the thoughts coded, and disagreements were resolved on the basis of a discussion among judges. The coding definitions for support arguments, counterarguments, and positive and negative ad-related thoughts were the ones frequently used by advertising researchers (Edell and Keller 1989). The negative ad thoughts were divided into two categories: thoughts about the tactics, and others. Negative thoughts about the tactics used by the sponsor included statements such as, “I did not like the way airline A put down airline B,” and “Airline A should have focused on their positives rather than on airline B’s negatives.”

Significantly more ( $F(1, 75) = 17.48, p < .0001$ ) negative tactics-related thoughts occurred when the ad seen was negatively framed ( $\bar{X} = 1.36$ ) than when it was positively framed ( $\bar{X} = 0.13$ ). But the main effect of degree of elaboration was not significant, which suggests that those who reported their cognitive responses after choice also expressed negative reactions to the tactics used in the ad. Thus, because respondents did not engage in extensive processing before choice, these tactics-related thoughts did not influence their brand choice as they did for those who engaged in elaborate processing before choice.

To test whether the tactics-related cognitions were related to choice in the high-elaboration, negative frame condition, a logistic regression analysis was carried out with choice as the dependent variable and tactics-related negative ad thoughts (0 = none, 1 = mention of such thoughts) as the independent variable. Negative tactics-related ad thoughts were a significant predictor of choice ( $\chi^2 = 4.46, p < .05$ ). This analysis provides evidence

that tactics-related thoughts, brought about by elaboration before choice, were related to the preference reversal.

## Discussion

The results of experiment 2 indicate that the effects of negative and positive framing on choice depend on the extent of processing intervening between ad exposure and choice. When choice was preceded only by ad exposure, the results were quite consistent with those found in experiment 1, with choice shares for the sponsor being higher with negative than positive framing. When choice was preceded by more elaborate processing, which was encouraged by asking participants to report their cognitive responses, the pattern on choice outcomes reversed, with the negatively framed ad resulting in lower choice for the sponsor than with the positively framed ad. Further, the cognitive-response data indicate that this choice reversal was brought about by the increased accessibility of tactics-related cognitions when more elaborate processing occurred before choice. Also, as in experiment 1, experiment 2 demonstrated differences in the patterns of results on choice and on brand attitudes when brand choice was preceded only by ad exposure. But the patterns were consistent when more elaborate processing preceded choice.

It must be noted here that, as in the first experiment, the airline category was used in the second experiment as well. We conducted another experiment that replicated the findings of experiment 2 with another product category (laundry detergents). When the extent of processing was low, choice shares for the sponsor were 76 percent and 54 percent in the negative and positive framing conditions, respectively. This advantage that negative framing had over positive framing was attenuated when the extent of processing was high, with choice shares being 38.1 percent and 43.5 percent in the negative and positive framing conditions. These findings replicate our results from experiment 2 and suggest that these framing effects are robust across experimental contexts.

## EXPERIMENT 3

Our findings suggest that negative ads are likely to be effective when consumers do not engage in elaborate processing but that there could be a backlash against the sponsor of a negative ad if consumers engage in more elaborate processing before choice. Yet, we see widespread use of negative ads and know that many political analysts believe these kinds of ads have played an important role in a number of winning campaigns. One answer to this seeming contradiction is that there may be situations in which the use of negative ads is not perceived to be unfair (as they were reported to be in our experiments). One situation in which this may be the case is when the sponsor is much better than the opponent in the dimension that is the focus of the attack in the negative ad. For example, if the index for on-time performance of airline A is 120 and that of airline B is 62, then the use of negative advertising by airline A may seem less unfair

than if the indices are 102 and 97. As a consequence, even when the consumer engages in elaborate processing before choice in the first situation, airline A may not suffer as much of a backlash effect as it would if the difference were perceived to be small.

