



"To compare or not to compare?": Comparative appeals in destination advertising of ski resorts

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of comparative appeals in destination advertising through an experiment with a randomized paired comparison design. Both cognitive and affective responses were measured toward comparative versus non-comparative advertising of a ski resort. The findings demonstrate that respondents viewed comparative advertising to be more persuasive than non-comparative advertising. However, their attitudes were less favorable toward comparative advertising for destinations. More specifically, comparative advertising was found to be more persuasive in the advertising of famous destinations rather than unknown destinations. Further, comparative advertising was more effective for those who were aware of the advertised destination than those who were not.

1. Introduction

Destination advertising is a crucial tool for destination marketing managers to attract tourists toward their destinations (Kim, Choe, & Lee, 2018; Kim, Moon, & Choe, 2016; Pratt, McCabe, Cortes-Jimenez, & Blake, 2010). Destination advertising contributes to forming distinct personalities and desirable images of destinations (Blumberg, 2005; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007; Kim et al., 2018). Previous studies show that effective destination advertising can influence tourists' attitudes and intentions in destination choices (Jones, Sinclair, Rhodes, & Courneya, 2004; Kim, Agrusa, & Chon, 2014; Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002; Wang, Kim, & Agrusa, 2018). For example, Byun and Jang (2015) find that a destination advertising that matches affective (*vs. cognitive*) language with hedonic (*vs. utilitarian*) destination type can promote tourists' positive attitudes and intentions to visit. Indeed, major states and cities in the United States have spent millions of dollars on destination advertising per year. Las Vegas spent \$93.1 million on advertising in 2015 (Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority, 2015) and California spent \$16.4 million in 2013 (Visit California, 2014).

Despite the importance of destination advertising in tourism, however, there are not many related studies. Academic research to investigate the effective design of destination advertising from the perspective of tourists is especially rare (Byun & Jang, 2015; Wang et al., 2018). In contrast, plenty of academic studies in retailing have investigated effective designing factors of advertising, such as format,

endorsement, frame and language, to encourage customers' positive responses (e.g. Beukeboom & Semin, 2006; Drolet, Williams, & Lau-Gesk, 2007; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012; Lewis, Whitler, & Hoegg, 2013). It would also be meaningful to examine diverse effective design factors for destination advertising to encourage tourists' positive responses (e.g. Byun & Jang, 2015; Wang et al., 2018).

The present study is particularly interested in comparative advertising for destinations. Comparative advertising involves direct or indirect comparisons of the sponsored brand in advertising (Williams & Page, 2013). Comparative advertising has been frequently used for various consumer products and services, such as foods (e.g. *Burger King vs. McDonald's*, *Quiznos vs. Subway*, and *Wendy's vs. McDonald's*) (Beard, 2010; Shimp & Dyer, 1978), airlines (e.g. *Lufthansa vs. American* and *Delta vs. United*) (Barry, 1993; Johnson & Horne, 1988), beverages (e.g. *Pepsi vs. Coke*) (Beard, 2013; Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991), and computers (e.g. *Toshiba vs. Compaq*) (Spink & Petty, 1998; Williams & Page, 2013). Although it is not yet widespread, comparative appeals have started to be used in destination advertising. The government of India, for instance, advertised its domestic attractions by comparing them with famous overseas destinations to increase domestic tourism demands, as in Appendix A (Ministry of Tourism Government of India, 2011).

The objective of this study is to examine whether comparative appeals can be used as an effective designing factor in destination

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advertising to encourage tourists' positive responses. Specifically, this study firstly investigates tourists' rational and emotional responses toward comparative advertising for destinations. It then examines whether the type of destination (*i.e. well-known vs. unknown*) can affect tourists' responses toward comparative advertising. Lastly, the study analyzes whether tourists who are aware of a destination in advance will show different responses toward comparative advertising. To achieve this goal, the study firstly reviewed diverse research in retailing about comparative advertising, and hypothesized tourists' responses toward comparative advertising for destinations. An experiment was then conducted to examine tourists' responses toward comparative versus non-comparative destination advertising in Appendix B. Lastly, the data were analyzed with the paired *t*-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA), and theoretical and practical implications were suggested. The findings of this study will contribute to designing more compelling advertisements for destination management organizations (DMOs) to attract tourists to their destinations. To the extent of the authors' best knowledge, this study is the first attempt to investigate the effectiveness of comparative appeals in destination advertising.

2. Literature review

2.1. Comparative advertising

Comparative advertising is defined as an explicit or implicit comparison of two or more brands in an advertisement (Emons & Fluet, 2012; Grewal, Kavanoor, Fern, Costley, & Barnes, 1997). In comparative advertising, the brand that sponsors and finances advertising is called as a 'sponsored brand,' and it is compared to 'competing brands' which are generally market leading brands (Goodwin & Etgar, 1980; Pillai & Goldsmith, 2008). For example, Burger King as a sponsored brand led consecutive comparative advertising campaigns, which later dubbed as 'Burger War,' against the market leading brand, McDonald's, to enhance its brand awareness in the 1980s (Beard, 2010, 2013). Likewise, in the comparative advertising of Appendix A, India as a sponsored destination is compared to the internationally famous destinations, such as Scotland and the Alps (Ministry of Tourism Government of India, 2011).

