

THE EFFECTS OF MESSAGE CLAIM TYPE AND ATTRIBUTE IMPORTANCE ON COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Using two experimental studies, this research investigates how different types of information included in the messages influence the consumer's attitude toward the advertised brand in a comparative ad. Study 1 demonstrates that the direct comparative ad is more effective when the message includes factual information. The indirect comparative ad is more effective when the message involves narrative information. Cell phone carriers, which are usually considered as utilitarian services, are used as the stimulus of the research. In Study 2, we aim to replicate the first study using sneaker shoes, which are often considered as hedonic products, to generalize the results. Study 2 also shows that the importance of the advertised attribute mediates the results. This research contributes to the marketing literature by demonstrating the moderating effect of message claim type on consumer attitude and the mediating role of the attribute importance. This research also tells marketing managers what kinds of information they should include in a direct versus indirect comparative ad and how critical it is to promote attributes that are important to their target consumers.

Keywords: Comparative advertising, Message claim type, Attribute importance, Consumer Attitude

INTRODUCTION

Information provided in the advertising claims is also considered an important factor in influencing the consumer's perceptions (Polyorat et al. 2007). There are two types of message claim: factual and narrative claims (Perrien et al. 1985; Polyorat et al. 2007). Factual claims are verifiable statements that utilize objective data and provide fact-laden and direct descriptions of product features and benefits, such as "the camera comes with an f1.8 lens" or "tests have shown brand A is better than brand B" (Gardial and Biehal 1991; Polyorat et al. 2007). On the other hand, narrative claims are unverifiable statements that may give inaccurate or imprecise indications of how a brand performs on an attribute by using emotional or hype words like "super" and "phenomenal" in describing the brand (Gardial and Biehal 1991; Polyorat et al. 2007). Prior research has shown that narrative information can generate higher message involvement and more positive brand evaluations than factual information (Polyorat et al. 2007; Gardial and Biehal 1991) and that factual information can induce less counterargument and generate more positive brand attitudes (McDougall 1978; Perrien et al. 1985; Barone and Miniard 1999). This research aims at investigating the moderating effect of claim information type on the effectiveness of direct versus indirect comparative advertising.

McDougall (1978) was the first one to investigate the effect of factual (substantial) versus narrative (unsubstantial) information in the advertisement message on the effectiveness of comparative advertising. The author found that respondents perceived comparative advertisements with factual information more reliable and helpful than those with narrative information (McDougall 1978). Since a direct comparative advertisement improves and strengthens consumers' perceptions toward the advertised brand and weakens consumers' perceptions toward the compared brand on the featured attributes (Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991), the reliable and helpful factual information can be perceived by consumers as valuable and useful for them in evaluating the featured attributes. Additionally, based on Kalro et al. (2013), direct comparative ads motivate consumers to analytically process the ad message which is best suited with factual information. They also found that this processing mode enabled consumers to better differentiate the brands and improve their attitudes toward the ad (Kalro et al. 2017). However, since an indirect comparative advertisement usually doesn't require consumers to comprehend across different brands in terms of certain attributes (Goodwin and Etgar 1980), processing factual information for different unnamed brands can be a challenging job for consumers (Na et al. 2006).

The positive effect of factual information was also proved by Perrien (1985) when the author investigated the effect of factual information in an advertisement and found that the respondents reacted positively toward the advertisement with factual information. However, in his research, the author didn't compare factual versus narrative information (Perrien 1985). Rotfeld and Rotzoll (1980) even considered an advertisement deceptive "if it communicates facts—by statement, implication, or omission—that differ from the reality of the situation and affect buying behavior to consumers' detriment" (p. 17). One of the biggest critiques for direct comparative advertising is that direct comparative advertising generates more negative cognitive thoughts than indirect comparative advertising (Prasad 1976; Belch 1981). However, Iyler (1988) further empirically proved that the consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions toward comparative advertisements with factual information were better than those with narrative information because factual information generated less counterargument and also was perceived more informative (Muehling and Bozman 1990). Therefore, using factual claims actually can help direct comparative advertising mitigate the negative thoughts by reducing the counterarguments and providing informative messages (Prasad 1976; Belch 1981; Iyler 1988; Muehling and Bozman 1990).

