Transforming Product Experience: the Impact of Pre-Trial Attribute Type Information and Claim Objectivity on Post-Trial Product Evaluations

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Several ad-trial studies have shown that advertising can influence consumers’ subsequent trial experience, especially for low diagnostic products. In this study, the authors investigate the effect of attribute type (search versus experiential) and claim objectivity (objective versus subjective) on post-trial evaluations of a highly diagnostic product. The results indicate in general that search attribute claims result in more positive post-trial evaluations than experiential attribute claims or trial alone. Subjective search attribute claims followed by trial result in higher purchase intentions and greater product choice than trial alone.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13852/eacr/vol8/E-08

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ABSTRACT

Several ad-trial studies have shown that advertising can influence consumers’ subsequent trial experience, especially for low diagnostic products. In this study, the authors investigate the effect of attribute type (search versus experiential) and claim objectivity (objective versus subjective) on post-trial evaluations of a highly diagnostic product. The results indicate in general that search attribute claims result in more positive post-trial evaluations than experiential attribute claims or trial alone.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The Integrated Information Response Model

The integrated information response model (IIRM) provides a useful structural approach for examining the attribute and claim effects related to consumers’ processing of ad information and product trial experience (Smith and Swinyard 1982, 1983, 1988). This approach is particularly relevant to highly diagnostic products, for which trial is not ambiguous (Smith 1993). IIRM examines consumers’ cognitive, affective, and conative reactions to product-related information provided in an advertisement and during trial (Smith and Swinyard 1982). The IIRM draws upon Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) expectancy value (EV) theory, which states that consumers’ expectancy that a brand has certain attributes is based on belief strength, belief confidence, and attribute evaluation (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). When a consumer reads an ad claim that Brand X is highly reliable, a correspondence belief will be formed that associates Brand X with high reliability at some level of subjective probability. If message acceptance is high, the probability of association (i.e., belief strength) will be relatively strong (i.e., close to 1); if message acceptance is low, the probability of association will be relatively weak (i.e., close to 0). Belief confidence represents one’s conviction in one’s beliefs, and attribute evaluation refers to the favorability of one’s attribute assessment. The full specification of the expectancy component of the ECV model includes a summative product of the three factors (i.e., belief strength, belief confidence, and attribute evaluation) across all attributes. Further, the derived expected value of a product is a determinant of purchase intention.

An important aspect of IIRM deals with a consumer’s attention to the advertisement. In general, IIRM states that an advertisement, because it is provided by a source with a vested interest, is apt to be met with resistance by consumers, and hence will generate weak (or “lower-order”) beliefs about the advertised brand. These weak beliefs coupled with weak affect lack sufficient expected value to create brand preferences (top line, detailed sequence, Figure 1), but they may trigger enough curiosity from customers to have them engage in product trial. Only upon trial can these weaker beliefs and affect be transformed to stronger (or “higher-order”) beliefs and affect, and result in commitment to the brand (bottom line, detailed sequence, Figure 1). Empirical tests of the IIRM in general provide evidence for superiority of trial: trial-only groups, in comparison with ad-only groups, had stronger and more confidently held beliefs, greater total expectancy, stronger brand attitudes, and higher attitude-behavior consistency (Smith and Swinyard 1983, 1988). These findings suggest that when the product attributes can be directly evaluated by trial, pre-trial advertising-based beliefs will lose their significance. Smith and Swinyard (1983) exposed participants to advertising claims that focused on experiential attributes of a salted snack food item that could be tested during trial. Thus, absence of an advertising effect may have been driven by the lack of information that is otherwise unavailable during trial (e.g., search attribute information).
Under certain circumstances (e.g., in the presence of a credible endorser or of a two-sided versus one-sided message), the acceptance of the advertising message can also be high, resulting in “higher-order” beliefs and affect (the dashed line, Figure 1), which will still have a significant weight in evaluating the product after trial. According to previous research in advertising and trial, higher-order beliefs may result if advertising is conveying information about search rather than experiential attributes (Wright and Lynch 1995), expressed in objective rather than subjective terms (see Darley and Smith 1993; Edell and Staelin 1983; Holbrook 1978).

