When More May Be Less: The Effects of Regulatory Focus on Responses to Maximal/Minimal Comparative Frames

Shailendra Jain, Indiana University, Kelley School of Business, USA
Nidhi Agrawal, Northwestern University, Kellogg School of Management, USA
Durairaj Maheswaran, New York University, Stern School of Business, USA

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12600/volumes/v34/NA-34

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ABSTRACT
We examined the consequences of regulatory focus on exposure to two types of comparative advertising frames—a maximal (“Brand A is superior to Brand B”) and a minimal claim (“Brand A is equivalent or similar to brand B”). Experiment 1 featured brand vs. brand comparisons while experiment 2 compared a brand with a normative standard. For promotion-focused people, a maximal frame simply represented a gain over a minimal frame leading to more favorable elaboration and greater persuasion. To prevention-focused individuals, maximal frames represented either a “no loss” or a “deviation from the norm”. The former representation led the two frames to be equally persuasive. The latter representation led to greater negative elaboration of maximal frames, making them less persuasive.

INTRODUCTION
Recent research has found that the effectiveness of comparative advertising is moderated by several message features (valence of comparison: Jain and Posavac 2004; gain/loss framing: Shiv, Edell, and Payne 1997, 2004; alignability: Zhang, Kardes, and Cronley 2002; featured attribute’s typicality: Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991) that systematically affect persuasion. We examine the differential persuasion effects of a maximal claim where the sponsor brand claims superiority over a comparison object, and a minimal claim where the sponsor brand claims parity with the comparison object (Buchanan and Smithies 1989). An example of maximal claims is Visa’s claim that it is accepted more widely than American Express. Minimal claims are exemplified by Nissan Altima’s claim that it has the same trunk space as a BMW.

While these examples suggest that maximal and minimal claims are mostly made in a brand vs. brand context, claims of brands comparing themselves against an established standard or a norm are also observed. For instance, manufacturers of dietary supplements cite their brands as meeting specific dietary and nutritional guidelines established by the FDA (e.g., % daily recommended value of vitamins, fiber, and other nutritional ingredients). Several automobile brands are often advertised as meeting specific regulatory standards relating to fuel emission and/or safety (e.g., performance in a crash test). We investigate minimal and maximal claims in brand vs. brand as well as brand vs. standard comparison contexts. Besides identifying and investigating different types of comparisons, our research makes two additional contributions. One, it examines regulatory focus (Higgins 1997) as a moderator of effectiveness of these two comparison frames; and second, it provides insight into the processes underlying this moderation.

REGULATORY FOCUS
Regulatory focus theory suggests that distinct motivational systems govern people’s drive to attain desired outcomes. To achieve these outcomes, a consumer may choose to either “approach outcomes that match the desired end-state” or “avoid outcomes that mismatch the desired end-state” (Crowe and Higgins 1997). Some consumers might prefer to maximize the occurrence of positive outcomes (e.g., hopes and achievements). Thus, they are driven towards scenarios representing ‘gains’ and away from scenarios associated with ‘non-gains’. In contrast, others may focus on minimizing the occurrence of negative outcomes (e.g., duties and responsibilities). They are motivated by the absence and presence of undesirable outcomes and are thus more driven towards approaching ‘no loss’ situations and avoiding ‘losses’. The motivational system that approaches positive outcomes is termed promotion focus while the system that is driven by avoiding negative outcomes is called prevention focus (Higgins 2000).

Recent research has examined the role of regulatory focus in persuasion and has shown that the effectiveness of an appeal advocating attainment of prevention/promotion goals varies depending on the context and/or frame of the appeal. Chernev (2004) found that prevention-focused individuals show a greater preference for status-quo than promotion focused individuals. Lee and Aaker (2004) demonstrated that gain-framed appeals were more persuasive for promotion-focused individuals, but loss-framed appeals were more effective for prevention-focused individuals. However, research on regulatory focus has not examined how the effectiveness of different types of comparisons may differ for promotion- and prevention-focused individuals. We suggest that maximal frames are more persuasive under a promotion orientation while minimal frames, depending on how they are perceived, are either equally or more effective than maximal frames under a prevention orientation. Further, we examine the processes that may underlie the judgments evoked by exposure to different frames by consumers with different regulatory foci.

