Relative Judgments in a Competitive Ad Context

Chingching Chang, National Chengchi University

ABSTRACT - This study suggests that the competing ad in an ad-viewing context can alter participants' evaluations of the target ad and the target brand. Results of two experiments have indicated that, for a new brand, the diagnosticity and effectiveness of ad messages is determined by the uniqueness of product attributes featured in the ads. Further, findings have demonstrated that perceived ad diagnosticity affects participants' ratings of ad liking and ad persuasiveness, thereby influencing their brand evaluations. However, for a familiar brand, participants' existing brand attitudes are more diagnostic than ad messages. Therefore, when viewing an ad for a familiar brand, participants' post-exposure brand evaluations are determined by their existing brand attitudes, not by the uniqueness of the featured product attributes, ad liking or ad persuasiveness.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8999/volumes/v31/NA-31

[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/.
Relative Judgments in a Competitive Ad Context
Chingching Chang, National Chengchi University

ABSTRACT

This study suggests that the competing ad in an ad-viewing context can alter participants’ evaluations of the target ad and the target brand. Results of two experiments have indicated that, for a new brand, the diagnosticity and effectiveness of ad messages is determined by the uniqueness of product attributes featured in the ads. Further, findings have demonstrated that perceived ad diagnosticity affects participants’ ratings of ad liking and ad persuasiveness, thereby influencing their brand evaluations. However, for a familiar brand, participants’ existing brand attitudes are more diagnostic than ad messages. Therefore, when viewing an ad for a familiar brand, participants’ post-exposure brand evaluations are determined by their existing brand attitudes, not by the uniqueness of the featured product attributes, ad liking or ad persuasiveness.

Consumer researchers have argued that judgments of a product are affected not just by the product’s features, but also by the features of products that are judged simultaneously (e.g., Farley, Katz, & Lehman, 1978; Lynch, Chakravarti & Mitra, 1991). Implicit in this argument is the assumption that, in a competitive ad-viewing context, ads, as well as advertised brands, may be evaluated in a relative sense. Surprisingly, this assumption has received little attention in advertising research. Rather, recent research exploring the influence of context on the effectiveness of advertising has focused on program context. Even when the interference from competing ads has been explored, the exploration has been limited to reduced message recall for the target ad, rather than the changes in brand judgments resulting from the interplay of ad strategies by the competing brands. Therefore, how competitors’ ads in the ad-viewing context affect judgments of a target brand needs more research attention and will be the focus of this paper.

Given that segmentation strategies are nearly universally adopted by the media, each program, magazine or newspaper is specifically designed to attract certain segments. As a result, it is common to see different brands that appeal to similar segments in the same product category selecting the same media vehicles for ad placement. Serious clutter problems may result from this practice. Since cognitive psychologists have argued that individuals rarely retrieve all the information that is potentially relevant for judgments, but rather rely on what is available in their working memory to form judgments (Wyer, Bodenhausen & Srrull, 1984), it is therefore reasonable to assume that an ad or a product will be judged differently when embedded in different contexts.

Drawing upon Feldman and Lynch’s (1988) Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model, this paper will explore how relative judgments may occur in different ad contexts, where the diagnosticity of a piece of accessible information varies. The Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model proposes that the likelihood that a particular piece of information will be used as an input for judgments and inferences depends on the accessibility of the information, as well as the diagnosticity of the information to the judgment or inference. Specifically, this study proposes that, in a competitive ad-viewing context, ad diagnosticity is a function of the relative uniqueness of featured product attributes. Most importantly, when competitors’ ad messages are present, ads featuring unique product attributes, in comparison to ads featuring shared product features, will be perceived to be more diagnostic, thereby increasing participants’ favorable responses toward the ads, as well as the advertised products. Experiment One will specifically test the effectiveness of presenting unique product attributes in a competitive ad context.