Smith and Swinyard’s IIRM model (1982) leaves many questions unanswered. For example, “while the model identifies the possibility of higher-order beliefs resulting from exposure to advertising, it does little to predict when this particular pattern will be traversed” (Smith and Swinyard 1982, p. 91). Our focus is on the joint advertising effects of attribute type and claim objectivity on post-trial evaluation.

The Attribute Type and Claim Objectivity

Research has distinguished between types of attributes, including characteristic/beneficial/image attributes (Lekhoff-Hagius and Mason 1993), tangible/intangible attributes (Darley and Smith 1993), and search/experience/credence attributes (Nelson 1974). The key difference between search and experiential attributes concerns the consumers’ need to try the product to assess the validity of the information related to that attribute (Wright and Lynch 1995). Information about search attributes (e.g., ingredients, price) can be collected and reliably interpreted from labels, advertising, and word-of-mouth, without having to try the product (Darby and Kami 1973; Wright and Lynch 1995). Experience attributes (e.g., taste of a candy bar and sound of a stereo system), on the other hand, can be assessed only by directly experiencing the product.

Another important consideration is the type of claims used in advertisements. Ford et al. (1990) define objective claims as describing “some feature of the product that is measured in a standard way,” and subjective claims as “some feature of the product that is not measured in a standard way.” Other researchers use different labels to refer to the objectivity of advertising claims, such as factual/evaluative (Holbrook 1978), rational/emotional (Atkin 1979), concrete/abstract (Debrevec, Meyers, and Chan 1985), and factual/impressionistic (Darley and Smith 1993). Despite the numerous labels and definitions, a common element across studies is the verifiability of the information presented in the ad. On one hand, objective claims are easily verifiable because they include specific data that can be measured by a standard scale, which is not subject to individual interpretation (Atkin 1979; Debrevec, Meyers, and Chan 1984; Edell and Staelin 1983; Holbrook 1978). At the other end of the continuum, subjective claims are not easily verifiable and are subject to individual interpretations. For example, an advertising message that includes objective claims about a car’s attributes would read: “a purchase price starting at $15,000, 27 miles per gallon of regular gas, and a 6-year average life span,” whereas a subjective message would read: “a surprisingly low initial purchase price, truly excellent gasoline mileage, and a long life span.”

Ford et al. (1990) contemplated the cross-classification of two types of product attributes (search/experiential attributes) with two dimensions of claim objectivity (objective/subjective). Their results suggest that consumers are least skeptical of advertising claims about search attributes expressed in objective terms (e.g., “Buy this product for only $4.99”), because consumers can associate the brand with verifiable attributes and specific facts (see also Darley and Smith 1993). Consumers become more skeptical of subjective claims about search attributes (“Buy this product at an extremely low price”), which are relatively ambiguous, and hence open to more alternative interpretations by consumers. Consumers are even more skeptical of objective claims about experiential
attributes (e.g., “[...] carpeting will not mildew or rot for at least three years”). Finally, consumers are most skeptical of subjective claims about experiential attributes (e.g., “[the automobile repair service] treats you fairly every time”).

**HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

In this section, we develop the theoretical bases for hypothesizing that advertising information (i.e., search attribute claim; experiential attribute claim; no claim) can affect consumers’ reaction to a subsequent trial experience with highly diagnostic products, and that the nature of advertising claims (i.e., objective/subjective claims about search/experiential attributes) impacts post-trial evaluations.

In the context of a highly diagnostic product, according to IIRM, trial experience forms a strong belief base because it is processed directly through the senses. “Since the validity of one’s own senses is rarely questioned, these [...] beliefs are, at least initially, held with maximal certainty” (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, p. 132). When advertising information is consistent with that of trial (e.g., both advertising and trial provide positive information about the product), trial beliefs will be more confidently held than those related to advertising, in which case the total expectancy from advertising-plus-trial should not differ from that produced by trial alone (as predicted by IIRM). Research suggests that an advertisement presenting experiential attribute information prior to the trial does not add information that is otherwise inaccessible at trial (Hoch and Ha 1986; Kempf and Smith 1998).