HYPOTHESES
Higgins (1997) suggests that individuals with a promotion focus work towards maximizing gains and/or minimizing non-gains. In contrast, a prevention focus is driven towards minimizing losses and/or maximizing non-losses. Promotion-focused individuals follow an ‘inclusive’ approach—they focus on striking ‘hits’ and avoiding misses. Alternately, a prevention focus fosters an ‘exclusive’ approach—the focus is on incorporating correct rejections and steering clear of ‘false-alarms’. In particular, promotion-focused individuals avoid committing errors of omission while prevention-focused individuals avoid making errors of commission (Crowe and Higgins 1997). Because of their drive to approach hopes and aspirations, promotion-focused individuals are open to change and prefer advancement to maintaining their existing states (Chernev 2004; Liberman et al. 1999), and are likely to set maximal goals (Crowe and Higgins 1997). Thus, when a brand is presented as superior to or exceeding a comparison brand versus being similar to it, promotion-focused individuals would be more persuaded by superiority rather than similarity claims. This outcome is predicted because in the ‘superior (vs. similar) to a comparison brand’ frame, the sponsor brand presents a gain (non-gain) and an advancement (vs. no improvement) from the norm.

Prevention-focused individuals focus on stopping losses and attaining non-losses. When a brand is presented as being at parity with a comparison brand, it represents a non-loss to them. Similarly, when the sponsor brand is seen as exceeding the comparison brand, any positive movement from an accepted entity is also likely to be perceived as a non-loss. Higgins (2000) states, “the duties, obliga-
tions, and responsibilities (that drive a prevention-focused individual) function more like minimal goals which a person must attain.” Thus, under a prevention-focus, a brand that is similar to a comparison brand is acceptable because it meets established expectations. A brand that is superior to the comparison brand also offers the same ‘non-loss’. Hence, prevention-focused people should find both minimal and maximal framed comparison equally appealing.

**H1:** In a brand vs. brand context, promotion-focused individuals will be more persuaded by maximal (vs. minimal) frames while prevention-focused individuals will be equally persuaded by minimal and maximal comparative frames.

Valence of Elaboration. Regulatory focus is expected to guide the valence of message-related elaboration. Promotion-focused individuals are likely to think more favorably of a maximal (vs. minimal) comparative frame because it represents their gain-driven goals. Hence, maximal (vs. minimal) framed comparisons should lead to more favorable elaboration. For such individuals, more positive thoughts and fewer negative thoughts should be evidenced in response to maximal frames than minimal frames. To prevention-focused individuals, both, maximal and minimal appeals represent non-losses and hence should be equally desirable. So, the valence of the thoughts generated by the prevention-focused individuals should not vary as a function of frame. To examine this ‘nature of elaboration’ prediction, we relied on a valenced elaboration index of positive minus negative thoughts (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991).

**H2:** For the promotion-focused individuals, the valenced elaboration index would be more favorable when featuring a maximal frame. However, prevention-focused individuals will have equivalent valenced elaboration index across both frames.

**EXPERIMENT 1**

97 undergraduate students participated in a 2 (promotion vs. prevention focus) x 2 (maximal vs. minimal comparison frames) between subjects experiment in two purportedly unrelated studies in exchange for course credit. The first study manipulated focus through a brand name recognition task (see Higgins et al. 1994-experiment 4). Participants were informed that the task will require them to solve anagrams that were ‘jumbled-up’ brand names and that they will be assigned points for each name. In the promotion (prevention) focus condition, respondents began with 0 (12) points and were informed that they will gain (lose) 2 points when they got a brand name right (wrong) and will not win (not lose) 2 points when they didn’t get the brand name right (wrong).