Experiment Two will provide a comparison to show that the effects of presenting different product attributes will only emerge in a competitive ad context, not in an ad-viewing context in which competing ads are not present. Further, Experiment Two will specifically test the process via which perceived ad diagnosticity affects brand evaluations through its influences on ad liking and ad persuasiveness ratings. Moreover, Experiment Two argues a step further that the different judgments incurred by ad viewing contexts will only be observed for familiar brands. Additionally, this study will provide more evidence for the proposed process by testing the relative influence of participants’ existing brand attitudes, ad persuasiveness and ad liking in evaluating a familiar brand.

AD COMPETITION ON BRAND EVALUATIONS

A fair amount of research has indicated that competing ads in the viewing environment cause memory interference. As the number of ads present in the ad processing environment increases, recall of brand information declines (Keller, 1991; Pillai, 1990). However, the interference caused by ad competition is not limited to message retrieval failure. Another important concern is the possible influence from competing ads on brand evaluations. However, past explorations were mainly concerned with the number of competing ads present in the viewing context of the target ad (e.g., Keller, 1991; Baumgardner, et al., 1983). In general, these findings have suggested that, as the degree of ad clutter increases, evaluations of the target brand deteriorate, especially when the competing ads are for brands in the same category. Given that a typical ad-viewing situation can be characterized by serious clutter from competing ads in the same product category and evaluation deterioration is likely to be critical, it is thus important to further explore this issue.

THE ACCESSIBILITY-DIAGNOSTICITY MODEL

It is well accepted among cognitive psychologists that individuals are cognitive misers and are not likely to engage in effortful information processing when it is unnecessary. Wyer and Srrull (1986) have proposed that, in making judgments, individuals first search their working memory and rely mainly on the information that is accessible there. Due to the limited effort individuals are likely to engage in, what is more accessible is more likely to be used as input for making judgments. Within this paradigm, Feldman and Lynch’s (1988) Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model has extended Wyer and Srrull’s argument further by suggesting that the likelihood that a particular piece of information will be used as an input for judgments and inferences depends not only on the accessibility of the information but also on the diagnosticity or relevance of the information to the judgments or inferences.

In Feldman and Lynch’s (1988) theorization, even though a piece of accessible information is more likely to be diagnostic, being accessible is not sufficient for that information to be used as an input for judgments. The likelihood that any information will be used as an input for later judgments is: (1) a positive function of the accessibility of the earlier information in memory, (2) a positive function of the diagnosticity of the earlier information for the judgments, (3) a negative function of the accessibility of alternative inputs, and (4) a negative function of the diagnosticity of these alternative inputs. Similar to Kisielius and Sterndahl’s (1986) Availability-Valence Model of consumer judgments, the Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model has proposed that the evaluation of the target is also determined by the valence of the information that is used as input for the judgment. To the extent the diagnostic
information is positive, the target object will be evaluated in a more positive light.

The diagnosticity of a piece of information is not objective, but depends on the relative informativeness of the accessible information. For example, Herr, et al. (1991) have argued that prior product beliefs, being persistent and resistant pieces of information, are more likely to be perceived as more diagnostic than other product information. Moreover, Purohit and Srivastava (2001) have suggested that brand reputation and retailer reputation are high-scope cues, cues that evolve over time, whereas product warranty is a low-scope cue, one that is more transient in nature. Most importantly, in Purohit and Srivastava’s empirical explorations, high-scope cues have been shown to be more diagnostic than low-scope cues in consumers’ brand judgments.

Drawing upon the Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model, this study proposes that information contained in competitors’ ads in the same context will affect the relative diagnosticity of the product information featured in the target ad and thus affect participants’ evaluations of the target ad and the target brand. Specifically, presenting unique attributes will increase the diagnosticity of the ad and generate more favorable ad attitudes and brand evaluations.

