

How brand attribute typicality and consumer commitment moderate the influence of comparative advertising

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Accepted 1 October 2007

Abstract

This study examines how product attribute typicality and brand commitment influence the effects of comparative versus non-comparative ads on brand attitudes. Employing perspectives from the literatures on typicality and commitment, the study examines the effects of commitment to the comparison brand on the effectiveness of comparative versus non-comparative advertising. A between-informants experiment uses data from 466 student informants. It is hypothesized that (a) when the attribute under consideration is typical (atypical), among comparison brand committed informants, a non-comparative ad is more (no more) persuasive than a comparative ad, (b) when the attribute under consideration is typical, among comparison brand non-committed informants, a comparative ad is more persuasive than a non-comparative ad, and (c) when the attribute under consideration is atypical, among comparison brand non-committed informants, a comparative ad is likely to be more persuasive than a non-comparative ad, but the effect will be weaker than in the case of a typical attribute. Hypothesis (a) is supported while (b) has directional support. The results support a three-way interaction between consumer commitment, attribute typicality, and type of advertisement. The findings are relevant to a variety of contexts, such as markets characterized by high levels of market share and commitment for the market leader as well as fragmented markets where market share and commitment levels are low.

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Keywords: Attribute typicality; Commitment; Comparative advertising

1. Introduction

The Federal Trade Commission's 1972 informal encouragement of explicit comparisons increased the popularity of comparative advertisements in the US (Wilkie and Farris, 1975). The FTC rationalized that explicit comparative advertisements deliver information previously unavailable to consumers. Advertisers seem to conclude that such ads can increase brand sales so that comparative advertising has become increasingly prevalent despite some advertisers' vehement opposition to the practice (Rogers and Williams, 1989). The FTC's explicit encouragement of brand comparisons, along with relaxed restric-

tions and competitor and media concerns (Tannenbaum, 1974), sparked the research interest of academicians and practitioners alike (Grewal et al., 1997).

However, according to a large body of extant empirical research, the effectiveness of comparative advertising is equivocal. Some investigators conclude that comparative advertising provides advantages that are not associated with non-comparative advertising (e.g., Droge and Darmon, 1987; Miniard et al., 1993; Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1991; Pechmann and Stewart, 1990; Rose et al., 1993). Others report that comparative advertising produces undesirable outcomes (e.g., Belch, 1981; Goodwin and Etgar, 1980; Levine, 1976). The conflicting opinions, though, do not seem to deter major consumer goods and service corporations from using comparative advertising in their promotions (Grewal et al., 1997).

In the face of continuing prevalence of comparative advertising, the equivocal research findings warrant further exploration

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of the observed effects. This research is especially important in the context where the Federal Trade Commission seems to be moving toward more stringent regulations that would disallow certain omissions in one-sided comparative ad claims in order to prevent consumer over generalizations (Pechmann, 1996). Thus, better theoretical understanding of the psychological processes consumers use when reacting to comparative ads is necessary to explain their effects. The study contributes to this effort by extending the research of Pechmann and Ratneshwar (1991), who explored the moderating effects of attribute typicality on the relative effects of comparative and non-comparative advertising. The findings suggest that attribute typicality can interact with consumer commitment to the comparison brand.

This paper applies the term “advertised brand” to refer to the brand sponsoring the comparative ad. The advertised brand is usually not the market leader, but the brand that wants to be compared (favorably) to the market leader. The “comparison brand” (or the compared-to brand) is the brand the advertised brand is compared to. The comparison brand is usually a market leader and is not the sponsor of the ad. In comparative advertising, the advertised brand is claimed to be superior on some feature or features to the comparison brand.

