Effects of Comparative Advertising in High and Low Cognitive Elaboration Conditions

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by

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ABSTRACT

The majority of the literature on comparative advertising assumes that consumers are rational decision makers and can utilize the brand comparison information rationally. However, consumers are not always rational and they often process ad information without deliberate thinking. A significant research gap exists with regard to consumers’ automatic processing of brand comparison information. Automatic processes occur when the consumer has only a minimal amount of cognitive elaboration on the information in an ad.

The present study investigates consumer attitudes and buying intention as a function of the comparative advertisement intensity and the level of cognitive elaboration. In addition, the persistence of the comparative advertising effects was examined to demonstrate the distinctive feature of automatic processing. The dependent variables investigated were 1) consumer attitudes toward the advertised product; 2) consumer attitudes toward the advertisement; and 3) buying intention associated with the advertised product. It was hypothesized that the relationships between comparative advertisement intensity (CAI) and the dependent variables follow a cubic trend with a rotated-S shape. It was also hypothesized that this shape of the relationship would be flatter in the low cognitive elaboration condition than in the high cognitive elaboration condition. Furthermore, consumer attitudes and buying intention would be more persistent over time when cognitive elaboration is low than when it is high.

The study adopted a 5 (five levels of comparative intensity) x 2 (high versus low level of cognitive elaboration) x 2 (two phases separated by one week) factorial design.
Two hundred participants were recruited. The hypotheses were generally supported. The findings are discussed in light of the different natures of implicit and explicit memories. The practical implications for marketers will also be discussed. I suggest that implicit and explicit memories should be important psychological processes that marketers should consider when they evaluate the communicative effectiveness of comparative advertising.
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