**DIAGNOSTICITY OF UNIQUE PRODUCT FEATURES**

Comparative advertising literature suggests that how typical a featured product attribute is can affect the effectiveness of comparative advertising (Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of product attributes presented in comparative ads is not determined by their absolute values but by their relative uniqueness. Based on similar reasoning, this paper argues that, in a competitive viewing context, the effectiveness of featured product attributes is a function of its uniqueness. A product attribute that is featured in all the ads is less diagnostic than the unique product attribute that is only featured in an ad for one brand. In line with the Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model, this study proposes that, in a competitive ad context, to the degree the featured product attributes are unique and positive, the more likely it is that they will generate more positive ad and brand evaluations.

**H1:** Participants rate the target ad more positively when a unique attribute is presented than when a shared attribute is presented in terms of ad liking (H1a), ad persuasiveness (H2a) and brand evaluations (H1c).

**EXPERIMENT ONE**

**Methodology**

**Design**

An experimental study was employed to investigate the hypotheses stated earlier. This was a one-factor experimental design: product attributes featured in the target ad (two levels: shared versus unique, see Table 1). Participants were exposed to one ad for the target brand and one ad for the competing brand. The order of the two ads to which participants were exposed was rotated and no order effects were detected on any of the dependent measures; therefore, participants’ responses for ads presented in different orders were collapsed in subsequent analyses.

**Selection of Products and Brands and Stimuli Development**

A pretest facilitated selecting sneakers as the product category. Another pretest (N=40) determined the brand name for the target product. A real brand, Sperry, not known to any participants in the pretest, was selected to be the target brand. The competing brand was New Balance, which is ranked second in market share in the area where the experiment was conducted. Stimuli ads were created by professionals working at Ogilvy & Mather Ad Agency were inserted among three genuine filler ads.

**Participants and Procedures**

This study recruited two hundred and two participants from undergraduate classes at a university in a metropolitan area. The sample was comprised of an equal number of males and females. Participants were seated and read brief instructions about the procedures and the purpose of the study. Participants were told that the study involved research about how different layouts of printed ads impact viewers’ information processing. Then they were asked to read a packet of five ads (two stimuli ads and three filler ads) that were bound together as they would appear in magazines. Each stimuli ad was preceded and followed by a filler ad. After reading the ads, the moderators collected the stimuli packets and distributed questionnaires for participants to complete.

**Independent Variable-Uniqueness of Featured Attributes**

Based on the results of a pretest, a comfortable fit, the most important attribute, was selected to be the shared attribute that was featured in the target ad as well as in the competing ad, whereas waterproof was chosen to be the unique attribute for the target brand and was only emphasized in the target ad.

**Dependent Measures**

Participants rated their liking of each ad on a five-item seven-point Likert scale. The five items were adopted from Madden, Allen, & Twible (1988). Cronbach’s reliability alphas of ad liking were deemed satisfactory at .93 for Sperry and .92 for New Balance. Participants also rated the persuasiveness of each ad on a four-item seven-point Likert scale to measure participants’ perceptions of the ads’ persuasiveness. The four items were adopted from Beltrami’s (1982) advertising believability scale. Cronbach’s reliability alphas of ad persuasiveness were deemed satisfactory at .85 for both Sperry and New Balance. Brand attitudes were measured with a five-item seven-point Likert scale. The items were adopted from Mitchell and Olson (1981) and Holbrook and Batra (1987). Cronbach’s reliability alphas for this scale were deemed satisfactory at .92 for Sperry and .93 for New Balance.

**Results and Analyses**

Hypotheses 1a–1c examined the main effect of attribute types featured in the target ad on participants’ ratings of ad liking, ad persuasiveness, and brand attitudes. ANOVA indicated that the main effect on each variable was significant (for ad liking, $M_{\text{shared}}=3.53$, $M_{\text{unique}}=4.01$, $F(1, 201)=8.92$, $p<.01$; for ad persuasiveness, $M_{\text{shared}}=3.53$, $M_{\text{unique}}=4.04$, $F(1, 201)=11.97$, $p<.01$; for brand attitudes, $M_{\text{shared}}=3.65$, $M_{\text{unique}}=4.11$, $F(1, 201)=6.73$, $p<.01$). Therefore, hypothesis 1a through hypothesis 1c were supported.

