



# Comparative advertising for goods versus services: Effects of different types of product attributes through consumer reactance and activation on consumer response

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## ABSTRACT

Comparative retail advertising for goods and services is often based on comparisons of intrinsic or extrinsic product attributes. We examine positive effects through activation and negative effects through reactance on ad attitudes and product evaluations for intrinsic versus extrinsic attribute comparisons and consider the product type (goods vs. services) as a moderator. The results show that reactance has negative and activation has positive effects through ad attitudes on product evaluations. For goods, extrinsic attribute comparisons are beneficial because they produce higher activation and less reactance than intrinsic attribute comparisons. For services, reactance arousal does not differ for intrinsic and extrinsic attribute comparisons, but extrinsic attribute comparisons are beneficial because they have more positive effects through higher activation, which in turn reduces reactance.

## 1. Introduction

Retailers often use comparative advertising (Beard, 2016a) to promote products in various categories. The product attributes used in comparative ads vary considerably. For example, Aldi, a discounter operating internationally, claims to sell products at *lower prices* than its competitors <<https://kristenobaid.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/catalogue-aldi-comparative-price-olive-oil-wall-poster-instore-pos.jpg>>, or a car rental company claims to provide *more comfortable transport* than public transport by train <[http://www.auto-vermietungen.net/news/wp-content/sixt\\_bahn.jpg](http://www.auto-vermietungen.net/news/wp-content/sixt_bahn.jpg)>. These examples and other examples of retailers using comparative advertising, such as retailers of consumer electronics, furniture stores or travel agencies, show that it is really important for retailers to learn more about the effects of comparative advertising before planning their advertising campaigns.

### 1.1. Background and objectives

Previous research on comparative advertising is extensive (Beard, 2016b) but most empirical studies examine the effectiveness of comparative compared to non-comparative advertising and analyze positive and negative consumer reactions (e.g., Anderson et al., 2016; Grewal et al., 1997 for a meta-analysis; Jain et al., 2000). Negative reactions can be explained by reactance theory (Brehm and Brehm, 1981)

according to which individuals, who feel that their decision making is influenced, react negatively to such manipulative attempts. If consumers believe that comparative claims try to manipulate them (Chang, 2007; Kalro et al., 2013, 2017), they are likely to feel threatened in their free opinion formation and to show reactance (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle, 2018) to cope with the persuasive attempt. Reactance in turn influences ad evaluations (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle, 2018) and consumer behavior such as purchase intentions (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle, 2018; Quick and Kim, 2009; van Doorn and Hoekstra, 2013). Comparative advertising can also trigger positive effects such as consumer activation (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle, 2018) because comparative information is often more relevant than non-comparative information (Muehling et al., 1990; Pechmann and Stewart, 1990). Activation, also called arousal in previous research, represents the level of internal energy mobilization and excitation caused by environmental stimuli (Berlyne, 1960; Purcell, 1982) such as advertising (e.g., Yan et al., 2016). It not only triggers attention (Matthews and Margetts, 1991; Storbeck and Clore, 2008 for a discussion), but also emotions and cognitions (Gorn et al., 2001).

Existing research examines the effects of the typicality (Pechmann and Ratneshwar, 1991; Pillai and Goldsmith, 2008) or relevance (Yagci et al., 2009) of an attribute for a product category, but little is known about the effects of using different product attributes for the comparison. In this context, Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle (2018) examine the

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role of claim concreteness and show that concrete claims that state the superiority of a specific product attribute have less positive overall effects than rather vague claims that compare the overall quality of products. Going beyond this research, we argue that even if concrete claims are considered, different types of product attributes used for a concrete comparison might have different effects on consumer response. Such concrete product attributes can be further categorized into extrinsic and intrinsic product attributes. Intrinsic attributes (e.g., flavour or and sweetness) as opposed to extrinsic attributes (e.g., brand name or price) (Zeithaml, 1988) cannot be changed without changing the product itself (Olson and Jacoby, 1972). Comparisons based on an *extrinsic* product attribute might trigger different consumer reactions than comparisons based on an *intrinsic* product attribute.

Starting from this background, we examine the role of different types of product attributes (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) that can be used for comparison on reactance and activation arousal. We wish to extend previous research by focusing on the type of comparison shown to have comparatively negative effects and to analyze whether there are more or fewer negative effects depending on the type of concrete product attribute used. Such analyses have not yet been done and better enable retailers to identify the most beneficial strategy for their comparative advertising.

