The Effects of Information Processing Modes on Consumers’ Reactions to Comparative Advertising

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Although academic research in consumer behavior has devoted considerable attention to the effects of comparative advertising, research findings are equivocal. Some studies have shown that the presence of brand comparisons may enhance the positioning of the advertised brand (e.g., Droge and Darmon 1987, Gotlieb and Sarel 1991). However, other studies have shown that comparative advertising does not result in significantly more positive evaluations (e.g., Goodwin and Etgar 1980) and can lead to more negative evaluations of the ad (e.g., Belch 1981). What can explain the existence of both positive and negative effects of comparative advertising?

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Although academic research in consumer behavior has devoted considerable attention to the effects of comparative advertising, research findings are equivocal. Some studies have shown that the presence of brand comparisons may enhance the positioning of the advertised brand (e.g., Dröge and Darmon 1987, Gotlieb and Sarel 1991). However, other studies have shown that comparative advertising does not result in significantly more positive evaluations (e.g., Goodwin and Etgar 1980) and can lead to more negative evaluations of the ad (e.g., Belch 1981). What can explain the existence of both positive and negative effects of comparative advertising?

We propose that consumers’ mode of information processing moderates their reactions to comparative advertising and their subsequent ad and brand evaluations. Two modes of information processing are often contrasted: analytical processing and imagery processing (MacInnis and Price 1987). Analytical and imagery information processing result in different brand evaluation strategies. The analytical mode, a data-driven, attribute-based strategy, results in piecemeal attribute comparisons across brands, which are consistent with the presentation of data in comparative advertising. In contrast, the imagery mode of information processing, based on sensory representations of ideas and feelings, results in a within-brand evaluation strategy, which is consistent with the presentation of data in noncomparative ads. We propose that the consistency between analytical processing and comparative ads and the consistency between the imagery processing and noncomparative ads will lead to higher brand and ad evaluations than other combinations.

To test these predictions, we manipulated consumers’ information processing mode both directly and indirectly. In our first study, we directly manipulated information processing mode by varying the instructions given to subjects about how to process the ad information. In our second study, we manipulated information processing mode indirectly by varying the position of the product in the ad to evoke different modes of information processing. In both studies, participants evaluated either a comparative advertisement or a noncomparative advertisement.

In study 1, eighty-three undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (analytical/imagery instructions) x 2 (noncomparative/comparative ad) between subjects experimental design. The product category (carns) and attributes depicted in the ads were the same across all conditions. The first factor manipulated the information processing instructions provided to subjects. The second factor manipulated the presence of comparative information in the ad. The information processing instructions clearly changed subjects’ reactions to the presence/absence of comparative information in the ads. When subjects received imagery instructions, the noncomparative ad generated a more positive attitude towards the ad, a more positive attitude towards the advertised brand, and marginally greater purchase intentions, relative to the comparative ad. Conversely, when subjects received analytical instructions, the comparative ad, relative to the noncomparative ad, led to a marginally more positive attitude towards the ad, a more positive attitude towards the advertised brand, and greater purchase intentions.

In study 2, eighty-seven undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 x 2 between subjects design. We manipulated the positioning of the product being advertised (utilitarian vs. hedonic) and the type of ad (noncomparative vs. comparative). The product category (cars) was kept constant across conditions. Evaluations of hedonic products are expected to rely more on affect, while evaluations of utilitarian products are expected to be more objective, based on their functional capabilities (Pham 1998). Thus, ads positioning the product as hedonic should lead to more imagery information processing and more favorable evaluations of noncomparative ads relative to comparative ads. Ads positioning the same product as utilitarian should evoke more analytical information processing and more favorable evaluations of comparative ads relative to noncomparative ads.

As predicted, ads with a hedonic product positioning induced significantly more imagery processing than analytical processing and ads with a utilitarian product positioning induced significantly more analytical processing than imagery processing. Moreover, we found that consumers’ reactions to comparative advertisements for products with a utilitarian or hedonic positioning are asymmetric. When the product positioning was utilitarian, comparative ads evoked more positive attitudes toward the brand and greater purchase intentions than noncomparative ads. In contrast, when the product positioning was hedonic, noncomparative ads generated more positive attitudes toward the ad and brand, and greater purchase intentions than comparative ads.

Taken together, our studies show that consumers’ mode of information processing can explain both positive and negative effects of comparative advertising. When the imagery mode of processing predominates, comparative ads are more effective than noncomparative ads. However, when the analytical mode of processing predominates, comparative ads are less effective than noncomparative ads.

REFERENCES