**Discussions**

Findings of this experiment suggest that the uniqueness of the target brand’s attribute relative to that of the competing brand’s boosts participants’ responses to the target brand. It seems that, for products that are not known to the audience, product attributes underscored in ads have a determining influence on ad persuasiveness and brand evaluations. Even though the featured product characteristic is not as important as the shared characteristic, it provides more diagnostic information than the shared one. However, this experiment used only one unique and one shared attribute. It is possible that the results found in Experiment One might be attributed to the novelty of the product attribute selected for Sperry. Moreover, the experiment did not explicitly test the process via which perceived ad diagnosticity affected brand evaluations. Finally, to provide a stronger test, it is important to compare how participants evaluate the target brand when the competing ad is
present, as opposed to when the competing ad is not. Therefore, more replications rotating the same product attributes for the two brands were necessary to help us reach stronger conclusions regarding the influence of attribute uniqueness.

**COMPETITIVE AD CONTEXTS VERSUS NON-COMPETITIVE AD CONTEXTS**

The Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model proposes that available information may not always be diagnostic. Different contexts will alter the relevance and diagnosticity of a piece of available information and determine the likelihood that it will be used as input for judgments. Therefore, it is important to compare the different patterns of results generated from contexts wherein the target brand is evaluated alone, as opposed to when the target brand is evaluated in a competitive ad context. Specifically, it theorizes that, in a competitive ad context, promoting unique attributes is more effective than promoting shared attributes in terms of improving participants’ ad liking, perceptions of ad persuasiveness, brand attitudes and purchase intentions. In contrast, in a non-competitive ad context, all the featured product attributes should be similar in terms of diagnosticity if they are equivalent in importance to start with. Therefore, when competitors’ ads are not present, what attributes the target brand promotes in the ad will not influence how participants evaluate the ad and the advertised brand.

Additionally, in order to argue that ads featuring unique product attributes lead to more effective responses mainly due to their diagnosticity, it is necessary to put this assumption to the test. Thus, other than ad liking, ad persuasiveness and brand evaluations, this paper will specifically examine whether or not, in a competitive ad-viewing context, emphasizing unique attributes generates higher ratings in terms of ad diagnosticity (H2a), ad liking (H2b), ad persuasiveness (H2c), brand evaluations (H2d) and purchase intentions (H2e), whereas when there are no ads for competitors, featuring various attributes does not generate different ratings.

Finally, the central idea behind the Accessibility-Diagnosticity model is that the more diagnostic the information is, the more likely it is that the piece of information will be considered when individuals make judgments. Also, if the diagnostic information provides positive information, the target object will be evaluated more favorably. It is important to test this underlying process. Specifically, how participants perceive the ad in terms of diagnosticity will affect their ad liking and their ratings of ad persuasiveness, which in turn will affect their brand evaluations.

**H3:** Ad diagnosticity will affect brand evaluations through its influence on ad liking and ad persuasiveness.

**BRAND FAMILIARITY AND THE UNIQUENESS OF PRODUCT FEATURES**

Will the cognitive interference effects be different when the brand in the competitive ad context is familiar to participants? In a typical ad-viewing context, different types of information cues are available to aid ad processing, some of which are ad-based, and some of which may be retrieved from a participant’s memory. Preexisting product preference is one of the potential information cues that can be activated from an individual’s memory when processing ad messages. Most importantly, it has been shown that preexisting product preference is perceived to be more diagnostic than other attribute cues (e.g., Herr, et al., 1991; Purohit & Srivastava, 2001). Purohit and Srivastava (2001) have also demonstrated that when multiple information cues suggesting different directions of valence are available in the same context, a participant’s existing preference, being a diagnostic cue, dominates the judgment process. In their study, a positive warranty, being a less diagnostic cue, will not override the influence of a negative brand preference, which is relatively more diagnostic than the valence of the warranty.