In the United States, comparative advertising has been commonly used (Jeon & Beatty, 2002). Since the early 1970s, the Federal Trade Commission encouraged comparative advertising to allow more information for consumers (Beard, 2010; Yagci, Biswas, & Dutta, 2009). In 1997, comparative advertising also became legal in Europe under a condition that it is not misleading (Barigozzi & Peitz, 2004; Emons & Fluet, 2012). Comparative advertising also started to be used in emerging countries such as China, Philippine, and India (Kalro, Sivakumaran, & Marathe, 2017). It was estimated that approximately 30–40% of all advertisements were comparative in nature (Donthu, 1992, 1998; Robinson, 1994). For example, it was reported that about 30% of full-page advertisements in popular consumer magazines used comparative appeals (Harmon, Razzouk, & Stern, 1983). Indeed, even today, various examples of comparative advertising can be easily witnessed around us. Burger King compared its cooking style with McDonald's, whereas Subway claimed that its sandwiches were healthier than McDonald's (Williams & Page, 2013).

In early days, comparative advertising used to advocate the superiority of a sponsored brand by implicitly comparing it to unnamed brands such as 'Brand X' or 'leading brands' (Barry, 1993). However, it started to compare a sponsored brand directly to specifically named competing brands, and this trend became a mainstream (Beard, 2013).

The comparison was made in terms of either specific product attributes, functions, and benefits or broad and general market positions and product categories (Williams & Page, 2013). For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, PepsiCo led a series of comparative advertising called 'Pepsi-Challenge,' and compared Pepsi's taste directly to Coca-Cola's (Beard, 2010). On the other hand, Avis, a rental car company compared

its market position to Hertz in the 'We are No. 2. We Try Harder' campaign (Beard, 2013).

2.2. Effectiveness of comparative advertising

The popularity of comparative advertising ignited a large number of studies to investigate the effectiveness of comparative advertising, especially, in contrast to non-comparative advertising (*e.g.* Ang & Leong, 1994; Donthu, 1998; Droge, 1989; Iyer, 1988; Jeon & Beatty, 2002; Nye, Roth, & Shimp, 2008; Pechmann & Esteban, 1993; Thompson & Hamilton, 2006). Even though there seems no definitive consensus on the effectiveness of comparative advertising (Kalro et al., 2017), it is claimed that comparative advertising generally induces more positive cognitive responses but less favorable affective responses than non-comparative advertising (Grewal et al., 1997; Jeon & Beatty, 2002; Williams & Page, 2013).

First, it is found that comparative advertising is likely to attract more attention and awareness (Choi & Miracle, 2004; Grewal et al., 1997) because comparative advertising can successfully arouse customers' rational and analytic thinking process (Williams & Page, 2013). Indeed, previous studies confirm that the rational and analytic mode of information processing is closely associated with customers' positive cognitive responses (Beukeboom & Semin, 2006; Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1990; Mackie & Worth, 1989). Further, comparative advertising is perceived to be more informative and stimulating because it provides objective and useful facts about both sponsored and competing brands by comparing them all together in terms of specific attributes or market positions (Droge, 1989; Grewal et al., 1997; Iyer, 1988). It is also found that customers recall comparative advertising more easily than non-comparative advertising (Donthu, 1998). In short, customers' cognitive responses, such as attention, awareness, informativeness, stimulation, and recall, are expected to be more positive toward comparative advertising than non-comparative advertising.

Customers' affective responses have, in contrast, been found to be less favorable toward comparative advertising (Grewal et al., 1997; Jeon & Beatty, 2002). Customers tend to view comparative advertising as an aggressive and impersonal attack on competing brands, and thus consider it as less friendly and pleasant (Droge, 1989). Indeed, attitudes toward comparative advertising are found to be particularly negative for those customers who are not familiar with comparative advertising (Donthu, 1998; Nye et al., 2008). Many previous empirical studies support that customers tend to show negative attitudes toward comparative advertising by doubting its source of information or disputing its message (Belch, 1981; Gorn & Weinberg, 1984; Swinyard, 1981; Wilkie & Farris, 1975).

However, it is still arguable whether consumers' negative attitudes toward comparative advertising will be transferred to the negative attitudes toward a sponsored brand because previous empirical studies have shown conflicting results (Grewal et al., 1997). For example, Mackenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986) found that the attitude toward comparative advertising positively affected the attitude toward the sponsored brand, whereas Droge (1989) found that customers' affective responses toward the comparative advertising were not linked to the attitude toward the sponsored brand. It seems that the final conclusion on such conflicting results still requires further investigation on moderators that influence the relationship between comparative advertising and sponsored brand (Pornpitakpan & Yuan, 2015).

2.3. Moderating variables in comparative advertising

As the effectiveness of comparative advertising is evasive in that customers' cognitive and affective responses are not always in accord with each other (Grewal et al., 1997; Pillai & Goldsmith, 2008), many studies have investigated moderators that explain the contexts where comparative advertising can be more effective than non-comparative advertising (Emons & Fluet, 2012; Kalro et al., 2017). For example,

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