Next, respondents completed a second study that exposed them to a toothpaste advertisement. In the maximal (minimal) frame condition, the sponsor brand was described as preventing cavities ‘more effectively than’ (‘as effectively as’) the comparison brand. Specifically, the copy stated: “Crown is more (as) effective in preventing tooth decay than (as) the leading brand, Gloss. Research has consistently shown that Crown provides cavity protection that is superior (similar) to Gloss. Try Crown today and experience superior (similar) cavity prevention to Gloss.” In addition, the sponsor brand was described as having a “Fresh Mint” flavor. The brand names were fictitious to control for prior brand knowledge/preference and were counterbalanced. This counterbalancing did not influence the dependent measures. After looking through the advertisement at their own pace, respondents went to the next page. Respondents then filled all measures (thoughts and evaluations counterbalanced) and manipulation checks for focus and comparison frames, responded to a suspicion probe, were debriefed and dismissed. The suspicion probe revealed no evidence of hypotheses guessing.

**Dependent Measures and Manipulation Checks**

**Brand Evaluation and Manipulation Checks.** Participants evaluated the sponsor brand on four 7-point scales anchored by ‘will definitely not consider buying-will definitely consider buying’, ‘very bad-very good’, ‘very unfavorable-very favorable’, and ‘negative-positive’ (higher scores indicate more positive evaluations). These items were averaged into an overall evaluation for the target brand (a=.91). Thoughts were coded by two independent raters (blind to the hypotheses) as message-related positive, negative, and neutral statements, as well as irrelevant statements (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Jain 2003; Jain and Maheswaran 2000). The judges agreed on 89% of the thoughts and resolved the disagreements through discussion. Positive thoughts indicated positive thinking and approval of the claims presented in the appeal (e.g., “This toothpaste seems like a good one”); negative thoughts indicated thoughts that reflected negatively on the product or were challenges to the claims presented in the appeal (e.g., “I am not sure if what they are saying is true.”); neutral statements did not clearly have a positive or negative evaluative implication on judgments (e.g., “The ad was for toothpaste.”). Thoughts appearing unrelated to the experimental materials were coded as irrelevant (e.g., “I am ready to head to work.”). The number of negative thoughts was subtracted from positive thoughts to yield an index of valenced elaboration.

**Manipulation Checks.** The manipulation check for the comparative frames elicited participants’ rating of the similarity between the two brands on two items anchored by “most different (1)-exact same (7)” and “totally dissimilar (1)-totally similar (7)” (r=.72). The manipulation for regulatory focus was assessed using two items. In a ‘follow-up on brand name quiz’ study, the promotion-focused item assessed the extent to which participants focused on scoring more points and was anchored by “not at all (1)-a lot (7)”. The measure for prevention focus assessed the extent to which participants focused on not losing any points with the same end points and numerical anchors.

**Results**

**Manipulation Checks.** A 2 (Focus) x 2 (Frame) between-subjects ANOVA was used to analyze the data. The comparative frame manipulation check yielded only a significant main effect—the two brands were seen as more similar in the minimal frame condition ($M_{\text{maximal}}=4.18, M_{\text{minimal}}=4.98, F(1,92)=12.38, p<.01$), confirming the success of this manipulation. Further, promotion focused participants were concerned marginally more with gaining points ($M_{\text{promotion}}=4.70, M_{\text{prevention}}=3.94, F(1,93)=2.99, p=0.08$) and significantly less with losing points ($M_{\text{promotion}}=3.31 vs. M_{\text{prevention}}=4.63, F(1,93)=8.51, p<.01$).

**Brand Evaluations and Processes.** A 2 x 2 ANOVA on sponsor brand evaluation yielded a marginal effect of regulatory focus ($M_{\text{promotion}}=4.38, M_{\text{prevention}}=3.93, F(1,93)=3.52, p=.07$) as well as a significant focus x frame interaction ($F(1,93)=4.91, p<.05$; see table 1). Consistent with hypothesis 1, follow-up contrasts indicated that promotion-focused individuals found maximal frames more persuasive ($M_{\text{maximal}}=4.80, M_{\text{minimal}}=3.95, F(1,89)=6.60, p<.05$) while prevention-focused individuals were indifferent between the two ($M_{\text{maximal}}=3.84, M_{\text{minimal}}=4.03, F<1$). An ANOVA on the valenced index (positive minus negative) of thoughts yielded two significant effects: a main effect of frame ($M_{\text{maximal}}=.96, M_{\text{minimal}}=.04, F(1,93)=8.79, p<.01$) and a focus
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TABLE 1
COMPARING TWO BRANDS
MEANS OF KEY DEPENDENT MEASURES (EXPERIMENT 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regulatory Focus</th>
<th>Promotion Focus</th>
<th>Prevention Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maximal Frame</td>
<td>Minimal Frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative Frame</td>
<td>Evaluations of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sponsor Brand</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valenced</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell sizes range from 24-26