Drawing upon the Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model and Purohit and Srivastava’s (2001) arguments, this paper proposes that, for familiar brands, existing brand evaluations will be more diagnostic than attribute information. Therefore, participants’ evaluations of a familiar brand will not be affected by the attributes that are presented by competing brands. In contrast, when evaluating an unfamiliar brand, an existing product evaluation is neither available nor accessible. Ad messages thus provide diagnostic information. Under these circumstances, judgments of the unfamiliar brand are more subject to the influence of attributes promoted by competing brands. This paper theorizes that evaluations of brands with established preferences are less likely to be affected by attributes featured in competing ads or the relative uniqueness of promoted attributes. On the other hand, for unfamiliar products, the uniqueness of product attributes featured in their own ads, compared to those featured in competitors’ ads, is more diagnostic and will alter the way participants evaluate the ads and the products.

**H4:** When an unfamiliar brand is considered, emphasizing unique attributes generates higher ratings than shared attributes in terms of ad diagnosticity (H4a), ad liking (H4b), ad persuasiveness (H4c), brand evaluations (H4d) and purchase intentions (H4e), whereas when a familiar brand is considered, ads emphasizing either unique or shared attributes do not generate different ratings.
To argue that the reason why evaluations of a familiar brand are not affected by ad content is due to the influence of existing brand liking, a piece of more diagnostic information, it is important to explicitly test whether or not, when evaluating a familiar product, participants’ existing product evaluations will significantly account for the variance in their brand evaluations. At the same time, participants’ responses toward the ad in terms of liking or perceived persuasiveness should not affect their brand evaluations.

H5: When the product is familiar, participants’ existing product evaluations will significantly predict their brand evaluations, whereas their perceived ad liking and ad persuasiveness will not.

**EXPERIMENT TWO**

**Methodology**

**Design**

This was a two-factor experimental design. The two factors were: presence of competitor’s ad (two levels: presence versus absence), product attributes featured in the target ad (two levels: set A versus set B, see Table 2). Participants in the condition in which the competitor’s ad was present were exposed to one ad for the competing brand and one ad for the target brand, whereas participants in the condition in which the competitor’s ad was absent were exposed to only one ad for the target brand.

**Selection of Products and Brands and Stimuli**

Sneakers were also selected as the product category in Experiment Two. The same brand, Sperry, was selected to be the target brand. The competing brand was Nike, which was ranked top in market share in the area where the experiment was conducted. Stimuli ads were created by professionals. To reduce confounding effects from using visuals that may generate different favorable product perceptions, the two sets of attributes were grouped together in set A and durability and breathability together in set B. The four attributes were grouped into two sets, with comfortable fit and lightweight being grouped together in set A and durability and breathability together in set B. The reason for rotating the two sets of attributes for the two products was to reduce confounding effects caused by the idiosyncrasy of the product attributes featured in the ads. In the analyses, the only focus will be on whether the attributes were shared attributes or unique to each brand, regardless of which set of attributes was featured in the ads.

**Independent Variables**

**Presence of the Competitor’s Ad.** Participants were either exposed to the Sperry ad alone or to both the Sperry ad and the Nike ad. In the former condition, the Sperry ad was inserted between one real ad for a watch and another ad for a soft drink. In the latter condition, the Nike ad was either presented before the Sperry ad and after the catch ad, or after the Sperry ad and before the soft drink ad.

**Uniqueness of Featured Attributes.** A pretest (N=20) asked participants in an open-ended question, the attributes they were to take into consideration when they purchased a pair of sneakers. Their responses were coded and ranked. The four attributes ranked at the top were selected. They were: comfortable fit, durability, lightweight and breathability. The four attributes were grouped into two sets, with comfortable fit and lightweight being grouped together in set A and durability and breathability together in set B. The reason for rotating the two sets of attributes for the two products was to reduce confounding effects caused by the idiosyncrasy of the product attributes featured in the ads. In the analyses, the only focus will be on whether the attributes were shared attributes or unique to each brand, regardless of which set of attributes was featured in the ads.

