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## The moderating roles of ad claim type and rhetorical style in the ads of competitor brands for diluting the consumers' brand commitment to the existing brands

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### ABSTRACT

This research explores the moderating roles of ad claim type and rhetorical style in the ads of competitor brands for diluting the consumers' brand commitment to the existing brands. Results indicate that, for highly committed consumers, experiential ad claims will elicit more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than functional ad claims. Conversely, for low committed consumers, functional ad claims will elicit more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than experiential ad claims. Moreover, for highly committed consumers, metaphorical ads will elicit more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than straightforward ads. On the contrary, for low committed consumers, straightforward ads will elicit more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than metaphorical ads. Subsequently, for highly committed consumers, metaphorical ads with experiential claims will lead to more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than metaphorical ads with functional claims. In contrast, highly committed consumers will not engender differentially favorable attitudes toward the straightforward ads, regardless of ad claim type. At last, for low committed consumers, functional claims will elicit more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than experiential claims, regardless of rhetorical styles.

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### 1. Introduction

An important task of advertising is to provide consumers with relevant information for them to determine the brand's true merits. Once committed to this preferred brand, consumers tend to stay with it to avoid the switching costs. Specifically, one of the most important advantages for established brands is the brand commitment to which the loyal consumers attach. A new competitor brand, which attempts to cross the border to a category-specific area, has to overcome the favorable position of the established brand and defend the consumers' attitudinal resistance toward the new competitor brand in consumers' minds. As Ahluwalia (2000) argued, brand commitment is a key determinant of attitudinal resistance when counter-attitudinal information about the preferred brand appears. In fact, the brand commitment effect occurs wherever the counter-attitudinal information is

present (Raju, Unnava, & Montgomery, 2009). Though for its importance, brand commitment has not received considerable attention in the literature on branding and marketing yet. This premise forms the first motivation for this research.

Brand commitment may have a negative impact on the competitor brands, especially for the new entrants into the same product category. As a consequence, marketers of new competitor brands may be interested in how to mitigate the inherent weakness resulting from the brand commitment attached to the established brands. Clearly, this research attempts to examine how to mitigate the negative impact of brand commitment on competitor brands by introducing other factors. Scant research has indicated that the ad claim type contributes to mitigate the counter-arguments; however, the underlying mechanism of ad claim type is still open for further interpretation. Therefore, the second question to be examined in this research is the moderating role of ad claim type (experiential vs. functional) in the impact of brand commitment on brand preferences.

At last, this research extends its findings by examining the effect of rhetorical style (metaphorical vs. straightforward) on brand commitment. Previous research has indicated that metaphors are commonly used in ads (Leigh, 1994) and able to meaningfully alter consumer belief (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009) and consumer

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response (Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, & Franke, 2002). However, the effect of rhetorical style varies depending on situations. Therefore, this research aims to distinguish between the impacts of metaphor and straightforwardness and clarify whether they contribute to switch brand preferences.

## 2. Background overview and theoretical development

### 2.1. Brand commitment

Prior research suggests that commitment is a central relationship-specific motive, and feelings of commitment reliably promote pro-relational cognitions, motivations and behaviors (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Rusbult (1983) defines commitment level as a psychological state that represents the experience of dependence on a relationship, a long-term orientation toward it, feelings of attachment to a person or an object and a desire to maintain the relationship. In the consumer behavior literature, Sargeant and Lee (2004) propose that commitment has been regarded as a key mediating influence on consumer behaviors. In addition, commitment has been defined as 'an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship'.

As compared with a less committed consumer, a high-commitment consumer generates emotional connections to the brand and is unwilling to switch to competitor brands (Raju et al., 2009). This sense of being connected to a brand results in the attitudinal insistence on the brand to which consumers are currently committed and the increased resistance to attitude change.

Moreover, brand commitment is mainly driven by consumers' experiences with a brand. Mick and Buhl (1992) further contend that consumers are committed to a brand across situation and usage experiences through how it fits into the consumers' life styles rather than how effective it is in meeting a specific need or solving a specific trouble. Brand commitment is deemed as a deeply-rooted thought in the minds of committed persons. Hence, competitor brands have to figure out effective strategies to mitigate these negative impacts originated in brand commitment.