x frame interaction \((F(1, 93)=11.40, p<.001)\). Supporting hypothesis 2, follow-up contrasts revealed that promotion-focused individuals had more favorable elaboration when exposed to a maximal frame \((M_{maximal}=1.67, M_{minimal}=-.48; F(1, 93)=20.34, p<.001)\). For prevention-focused participants, the valence of elaboration did not vary across the two frames \((M_{minimal}=.40, M_{maximal}=.26; F(1)<1)\).

EXPERIMENT 2

Findings of experiment 1 are consistent with our prediction that focus moderates the effectiveness of comparative frames. In the next experiment, we tested this moderation in a brand vs. standard context guided by the prediction that for the prevention-focused individual, a minimal appeal will be more persuasive. The reasoning for this expectation is as follows.

Prevention focus fosters a preference for stability and maintenance of the status quo rather than risking a move to a ‘better’ position (Liberman et al. 2001). Therefore, prevention-focused individuals find a new brand that meets a credible standard (as in a minimal appeal) acceptable because it represents stability. On the other hand, a maximal claim represents a movement from or challenge to the status quo and hence carries uncertainty with it. Thus, it could be interpreted in one of two ways by a prevention-focused individual: a) simply as a ‘non-loss’ or b) as a deviation from the norm that may be perceived as a potential source of loss (a.k.a. a ‘false-alarm’).

In experiment 1, as reasoned earlier, the presentation of a brand as being superior to a competing brand induced perceptions of non-loss. Consumers routinely encounter advertising that promotes a brand as superior to another brand and to that extent, such claims may be simply coded as non-losses. Also, brands might not be associated with being ‘guidelines’ or ‘standards’ in quite the same way as, say, an FDA requirement. Thus, under prevention focus, a maximal ‘brand vs. brand’ comparison is as persuasive as a minimal frame. In a brand vs. standard domain, a brand’s claim that its performance exceeds a standard may be perceived as a deviation from an established norm–‘false-alarm’ or ‘possible loss’–that should be avoided. Hence, prevention-focused individuals may find a maximal comparison less persuasive based on their aversion to steering away from the status-quo and their preference for avoiding ‘false-alarms’. However, when the brand claims to meet the normative standards (as in minimal frames), it represents the desirable end-state of ‘no loss’, and should thus be more persuasive.

H3: In a brand vs. standard context, promotion-focused individuals will be more persuaded by maximal (vs. minimal) frames. Prevention-focused individuals will be more persuaded by minimal (vs. maximal) frames.

The valence of elaboration should also reflect our theorizing. If prevention focused individuals indeed sense a maximal framed comparison to an established standard as a potential loss, then this perceived risk of a loss should be reflected in the valence of thoughts such that maximal (vs. minimal) frames should lead to more unfavorable elaboration. Hence, we predict:

H4: For the promotion-focused individuals, the valenced elaboration index would be more favorable when featuring a maximal frame. However, prevention-focused individuals will elaborate more favorably on a minimal (vs. maximal) frame.

Method

We tested hypotheses 3 and 4 in a 2 (promotion/prevention focus) x 2 (minimal/maximal frame) between subjects experiment conducted among 122 undergraduate participants in two purportedly unrelated studies. In the first study that manipulated regulatory focus, promotion- (promotion-) focused respondents were asked to write down and explain how their ‘hopes and aspirations’ (‘duties and obligations’) differed from those they had in their childhood (see Liberman et al. 2001).

