Attitudes Toward Comparative Advertising in Thailand: the Moderating Role of Product Category Types

Kawpong Polyorat, Khonkaen University, Thailand

While comparative advertising has been widely used in the US, it is uncommon in several other countries. This study attempts to examine the attitudes toward comparative advertising in Thailand, a country where comparative advertising has been rarely used. In addition, this study also seeks to investigate the moderating role of product category types (utilitarian vs. hedonic). Overall, the results from an experimental study demonstrated that comparative ads elicited more favorable ad attitudes than noncomparative ads for utilitarian products but not for hedonic products. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are provided and avenues for future research are suggested.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13039/volumes/ap07/AP-07

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING IN THAILAND: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PRODUCT CATEGORY TYPES
Kawpong Polyorat, Faculty of Management Science, Khonkaen University

Partial Funding for this research was provided by The Thailand Research Fund. The author thanks Dana L. Alden, Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan and Nitipon Phutachoti, the editors and two anonymous reviewers.

ABSTRACT
While comparative advertising has been widely used in the US, it is uncommon in several other countries. This study attempts to examine the attitudes toward comparative advertising in Thailand, a country where comparative advertising has been rarely used. In addition, this study also seeks to investigate the moderating role of product category types (utilitarian vs. hedonic). Overall, the results from an experimental study demonstrated that comparative ads elicited more favorable ad attitudes than noncomparative ads for utilitarian products but not for hedonic products. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are provided and avenues for future research are suggested.

QUESTIONS
Comparative Advertising
Comparative advertising explicitly or implicitly compares at least two brands in the same product class on specific product attributes (Grewal et al., 1997). Direct comparative ads make explicit references by mentioning the name of a competitive brand. Indirect comparative ads, on the other hand, do not mention any specific comparison brand(s) but compare the focal brand with other brands or the category in general; e.g., “our brand is better than any other brand” (Pechman and Ratneshwar 1991). Most comparative ads are indirect since the competitor is often simply implied rather than directly named (Walker and Anderson 1991). Noncomparative ads, in contrast, try to make an impression by conveying the information of the advertised brand without implicating how it fares against competitors (Manning et al. 2001).

A meta-analysis of comparative versus noncomparative advertising studies by Grewal et al. (1997) revealed that while comparative (vs. noncomparative) ads elicit more attention, greater awareness, more favorable brand attitudes and stronger purchase intention, they tend to elicit less favorable ad attitudes. One plausible explanation for the less favorable ad attitudes is that consumers see the comparison as an attack on the comparison brand, which would either derogate the message source or produce counterargument to the message content (Wilkie and Farris 1975). In spite of the less favorable ad attitudes, the fact that comparative advertising is still widely used suggests more studies are needed in this topic.

Since the majority of comparative advertising studies are conducted in the US, where comparative advertising is common, the impact of comparative advertising on ad attitudes may be different for consumers in a country where comparative advertising is not common. Comparative advertising is rarely used in Thailand. Its persuasiveness (e.g., ad attitudes), thus, remains largely unexplored. As a result, from a managerial perspective, it is interesting to examine attitudes toward comparative ads before an implementation in real media. From a theoretical perspective, two competing hypotheses which suggest the two possible but opposite attitudes toward comparative advertising for Thai consumers are largely unexplored. This research will, therefore, fill this gap.

The first hypothesis, based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, suggests that comparative (vs. noncomparative) advertising will elicit less favorable ad attitudes in Thailand, where collectivism is highly valued and uncertainty avoidance is relatively high (Hofstede 1990). In collectivist societies, harmonious relationships, modesty and face-saving considerably influence communication. Comparative advertising, which claims the superiority of the sponsoring brand over the competitor(s), however, would seem to be at odds with these values. For example, a number of content-analytic studies indicate that comparative advertising has been very rare in collectivist countries (e.g., Japan; Mueller 1987; 1992). Moreover, literature on conflict management suggests that while individualist Americans have a stronger tendency toward competition, collectivist Chinese are more likely to avoid

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH
conflicts (Morris et al. 1998). Based on the results from these two streams of individualism–collectivism research, comparative advertising should provoke less favorable ad attitudes than noncomparative advertising.

