Beyond the Asterisk: the Effect of Referent Disclosure on Consumer Response to Incomplete Comparative Advertising

Guang-Xin Xie, University of Massachusetts Boston, U.S.A.

This research examines the signaling effects of disclosing referents in incomplete comparative advertising claims. Three experiments demonstrate that referent disclosure can reduce claim ambiguity and increase perceived competence of advertised company. The positive effect can be attenuated when consumers become suspicious about whether advertisers adhere to cooperative communication norms.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The use of comparative claims in advertising is ubiquitous to emphasize superior product offerings. Advertisers make comparisons with a variety of referents such as companies’ previous products, competitors, and industry standards. Such referents, however, are often omitted from the focal claims. For example, an automobile manufacturer promotes a new model of passenger car as having “3 times less carbon emissions.” A sports apparel brand advertises a new backpack as containing “50% more recyclable materials.” Shimp (1978, p. 21) coined the term “incomplete comparative” to illustrate this type of advertising claim. Building upon Grice’s (1975) theory of cooperative norms in communication, the present research investigates the effects of disclosing the referents in comparative claims on ad trustworthiness and perceived competence of the advertised companies.

In study 1 (n = 123), participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subject conditions (i.e., “referent disclosure” vs. “referent omission”). A fictitious print ad of an energy-efficient light bulb was created, mimicking magazine ads or online banner ads. The ad consisted of a light bulb picture and a catchphrase: “introducing the new CFL light bulb, 3 times more energy efficient.” In the referent-disclosure condition, the ad contained an asterisk accompanying the focal claim: “3 times more energy efficient.” Below the claim, the referent was disclosed: “compared to traditional light bulbs.” In the referent-omission condition, no asterisk was included and the referent was not disclosed, as in a typical incomplete comparative ad. The MANCOVA results suggest that referent disclosure increased perceived competence, but not ad trustworthiness. Further, when the referent was disclosed, participants tended to interpret it as a qualifier clarifying the meaning of the incomplete comparative claim. As a result, the ad became less ambiguous and the advertised company appeared to be more competent.

Study 2 (n = 303) used a 2 (priming vs. control) x 2 (referent disclosure vs. referent omission) between-subject design. A fictitious print ad was created promoting an environmentally-friendly printer. The ad consisted of a simple picture of a printer and a catchphrase: “introducing the new eco-friendly GL-300. 3X less ultrafine particle emissions.” In the referent-disclosure condition, an asterisk accompanied the incomplete comparative claim: “3X less ultrafine particle emissions.” At the bottom of the ad, a note with an asterisk indicated that “compared to the previous model GL-200.” In the referent-omission condition, no disclosure was provided. In the priming condition, participants first completed the ad skepticism scale (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). This scale consisted of nine statements about informativeness, motives, and truthfulness of advertising in general. Participants were then randomly assigned to the referent-disclosure or the referent-omission condition first. After rating the ad, they completed the ad skepticism scale. The MANCOVA results suggest that the positive effect of referent disclosure on perceived competence was attenuated when participants were primed to deliberate about the extent to which advertisers follow the cooperative communication norms.

In study 3 (n = 241), a 2 (priming vs. control) x 2 (direct disclosure vs. no disclosure) between-subject design was employed. The same ad in study 2 was used (i.e., the printer ad) except the disclosure statement. In the direct-disclosure condition, the asterisk indicated an indirect disclosure at the bottom of the ad: “learn more at www.brandname.com.” In the no-disclosure condition, participants read the same ad as the referent-omission ad in study 2. Consumer suspicion of advertisers’ cooperativeness was manipulated by a priming task. In the priming condition, participants first read an example of referent omission: “An area rug is labeled ’50% more recycled content than before.’ The manufacturer increased the recycled content of its rug from 2% recycled to 3%. Although the claim is technically true, it likely conveys the false impression that the manufacturer has increased significantly the use of recycled fiber.” Participants were asked to type in any thoughts about this example. They then read and rated the ad. In the control condition, participants rated the ad without completing the priming task. The MANCOVA results suggest that indirect disclosure did not increase ad trustworthiness or perceived competence. This “null effect” was consistent in both priming and control conditions, which did not support the speculation that indirect disclosure had any positive effect on ad trustworthiness or perceived competence. That is, even if indirect disclosure may suggest the advertiser’s attempt to clarify the meaning of an incomplete comparison, the effect may not be strong enough to affect consumers’ perceptions or judgments at the moment of initial exposure to the ad.

Combined, three studies demonstrate the conditional effects of referent disclosure on consumer responses to incomplete comparative advertising claims. This research also reveals the underlying mechanisms based on consumers’ inferences about advertising norms. The findings contribute to the literature on advertising disclosure, comparative advertising, and persuasion knowledge.

REFERENCES