Consumers generally form positive beliefs and affect toward a product after exposure to advertising, which will predispose customers to evaluate the product’s experiential attributes favorably during trial. If the pre-trial ad presents search attribute information, the post-trial evaluations will incorporate both search (conveyed by the pre-trial ad) and experiential (collected personally during trial) attribute information. Because belief confidence is a function of the amount of information the individual has available to form a judgment of relevant attributes (Peterson and Pitz 1988), search attribute claims followed by trial have the potential to generate more strongly held trial-based brand beliefs than trial alone. Thus, we posit:

\[ H1: \text{Search attribute claims will generate more favorable reactions than trial alone, resulting in more positive post-trial expectancy value (H1a), more positive post-trial product attitude (H1b), greater post-trial purchase intention (H1c), and greater purchase (H1d).} \]

We also expect search attribute ads to result in more positive post-trial evaluations than experiential attribute ads because the experiential attribute claims do not add information that is otherwise inaccessible at trial. Thus, we posit:

\[ H2: \text{Search attribute claims will generate more favorable reactions than experiential attribute claims, resulting in more positive post-trial expectancy value (H2a), more positive post-trial brand attitude (H2b), greater post-trial purchase intention (H2c), and greater purchase (H2d).} \]

In an advertising only context, using the EV model, several studies have demonstrated that objective claims, as opposed to subjective claims, generate more positive post-ad expected values, are more credible (Ford et al. 1990; Holbrook 1978), encounter less cognitive resistance (Edell and Staelin 1983), and generate higher purchase intentions (Darley and Smith 1993). In the context of advertising and trial, we expect claim objectivity to have an effect on post-trial evaluations if search attribute information, but not experiential attribute information, is shown in the pre-trial ad. With regard to the former, the relationship between advertising and higher-order beliefs (i.e., the dashed line in the IIRM model in Figure 1) is likely to be stronger for objective claims (which are more credible) than for subjective claims. With regard to the latter, consumers should form strong beliefs about experiential attributes during trial, thus having information consistent with that of trial (expressed in objective or subjective terms) from a less credible source, like advertising, cannot influence their post-trial evaluations. Thus, we expect:

\[ H3: \text{Objective search attribute claims will generate more favorable reactions than subjective search attribute claims, resulting in more positive post-trial expectancy value (H3a), more positive post-trial brand attitude (H3b), greater post-trial purchase intention (H3c), and greater purchase (H3d).} \]

**MEASUREMENT AND METHOD**

**Stimulus Pretest and Attribute Identification**

**Product Choice.** Several pretests were conducted to identify the product and the attributes to be used in advertisements. Fifty-four undergraduate students rated ten products on diagnosticity by responding to two 7-point items: “Overall, if you were able to try the product, how confident would you be in your ability to judge the quality and performance of this product?” and “Overall, if you were able to try the product, how easy do you think would be for you to judge the quality of the product?” (Kempf and Smith 1998). Pens scored above the midpoint \( M=4.00 \) on the diagnosticity scale \( M=6.05, t(51)=16.75, p<.001 \), and were chosen for the experiment because of suitability to be tested in a group, laboratory setting.

**Attribute Identification and Evaluation.** Based on a review of pen advertisements and information solicitation of students’ opinions about the important attributes considered when buying a pen, we developed a list of attributes for each product that we included in the second pretest. Participants responded to “If you were going to buy a pen, how important would the following features be to you?” on a 7-point scale (1 = “Not at all important,” 7 = “Very important”) (Darley and Smith 1993). Attributes included feel/comfort of the pen, smooth feel of ink, functionality/easy operation, no leaking, durability, color of pen, color of ink, price, style/design, weight, and physical appearance. Six attributes were significantly above the midpoint \( M=4.00 \) of the importance scale: style/design \( M=4.69 \), price \( M=5.77 \), ink color \( M=5.08 \), pen comfort \( M=5.52 \), smooth feel of ink \( M=5.65 \), and no leaks \( M=6.46 \). Two independent judges trained in the definition of search and experiential attributes identified color of ink, price, style/design as search attributes and comfort of the pen, smooth feel of ink, and no leaking as experiential attributes.