Furthermore, Thailand is also different from the US in terms of uncertain avoidance (Hofstede 1990), the extent to which ambiguity and uncertainty are tolerated among members of a society. Donthu (1998) investigates comparative ad persuasiveness in four different countries including the US (as a base since most of comparative advertising studies are conducted here), Canada (where comparative advertising is legal and widely used), the UK (where comparative advertising is legal but not widely used), and India (where comparative advertising is illegal and therefore is rarely used). People from countries where comparative ads are not widely used have more negative attitudes toward comparative advertising than those from countries where comparative ads are more common. The researcher attributes this finding to (1) mere exposure effects, (2) differences in national diffusion of innovation, and/or (3) differences in uncertainty avoidance. The final explanation stems from native differences in levels of uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede (1990) classifies the US and Canada as cultures low in uncertainty avoidance and India as a culture high in uncertainty avoidance. Cultures with low uncertainty avoidance tend to be open to new things and behaviors whereas cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to be risk-averse, resistant to change, and low tolerant for ambiguity (Donthu 1998). Comparative ads may be considered novel, ambiguous, and risky. As a result, cultures low in uncertainty avoidance such as US and Canada may be more receptive to comparative advertising than cultures high in uncertainty avoidance such as India. Based on this rationale and empirical evidence, in Thailand where uncertainty avoidance is relatively high, comparative ads should be less persuasive than noncomparative ads.

The other hypothesis, based on novelty effect and the other side of Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance implication, nevertheless, suggests the opposite. That is, comparative (vs. noncomparative) advertising could elicit more favorable ad attitudes. Because comparative advertising has been rarely employed, Thai consumers could find this type of ad novel. Aaker and Williams (1998)’s cross-cultural research reported that more novel ad appeals would bring about more favorable attitudes. In Thailand, comparative ads are more novel than noncomparative ads. In other words, Thai consumers are less familiar with comparative (vs. noncomparative) ads. As novelty has been found to produce more favorable attitudes, it is expected that comparative (vs. noncomparative) advertising will be more persuasive.

Moreover, based on the other implication of uncertainty avoidance, a positive impact of comparative advertising on persuasiveness could also be predicted. High uncertainty avoidance culture could be argued to prefer comparative ads to noncomparative ads because the former provides more information regarding the sponsoring brand. As a result, uncertainty could be reduced to a larger extent through the use of comparative (vs. noncomparative) ads. This line of reasoning received preliminary supports from Jeon and Beatty’s (2002) study which reports that, in Korea (a high uncertainty avoidance culture), comparative ads are more persuasive than their noncomparative counterparts.

Jeon and Beatty (2002) suggest that Koreans, which are classified as high uncertainty avoidant according to Hofstede (1990), consider comparative ads (vs. noncomparative ads) to be novel and thus found them more persuasive. Their argument for a novelty effect, however, appears to be at odds with the explanation regarding the role of national uncertainty avoidance offered by Donthu (1998). Specifically, comparative ads are novel. Countries with high levels of uncertainty avoidance might regard novelty as risky and ambiguous. As a consequence, from Donthu’s (1998) perspective, those with high levels of uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Indians) have less positive attitudes towards comparative ads versus noncomparative ads.

These two competing hypotheses and empirical evidences, thus, lead to the first research question which seeks to examine whether comparative or noncomparative ads would elicit more favorable ad attitudes for Thai consumers.

RQ 1: What type of advertising (comparative vs. noncomparative) will elicit more favorable ad attitudes for Thai consumers.

Product category type and attitude towards comparative advertising

In addition to examining the main effect of ad types, this study also explores the role of product category types (utilitarian vs. hedonic). Apart from a few studies (e.g., Goodwin and Etgar 1980; Gorn and Weinberg 1983; Putrevu and Lord 1994), previous comparative ad research has paid relatively scant attention to the possible moderating role of product category types.

There are differences between the two types of product categories. On one hand, utilitarian products are primarily concerned with the functional/instrumental usefulness of the products which is derived from the performance of the products. They provide the customer value by being a means to an end (Chandon, Wansink and Laurent 2000). They do not have either inherently positive or negative affects (Youn et al. 2001). Office supplies, batteries (Youn et al. 2001), calculators, cameras, antacids, weighing scales and electric blankets (Hsu and Monroe 1998) fall into this product category type.

On the other hand, hedonic products are largely concerned with the experiential pleasure derived from the affective, esthetic, sensory and/or symbolic aspects of that product (Batra and Ahtola 1991; Spangenberg, Voss and Crowley 1997). They are noninstrumental and experiential. They are appreciated for their own sake, without further regard to their practical purposes (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Hedonic products are sometimes called value-expressive products. They carry symbolic or expressive qualities, which lead to the users’ social and psychological interpretation of the product (Kim and Kang 2001). For example, a consumer of an exotic sport car may be associated with an image of the stereotypical driver who is young, attractive, modern, affluent and single (Johar and Siggy 1991).