However, to some consumers, advertisements with narrative claims may be easier to understand and process the information (Gardial and Biehal 1991). Gardial and Biehal (1991) found that consumers with median product knowledge, who they claimed to be the majority of the consumers, tend to perceive the narrative information useful for inference making and express more positive brand attitudes. Since indirect comparative advertisements have been found to increase consumers' involvement with the message and lead to more favorable attitudes towards the compared brand because they don't provide the consumers a clear reference point and making them use their own reference points (Jeon and Beatty 2002), narrative claims in an indirect comparative advertisement can motivate the consumers to make their own inferences and generate even higher positive attitude than those in a direct comparative advertisements (Jeon and Beatty 2002; Miniard et al. 2006; Na et al. 2006). Direct comparative advertising is all about head-to-head direct comparisons so consumers tend to be more involved and require more information (Pechmann and Esteban 1993). Therefore, narrative claims, which are perceived

“fun”, but not “informative”, can actually damage consumers’ attitude toward a direct comparative advertisement (Gardial and Biehal 1991).

Since one of the drawbacks for indirect comparative advertising is that it usually generates less attention than direct comparative advertising because of the low intensity (Donthu 1992), narrative claims, also labeled “drama”, which utilize a story-like format to provide product information and contain specific details triggering consumers’ emotions and excitement can motivate consumers to process the advertisement by building empathic relationships with the advertisement characters and enhance message involvement (Polyorat et al. 2007). In turn, indirect comparative advertisements can generate more positive brand evaluations (Polyorat et al. 2007). Similarly, Karlo et al. (2013) found that indirect comparative ads motivated consumers to process imagery information rather than analytical information. Additionally, Cowley (2006) indicated that even though consumers tended to consider narrative claims as exaggerated claims and perceived them as less credible than factual claims, their brand evaluations were much more positive after exposure to those “exaggerated claims”. Cowley (2006) believed that these narrative claims were already accepted before being discredited by the consumers during the process of comprehension. However, direct comparative advertising has been found to influence consumers’ routes to persuasion differently depending on the level of involvement and to make them perceive the advertisement to be more interesting and valuable because direct comparative advertising motivates consumers to process the arguments in the advertisement message (Pechmann and Esteban 1993). The “exaggerated claims” are less likely to be ignored in a direct comparative advertisement when the consumers’ message involvement is high (Pechmann and Esteban 1993; Polyorat et al. 2007; Cowley 2006; Na et al. 2006; Jeon and Beatty 2002; Miniard et al. 2006). Thus, the hypothesis for the moderator of message claim type is as following.

H₁: *Message claim type moderates the relationship between advertising directness and attitude towards the brand, such that,*

- a) *When the comparative advertisement contains only factual claims, direct comparative advertisements generate more positive attitude towards the brand than indirect comparative advertisements; and*
- b) *When the comparative advertisement contains only narrative claims, indirect comparative advertisements generate more positive attitude towards the brand than direct comparative advertisements.*

STUDY 1: CELL PHONE PLANS STUDY

This study aims at investigating the moderating effect of message claim type (factual versus narrative information) using cell phone plans as the experimental setting. Participants evaluated a fictitious advertisement of a well-known cell phone provider.

Design and Procedure

A 2 (advertising directness: direct vs. indirect) by 2 (message claim type: factual vs. narrative) between-subject design was used in this study. A total of 142 American adults (58 females and 84 males) aged 21 to 68 completed the study on Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk). For direct comparative advertisements, T-Mobile was the advertised focal brand and AT&T was the compared brand. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions (direct/factual, direct/narrative, indirect/factual, and indirect/narrative). Advertising directness was manipulated by whether T-Mobile specifically named AT&T (direct comparative advertising) or not (indirect comparative advertising) in the advertisement. For indirect comparative advertising, T-Mobile compared itself to “all other brands.” Message claim type

was manipulated by the information included in the advertisement message: T-Mobile made the comparisons: “T-Mobile ... Introducing unlimited nationwide 4G data ... Consumer Reports prove that we are the only one!” (factual message claim) versus “T-Mobile ... Introducing unlimited nationwide 4G data ... Really? Awesome!” (narrative message claim). Then, participants responded questions about their attitudes towards the brand, thoughts regarding the messages, and their demographics such as age, gender and ethnicity.

