

Research Report

Where you say it matters: Why packages are a more believable source of product claims than advertisements ☆

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Abstract

This research demonstrates that a marketing claim placed on a package is more believable than a marketing claim placed in an advertisement. In three studies, we show that the benefit of greater believability for packages is driven by perceptions of proximity. In general, consumers perceive packages, and thus the claims they offer, as closer to the product than ads and their respective claims. This perception of greater claim-to-product proximity is likely to make a claim seem more verifiable. Therefore, claim-to-product proximity is taken as a signal of the marketers' credibility, decreasing inferences of manipulative intent and thereby increasing claim believability and purchase likelihood.

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By 2016, global advertisement expenditure is expected to reach over \$530 billion (ZenithOptimedia Group Limited, 2015) and the cost of packaging materials over \$800 billion (Pira International, 2011). Despite the vast amount of resources dedicated to advertising and packaging, there is a dearth of research identifying how these marketing media may differ. Indeed, research has generally assumed that consumers respond to advertisements and packaging in the same manner; findings in one format are assumed to work similarly in the other (e.g. Bellizzi & Hite, 1992; Mohr, Eroglu, & Ellen, 1998). While there are similarities between packages and ads, we contend that their differences need also be appreciated in order to better understand how various marketing media work.

In this paper, we explore the impact of one notable difference between ads and packages, the proximity of claims

made in each to the referenced product. Marketing messages, such as claims communicating advantages of a product, are closer to the product when they are featured on a package as opposed to in an ad. We hypothesize that merely presenting a message close to the referenced product offers a signal to the consumer that the marketer is trustworthy, and this results in higher message believability and greater purchase likelihood.

Claim-to-product proximity and its effects on believability

Product promotion is necessary due to an inherent information asymmetry between the producer of a product and the intended consumer; presumably, marketing messages offer information about the firm and its product to audiences who would otherwise lack this knowledge. However, marketers wish to do more than simply offer information; their messaging seeks to encourage purchase. This does not go unnoticed; through experience consumers develop an understanding of marketers' motives and form beliefs about the appropriateness of particular marketing tactics (Friestad & Wright, 1994). When marketers use tactics that the consumer perceives as inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative, the consumer infers manipulative intent (Campbell, 1995),

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becomes more skeptical towards the marketing message (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994) and more resistant to persuasion attempts (Campbell, 1995; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000).

Given that skepticism towards marketing is a general and growing phenomenon (Boush et al., 1994; Nielsen, 2011), it is increasingly important to identify tactics marketers can use to signal their credibility. Research has demonstrated, for instance, that consumers perceive presenting information that is less ambiguous or from a third party as more fair and appropriate (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007). Similarly, consumers tend to perceive comparisons that are positively valenced (Jain & Posavac, 2004) and complete (Barone, Rose, Miniard, & Manning, 1999) as more honest, sincere, and unbiased. Presumably, consumers infer that these are tactics a deceptive marketer would not undertake. Therefore, they signal that the marketer is trustworthy and, in doing so, increase the overall effectiveness of marketing communications (Barone et al., 1999; Jain & Posavac, 2004; Kirmani & Zhu, 2007).

In line with this stream of research, we propose that claim-to-product proximity serves as a signal of the marketer's credibility. With the referenced product close, a product-related claim seems easier to test. Consumers should associate marketing tactics that seem to encourage claim verifiability with trustworthy firms as only an honest firm is likely to encourage such behavior. Indeed, deceptive firms that intend to manipulate and mislead consumers are unlikely to encourage claim verifiability as it enhances the risk of discovery. This suggests that when the perception of claim verifiability is heightened by claim-to-product proximity, consumers will perceive the marketer and their messages as less manipulative and more trustworthy. Because we predict that packages are higher in perceptions of claim-to-product proximity than advertisements, we hypothesize that consumers will infer less manipulative intent and therefore find product claims more believable when they are presented on a package versus in an ad.

Differences between packages and advertisements

While the difference in believability between packages and ads has yet to be formally identified in the marketing literature, there are several differences, in addition to claim-to-product proximity, which might suggest that claims placed on packages are more believable than those in ads. For instance, in the U.S. food industry, there are more stringent regulations on packages (from the FDA) than on ads (from the FTC). If consumers perceive this difference, then they may perceive food health claims made on packages as more credible than those featured in ads (Mazis & Raymond, 1997). Furthermore, consumers may extrapolate this perception onto other product categories and form lay beliefs about the relative believability of packages and ads. Consumers' experience in the marketplace may also lead to lay beliefs about the purpose of packaging and advertisements. For instance, consumers may believe that packages are meant to communicate objective information, such as usage instructions, whereas ads are meant to persuade consumers to select a specific brand.

While these differences may have some effect on believability, we propose that, in our studies, perception of claim-to-product proximity is the primary driver of the impact of presentation material (package vs. ad) on claim believability. Indeed, in our studies, we manipulate both presentation material and claim-to-product proximity. If claim-to-product proximity is driving the effect of presentation material on believability, making the referenced product seem closer to the claim should increase claim believability when it is presented in an ad but not when it is presented on a package. If a package is already perceived as close to the product, a manipulation to make the product seem closer should not impact product claim believability. Therefore, we hypothesize an interaction between presentation material and manipulations of product-to-claim proximity. We test this hypothesis, and our proposed mediator, inferences of manipulative intent, across three studies.

Of note, in all of our studies, we limit our exploration to advertisements in print and exclude other forms such as television, radio, or mobile. By doing this, we are able to control for other factors that might influence believability such as vividness (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005) or involvement (Krugman, 1965, 1967; Wright, 1974). Theoretically, it would seem these other forms of advertising share print's distance from the product and thus, all else being equal, would be less believable than packages. However, this investigation focuses solely on advertisements in print.

Study 1

In study 1, we examine the downstream effect of presentation material and claim-to-product proximity on actual purchase behavior. Earlier work has established a direct relationship between claim believability and purchase likelihood (Yagci, Biswas, & Dutta, 2009). Consequently, we predict the same pattern of results for purchase as we would for believability. Specifically, our hypothesis is that consumers will be more likely to believe a marketing claim, and thus make a purchase, when a claim is presented on a package versus in an advertisement and that the effect of presentation material on claim believability and product purchase is driven by perceptions of claim-to-product proximity. Therefore, presenting a referenced product near the claim should increase ad claim believability, making an ad claim appear as believable as a package claim and thus making an ad as effective as a package in generating sales.

Method

Participants and design

Participants were 122 undergraduate students (46.7% female) who were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (claim-to-product proximity: control, close) \times 2 (presentation material: package, ad) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Upon entering the lab, each participant was given \$1 ostensibly in appreciation for his or her time. After an hour of completing

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