



# Comparative advertising: Effects of concreteness and claim substantiation through reactance and activation on purchase intentions

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine positive (activation) and negative (reactance) effects of concrete versus non-concrete comparative advertising and the impact of claim substantiation in such comparative advertising on purchase intentions. We also analyze the moderating role of consumers' predisposition to show reactance. The results indicate that without claim substantiation, quality comparisons (less concrete) produce higher activation but also more reactance than comparisons based on intrinsic attributes (more concrete). With claim substantiation, quality comparisons still trigger higher activation, but they only trigger more reactance in consumers who have a high predisposition to show reactance. For consumers with a low predisposition to show reactance, quality comparisons trigger even less reactance than intrinsic attribute comparisons. This research enhances the theoretical understanding of processes underlying consumer reactions to comparative advertising and provides marketers with knowledge about the appropriate use of claim substantiation as well as of the comparative basis for addressing different consumer types.

## 1. Introduction

Comparative advertising is used in many product categories (Beard, 2016; Kalro, Sivakumaran, & Marathe, 2010) and, as such, many different arguments are used to highlight the competitive advantage of products. For example, McDonald's advertises store hours that exceed Burger King's store hours [1], BMW claims to provide better overall quality than Audi [2], and Verizon Wireless suggests it provides better network coverage than AT&T [3]. These examples show that comparisons used in marketing vary considerably in terms of the attribute used for comparison as well as in verifiability (i.e., whether consumers can or cannot verify the comparison prior to purchase) and concreteness (i.e., comparisons can be rather broad and vague or quite concrete).

Research has only marginally examined the effectiveness of using such different product characteristics for comparative advertising. However, many studies have examined the effectiveness of comparative advertising as compared to non-comparative advertising (e.g., Donthu, 1998; Dröge, 1989; Jeon & Beatty, 2002; Jewell & Saenger, 2014; Pechmann & Stewart, 1990; Zhang, Moore, & Moore, 2011). Such studies reveal positive and negative cognitive and behavioral effects (e.g., Chang, 2007; Grewal, Kavanoor, Fern, Costeley, & Barnes, 1997). Positive effects occur because comparative advertising provides consumers with valuable information, thus leading to increased attention (Muehling, Stoltman, & Grossbart, 1990), which, in other contexts, has

been shown to trigger activation (Kroeber-Riel, 1979). Negative effects are a result of consumers thinking that marketers are using comparative advertising to mislead them (Chang, 2007; Swinyard, 1981). In such cases, consumers might show reactance (a motivational reaction to offers, persons, rules, or regulations that threaten or eliminate specific behavioral freedoms) to regain their threatened freedom (Brehm & Brehm, 1981) of free product choice and opinion formation (Clee & Wicklund, 1980). Reactance can be situation-specific, but individuals also differ in their predisposition to show reactance (PSR; Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

The type of product-related information that should be provided in a comparison has received little attention. In a basic study, Jain, Buchanan, and Maheswaran (2000) examine the effects of the verifiability of product characteristics. However, this categorization only roughly covers what is common in advertising practice because comparisons based on product attributes not easily verifiable prior to purchase can still be more or less concrete, and consequently vary in their effectiveness. Thus, the objective of this research is to examine the effects of concrete versus less concrete comparisons in advertising. We examine the positive effects of such comparisons through activation and the negative effects through reactance, and the possible moderating effect of consumers' PSR. We also examine the effect of claim substantiation in terms of factual information that supports and legitimizes the comparative claim (McDougall, 1978). Claim substantiation is of

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particular interest in this context because it can compensate for a lack of advertising credibility (Snyder, 1989), considered to be the main driver of negative consumer reactions to comparative advertising (Grewal et al., 1997).

This study contributes to the literature by simultaneously examining positive and negative effects of comparative ads with differing levels of concreteness through activation and reactance. The results provide interesting new insights because there is no current research on both positive and negative effects of comparative advertising, and on the effects of claim substantiation and individual PSR levels.

The results reveal to marketers which comparative ad triggers more positive effects through activation and less negative effects through reactance, and under which conditions the use of claim substantiation is beneficial for comparative advertising with differing levels of ad concreteness.