Manipulation Checks

Participants responded to state the level they agreed or disagreed with the following three statements using 7-point strongly disagree/agree Likert scales: “T-Mobile is comparing itself to one particular named competitor in the advertisement” (manipulation check of advertising directness), as well as “The advertising claim contains a great deal of subjective opinion,” (reversed coded) and “The advertising claim can be objectively verified” (manipulation check of message claim type). Participants in the direct comparative advertising conditions reported significantly higher scores ($n = 69$, mean = 6.46) than those in the indirect comparative advertising conditions ($n = 73$, mean = 2.77) on manipulation check measure, $F(1,141) = 247.491$ ($p < .001$). Participants in the narrative message claim conditions reported significantly higher scores ($n = 70$, mean = 4.90) than those given in the factual message claim conditions ($n = 72$, mean = 3.85) on the first message claim type manipulation check item ($F(1,141) = 4.746$, $p = .031$). Therefore, the two manipulations worked as intended.

Results

As expected, a 2-way ANCOVA with attitude toward the brand as dependent variable and age, gender, and race as control variables showed that neither the main effect of advertising directness (*Cronbach's Alpha* = 0.991, $F(1,141) = .102$, $p > .75$) nor the main effect of message claim type ($F(1,141) = .164$, $p > .65$) was significant. As indicated in Table 1 (Appendix), none of the control variables was significant. Supporting the hypothesis, the interaction between advertising directness and message claim type was significant (see Fig. 1, $F(1,141) = 18.186$, $p < .001$). A planned contrast analysis revealed that, when the comparative advertisement used narrative claims (coded as 0, factual was coded as 1), indirect comparative advertising (coded as 0, direct was coded as 1) generated significantly more positive attitude toward the brand (mean_{indirect/narrative} = 5.146) than direct comparative advertising (mean_{direct/narrative} = 4.030, $F(1,65) = 9.035$, $p = .004$). In addition, when the comparative advertisement contained factual claims, direct comparative advertising generated significantly more positive attitude toward the brand (mean_{direct/factual} = 4.944) than indirect comparative advertising (mean_{indirect/factual} = 3.913, $F(1,73) = 8.102$, $p = .006$). Therefore, both Hypotheses 1a and 1b were supported.

Dependent Variable: Attitude toward the Brand					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	146.538a	7	20.934	13.186	0.000
Intercept	1.257	1	1.257	0.792	0.375
Pre_Att_AVG	91.809	1	91.809	57.828	0.000

Age	5.389	1	5.389	3.394	0.068
Gender	6.098	1	6.098	3.841	0.052
Race	0.579	1	0.579	0.365	0.547
Factual	0.462	1	0.462	0.291	0.590
Direct	0.439	1	0.439	0.277	0.600
Factual * Direct	28.873	1	28.873	18.186	0.000
Error	212.741	134	1.588		
Total	3367.680	142			
Corrected Total	359.279	141			

Discussion

Based on the results, it has been shown that direct comparisons with factual information is much more effective while narrative messages should be included with indirect comparisons. That means the advertisers should provide objective verifiable messages if they wish to name specific competitors in the ads. In this way, the ads give the consumers more information they would need not only to process the direct comparisons but to make their own conclusions. On the other hand, if the advertisers wish to indirectly compare themselves to other competitors, narrative messages are actually able to stimulate the consumers' emotional responses which would make processing indirect comparisons less difficult and more fun.

Although the results from Study 1 do provide some guidelines for the advertisers in terms of what information should be included in their ad messages. However, to use the information more effectively, it would be better to understand the underlying factors that influence how the consumers process direct and indirect comparisons in the ad messages they are exposed to. Therefore, we have conducted another study to better understand the mediating effects in the process.