**Existing Brand Attitudes toward Nike.** Brand attitudes were measured in the first stage with a five-item seven-point Likert scale. The items were adopted from Mitchell and Olson (1981). Cronbach’s reliability alpha for this scale was deemed satisfactory at .91.

**Dependent Measures**

Participants were asked to rate ad diagnosticity on a 3-item seven-point Likert scale. Cronbach’s reliability alphas for the scale were assessed at .90 for Sperry and .89 for Nike, which were both satisfactory. Participants rated their liking and the persuasiveness of each ad using the same scales as in Experiment One. Cronbach’s
reliability alphas of ad liking were deemed satisfactory at .92 for Sperry and .91 for Nike and Cronbach’s reliability alphas of ad persuasiveness were deemed satisfactory at .88 for Sperry and .87 for Nike. Brand attitudes were also measured using the same scale as in Experiment One. Cronbach’s reliability alphas for this scale were deemed satisfactory at .90 for Sperry and .92 for Nike. Participants were asked to rate how likely they were to purchase the product in the future on a seven-point Likert scale. The three items were adopted from Zhang (1996). Cronbach’s reliability alpha for this scale was deemed satisfactory at .95 for Sperry and .89 for Nike.

Results and Analyses

Hypothesis 2a concerns ad diagnosticity. Analyses showed that when competing ad was present, whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on how participants rated the ad on its diagnosticity, $F(1,39)=5.93, p=.02, M_{\text{shared}}=3.23, M_{\text{unique}}=4.32$. However, when there was no competing ad, featuring various attributes did not have an impact on how participants rated the ad on its diagnosticity, $F(1,42)=.40, p=.51, M_{\text{shared}}=3.70$. Therefore, supportive results were found for hypothesis 2a.

Hypothesis 2b concerns ad liking. Analyses showed that when competing ad was present, whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on how participants evaluated the ad in terms of persuasiveness, $F(1, 39)=14.59, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=3.26, M_{\text{unique}}=4.65$. However, when there was no competing ad, featuring various attributes did not have an impact on participants’ ratings of ad liking, $F(1, 42)=2.22, p=.14, M_{\text{shared}}=3.53, M_{\text{unique}}=3.97$. Thus, hypothesis 2b was supported.

Hypothesis 2c concerns ad persuasiveness. Analyses showed that when competing ad was present, whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on how participants evaluated the ad in terms of persuasiveness, $F(1, 39)=8.20, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=3.40, M_{\text{unique}}=4.46$. However, when there was no competing ad, featuring various attributes did not have an impact on participants’ ratings of ad persuasiveness, $F(1, 42)=1.9, p=.16, M_{\text{shared}}=4.13, M_{\text{unique}}=3.97$. Therefore, hypothesis 2c was supported.

Hypothesis 2d concerns brand evaluations. Analyses showed that when competing ad was present, whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on how participants evaluated the brand, $F(1, 39)=14.59, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=3.26, M_{\text{unique}}=4.65$. However, when there was no competing ad, featuring various attributes did not have an impact on participants’ brand evaluations, $F(1, 42)=3.0, p=.09, M_{\text{shared}}=3.88, M_{\text{unique}}=4.10$. The clear contrast provided support for hypothesis 2d.

Hypothesis 2e concerns purchase intention. Analyses showed that when competing ad was present, whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on participants’ levels of purchase intention toward the advertised brand, $F(1, 39)=7.91, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=1.94, M_{\text{unique}}=3.35$. However, when there was no competing ad, featuring various attributes did not have an impact on participants’ levels of purchase intention, $F(1, 42)=.01, p=.99, M_{\text{shared}}=3.01, M_{\text{unique}}=3.02$. Therefore, hypothesis 2e was supported.

