Perceived Variability, Category Size, and the Relative Effectiveness Of “Leading Brand” Versus “Best in Class” Comparative Advertising Claims

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Based on a content analysis, the authors examine the two most frequently observed types of indirect comparisons (“Better than the Leading brand” and “Best in class”). A framework is provided which posits that the attitudinal effects of exposure to specific types of indirect comparisons are moderated by consumers’ perceptions of category variability and category size. It is further argued that these judgmental effects are mediated by consumers’ a priori search mode (confirmatory or disconfirmatory), the type of processing evoked by the indirect comparison (instance-based or abstraction-based), and whether there is a match or mismatch between search mode and type of processing. Two experiments provide support for the proposed theory.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Direct comparative ads map an advertised brand to a specific strategically-selected competing brand (e.g., “Visa is better than American Express”; “Pepsi is better than Coke”), and indirect comparative ads imply superiority to other brands without mentioning any specific competing brands by name (e.g., “Benadryl Allergy Relief is 54% more effective than the leading prescription antihistamine”; “Chevy is the biggest truck in its class”, and “You are more certain of safe delivery of your urgent documents with FedEx than with other carriers”). Two major types of indirect comparative ads are frequently used: “Better than the Leading brand” indirect comparative ads state that the advertised brand is better than the leading member of the product category, and “Best in class” indirect comparative ads state that the advertised brand is generally the best brand in the product category. “Leading brand” indirect comparative ads invite consumers to compare the advertised brand to a specific instance or member of a product category, whereas “Best in class” indirect comparative ads encourage consumers to compare the advertised brand to a global abstraction-based representation of a product category. Our research investigates the antecedents and consequences of instance-versus abstraction-based comparative processing.

It is proposed in the paper that exposure effects to these different indirect comparative ads are moderated by two factors: (1) perceived variability or the perceived dispersion of category instances around the prototype or the abstraction of the central tendency of category members on a given attribute (Park and Hastie 1987) and (2) category size. When perceived variability is high, consumers focus on specific instances and engage in confirmatory search, regardless of category size (Mussweiler 2003; Sanbonmatsu, Posavac, Vanous, and Ho 2005). “Leading brand” claims are likely to be more effective than “Best in class” claims and the matching hypothesis is supported.

Disconfirmatory or negative search is likely to occur when perceived variability is low (Mussweiler 2003; Sanbonmatsu, Posavac, Vanous, and Ho 2005). When category size is large, consumers prefer to focus on abstractions and “Best in class” claims that encourage consumers to compare the advertised brand to an abstraction-based representation facilitate disconfirmation. Consequently, “Leading brand” claims are likely to be more persuasive. When category size is small, consumers prefer to focus on instances and “Leading brand” claims that encourage consumers to compare the advertised brand to instance-based representations facilitate disconfirmation. Consequently, “Best in class” claims are likely to be more persuasive. Thus the mismatching hypothesis is supported.

Two experiments were conducted to test our expectations regarding the interaction between perceived variability, category size, and advertising claim. Both experiments were 2 (type of indirect comparative ad: “Leading brand” vs. “Best in class”) x 2 (category size: large vs. small) x 2 (perceived variability: high vs. low) full-factorial between-subjects design. Participants were asked to review an indirect comparative ad (“leading brand” or “best in class”) and complete a questionnaire containing relevant dependent variables (brand evaluations, covariates) at their own pace. The differences between the two experiments are as follows: (1) Real product categories were used for each cell in the first experiment. By contrast, perceived variability and category size were manipulated using a fictitious survey in the second experiment. (2) In the second experiment, process data was collected (level of counterarguing to measure confirmation/disconfirmation; type of information relied on—instance vs. abstraction based) to enable a direct test of mediation. Analysis of the data obtained from the two experiments revealed support for our hypotheses.

REFERENCES