We tested the above proposition in experiment 3 by examining the perceived unfairness of the advertising tactic, varied by the range of values for on-time performance and in-flight amenities. The perceived unfairness of the negative ad tactic was not expected to be as great when the range of values for on-time performance (the framed attribute) was large as it would be when the range was small. Since the focus of this experiment was to examine the effects of varying the perceived unfairness of ad tactics when the processing was elaborate in nature, the extent of processing was kept high in all conditions by having all respondents report their cognitive responses before choice. Further support for our conceptualization would be obtained if the choice proportions for the sponsor were higher in the negative framing, low-unfairness condition than in the negative framing, high-unfairness condition. Thus,

**H3:** When elaborate processing of a negatively framed ad occurs before choice, the perceived fairness of the tactics used and the choice proportion for the sponsor will be lower when the differences between brands are small rather than large.

Another objective of experiment 3 was to investigate the possibility that, in experiment 2, the instructions used in eliciting the cognitive responses, rather than the extent of processing, brought about the choice reversals when elaborate processing occurred before the choice. The instructions used in experiment 2 asked respondents to "describe as completely as possible what thoughts and feelings went through your mind while you read the excerpt." By mentioning feelings, the instructions may have prompted respondents to consider the tactics used by the sponsor. Experiment 3 used instructions that were even more undirected for obtaining respondents' cognitive responses: "We are interested in knowing what was going through your mind as you were reading the ad excerpt. Please write down anything and everything you remember going through your mind when you were reading the excerpt."

Experiment 3 used a between-subjects design with framing (negative vs. positive) as one factor and unfairness of ad tactic (low vs. high) as the second factor. The unfairness-of-ad-tactic factor was manipulated by providing different values relating to the on-time performance and in-flight amenities indices. Recall that the stimulus material used in our earlier experiments presented a footnote at the bottom of the ad providing on-time performance indices for the two airlines (A: 110; B: 94). Respondents were presented with indices for in-flight amenities (A: 97; B: 107) on the subsequent page. In this experiment, the values in the high-unfairness conditions were (1) on-time performance, 101 (airline A)/99 (air-

line B); and (2) in-flight amenities, 99 (airline A)/101 (airline B). The values in the low-unfairness conditions were (1) on-time performance, 130 (airline A)/67 (airline B); and (2) in-flight amenities, 65 (airline A)/128 (airline B). A pretest with 17 respondents indicated that the stimulus material for the negative and the positive frame conditions, within each level of the unfairness factor, did not differ on information content.<sup>1</sup>

## Procedure

Ninety-five respondents were randomly assigned to the four conditions. Each respondent was given a booklet that contained the instructions, the ad for airline A (which contained the framing and the unfairness manipulations), and the instructions for reporting their cognitive responses. Next, all respondents received the in-flight amenities index numbers for airlines A and B. Respondents were then asked to make their brand choice. Brand choice was followed by attribute evaluations, brand attitude measurement, attitude toward the ad, and the manipulation checks, including a measure of perceived fairness of the tactics used by the ad sponsor. The measures used in experiment 3 were identical to those used in experiment 2.

## Results

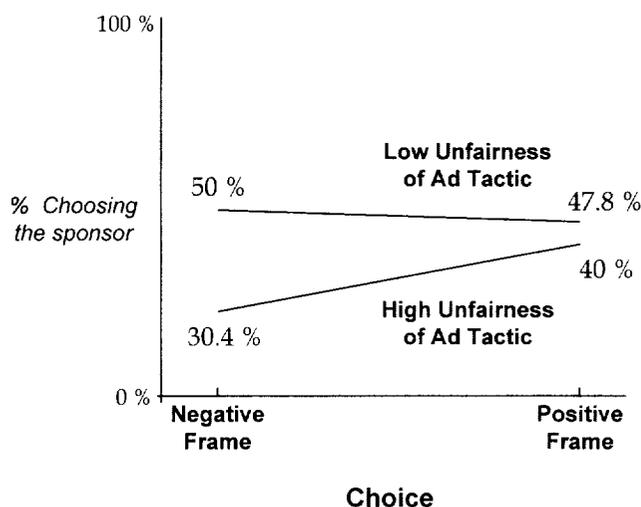
**Manipulation Checks.** As in the earlier experiments, the manipulation checks indicated that the framing manipulation was successful, with the negatively framed ad being seen as more negative ( $\bar{X} = 5.29$ ) than the positively framed one ( $\bar{X} = 4.30$ ;  $F(1, 91) = 15.50$ ,  $p < .0005$ ;  $\eta = .38$ ). Similarly, the negatively framed ad was perceived to be less positive ( $\bar{X} = 2.98$ ) than the positively framed one ( $\bar{X} = 3.77$ ;  $F(1, 91) = 10.93$ ,  $p < .005$ ;  $\eta = .35$ ).