Next, in a ‘second study’, participants were exposed to an ad for a nutrition bar, the copy for which stated: “The FDA (U. S. Food and Drug Administration) and the NAS (Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences) have set up recommended Dietary Allowances and Daily Values (DV) of most nutrients, vitamins, and minerals that we should consume. The Nutri-Bar® was designed to meet \((exceed)\) these standards of health and nutrition. Developed to be the body’s most efficient source of fuel, each Nutri-Bar® packs 10 grams of complex carbohydrates. That means you can easily satisfy the energy demands of your hectic daily schedule. Add to that our exclusive vitamin formulation
which includes 105% DV of the antioxidant vitamins C and E and 105% DV of all eight B-complex vitamins to aid energy metabolism, plus 9-10 grams of high quality protein to help muscles recover and rebuild. These ingredients all add up to nutrition in a convenient, no-melt, no-crumble bar that fuels your daily activities, no matter where your adventures take you. Available in several flavors. The Nutri-bar meets (exceeds) the standards. The Nutri-bar meets (exceeds) your needs.”

As indicated by the italicized words in parentheses above, only the framing of the comparison of the target brand with a credible standard (FDA and NAS) as meeting/exceeding was varied. Participants then filled the dependent measures as in experiment 1, responded to manipulation check items for the independent variables, were probed for suspicion, debriefed, thanked, and dismissed. No evidence of hypotheses guessing or demand was found.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regulatory Focus</th>
<th>Promotion Focus</th>
<th>Prevention Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparative Frame</td>
<td>Maximal Frame</td>
<td>Minimal Frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations of Sponsor Brand</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valenced Elaboration</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>-.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell sizes range from 30-31.

### Results

The data were analyzed using a 2 (Focus: promotion / prevention) x 2 (Frame: maximal / minimal) between subjects full-factorial design. No effects were observed based on the order of administering the dependent variables.

**Manipulation Checks.** Promotion-focused individuals indeed thought more about hopes and aspirations ($M_{\text{promotion}}=4.06, M_{\text{prevention}}=3.18; F(1, 118)=6.67, p<.05$) and less about duties and obligations ($M_{\text{promotion}}=3.39, M_{\text{prevention}}=4.53; F(1, 118)=8.85, p<.01$). In addition, respondents in the minimal frame condition thought that the advertised breakfast bar met standards while those in the maximal frame condition thought it exceeded standards ($M_{\text{minimal}}=4.02, M_{\text{maximal}}=4.82; F(1, 118)=5.56, p<.05$).

**Brand Evaluations and Processes.** An ANOVA on the evaluation of Nutri-bar yielded only a significant focus x frame interaction ($F(1, 118)=26.15, p<.001$; see table 2). Follow-up contrasts indicated that promotion-focused participants were more persuaded by the maximal frame ($M_{\text{maximal}}=5.07, M_{\text{minimal}}=3.45; F(1, 118)=19.34, p<.001$) while the minimal frame was more effective under a prevention focus ($M_{\text{minimal}}=4.64, M_{\text{maximal}}=3.57; F(1, 118)=8.11, p<.01$).

As predicted in hypothesis 4, an ANOVA on the valenced index of thoughts yielded the predicted focus x frame interaction ($F(1, 118)=29.28, p<.001$). In particular, participants with a promotion focus were more favorable in their elaboration under the maximal frame condition ($M_{\text{maximal}}=1.26, M_{\text{minimal}}=-.61; F(1, 118)=20.73, p<.001$) while prevention focus elicited more favorable thoughts in the minimal frame cell ($M_{\text{minimal}}=1.13; F(1, 118)=9.68, p<.01$).

### General Discussion

We examined the effectiveness of maximal/minimal comparative messages under different foci when the comparison benchmark was a brand (experiment 1) and a normative standard (experiments 2). Consistent with the promotion-focused goal of seeking gains, the maximal message was more persuasive and favorably elaborated upon. However, under a prevention-focus, its claim of being better than a recommended norm undermined persuasion. When a brand was compared to a brand however, maximal and minimal frames were equally persuasive. Process measures provided insights into the mechanisms that may account for the differences in the judgmental effects of maximal comparison under a prevention-focus. When maximal frames represented a “no loss” (as in experiment 1), then the two frames were equally persuasive. But when maximal frames were perceived to be a deviation from an established norm (experiments 2), they led to negative elaboration and attenuated persuasion.