We additionally examine a possible moderating effect of product type (goods vs. services) because previous research focused mainly on goods, although comparative advertising for services is common (Beard, 2015, 2016b; Kalro et al., 2010), and the unique characteristics of services and goods create different challenges for advertising (Stafford et al., 2011). Only the study of Donthu (1993) compares consumer reactions to comparative advertising for goods and services and concludes on the basis of descriptive data analyses that consumers might evaluate comparative ads for professional services more negatively than comparative ads for goods and non-comparative ads for services and goods.

## 1.2. Contributions

This study extends previous research by further elaborating on the application of reactance theory and activation in the context of comparative advertising. No previous study has examined the effects of intrinsic compared to extrinsic attributes used in comparative ads on consumer response in general, and more particularly the effects of such attributes through mediators such as reactance and activation. Furthermore, differentiating between goods and services in the context of using different types of product attributes for comparisons is new and likely to provide an interesting contribution because one type of attributes might work for physical goods but not for intangible services and vice versa.

The common use of comparative advertising in retail contexts and its possible effects on consumer behavior, such as purchase intentions and store patronage, show the importance of our research for retailers. This study aims to provide retailers with detailed insights into which types of product attributes are more beneficial for comparative advertising for different products (goods or services) due to more positive effects through activation and fewer negative effects through reactance. Such insight is of particular importance for retailers because comparisons are increasingly used in retail advertising for goods and services, but possible negative effects of this advertising strategy are often blinded out in retail practice.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses development

This section is structured as follows. We first present the findings of existing research (which is rather limited in this particular field) to show our starting point and then the theoretical arguments from which we derive our hypotheses.

### 2.1. Effects of intrinsic versus extrinsic attribute comparisons on reactance

#### 2.1.1. Overview of existing studies on negative effects of comparative advertising

Consumers sometimes perceive comparative advertising as more aggressive (Wilson and Muderrisoglu, 1979), offensive (Wilson, 1976), less believable (Barone et al., 2004; del Barrio-García and Luque-Martínez, 2003; Shimp and Dyer, 1978), and more manipulative (Chang, 2007) than non-comparative advertising. Comparative advertising can evoke counterarguing and source derogation (e.g., Grewal et al., 1997 for a meta-analysis; Pant et al., 2014). Although these studies on comparative advertising show the risk of negative consumer reactions, they do not examine whether different types of comparative advertising produce differing negative reactions.

Another thread of research considers negative reactions depending on whom the comparison refers to. Goodwin and Etgar (1980) show that indirect comparisons (ads that do not reveal the comparison brand) are perceived to be more impersonal than direct comparisons (ads that directly mention the comparison brand), if products with high functional utility are advertised. Beard (2015) shows that consumers believe direct (vs. indirect) comparative advertising for services less, but only older consumers are less likely to recommend the advertised service. The study of Kalro et al. (2013) provides the notion that indirect comparisons are perceived as more manipulative than direct comparisons under analytical processing (vice versa under imagery processing). Furthermore, Kalro et al. (2017) show that perceptions of the manipulative intent are higher for direct (vs. indirect) market leader comparisons and for indirect (vs. direct) multi-brand comparisons. These studies show that negative reactions vary depending on the reference used in the comparison.

#### 2.1.2. Overview of existing studies on different product characteristics used for comparison

Only some studies have analyzed the effectiveness of using comparisons based on different product characteristics. Iyer (1988) reports that factual comparative information triggers more positive brand attitudes than evaluative information. Nye et al. (2008) found that factual information leads to better brand attitudes, but only when comparative advertising is novel. Snyder (1989) shows that comparisons based on vaguely (vs. concretely) described product benefits are less credible but affect neither brand quality evaluations nor trial interest. These studies do not consider the processes underlying the processing of such ads. Jain et al. (2000) show that consumers evaluate comparative claims based on less easily verifiable product attributes as less credible and more manipulative than comparative claims based on easily verifiable product attributes and non-comparative claims together and produce more counterarguments. However, as they do not directly compare comparative ads that differ in verifiability, their study cannot identify more or less beneficial types of comparison. Only the study of Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle (2018) directly compares different comparative claims and shows that concrete claims trigger less negative but also less positive consumer reactions than vague claims. We add to this research by focusing on concrete claims and differentiating for the specific product attribute used for comparison. Furthermore, we examine a possible moderating effect of product type (good vs. services) which is new in this particular context.

#### 2.1.3. Reactance arousal for intrinsic versus extrinsic attribute comparisons

As consumer reactance represents an important facet of negative consumer reactions (Fransen et al., 2015), reactance theory (Brehm and Brehm, 1981) might explain negative consumer reactions to comparative advertising (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle, 2018).

According to attribution theory (Kelley, 1967), individuals try to understand the intentions behind experienced phenomena. In a marketing context, consumers might believe that marketers behave in a self-serving way and thus suspect a manipulative intent. Adding to this,

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