Hypothesis 3 suggests that ad diagnosticity will affect brand evaluations through its influence on ad liking and ad persuasiveness. Regression showed that: (1) ad diagnosticity exerted a significant impact on ad liking, $t=2.93, p<.01, b=.72$; and ad persuasiveness ratings, $t=3.96, p<.01, b=.24$; (2) ad liking and ad persuasiveness contributed significantly to brand evaluations (for ad liking, $t=10.39, p<.01, b=.76$; for ad persuasiveness, $t=10.31, p<.01, b=.75$; (3) ad diagnosticity had a significant impact on brand evaluations, $t=6.31, p<.01, b=.57$; (4) when ad diagnosticity, ad liking and ad persuasiveness were in the equation, the impact of ad diagnosticity on brand evaluations disappeared, $t=-2.8, p=.07, b=-.03$, but the impacts of ad liking and ad persuasiveness were still significant for ad liking, $t=2.93, p<.01, b=.42$; for ad persuasiveness, $t=2.74, p<.01, b=.41$. These results supported hypothesis 3.

To test H4a-4e, repeated measure MANOVA was first conducted. The results indicated that the significance of the interaction between brand difference (Nike vs. Sperry) by uniqueness of featured attributes (unique vs. shared) on ad diagnosticity, ad liking, ad persuasiveness, brand evaluations and purchase intention was at .055, $F(1, 39)=2.47$. Hypothesis 4a concerns ad persuasiveness. ANOVA indicated that the interaction was not significant, $F(1, 39)=.53, p=.47$. Yet, whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on how participants rated the Sperry ad on its diagnosticity, $F(1, 39)=5.93, p=.02, M_{\text{shared}}=3.23, M_{\text{unique}}=4.32$. In clear contrast, the uniqueness of the featured attributes did not have an impact on how participants rated the Nike ad on its diagnosticity, $F(1, 39)=1.89, p=.18, M_{\text{shared}}=3.48, M_{\text{unique}}=3.70$.

Hypothesis 4b concerns ad liking. ANOVA indicated that the interaction was significant, $F(1, 39)=8.81, p=.01$. Whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on how participants evaluated the Sperry ad in terms of persuasiveness, $F(1, 39)=13.79, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=3.20, M_{\text{unique}}=4.55$. On the other hand, the uniqueness of the featured attributes did not have an impact on participants’ liking of the Nike ad, $F(1, 39)=.61, p=.44, M_{\text{shared}}=4.65, M_{\text{unique}}=4.40$. Therefore, supportive results were found for hypothesis 4b.

Hypothesis 4c concerns ad persuasiveness. ANOVA indicated that the interaction was significant, $F(1, 39)=4.10, p=.05$. Whether or not the featured attribute was unique did affect the way participants evaluated the Sperry ad in terms of persuasiveness, $F(1, 39)=8.20, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=3.40, M_{\text{unique}}=4.46$. In contrast, whether or not the featured attributes were unique did not affect how participants rated the Nike ad on persuasiveness, $F(1, 39)=.45, p=.51, M_{\text{shared}}=4.76, M_{\text{unique}}=4.50$. Therefore, hypothesis 4c was supported.

Hypothesis 4d concerns brand evaluations. ANOVA indicated that the interaction was significant, $F(1, 39)=7.75, p=.01$. Whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on how participants evaluated Sperry, $F(1, 39)=14.59, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=3.26, M_{\text{unique}}=4.65$. Conversely, the uniqueness of the featured attributes did not influence participants’ evaluations of Nike, $F(1, 39)=1.32, p=.26, M_{\text{shared}}=5.33, M_{\text{unique}}=5.11$. Hypothesis 4d was thus supported.

Hypothesis 4e concerns purchase intention. ANOVA indicated that the interaction was significant, $F(1, 39)=7.79, p=.01$. Whether or not the featured attribute was unique had a significant impact on participants’ purchase intentions toward Sperry, $F(1, 39)=7.91, p=.01, M_{\text{shared}}=1.94, M_{\text{unique}}=3.35$. However, whether the featured attributes were unique or not did have an impact on participants’ purchase intentions toward Nike, $F(1, 39)=1.32, p=.26, M_{\text{shared}}=4.75, M_{\text{unique}}=5.34$. Therefore, hypothesis 4e was supported.