There was a main effect of the framing and unfairness manipulations on the perceived fairness of the tactics used by airline A, as expected. The tactics were perceived to be less fair for the negatively framed ads ( $\bar{X} = 3.00$ ) than for the positively framed ones ( $\bar{X} = 3.51$ ;  $F(1, 91) = 3.40$ ,  $p = .06$ ;  $\eta = .19$ ). Also, the tactics were perceived to be less fair in the high-unfairness condition ( $\bar{X} = 2.88$ ) than in the low-unfairness condition ( $\bar{X} = 3.63$ ;  $F(1, 91) = 7.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\eta = .28$ ). The interaction between framing and fairness-of-ad-tactic was not significant.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that perceptions of fairness in the negative framing conditions would be lower when the

<sup>1</sup>Respondents were presented with both the positive and negative versions of the ad in two sets: (1) the versions with small differences in values and (2) the versions with large differences in values. The order in which the sets were presented was counterbalanced. After reading the ads in each set, respondents indicated how similar the ads were on information content. One hundred percent of the pretest respondents indicated that the versions in each set were similar on information content.

FIGURE 2  
EXPERIMENT 3



range of values was small than when it was large. Consistent with this hypothesis, within the negative frame conditions, the tactic used was seen as being less fair ( $F(1, 91) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ) when the differences were small ( $\bar{X} = 2.63$ ) than when the differences were large ( $\bar{X} = 3.35$ ).

**Choice.** As shown in Figure 2, and consistent with Hypothesis 3, choice of the sponsor by those seeing the negative ad was 30.4 percent when the perceived unfairness of the ad tactic was high, as compared with 50 percent when the perceived unfairness was low. This difference was marginally significant ( $z = 1.37$ ;  $p < .10$ ). Further, consistent with our conceptualization, the pattern of the interaction seemed to be due to the effect of framing within the high-unfairness conditions (the lower, upward sloping line). Although this effect was not significant in this particular experiment, a Rosenthal aggregation test (Rosenthal 1978), which combined the effects found in this experiment with the corresponding one found in experiment 2, suggests that our conceptualization was supported ( $z = 1.51$ ,  $p = .06$ ).

## Discussion

The results of experiment 3 indicate that, even when elaborate processing of a negative ad occurs before choice, the backlash on the sponsor may not occur if the viewer does not perceive the attack to be unfair. Thus, it appears that elaborate processing of a negatively framed ad is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one, for a backlash against the user of negative advertising tactics to occur; the negative advertising tactics must also be perceived to be unfair.

As discussed earlier, one possibility for the differences in choice proportions between those who reported their cognitive responses before making their choice and those who reported after making their choice in experiment 2

was that the cognitive response instructions used the words "feelings" and "reactions." Instead of the extent of processing being responsible for the differences, these words could have enhanced the accessibility of tactics-related cognitions. Experiment 3 eliminated these words from the cognitive response instructions. The choice share obtained in experiment 3 in the negative frame, high-unfairness condition (30.4 percent) was very similar to that obtained in experiment 2 in the elaboration-present, negative frame condition (28.6 percent). Thus, it does not appear that the earlier results can be attributed to the wording of the cognitive-response instructions.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Evidence from three experiments indicates that the effect of the negative advertising depends on the elaborativeness of the ad processing and how fair the respondent perceives the use of the tactic to be. Unless the respondent engaged in elaborative processing before making a brand choice, tactics-related cognitions did not influence the choice. As a consequence, under low-elaboration conditions, those seeing a negatively framed ad were more likely to choose the advertised brand than were those seeing the positively framed ad. However, when respondents engaged in more elaborate processing of the ad before making their choice, their perception of the fairness of the tactics used by the advertiser influenced their choice. When respondents perceived the tactics to be unfair, their choice of the ad sponsor decreased. However, when respondents perceived the tactics to be fair, the extent of the backlash against the ad sponsor declined.