A few studies report the roles of product characteristics in comparative ad persuasiveness. For example, Putrevu and Lord (1994) report that comparative ads elicit more favorable brand attitudes when products are concurrently cognitive-involving and affective-involving. However, noncomparative ads produce more favorable brand attitudes when affective involvement alone is high rather than low. Gorn and Weinberg (1983) find a relative advantage of comparative ads over noncomparative ads in provoking more favorable brand attitudes for toothpaste but not golf balls. Goodwin and Etgar (1980) report that for cold remedies, comparative (vs. noncomparative) ads were perceived as providing greater extent of product knowledge and elicited more favorable ad personality. However, for beer, the two ad types were not perceived as different in enhancing product knowledge and eliciting favorable ad personality.

Although these three studies indirectly suggest the potential moderating roles of product category types, they do not explicitly study this factor. As a consequence,
another objective of this study is to fill in this gap. It is expected that the findings from the current study will contribute to the literature on the moderating role of product category types. That is, on the one hand, if attitudes toward comparative versus noncomparative ads were similar across the two product category types, we would have an evidence for the lack of the moderating impact of product category types. On the other hand, if ad attitudes were different across the two product category types, we would have the evidence for their moderating role.

RQ 2: What are the roles of product category types on attitudes toward comparative versus noncomparative ads?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An experimental study was conducted where the independent variables were ad types (comparative vs. noncomparative) and product category types (utilitarian versus hedonic). The dependent variable is ad attitudes. In addition, the product familiarity was included as a covariate since previous research suggested its impact on comparative advertising effectiveness (Dasgupta and Donthu 1994).

Sample and Procedure

The study sample was comprised of 204 undergraduate students (63% female; mean age = 20.3 years) from a major Thai university. The subjects participated in the study during a regular class meeting as a course requirement. All stimuli and measures were provided in a survey booklet format. The subjects were first given a basic description of the study and viewed either a comparative or noncomparative ad for the first product and responded to measures of ad attitudes. Next, the subjects read the ad of the second product and completed the same measure sheet as that for the first ad. The ad types for the first and second products are always different. The subjects then were asked to complete the product familiarity measure sheets for the two products. Finally, after providing basic demographic data, subjects were debriefed.

Ad stimuli

Toothpaste and candy were selected as the focal utilitarian and hedonic products. A pre-test with 40 undergraduate students from the same subject pool as the main study was conducted to determine whether toothpaste and candy could appropriately represent the two product category types. Specifically, the subjects indicated the extent to which the products were utilitarian versus hedonic on a 2-item, 7-point (1=utilitarian, 7= hedonic) scale drawn from Kempf (1999) and Strahilevitz and Myers (1998); and the extent to which the subjects were involved with the products were utilitarian versus hedonic on a 2-item, 7-point (1=low involved, 7= highly involved) drawn from Poloryat, Alden and Kim (2005). The results indicated that the two product were different in terms of utilitarian versus hedonic aspects ($\bar{X}_{\text{toothpaste}} = 1.47, \bar{X}_{\text{candy}} = 5.15, t = -15.00, p \leq .001$), but similar in terms of product involvement ($\bar{X}_{\text{toothpaste}} = 4.62, \bar{X}_{\text{candy}} = 4.27, t = 1.30, p > .1$).

Although comparative ads could be presented in the form of either direct comparative or indirect comparative, only indirect comparative ads were employed in the experiment. Thailand’s trademark law prohibits any public use of another trade name (Chirapratavi 1996). As a consequence, the direct mention of a comparison brand is illegal and thus not used. The use of indirect comparative ads, therefore, would accommodate this restriction and thus enhance external validity of the current study.

Following work by Barone and Minard (1999), the researcher developed print ads featuring a general headline with four attribute descriptions for toothpaste and five for candy and a concluding remark. The two print ads (comparative and noncomparative ads) for each product category type contained the same information, except comparative ads also indicated that the sponsoring brand was better on each attribute than the leading brand. A pilot test was then conducted to examine if the two ad types were perceived as intended. As expected, at least 90% of the subjects correctly identified comparative ads as comparative ads and noncomparative ads as noncomparative ads.

Measures

Ad attitudes were assessed by a 7-point Likert-type six-item scale drawn from Neese and Taylor (1994). Specifically, the subjects were requested to identify the extent to which they think the ad is believable, useful, informative, clear, likable, and convincing. Scores from the six items were averaged to yield ad attitude scores ($\alpha_{\text{toothpaste}} = .88$ and $\alpha_{\text{candy}} = .88$).

The familiarity of product category was assessed by a 2-point Likert-type two-item scale drawn from Polyorat, Alden and Kim (2005). Specifically, the subjects identified the extent to which they are familiar with toothpaste/candy and the features of toothpaste/candy ($r_{\text{toothpaste}} = .71$ and $r_{\text{candy}} = .82$).

Results

The two research questions were examined using ANCOVA where ad format (comparative vs. noncomparative) was an independent variable, ad attitudes as a dependent variable and product familiarity as a covariate. An ANCOVA model was used for each product category type (utilitarian and hedonic). Treatment means and standard deviations for each cell are shown in Table 1. The ANCOVA results were displayed in Table 2.