Some researchers attribute the mixed results regarding the efficacy of comparative advertisements to methodological reasons (Rose et al., 1993). Researchers also examine the moderating effects of pertinent variables, showing that the presence of moderators can yield different effects. For instance, Pechmann and Stewart (1990) examine the role of the market shares of the advertised brand and comparison brand in moderating the effectiveness of comparative advertising. Jain et al. (2000) examine the moderating role of prepurchase attribute verifiability. Pechmann and Ratneshwar (1991) study the moderating roles of attribute typicality and familiarity of the advertised brand.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

2.1. Previously identified moderator variables

In a meta-analysis of comparative versus non-comparative advertising, Grewal et al. (1997) identify six moderating variables that researchers have examined. Their criteria for selection of the variables were that they should be theoretically relevant and important to the advertiser. The variables identified are: the sponsoring brand’s newness or competitive position (Iyer, 1988; Pechmann and Stewart, 1990), the comparison brand’s market position (Iyer, 1988; Mazis, 1976; Pechmann and Stewart, 1990), the sponsoring brand’s relative market position (Iyer, 1988; Mazis, 1976; Pechmann and Stewart, 1990; Shimp and Dyer, 1978), the comparative ad’s credibility (e.g., Kavanoor et al., 1997), the factual content of the message (Iyer, 1988), and the nature of the dependent measure, that is, relative versus absolute (Miniard et al., 1993; Rose et al., 1993). The list evidently points to the fact that a number of pertinent variables remain to be explored as potential moderators.

Pechmann and Ratneshwar (1991) examine the effect of attribute typicality and familiarity of the advertised brand in producing effects of association and differentiation between the

advertised brand and the comparison brand. A key finding is that direct comparative ads are most effective for both unfamiliar and familiar advertised brands when the featured attribute is typical of the category. Jain et al. (2000) extend this research by examining the moderating impact of prepurchase verifiability and find that non-comparative ads might be more believable than comparative ads for experience attribute claims, while for search claims both ads elicit similar levels of believability. The present study seeks to further the extension by investigating the role of brand commitment.

2.2. Commitment

Recent consumer research examines the concept of brand commitment (Fournier, 1998). Commitment is defined as psychological attachment (Kiesler, 1971) to a brand and is viewed as a close antecedent of behavioral loyalty (Beatty et al., 1988). Commitment is expected to lead a person into a state of defense motivation (Eagly and Chaiken, 1995). The defense motivation engendered by high levels of commitment is expected to foster selective cognitive processing of information that filters out aspects threatening to the person’s attitude (Chaiken et al., 1989).

Consumer research also examines the role of commitment in moderating the effect of advertising. Consistent with the notion of commitment as the state of being pledged or bound to a particular course of action (Johnson, 1973), Lastovicka and Gardner (1979) view commitment in terms of brand choice. They indicate that the primary effect of commitment is to make behavior and cognitions more resistant to change. Kiesler (1971), who defines commitment in attitudinal and behavioral terms, suggests that more committed individuals are more discriminating and resistant to change. His theory and experiments extend perspectives of other studies suggesting that committed individuals reject communications attacking their position (Pallack et al., 1972) and pay closer attention to and selectively perceive information reinforcing their position (Bazerman et al., 1982; Crosby and Taylor, 1983). The motivation to defend attitudes and associated beliefs occurs even at the cost of accuracy (e.g., Pomerantz et al., 1995). However, even committed consumers are likely to yield to communications that are strong and credible (Petty et al., 1981).

Previous research also looks at the effect of commitment on diagnosticity and validity of information. Ahluwalia et al. (2000) report that committed consumers perceive attitude inconsistent negative information as lower in diagnosticity than attitude consistent positive information. Ahluwalia et al. (2000) find that committed respondents are likely to question the validity of negative information about the target while low commitment individuals are more likely to accept this information.

Given the empirically established role of commitment in moderating the effectiveness of communication, research should examine *how* commitment influences the effectiveness of comparative versus non-comparative advertising. Of more importance is how commitment interacts with other significant variables to moderate the effectiveness of comparative versus non-comparative advertising. Previous research has examined the role of constructs related to commitment in a comparative

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