Study 2: Sneakers Study

This study aims at exploring a potential mediator, perceived attribute importance, of the moderating effect of message claim type as well as replicating the moderating effect of message claim type found in study 1 to a product that is considered less utilitarian but also has low status relevance, sneakers, to gain generalizability of the findings while avoid adding overwhelming brand effect (Chang 2006, Fuchs et al. 2013).

Attribute Importance as Mediator

The consumer's perceived attribute importance has been studied extensively and found to be a critical mediator or moderator of the relationship between advertising stimuli and consumer responses (Mackenzie 1986; Chernev 1997; Malaviya and Sivakumar 1998; Park and Kim 2012). Different consumers value and assign different importance to different product attributes. Generally, perceived attribute importance is conceptualized as a person's overall assessment of the significance of an attribute for products (Mackenzie 1986; Park and Kim 2012). Manipulations in the advertising messages (e.g., prices, information, attention attractions, and etc.) have been found to significantly influence the consumer's perceived attribute importance (Mackenzie 1986; Park and Kim 2012), and, in turn, perceived attribute importance has been found to directly affect the consumer's responses to a marketing activity (Chernev 1997; Malaviya and Sivakumar 1998; Park and Kim 2012).

Design and Procedure

A 2 (advertising directness: direct vs. indirect) by 2 (message claim type: factual vs. narrative) between-subject design was used in this study. A total of 143 American adults (76 females and 67 males) aged 20 to 67 completed the study on Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk).

For direct comparative advertisements, T-Mobile was the advertised focal brand and AT&T was the compared brand. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions (direct/factual, direct/narrative, indirect/factual, and indirect/narrative). Advertising directness was manipulated by whether Reebok specifically named Adidas (direct comparative advertising) or not (indirect comparative advertising) in the advertisement. For indirect comparative advertising, Reebok compared itself to “all other brands.” Message claim type was manipulated by the information included in the advertisement message: Reebok made the comparisons: “Based on Consumer Reports, Reebok sneakers’ overall sole support can reduce 50% more of pressure on your foot than Adidas/all other brands...Reebok makes your every step easier than EVER!” (factual message claim) versus “Reebok sneakers’ overall sole support can reduce more pressure on your foot than Adidas/all other brands...Reebok makes your every step easier than EVER!” (narrative message claim). Then, participants responded questions about their attitudes towards the brand, perceptions about the importance of the compared attribute, thoughts regarding the messages, and their demographics such as age, gender and ethnicity. Perceived attribute importance was measured using 7-point semantic differential scale: Not important at all/Very important (Park and Kim 2012).

Manipulation Check

Participants responded to state the level they agreed or disagreed with the following three statements using 7-point strongly disagree/agree Likert scales: “Reebok is comparing itself to one particular named competitor in the advertisement” (manipulation check of advertising directness), as well as “The advertising claim contains a great deal of subjective opinion,” (reversed coded) and “The advertising claim can be objectively verified” (manipulation check of message claim type). Participants in the direct comparative advertising conditions reported significantly higher scores ($n = 57$, mean = 6.39) than those in the indirect comparative advertising conditions ($n = 86$, mean = 1.96) on manipulation check measure, $F(1,142) = 318.70$ ($p < .001$). Participants in the narrative message claim conditions reported significantly higher scores ($n = 71$, mean = 4.90) than those given in the factual message claim conditions ($n = 72$, mean = 3.85) on the first message claim type manipulation check item ($F(1,142) = 13.88$, $p < .001$). Therefore, the two manipulations worked as intended.