The findings also indicate that negative and positive framing of advertising claims affect choice and attitudes differently when the extent of processing before choice is low and that this difference seems to be due to the more elaborate processing associated with attitude judgments, as compared with that associated with choice. In contrast to choice, attitude toward the sponsor was found to be more negative when the ad was framed negatively than when it was framed positively. This finding helps to explain why the advantage of negative framing over positive framing has not been reported in earlier studies such as Hill (1989) and Klein and Braig (1996). The attitude measures used in these studies may have engendered more elaborate processing, which enhanced the accessibility of tactics-related cognitions and consequently led to the result that negative framing was less effective than positive framing.

Thus, our findings indicate that using negative framing as an advertising tactic is likely to be effective when consumers choose without much thought, such as for some low-involvement product categories or when the choice is an impulse purchase. If consumers engage in more elaborate processing before choice, the effectiveness of the negative campaign is likely to be reduced, in some cases to a level well below that achieved with a positively framed ad. The findings in experiment 3 also indicate that one way marketers can reduce backlash against their

brand when using negatively framed ads is to ensure that the attribute that is the focus of the claims is significantly different from the target of the attack, so that the perceived unfairness of negative framing is reduced.

The focus of this article was on examining factors that could affect the accessibility of, and, hence, the impact on preferences of, various cognitions that could be engendered by exposure to a negatively or a positively framed ad. According to the Feldman and Lynch (1988) framework, the impact of cognitions on preferences also depends on the diagnosticity of these cognitions (i.e., their relevance for accomplishing some salient processing goal). Future research is needed to examine factors that could affect the diagnosticity of tactics-related and claims-related cognitions and hence their relative weights in determining preferences. One factor that can affect the relative diagnosticity is the substantiveness of the claims. For example, the attribute on which the claims are framed may be extremely important and hence substantive to the individual (e.g., safety in the case of airlines). Under such circumstances, even if an airline that is good on safety uses negative framing as an advertising tactic, and if tactics-related cognitions are accessible, the consumer may weight the claims more heavily than the tactics in forming preferences. As a consequence, the extent of the potential backlash is likely to be lower than when the attribute is less important.

In this study, the accessibility of tactics-related cognitions was enhanced to bring about a reversal in the advantages of negative framing over positive framing by asking respondents to report their cognitive responses between ad exposure and choice. Future research needs to examine ways in which an attacked marketer can make consumers think of the fairness of the tactics used by the attacker. One possible way might be to have an advertising campaign that draws consumers' attention to the unfairness of the tactics that had been used by the attacker, thereby bringing about activation of tactics-related cognitions.

Finally, we examined the effectiveness of negative framing, an advertising tactic that has been growing in popularity in both the political and consumer-product domains. We identified one factor, the extent of post-ad exposure processing, that can moderate the effects of negative framing on persuasion by affecting the relative accessibility of tactics- and claims-related cognitions. In doing so, we gained insights into a seeming paradox: although consumers often say that they dislike negative framing as an advertising tactic, the use of this tactic has been on the increase. Future research needs to examine the effectiveness of other persuasion tactics that consumers may consider unacceptable, such as deceptive ads and fear appeals. Examining these issues will provide researchers, as well as marketers, with rich insights into the effects of advertising tactics on brand attitudes and choice.

## APPENDIX

### Framing Manipulations

Positive framing is in italics and negative framing is in parentheses.

"We have been claiming all along that *A is better than B* (B is worse than A) on on-time performance."

"Flying A (B) means *fewer* (more) of those endless, frustrating waits for you and those expecting you at your destination. It also means being *on-time* (late) for your appointments. And *no more* (more) missed flights."

The following are the framing manipulations for the experiment reported in the discussion section of experiment 2:

"We have been claiming all long that Detergent *A is better than B* (B is worse than A) in providing color-guard protection for your clothes."

"Using Detergent A (B) means your clothes look *new* (old) even after a few washes. With Detergent A (B) your blacks will look *black* (grey), your bold reds will *remain vivid* (will be faded). Just think of the money you will *save* (spend) *by not having* (by having) to replace your favorite clothes."

[Received June 1995. Revised January 1997. Brian Sternthal served as editor and Deborah Roedder John served as associate editor for this article.]

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