While past comparative advertising literature has examined gain/loss framing (Shiv et al 1997), valence (Jain and Posavac 2004), and alignability (Zhang et al 2002), our research examines the frame of the ‘extent’ of claimed difference in comparisons.
the process, it extends comparative advertising literature by identifying two types of comparison–comparison with a norm and minimal (similarity) comparison. While industry practice often relies on a standard-based comparison in advertising, relatively little insight is available on the effectiveness of this frame. We identify conditions under which such a comparison would be productive. Second, while considerable research has addressed the effectiveness of maximal comparisons, the effects of minimal frames have not been well understood. Our studies suggest that minimal frames by themselves may be an important comparative advertising execution since they could be more persuasive than maximal frames in some situations. Also, while most research assumes that maximal comparisons might always be more persuasive, our research shows conditions when maximal frames may be less persuasive than minimal comparative frames.

The present research also extends the literature on regulatory focus. Our findings provide support for the expectation that relative to a current state, promotion-focused individuals are geared towards maintenance while prevention focused individuals toward maintenance. In addition, our results are novel in suggesting that prevention-focused individuals might process information pitching a non-loss differently, based on the uncertainty or ‘possibility of loss.’ That is, for prevention-focus respondents, different contexts may prime different degrees of losses or non-losses. For example, exceeding (vs. meeting) a recommended norm may lead to discomfort and uncertainty about attainment of a non-loss. But being superior to another brand presents as much a non-loss as being equal to another brand. Future research could identify more conditions when prevention-focused individuals may see the same information as representing a ‘non-loss’ versus a ‘potential loss’ depending on differing frames or contexts.

One concern across experiments one and two is the difference in domain. In experiment 1, the toothpaste category may be associated more with preventing losses than with promoting gains. The breakfast bars might be more associated with gain-domain. We investigated the differences in gain/loss domain in an ancillary study. We examined category associations by asking 79 undergraduates to rate four categories (breakfast bars, condoms, ice creams, and toothpaste) on two scales regarding the extent to which respondents perceived they “reduce negative feelings”(1)“increase positive feelings”(7) and “prevent problems”(1)“promote benefit”(7) (r=0.78; lower scores indicate more loss/prevention association). Besides the finding that the difference in means for the two stimuli categories was not statistically significant (M_{breakfast bars}=4.37, M_{toothpaste}=4.18, F<1), their average rating was around the mid-point of the scale, suggesting that their domain (gain/loss) was ambiguous (in comparison, condoms received a rating of 2.7 suggesting a strong prevention/loss focus and ice creams were rated at 6.2 suggesting a strong promotion/gain focus). Hence, the difference in gain and loss domains does not explain our findings. However, future research would benefit from testing circumstances where gain and loss domains might lead to differential effects for regulatory focus or comparative frames.

A limitation of our research is that we have used different categories to represent different contexts in separate experiments. It would be useful to test our predictions either by controlling for the category or through category replicates. In particular, an important task for future investigations is to identify factors that may systematically activate the non-loss and deviation mechanisms under a prevention-focus. Also, follow-up inquiries could help identify conditions other than prevention focus that might influence the effectiveness of norm versus brand-based comparisons. Future research could also investigate the effects of regulatory focus on comparative frames using further measures of processing (time spent, elaboration) and effectiveness (ad credibility, claim believability, evaluations of competing brands). We have proposed an individual’s regulatory motivation moderating the impact of different comparative ad frames. There has been an increasing interest in individual differences (e.g., Sorrentino and Roney 2000) and motivational variables (e.g. Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005a; Jain 2003; Jain and Maheswaran 2000) as predictors of a host of process and persuasion-related measures. While our research examines regulatory focus differences in a specific comparative context, examining other variables such as self-monitoring (Snyder 1974), self-construal (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005b), and cultural differences (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000; Maheswaran and Agrawal 2004), may further deepen our understanding of framing effects in general and comparative advertising effects in specific.

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