Results of Moderating Effects

As indicated in Table 2 (Appendix), consistent with Study 1, a 2-way ANOVA with attitude toward the brand as dependent variable and age, gender, and race as control variables showed that neither the main effect of advertising directness (*Cronbach's Alpha* = 0.99, $F(1,142) = .674$, $p > .41$) nor the main effect of message claim type $F(1,142) = .183$, $p > .669$ was significant. None of the control variables was significant ($p > .05$). Supporting H_{2a} and H_{2b} , the interaction between advertising directness and message claim type was significant (see Fig. 1, $F(1,142) = 16.724$, $p < .000$). A planned contrast analysis revealed that, consistent with Study 1, when the comparative advertisement used narrative claims (coded as 0, factual was coded as 1),

indirect comparative advertising (coded as 0, direct was coded as 1) generated significantly more positive attitude toward the brand ($\text{mean}_{\text{indirect/narrative}} = 5.14$) than direct comparative advertising ($\text{mean}_{\text{direct/narrative}} = 3.91$, $F(1,70) = 9.821$, $p = .003$). In addition, when the comparative advertisement contained factual, direct comparative advertising generated significantly more positive attitude toward the brand ($\text{mean}_{\text{direct/factual}} = 5.25$) than indirect comparative advertising ($\text{mean}_{\text{indirect/factual}} = 4.18$, $F(1,71) = 7.038$, $p = .01$).

Dependent Variable: Attitude toward the Brand					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	7.769	1	7.769	3.115	0.08
Pre-Attitude	30.343	1	30.343	12.167	0.001
Age	1.596	1	1.596	0.64	0.425
Gender	0.096	1	0.096	0.038	0.845
Race	0.016	1	0.016	0.006	0.937
Direct	1.701	1	1.701	0.682	0.41
Factual	1.144	1	1.144	0.459	0.499
Direct * Factual	40.489	1	40.489	16.235	<.001
Error	319.216	128	2.494		
Total	3343.16	142			
Corrected Total	417.039	141			

Results of Mediating Effects

To test the mediation effects of perceived attribute importance on the attitude toward the advertised brand, we closely followed the approach recently suggested by Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) instead of the methodology by Baron and Kenny (1986). Zhao et al. (2010) have pointed out a number of issues with the procedure presented by Baron and Kenny (1986) and suggested a revised testing approach that provides a more nuanced analysis of mediation effects. In a nutshell, these authors recommend replacing the Baron–Kenny “three tests + Sobel” approach with a single bootstrap test of the indirect (mediated) effect (which is the multiplicative product of the path from the independent variable to the mediator and the one from the mediator to the dependent variable; Preacher & Hayes, 2008; see Zhao et al., 2010, for a detailed discussion).

The results indicated that the mean indirect effect for perceived attribute importance from the bootstrap analysis was negative and significant (-.095), again with a 95% confidence interval that did not include zero (-.0020 ~ -.3138). In the indirect path, a change from indirect comparative advertising to direct comparative advertising decreased perceived attribute importance by .403 units on the one-to-seven scale. Holding advertising directness constant, a unit increase in perceived attribute importance increased the attitude toward the advertised brand by .237. However, the direct effect (-.1383) of advertising directness on the attitude toward the

advertised brand was not significant ($p = .662$). Therefore, we concluded that perceived attribute importance is an indirect-only mediator for the relationship between advertising directness and attitude toward the advertised brand. According to Zhao et al. (2010), the results also showed evidence that the mediator (perceived attribute importance) is consistent with the hypothesized theoretical framework and it is unlikely there is any omitted mediator (see Table 2).

A conceptual framework was developed and tested to address the research question on direct versus indirect comparative advertising. We investigated the effects of message claim type as moderator and perceived attribute importance as mediator that help explain the mixed results found in previous research. In study 1, as hypothesized, we found that direct comparative advertisements generated more positive attitude toward the brand than indirect comparative advertisements, when factual claims are applied. In contrast, indirect comparative advertisements generated more positive attitude toward the brand than direct comparative advertisements, when the advertisements contained narrative claims as hypothesized. These findings indicated that providing facts and objective information in the comparative advertisement is extremely important if the company wants to use head-to-head comparisons to one particular competitor. On the other hand, if the company wants to compare itself with the rest of the industry, it should instead utilize more subjective form of information in their comparative advertisement. Study 2 found supporting evidence of perceived attribute importance as a mediator to the moderating effect of message claim type found in study 1.

