Effects of Matched and Mismatched Comparative Advertising Messages: the Moderating Role of Consumers’ Processing Focus

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Across two experiments, we find that consumers with a cognitive focus find comparative messages mismatching the ad context (e.g., using “better than the leading brand” comparative claims to promote a product in a large category) more effective. The reverse was true for consumers with an affective focus.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
A frequently employed framework to account for findings in persuasion research focuses on whether persuasive messages match or mismatch consumers’ self-schemata (e.g., extroversion; Wheeler, Petty, and Bizer 2005), goals (e.g., regulatory focus; Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010), emotions (Agrawal and Duhacheck 2010), or contextual factors during message processing (e.g., temporal distance; Zhao and Xie 2011). Most of this research has documented a “matching” effect of advertising messages, suggesting that matched messages are more persuasive than mismatched messages, though on some (but rare) occasions, mismatched messages have been found to be more effective (Millar and Millar 1990; Aaker and Williams 1998).

Researchers have recently set out to account for these seemingly opposing findings of matched and mismatched messages. For example, Malaviya and Brendl (2014) show that hedonic motives moderate the effects of matched vs. mismatched messages. They find that favorable persuasion outcomes from a match (vs. mismatch) between regulatory focus and message framing occur only when the hedonic motive of the perceiver is consistent with (vs. opposes) that of the message. Extending this stream of research, we examine the moderating role of consumers’ processing focus (cognitive vs. affective) and posit that consumers with a cognitive (vs. an affective) focus find mismatched (vs. matched) messages more persuasive.

We conduct our inquiry by focusing on two types of indirect comparative messages: “leading brand” comparisons (“brand X analgesic relieves pain better than the leading brand”) and comparisons featuring “other brands” (“brand X trucks are better than other brands in their class”). We choose comparative advertising and, more specifically, indirect comparative messages, as our context because: (1) more than 70% of all advertising in the US may feature some type of comparison (Pechmann and Stewart 1990), and (2) though indirect comparative advertising is significantly more prevalent in practice than direct comparative advertising (Pechmann and Stewart 1990), most comparative investigations have focused on direct comparisons (e.g., Jain, Agrawal, and Maheswaran 2006; Zhang, Kardes, and Cronley 2000).

Drawing on categorization research, we posit that different comparative claims and ad contexts may induce alternative categorization approaches and distinct types of elaborations. First, consistent with Snyder (1992), we posit that “leading brand” claims invite consumers to compare the advertised brand to a specific (albeit unnamed) brand, leading to exemplar-based processing. Further, “other brands” claims invite consumers to compare the advertised brand to a group of brands, eliciting prototype-based processing. In addition, we propose that when a category consists of relatively few brands, consumers may be more predisposed to exemplar-based processing whereas when it comprises a relatively large set of brands, consumers may be more likely to hold prototypical representation of the category (e.g., Yeung and Soman 2007). Given that both comparative messages of different types (“leading brand” and “other brands”) and categories of differing sizes may influence the reliance on prototype-vs. exemplar-based processing, conceptually, and from a research design viewpoint, a match exists when the perceived category size is large (vs. small) and consumers are exposed to an “other brands” (vs. a “leading brand”) message. This is so because both such conditions promote a prototype-(vs. exemplar-) based representation.

On the basis of metacognition research (Alter et al. 2007) and the finding that matched messages are easier to process than mismatched messages, we contend that when processing matched comparative advertising messages (“leading brand” claims in a small category or “other brands” claims in a large category), consumers should experience less processing difficulty, which in turn will engender a feeling-based processing strategy that is affective, intuitive, and holistic; however, exposure to mismatched comparative messages (“leading brand” claims in a large category or “other brands” claims in a small category) will lead consumers to resort to a more analytical processing strategy that is cognitive, rational, and deliberative. We further propose that the extent to which matched or mismatched comparative advertising messages elicit more favorable consumer responses hinges on consumers’ processing focus, whether activated prior to ad exposure or chronically preferred by consumers. That is, consumers should develop more favorable reactions toward mismatched comparative advertising messages if their processing focus is also more cognitive. If their processing focus is affective, they should develop more positive responses toward matched comparative advertising messages.

We report two experiments which provide support to our theorizing. In the first experiment, respondents were first exposed to a cognitive (or an affective) processing focus manipulation task where they were asked to search words related to cognition or affect. Next, they received information about the car market where category size was manipulated (emphasizing there are many or few choices in the car market). Then they viewed a car ad which featured the “leading brand” claim or the “other brands” claim. Finally, they reported their brand evaluations. Our results find that when a cognitive (vs. an affective) focus was induced, respondents reported more favorable brand evaluations where there was mismatch (vs. match) between category size and type of claim. In the second experiment, the cognitive/affective focus was operationalized using chronic construal-level, which was measured using the behavioral identification form. Findings from experiment 1 were replicated.