**Objective and Subjective Claim Identification.** Based on the findings from the product attribute pretest, we developed one objective and one subjective claim for each salient attribute. Fifty undergraduate students were exposed to a description of claim objectivity/subjectivity (Ford et al. 1990) and asked to rate each claim on a 7-point scale (1 = “Completely objective,” 7 = “Completely subjective”). Participants perceived the objective search (OS) attribute claims \( M_{OS}=2.86 \) to be more objective than subjective search (SS) attribute claims \( M_{SS}=3.78, F (1, 50)=12.68, p=.001 \), and the objective experiential (OE) attribute claims
Ad Stimuli and Experimental Procedures

Four print advertisements, each containing three attribute claims, were developed. The ads were designed to resemble magazine advertisements in both content and layout. Except for the different attribute information, the four advertisements are identical in terms of color, graphic design, headline, and as similar as possible in terms of layout, and length of claims. The ads featured a graphic of the product and bullet points below the graphic listing attribute information. A headline designed to attract attention to the advertisement was also included.

Participants in each of the four Ad-Trial conditions and Trial-Only condition received a booklet upon entering the experimental session. Participants in the former conditions were exposed to all of the four advertisements: objective search attribute, objective experiential attribute, subjective search attribute, and subjective experiential attribute. The Trial-Only data were collected separately than Ad-trial data. The Ad-Trial and the Trial-Only booklets included a cover story and the questionnaire. The sample sizes for the conditions are: \( n_{OS}=27 \), \( n_{SS}=27 \), \( n_{OE}=25 \), \( n_{SE}=28 \), and \( n_{Trial}=23 \).

Participants in the Ad-Trial conditions read the advertisement carefully, and then answered questions about the product and the ad. Next, participants examined the pen up to five minutes (see Hoch and Ha 1986), after which they completed manipulation checks, dependent measures, and demographic information including age, marital status, family income, and race. Trial-Only participants tried the product for five minutes and completed the same post-trial measures, but not the post-ad, pre-trial measures, as the Ad-Trial participants.

Measurement: Manipulation Checks

Product diagnosticity. Product diagnosticity was measured after trial using the same two-item scale as in the pretest \( (r=.63, p<.01) \). The pen’s diagnosticity score \( [M=6.09] \) was above the scale midpoint \( [M=4.00, t(129)=27.01, p<.001] \), indicative of a highly diagnostic product.

Experiential/Search Attributes. Participants were asked to indicate whether each attribute could be judged directly by product trial \( (7\text{-point scale}; 1=\text{“Trial did not enable me to judge this attribute.”}, 7=\text{“Trial fully enabled me to judge this attribute.”}) \). Participants mentioned that trial enabled them to judge the experiential \( (E) \) attributes \( [M_E=5.74] \) more than the search \( (S) \) attributes \( [M_S=3.40, t(112)=10.41, p<.001] \). Therefore, this manipulation was successful.

Claim Objectivity. Participants were first exposed to a description of claim objectivity/subjectivity \( (Ford \text{ et al}. 1990) \) and then asked to rate the three claims on objectivity/subjectivity. The analysis indicates that objective claims were perceived as being more objective than subjective claims both for the search attribute condition \( [M_{OS}=2.93 \text{ vs. } M_{SS}=3.52, t(56)=2.10, p<.05] \) and for the experiential attribute condition \( [M_{OE}=3.41 \text{ vs. } M_{SE}=4.12, t(54)=2.05, p<.05] \).

Measurement: Confound Checks

We assessed two potential confounds including ad likeability and attribute importance. First, advertisements communicating different claims should not be different from each other. A 2 (claim type: objective vs. subjective) X 2 (attribute type: search vs. experiential) ANOVA with ad likeability as the dependent variable indicates no main effects of claim or attribute type and no significant interaction. Second, if search and experiential attributes differ in their importance, any comparison in their effectiveness will be confounded. A 2 X 2 MANOVA with search attribute importance and experiential attribute importance as dependent variables indicated a non-significant main effect and a non-significant interaction.