## 2. Literature overview

### 2.1. Different bases for comparison and claim substantiation

While many studies focus on the object of comparison (e.g., Goodwin & Etgar, 1980; Kalro, Sivakumaran, & Marathe, 2014; Pechmann & Stewart, 1990), only a few studies examine the effectiveness of different product characteristics used for comparison. Pechmann and Ratneshwar (1991) show that consumers differentiate better between the advertised brand and the comparison brand in direct (vs. indirect) comparative ads when the comparison attribute is typical (vs. atypical) for the product category. Pillai and Goldsmith (2008) report that non-comparative ads produce more positive brand attitudes than comparative ads when a typical attribute of a brand with high consumer commitment is the basis for comparison. For atypical attributes, comparative and non-comparative ads do not produce differing brand attitudes (regardless of brand commitment). Yagci, Biswas, and Dutta (2009) show that irrelevant attributes for the comparison produce more negative ad and brand attitudes for across-brand than for within-brand comparisons regardless of brand image. For relevant attributes, such an effect exists only in the case of poor brand image. Iyer (1988) found that comparative advertising for new brands should contain factual rather than evaluative information because facts produce more positive brand attitudes and higher intentions to use the product. Jain et al. (2000) show that less easily verifiable comparative claims trigger more counterarguments and negative attributions and are less credible than either easily verifiable comparative claims or non-comparative claims. Snyder (1989) shows that comparative claims based on concrete (vs. vague) attributes are more credible but do not influence brand quality perceptions and interest in trials, whereas claim substantiation positively influences these variables for fictitious but not for familiar brands.

The few studies on claim substantiation in comparative advertising show that consumers perceive substantiated claims as more reliable, helpful, and informative than unsubstantiated claims and that consumers show higher ad awareness (Earl & Pride, 1980; McDougall, 1978). Golden (1979) reports that for comparative and non-comparative advertising, substantiated claims produce higher believability and credibility for the market leader, whereas unsubstantiated claims are more beneficial for new and weak brands. Boush and Ross (1986) compare different types of claim substantiation and report that believability is highest for independent test results (vs. advertiser-initiated test results and surveys) that represent the opinion of the general population (vs. specific users).

Existing studies show that research on the effects of different product characteristics used in comparative ads is limited and that the impact of claim substantiation has not yet been considered in this context. Our new research aims to address these issues.

### 2.2. Negative effects of comparative advertising

Consumers often judge comparative advertising as more offensive (Wilson, 1976), more aggressive (Wilson & Muderrisoglu, 1979), and less credible (Beard, 2015; del Barrio-García & Luque-Martínez, 2003; Shimp & Dyer, 1978) than non-comparative advertising. Comparative advertising can also evoke counterarguments and source derogation (Belch, 1981; Jain et al., 2000; Swinyard, 1981; Wilson & Muderrisoglu, 1980).

Goodwin and Etgar (1980) show that consumers perceive indirect comparative advertising for products with high functional utility as more impersonal than direct comparative advertising. Kalro, Sivakumaran, and Marathe (2013) found that under analytical (imagery) processing, indirect comparative ads are perceived as more (less) manipulative than direct comparative ads.

The summarized studies focus mainly on negative *cognitions* triggered by comparative advertising but omit the more comprehensive concept of reactance that comprises negative *cognitions and emotions* (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Worchel, 1974). Our studies provide detailed insights into the negative effects of comparative advertising in terms of reactance.

### 2.3. Positive effects of comparative advertising

Research on activation in the context of comparative advertising does not exist. However, two studies examined the concept of attention. While activation represents an internal energy mobilization and excitement (Purcell, 1982), attention is the cognitive capacity allocated to the external environment (Muehling et al., 1990). However, these concepts are closely related because higher activation triggers further examination of external stimuli in terms of attention, thus the latter is a consequence of activation (Matthews & Margetts, 1991).

Muehling et al. (1990) show that consumers perceive comparative (vs. non-comparative) ads as more attention-grabbing and more stimulating, an aspect typically used to measure activation (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Pechmann and Stewart (1990) found that direct comparisons attract more attention than indirect comparisons or non-comparative ads when the ad compares low to high share brands.

Thus, different types of comparative advertising trigger differing attention. In our studies, we consider activation because it has not been examined yet and because it triggers both cognitive and emotional reactions (Muehling et al., 1990) and might, therefore, affect reactance.

## 3. Framework and hypotheses

### 3.1. Effects of comparison concreteness through reactance on attitudes toward the ad, attitudes toward the product, and purchase intentions

Differing levels of comparison concreteness are likely to trigger differing levels of consumer reactance. According to reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981), individuals facing a threat to personal freedom react negatively toward the threat. Thus, consumers might consider comparative advertising an attempt to influence their attitudes toward the advertised and compared products as well as their purchase behavior. Applying attribution theory (Kelley, 1967) where individuals try to understand and explain intentions behind the phenomena they experience to a marketing context suggests that consumers are likely to perceive the manipulative attempt of a marketing campaign because they tend to believe that marketers behave in a way advantageous to themselves. In addition, the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) suggests consumers have some knowledge about advertising tactics, want to interpret the causes of such influence attempts, and try to cope with them (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Comparative advertising is such an advertising tactic; consumers are likely to ascribe a manipulative intent to the advertiser and try to cope with such manipulation by developing reactance in order to regain their threatened

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