

# Processing exaggerated advertising claims

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## Abstract

Government policymakers allow advertisers to use wildly exaggerated, fanciful or vague claims for a product or service because they believe that nobody could possibly treat the claims seriously or be misled by them. The results demonstrate that although consumers are able to identify exaggerated claims as less credible than factual claims, their brand evaluations are inflated after exposure to exaggerated claims. The explanation is that during the process of comprehension, claims are accepted before being discredited. The temporary acceptance of the claim affects memory, even after the claim is understood as an exaggeration.

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## 1. Introduction

Is belief independent of comprehension? Descartes asserted that comprehension precedes, and is independent of, belief. As humans come into contact with claims or opinions, they comprehend them automatically, and then decide whether to accept or reject the information (Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert et al., 1993). Spinoza, on the other hand, believed that comprehending and accepting were part of the same process. “According to Spinoza, the act of understanding is the act of believing. As such, people are incapable of withholding their acceptance of what they understand. They may indeed change their minds after accepting the assertions they comprehend, but they cannot stop their minds from being changed by the contact with those assertions” (Gilbert et al., 1993, p. 222).

Why does the disagreement matter in marketing? Self-regulatory industry groups, such as the ASA in the United Kingdom and government regulatory bodies, such as the FTC in the United States and the ACCC in Australia, have created rules using Cartesian logic. Government policymakers allow advertisers to use *puffery*, defined as wildly exaggerated, fanciful or vague claims for a product or service, because they believe that

nobody could possibly treat puffery seriously or be misled by it. Two critical assumptions underly the policy. First, consumers can identify puffed claims as not credible. Second, consumers will not incorporate a puffed claim into their evaluations or beliefs because they understand that the puffery is a ‘wild’ exaggeration. Although Cartesian logic is used by policymakers, empirical evidence supports Spinoza’s view. Gilbert et al. (1993) show that interrupting the processing of false claims results in participants believing the claims to be truer. The disturbing implication of the findings by Gilbert et al. (1993) is that every encounter with misinformation or an exaggerated claim can potentially affect future behavior, even if the consumer realizes that the claim is false. The research presented here demonstrates that although consumers are able to identify an exaggerated claim as less credible, exposure to the puffed claim still shifts the evaluation of the brand to be more positive.

## 2. Processing exaggerated claims

### 2.1. A Cartesian approach

Government policymakers have taken the position that consumers recognize that puffery lacks credibility, even though very little empirical evidence has been presented to support this assumption. Policymakers assume that when consumers process exaggerated claims they understand the lack of credibility and

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ignore the claims. Cartesian logic is implicit in this assumption, as there is no concern for partially processed claims.

Previous academic research has focused on conditions under which consumers believe exaggerated claims (Kamins and Marks, 1987; Olson and Dover, 1978; Rotfeld and Rotzoll, 1980; Wyckham, 1985). Most research has shown that consumers do form beliefs based on specific puffed claims such as “the fastest headache relief possible.” Two explanations are offered for the deception. First, consumers believe the claims (Kamins and Marks, 1987; Rotfeld and Rotzoll, 1980; Shimp and Preston, 1981). “Consumers do not recognize them [puffed claims] for what they are ...” (Shimp and Preston, 1981, p. 24). Second, consumers process the puffed claims as though they were fact and generate inferences on the basis of those *facts* (Holbrook, 1978; Shimp and Preston, 1981; Wyckham, 1987). “[Consumers] are prone to interpret evaluative claims [puffery] as constituting factual claims. It is a process of implication in which the consumer accepts an unstated factual claim as being the implied meaning of the stated evaluative claim” (Shimp and Preston, 1981, p. 24). In both cases, the concern is that consumers will make a mistake during the assessment of the accuracy of the claim. Again, Cartesian logic is implicit in the assumption that one representation of the claim will be made in memory.

Are consumers unable to differentiate between fact and exaggeration? Is “the public more tolerant of advertising hyperbole and less inclined to counter argue than is the case with other message forms” (Shimp and Preston, 1981, p. 26)? Is it safe to assume that a necessary condition for forming beliefs on the basis of puffed claims is that the claim is judged to be credible?

Instead of a Cartesian approach, perhaps the claim is initially represented in memory as true during the comprehension process, affecting other associated beliefs. After determining that the claim is not credible, consumers are able to store the claim with a ‘not credible’ tag, but the corresponding evaluation will not be appropriately adjusted.

## 2.2. A Spinozian approach

Gilbert et al. (1990) provide evidence that people initially represent false information as true. In their research, participants are asked to learn new propositions, both true and false. If participants were interrupted while processing the propositions, they rated a significantly greater proportion of both true and false statements as true, compared to participants that were allowed to completely process the propositions. The result is interpreted as support for the Spinozian explanation. Gilbert and colleagues found the result to hold even when the participants were forewarned that some of the information presented would be false.

Perhaps consumers temporarily believe puffed claims as part of the comprehension process. Even though consumers may expect some advertising to lack credibility, they initially represent the claim as true. In the process of determining whether the claim is true, an *accepted* form of the claim is represented in memory. If the claim is a generalized exaggeration such as “the very best restaurant in town” then the positive global evaluation may be later stored with a ‘not credible tag,’ but is not ignored

during the evaluation procedure. More specific attribute beliefs may not be affected as they are at a different level of abstraction (Hawkins et al., 2001). The prediction that a global evaluation of the brand will be affected by puffery, even though the claim is ultimately determined to be untrue, is consistent with a larger body of research that finds that people are particularly poor at rejecting, ignoring or failing to believe what they have comprehended (Bjork, 1972; Schul and Burnstein, 1985; Wyer and Budesheim, 1987), even when they are forewarned that the information will be false (Gilbert et al., 1990). The outcome of this comprehension process is also consistent with dissociations found between perceptions of truth and belief (Begg et al., 1992).

## 2.3. Remembering exaggerated claims

Even though consumers may be able to correctly *unaccept* a puffed claim, it has been shown that thinking about and negating a proposition can lead to false memory (Mayo et al., 2004). Feidler et al. (1996) found that after correctly negating a fact and following a filler task, respondents were more likely to falsely recognize the fact in its non-negated form than they were to recognize unrepresented facts. This is counter to the Cartesian explanation. Because under Cartesian logic only the negated claim would be stored in memory, non-negated facts could not be retrieved from memory. If the Spinozian model is correct, then factual claims should be better remembered than puffed claims because there is no alternative representation to cause interference during retrieval. However, if the processing of the exaggerated claims is interrupted, then the puffed claims should be as well recognized as the factual claims because the non-negated fact is the only representation available in memory.

## 3. Hypotheses

Consumers are able to identify generalized puffed claims as less credible than factual claims if processing is uninterrupted (H1). However, even after identifying the generalized puffed claims as less credible, they are still more positive in their evaluation of the brand associated with the puffed claim (H2a), but no change occurs in their specific brand beliefs (H2b). Support for the Spinozian explanation is expected. When processing is interrupted, puffed claims are rated as credible as the factual claims (H3).

Consumers are better able to remember the factual claim compared to the puffed claim in an uninterrupted processing condition (H4a). However, the memory advantage for factual claims should disappear if processing is interrupted because the negation process will not occur (H4b).

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Design and manipulations

Sixty undergraduate students at an Australian university participated in the study for course credit. The design of the study was 2×3. The processing at encoding was a between

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