The findings provide the advertisers evidence that they should utilize direct comparative advertising to compare it with one particular named competitor when they include factual message claims, which are the verifiable statements that utilize objective data and provide fact-laden and direct descriptions of product features and benefits. When consumers directly compare two brands or products, they do pay attention to the information which can be objectively verified. The reliable and helpful factual information can be perceived by consumers as valuable and useful for them in evaluating the featured attributes. For example, recently Samsung has used a series of direct comparative TV or radio advertisements against Apple for their mobile phones, tablet computers, or laptops. In these comparative advertisements, Samsung has been focused on those attributes that are only offered by Samsung's products and included factual and objective information usually provided by a third-party institution to support their arguments. The objective data can make the advertising arguments more believable and perceived more informative (Polyorat et al. 2007).

Table 3				
RESULTS OF THE MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF PERCEIVED ATTRIBUTE IMPORTANCE				
Level of Confidence for Confidence Intervals: 95				
Number of Bootstrap Resamples: 20000				
	Coefficient	SE	t-statistics	p-value
IV to Mediators (a paths)				
	-0.4025	0.2074	-1.9406	0.0547
Direct Effects of Mediators on DV (b paths)				
	0.2365	0.1378	1.7161	0.0888
Total Effect of IV on DV (c path)				
	-0.2335	0.313	-0.746	0.4571
Direct Effect of IV on DV (c' path)				

	-0.1383	0.3154	-0.4386	0.6617
Bootstrapping Results for Indirect Effects				
Indirect Effects of IV on DV through Proposed Mediators (ab paths)				
	Data	Boot	Bias	SE
	-0.0952	-0.0919	0.0033	0.0723
Bias Corrected Confidence Intervals				
	Lower	Upper		
	-0.3138	-0.002		

On the other hand, if the company decides to use narrative claims, which are the unverifiable statements that may give inaccurate or imprecise indications of how a brand performs on an attribute by using emotional or hype words like “super” and “phenomenal” in describing the brand (Gardial and Biehal 1991; Polyorat et al. 2007), they should utilize indirect comparisons in their advertisements. The company should use some emotional words or appeals to stimulate consumers’ levels of involvement with the advertising messages so that higher attitude toward the advertised brand can be generated (Gardial and Biehal 1991). In its recent comparative advertisements, Nokia has used drama-like advertising themes and emotional messages to promote Lumia mobile phones against Apple, Samsung, and the field for their unique 41-megapixel built-in cameras. This is a perfect example to demonstrate how companies can include narrative claims in their indirect comparative advertisements to effectively promote and market some of their great product features Martin and Strong (2016).

CONCLUSION

Additionally, the results of the mediation analysis indicated that a change from indirect comparative advertising to direct comparative advertising decreased perceived attribute importance and increase in perceived attribute importance improved the attitude toward the advertised brand. That means indirect comparative advertisements are significantly better than direct comparative advertisements in enhancing the consumer’s perceived importance of the compared attribute and, in turn, increasing the consumer’s attitude toward the advertised brand. This indirect-only mediating effect provides another explanation for the inconclusive findings of the relationship between advertising directness and consumer responses. To our best knowledge, this is the first research that specifically focused on the mediating effect of perceived attribute importance on the effectiveness of comparative advertising. We hope this research can not only advance our knowledge in the literature but also initiate a new research stream that can take us further in comparative advertising research found differences in direct comparative advertising between comparing to the market leader and multiple brands. We used underdog level of brand as the focal brand in the studies as this is the more common in advertising practices. But it is certainly important to expand and examine the results found here to brands of other market positions including market leaders or new entrants. Also, we have tested one mediator in this paper and results showed indirect mediation only. This suggested the potential of other mediators at work. Future research should also explore other mechanisms affecting the moderation found in this study. In addition, have found that comparative advertising with implicit conclusions is more effective if the consumers are persuasion aware. It would be interesting to see how variables like conclusion explicitness and persuasion knowledge influence the effectiveness of direct versus indirect comparative ads.

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