Measurement: Dependent Variables

Post-Trial Expectancy Value (EV). The complete expectancy value factor is constructed as the summation of the subject’s posttrial attribute-specific belief strength measured for each performance attribute \( (i.e., \text{“How likely do you believe it is that the product has Attribute X?” measured on a 7-point scale of } 1=\text{“Zero likelihood” to } 7=\text{“Compleately certain”}) \) multiplied by the respective post-trial belief confidence \( (i.e., \text{“How confident are you that the likelihood estimates you just provided in the question above for each of the product attributes is accurate?” measured on a 7-point scale of } 1=\text{“Not confident at all” to } 7=\text{“Extremely confident”}) \) and by the respective post-trial evaluation of the each attribute \( (1=\text{“Extremely bad”}, 7=\text{“Extremely good”}) \) \( (Smith \text{ and Swinyard } 1983) \).

Post-Trial Product Attitude. Although EV calculation is based on attributes in the advertisement, participants may evaluate the product on dimensions not mentioned in the advertisement \( (e.g., \text{appropriateness of pictures, colors, or other elements}) \). Thus, we included nine 7-point semantic-differential items to assess posttrial product attitude, including: bad/good, pleasant/unpleasant, agreeable/disagreeable, unsatisfactory/satisfactory, low appeal/high appeal, poor/excellent, one of the worst/one of the best, inferior/superior, poor/value/good value, low quality/high quality \( (Marks \text{ and Kamins } 1988) \). A product attitude score was calculated \( (Cronbach’s \alpha=.95) \).

Post-Trial Purchase Intention. Purchase intention was measured using a two 7-point scale items \( (1=\text{“Not at all likely,”} 7=\text{“Very likely”}) \) \( (i.e., \text{“How likely would you be to consider this product as a possible option if you were shopping for such a product?” and “How likely would you be to purchase this product if you were shopping for such a product?”}) \). An unweighted average of the two items was used to assess participants’ purchase intention after they tested the advertised product \( (r=.88, p<.001) \).

Post-Trial Product Choice. Participants were given the choice of keeping either the product that they tested \( (i.e., \text{pen or another product}) \) \( (i.e., \text{a battery-operated air freshener with fan or pen}) \). At the time of choice, participants were given information about the “suggested price” of the products \( (i.e., \text{same price, } $5.95, \text{for both products}) \). The choice of the product tested was coded as “1” and the choice of the other product offered as “0.”

RESULTS

H1. H1 posits that a search attribute ad should generate more positive post-trial evaluations than a trial alone. A MANOVA with attribute type \( (i.e., \text{search; experimental; no claim}) \) as the independent variable indicates a significant main effect \( [Pillai’s Trace=.19, F(8, 258)=3.31, p<.01] \). Further, MANOVA indicates a significant effect on expectancy value \( [F(2, 131)=5.06, p<.01] \), on purchase intention \( [F(2, 131)=3.28, p<.05] \), on product choice \( [F(2, 131)=5.03, p<.01] \), and a marginally significant effect on product attitude \( [F(2, 131)=2.27, p=.19] \). We follow up with univariate ANOVAs and post-hoc contrasts to test specific hypotheses. H1a is not statistically supported, even though the means are in the expected direction (see Table 1). The findings support H1b, H1c, and H1d. Specifically, participants in the search attribute condition, compared to participants in the Trial-Only condition, shown more positive product attitudes \( (M=4.52 \text{ vs. } M=3.87, p<.05) \), higher
purchase intentions ($M=3.28$ vs. $M=2.28$, $p<.05$) and greater product choice ($M=63.8$ vs. $M=26.1$, $p<.01$).

**H2.** H2 posited that search attribute information would generate more positive post-trial evaluations than experiential attribute information. Independent-sample $t$-tests that follow MANOVA provide support for H2a and partial support for H2c. Specifically, participants in the search attribute condition, compared to those in the experiential attribute condition, expressed higher expectancy values ($M=152.73$ vs. $M=117.21$, $t(109)=2.9$, $p<.01$) and higher purchase intentions ($M=3.28$ vs. $M=2.69$, $t(111)=1.29$, $p=.09$).