Hypothesis 5 proposes that when the product is familiar, participants’ existing product evaluations will predict their brand evaluations, whereas their perceived ad liking and ad persuasiveness will not. As expected, when brand evaluations were regressed upon participants’ existing attitudes toward Nike, their ad liking and ad persuasiveness, the impact of existing ad attitudes was significant, $t=4.51, p<.01, b=.54$, yet ad liking and ad persuasiveness did not exert significant influence on brand evaluations (for ad liking, $t=7.77, p<.45, b=.19$; for ad persuasiveness, $t=7.78, p<.44, b=.20$). These results indicated that, when evaluating a familiar
product, existing brand attitude was a more diagnostic cue than the responses generated by one-shot ad exposure. Therefore, hypothesis 5 was supported.

Discussion

Findings of Experiment Two provided strong evidence regarding the influence of attribute uniqueness in two ways. First, the clear contrast in terms of ratings of ad diagnosticity, ad liking, ad persuasiveness and brand liking in the two different contexts were directly presented. This indicated that it was indeed the competitive ad context that caused the differences. Second, two sets of product attributes were rotated for Nike and Sperry. This ensured that it was attribute uniqueness, not the idiosyncratic characteristics of the selected product attributes that led to different ad and brand evaluations. Additionally, Experiment Two proffered more evidence for the Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model by showing that the ads featuring unique product attributes were perceived to be more diagnostic, as well as by establishing the mediational process via which ad diagnosticity affects brand evaluations through its influence on ad liking and ad persuasiveness ratings. Experiment Two also extended the exploration of attribute uniqueness effects by demonstrating that brand familiarity moderated the influence of uniqueness of featured attributes.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Findings of the two experiments suggest that the effectiveness of advertising should not be considered without taking the competitive ad context into account. Brand judgments in a competitive advertising context are partly determined by information presented in the target ad, and partly affected by information presented in competitors’ ads. The findings can be well explained by Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model, which theorizes that information that is accessible at the time judgments are made does not necessarily affect brand evaluations unless the piece of information is relatively diagnostic. Experiment Two further establishes the process via which ad diagnosticity affects ad liking and ad persuasiveness, thereby influencing participants’ brand evaluations.

Ad exposure does not exert significant influence on brand evaluations for familiar products. This is consistent with Kent and Allen’s (1994) findings which indicate that, in a cluttered viewing environment, consumers’ ad recall for a familiar brand is less affected by exposure to competitors’ ads, as well as Machleit, Allen and Madden’s (1993) findings which demonstrate that consumers’ brand attitudes for a familiar brand are less affected by ad exposure. Within the Accessibility-Diagnosticity Model, this study reasons that existing brand attitudes provide more diagnostic information than product information presented in ads, therefore, whether or not the featured product attributes are unique does not affect the way participants respond to ads or products, as it does when ads feature an unfamiliar product.

One of the important implications that can be derived from this study’s findings is that, for advertisers of newly introduced products, it is important to use caution in selecting which product attributes to emphasize in ad messages. When a new brand introduces or highlights an attribute that is not readily associated with competing brands, more positive evaluations will be developed. In other words, me-too strategies will definitely not help a new brand. A more effective way to avoid the failure of a new product would be to focus on an important, yet less featured attribute, which will help break up ad clutter and lead to more favorable responses toward the ad and the brand, and even generate higher purchase intentions.

The final, yet most important implication for marketers, is that it is crucial to test ad effectiveness in real viewing contexts. Given that the effectiveness of ad messages may vary depending on other ads in the viewing context, the interference from these surrounding advertisements may be too important for advertisers to ignore. Overlooking the interplay between the target ad and competing ads may limit our understanding of consumers’ ad-viewing processes, inflate estimates of ad effectiveness and even bias marketers’ decision-making regarding which strategy is going to be effective.

REFERENCES