### 2.2. Ad claim type

Consumers' emotional response occurs before rational thought and, in fact, decision making always has emotional components (Rubinson, 2008) or based upon the experiential bonds with a brand. Understanding the relationship between a brand and a consumer on an affective or experiential-based connection helps build long-term consumer commitment (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006). Even based on this premise, advertisers are still in face of two options: functional ad claims versus experiential ad claims when they attempt to launch a new brand in a well-established category. While functional claims center on tangible attributes and benefits, experiential claims focus on promises of experiences the consumer should expect from the new brand. The conclusions regarding whether functional claims or experiential appeals are more persuasive are mixed.

Trope and Liberman (2000) imply that affect or experiential appeals are more influential on consumer decisions than rational or functional appeals. Practically, some advertisers may choose to convey the superiority of messages with an experiential content, as consumers supposedly are overexposed to attribute-based, functional messages (Samuelsen & Olsen, 2010). With experiential messages, advertisers hope to evoke memories to affect consumers' evaluations of the advocated brands (e.g., Braun-LaTour, LaTour, Pickrell, & Loftus, 2004; Price, Axom, & Coupey, 1997). Likewise, Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that "as goods and services become commoditized, the customer experiences that

companies create will matter most" (p. 97). Sujan, Bettman, and Baumgartner (1993) suggest advertisers to make connections between the new brands and consumers' routine lives and make the new brand perceived as personally relevant to consumers. Metcalfe and Mischel (1999) further argue that the "affective" experience can drive the behavior. Lerner and Keltner (2001) conclude that affective experiences tend to elicit different associations and hence may affect behavior. Bülbül and Menon (2010) also argue that affective or experiential claims have positive impacts on consumer decisions.

In contrast, the goal of functional claims is to focus directly on the features or benefits of the product. As Johar and Sirgy (1991) defined, functional claims highlight the functional features of the product (or brand) or performance information. Dourish (2001) implies that functional appeals prompts consumers to take actions in exchange for benefits afforded by a product.

As compared with experiential claims, functional claims propose the more concrete consequences of consuming the utilitarian benefits endorsed by the advocated brand (Dourish, 2001) and are more straightforward and more consistent with the ad information with semantic facts-based knowledge about the prototypical attributes and benefits in the category (Samuelsen & Olsen, 2010). Deighton (1987) observes that, functional claims are more likely to change cognitive expectations about the brand's performance than experiential claims. Functional claims are more easily compared to the salient category points-of-parity benefits than experiential claims (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). In addition, Heath, Nairn, and Bottomley (2009) argue that emotional or experiential claims do not drive as much attention as functional claims. Samuelsen and Olsen (2010) argue that functional claims are likely to face less variation in the target segment's comparison standard, simply because the brand-related information opens up for relatively less idiosyncratic interpretations, is more familiar to most recipients, and is potentially more easily encoded.

Due to the mixed conclusions, this research predicts that experiential and functional ad claims can vary as a function of individual differences; that is, the extent of brand commitment can affect individual attitudes toward the competitor ads with experiential and functional claims.

### 2.3. Rhetorical style

The linguistics literature argues that different meanings can be conveyed by rhetorical styles and the message recipients will form different perceptions toward the conveyed meaning content (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009). Prior research has demonstrated that rhetorical styles are increasingly common in advertising and contribute to alter consumer belief and response (e.g., Mothersbaugh et al., 2002; Lagerwerf & Meijers, 2008). Traditionally, straightforward or explicit claims have long been applied as the means for advertisers to launch new products. Generally, advertisers usually adopt explicit (or straightforward) strategies to highlight the features (Ziamou & Ratneshwar, 2003) in comparison ads to ensure that the newly launched products are really perceived as innovative or different. More clearly, advertisers who apply straightforward appeals believe that the straightforward claims can facilitate consumers to perceive the differences between the existing and new brands. Therefore, it is logical for advertisers to apply straightforward appeals to differentiate the new brands from their existing brands.

However, advertisers increasingly apply rhetorical styles to penetrate the ad clutter and communicate a specific message (Ang & Lim, 2006). McQuarrie and Mick (1996) define rhetorical styles as expressions that deviate from expectations, and yet are

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