**H3.** A MANOVA with advertising claim (i.e., OS, SS, OE, SE, and Trial) as the independent variable indicates a significant advertising claim effect [$Pillai’s Trace=.23$, $F(16, 480)=1.83$, $p<.05$]. The effect is significant for only two of the dependent variables, purchase intention [$F(4, 120)=2.54$, $p<.05$] and product choice [$F(4, 120)=2.80$, $p<.05$]. Post-hoc contrasts on the previous analysis indicate no difference between post-trial evaluations given by participants in the objective search attribute condition and those given by the participants in the subjective search attribute condition. Thus H3 is not supported.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study integrates and extends past findings in the advertising-trial area in numerous ways. First, we focus on a highly diagnostic product. Second, we examine the effect of trial alone and pre-trial advertising claims on post-trial evaluations, including product choice. Third, we distinguish between types of ad claims (subjective/objective claims about search/experiential attributes). Thus, we collectively consider relevant information about the product, advertisement, and trial experience.

Consistent with H1, we found that search attribute claims followed by trial generate more positive post-trial evaluations (i.e., product attitude, purchase intention, and product choice) than trial alone. Although the effect of attribute type on the expectancy value was not significant, the means were in the expected direction. The results contribute to the IIRM model that identifies the possibility of higher-order beliefs resulting from exposure to advertising, but does little to predict under what conditions the higher-order beliefs will occur. Our results indicate that the pattern from advertising to higher-order beliefs is traversed when showing search attribute information in a pre-trial ad, which results in higher post-trial evaluation than trial alone.

Consistent with our expectations (H2), participants in the search attribute condition expressed higher post-trial expectancy values and marginally higher post-trial purchase intention than those in the experiential attribute condition. According to IIRM, advertising generates lower-order beliefs about the promoted attributes, thus having additional information from a less trusted source about attributes that consumers can test themselves during trial (i.e., experiential attributes) does not add value to the product experience. However, providing different (i.e., search attribute) information than that of trial increases consumers’ knowledge about the product, their confidence, and their post-trial product evaluations.

With regard to claim objectivity, H3 predicted that objective search attribute information (expected to be more credible) generates more positive post-trial evaluations than subjective search attribute information. The results, however, do not support this hypothesis. A follow-up analysis revealed that objective search attribute claims were perceived as being equally credible as subjective search attribute claims, which may account for these findings.

### DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our work offers several opportunities for future research. First, we focused on pens, which would typically be characterized as a functional product. Future work designed to examine the effects of these advertising variables on hedonic products would be beneficial. We speculate that for hedonic products, for which experience itself is extremely important and “creates the opportunity for individual dream” (Hopkinson and Pujari 1999, p. 273), identification of experiential attributes in an advertising campaign preceding trial may facilitate imagination and guide the experience that is so important for judging a hedonic product adequately (Holbrook and Moore 1981).

Second, in contrast to past research (see Ford et al. 1990) which indicated that subjective claims were not perceived as less credible than objective claims, our findings indicated that objective and subjective claims were equally credible. This lack of difference may account for the lack of a significant difference between the objective and subjective search attribute conditions as related to the objectivity effect on post-trial evaluations. Thus, additional work is needed to further clarify the distinguishing dimensions of objective and subjective claims.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute Type Conditions</th>
<th>Search attribute ad</th>
<th>Experiential attribute ad</th>
<th>Trial-Only</th>
<th>Overall mean</th>
<th>F-value $^a$</th>
<th>Post hoc test $^b$</th>
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<td>Expectancy Value</td>
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<td>139.39</td>
<td>135.86</td>
<td>5.06**</td>
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<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>2.31</td>
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<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>3.34*</td>
<td>ac; ac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Choice (%)</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>4.93**</td>
<td>ac; bc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ Univariate ANOVAs; The df for F-tests were 2/134, except for expectancy value for which it was 2/131.

$^b$ Post-hoc contrasts at $p ≤ .05$ are shown by letters: a (search attribute ad), b (experiential attribute ad) and c (no claims/Trial-Only); (e.g., ab represents a significant difference between the search attribute ad condition (a) and the experiential attribute ad condition (b); NS indicates no differences between conditions significant at $p ≤ .05$).
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