The results indicate that comparative (versus noncomparative) ads do not necessarily always elicit more favorable ad attitudes in Thailand. In fact, their persuasiveness appears to depend on product category types. Specifically, for a utilitarian product, comparative ads elicit more favorable ad attitudes than their noncomparative counterparts ($\bar{X}_{\text{comparative}} = 4.42, \bar{X}_{\text{noncomparative}} = 4.09, F = 5.99, p \leq .05$). In contrast, for hedonic products, noncomparative ads elicit more favorable ad attitudes than their comparative counterparts ($\bar{X}_{\text{comparative}} = 3.71, \bar{X}_{\text{noncomparative}} = 3.98, F = 3.55, p \leq .07$). The results are graphically displayed in Figure 1. In addition, the covariate (product familiarity) is significant in both product ($F_{\text{utilitarian}} = 7.66, p \leq .01; F_{\text{hedonic}} = 14.00, p \leq .01$)
TABLE 1
TREATMENT MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Category Type</th>
<th>Ad Type</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noncomparative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedonic</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2
ANCOVA RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian Product Ad attitude</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product familiarity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.66</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedonic Product Ad attitude</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product familiarity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1
EFFECTS OF AD TYPES AND PRODUCT CATEGORY TYPES

Ad Attitude

More favorable
Less favorable

Noncomparative
Comparative
Ad Type

Utilitarian
Hedonic
Products

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this research is to examine the persuasiveness of comparative versus noncomparative advertising in Thailand. In addition, this research also seeks to study the moderating role of a product-related variable, product category types (utilitarian vs. hedonic). Overall, the results from an experimental study demonstrated that comparative ads do not necessarily always engender more favorable ad attitudes than their noncomparative counterparts. Their persuasiveness, however, is moderated by product category types. Specifically, comparative ads elicit more favorable ad attitudes for utilitarian products, whereas noncomparative ads elicit more favorable ad attitudes for hedonic products.

Research and Managerial Implications

This research made a number of contributions to existing consumer and advertising literatures. First, it studied attitudes toward comparative ads in an under-examined country, Thailand. To date, the majority of comparative advertising studies are conducted in the US. As a consequence, the cross-cultural attitudes toward comparative ads need to be more investigated. This study is one toward such direction. Second, the impacts of product category types on the persuasiveness of comparative ads have received scant attention. The results of this study reveal the boundary of comparative versus noncomparative ad persuasiveness set by product category types (utilitarian vs. hedonic), at least for Thai consumers. That is, comparative ads elicit more favorable ad attitudes than noncomparative ads for utilitarian products while the opposite is true for hedonic products. Moreover, this study attempts to rule out alternative explanations of other product-related factors by controlling for product.
involved in the pretest) and product familiarity (as a covariate in the main study). As a consequence, it can be ascertained that the difference in attitudes toward comparative advertising are more likely to be driven by product-related characteristics in terms of utilitarian versus hedonic aspects rather than product involvement or familiarity.

In terms of managerial implications, our study results suggest that in a country where comparative advertising is rarely used, comparative advertising is novel and has an advantage over noncomparative advertising for certain products. Marketers, as a consequence, may consider using comparative ad (at least indirect comparative) in a country where it is relatively uncommon, if law permits. Marketers, however, may consider using comparative ads only when their products are utilitarian as opposed to hedonic. Nevertheless, when the product is hedonic in nature, noncomparative ads are more suitable. Furthermore, our study results suggest avenue for the cross-cultural use of standardised international ads (Onkvisit and Shaw 1999). Global companies may now become more comfortable in advertising their global products in a comparative manner for utilitarian products because it appears to be as persuasive in Asia as in the West.

Limitations and Future Research

First, in addition to ad attitudes, future studies should include upstream consumer responses to alternative ad types, such as ad recalls and downstream consumer responses such as purchase intention. Second, the focus of this study was print ads only. Other media including television and radio commercials are worth investigating as well.

Furthermore, certain features of this experimental study may limit generalizability of the findings. Research subjects were exposed to prints ads that were not embedded in a book or a magazine. In addition, the exposure environment was relatively free of normal clutters. Given that fictitious brands and student samples may limit external validity, future research should validate our findings with real ads and non-student samples. Moreover, the replications of this study in other countries with different degrees of individualism-collectivism and uncertainty avoidance will extend our level of understanding further. Finally, only indirect comparative ads were examined in this study due to legal constraints, future research may need to verify our findings with direct comparative ad to examine if the explicit mention of a comparison’s brand might systematically affect the results.

REFERENCES


______ (1992), “Standardization vs. Specialization: An Examination of Westernization in Japanese


