The Moderating Roles of Product Category Types and Need For Cognition on the Attitudes Toward Comparative Advertising

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Despite the common use of comparative advertising, its effectiveness is mixed, or even conflicting. The discrepancies in comparative advertising research suggest the potential roles of moderating factors. This study attempts to propose two of such factors: need for cognition (high vs. low) and product category types (utilitarian vs. hedonic). Overall, the results from an experimental study demonstrate that comparative (vs. noncomparative) ads are particularly more persuasive for utilitarian products and consumers with high need for cognition. Theoretical and managerial implications and avenues for future research conclude the study.

[to cite]:
Kawpong Polyorat and Dana L. Alden (2007), "The Moderating Roles of Product Category Types and Need For Cognition on the Attitudes Toward Comparative Advertising", in E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 8, eds. Stefania Borghini, Mary Ann McGrath, and Cele Otnes, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 360-.361.

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13984/eacr/vol8/E-08

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite the common use of comparative advertising, its effectiveness is equivocal, mixed, or even conflicting (Donthu 1992). These discrepancies suggest that more research is needed to examine the moderating factors of comparative advertising effectiveness. This study proposes two of such factors: a product category type (hedonic vs. utilitarian) and need for cognition (Cacioppo and Petty 1982).

Theoretical Framework

Product category type and attitude towards comparative advertising

Utilitarian products (e.g., cold remedy and textbooks) are viewed as more practical, instrumental and associated with necessary function in life. Hedonic products (e.g., designer clothes and ice-cream) are associated with pleasure-oriented, fun, and experiential consumption (Chernev 2004).

In general, comparative (CP) ads compare the advertised brand with competitive brands attribute by attribute. This comparison style should encourage analytical thinking and lend itself better to rationale thinking which is more consistent with the characteristic of utilitarian products that focus on the usefulness or functionality of the product attributes.

Noncomparative (NC) ads, on the other hand, are not likely to encourage analytical or piecemeal processing. Ad audience may use holistic processing which is more consistent with the nature of hedonic products which are primarily concerned with global or experiential pleasure. Consumers may form an overall consumption image rather than focusing on each attribute of the product. So CP ads which encourage analytic information processing are more likely to be less effective for hedonic products which elicit global consumption experience. Based on the foregoing discussions, we hypothesize:

H1a: For a utilitarian product, CP (vs. NC) ads will elicit more favorable ad attitude.
H1b: For a hedonic product, NC (vs. CP) ads will elicit more favorable ad attitude.

Need for cognition and attitude toward comparative advertising

Need for cognition (NFC) refers to the tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful thinking (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). Individuals high in NFC intrinsically enjoy thinking while those low in NFC try to avoid effortful cognitive tasks. Because high (vs. low) NFC consumers have an intrinsic motivation to process information in a relatively more effortful manner and CP ads provide consumers with more factual information which presumably helps them to make rational brand choices (Wilkie and Farris, 1975), it is thus expected that the effectiveness of CP (vs. NC) will be more pronounced in high (vs. low) NFC consumers.

Nevertheless, it is likely that the moderating effect of NFC will be observed primarily with utilitarian (vs. hedonic) products. For utilitarian products, consumers are likely to exert cognitive effort to process the ad information and examine the product’s ability to perform a specific function. In contrast, for hedonic products which often stimulate the sensory or affective responses, consumers are not likely to cognitively process CP ad information to assess the affective consumption experience. Literature also suggests that need for cognition increases the likelihood of attribute-based (which is more consistent to the consumption of utilitarian products) versus attitude-based processing (which is more consistent to consumption of hedonic products) (Mantel and Kardes, 1999). Based on the foregoing discussions, we hypothesize:

H2a: For utilitarian products, CP (vs. NC) ads will elicit more favorable ad attitude primarily for consumers with high (vs. low) NFC.
H2b: For hedonic products, the impact of NFC will be attenuated.

Methodology

An experimental study was conducted with two hundred and four undergraduate students. The subjects were first given a basic description of the study and viewed either a CP or NC ad for the first product and responded to measures of ad attitudes (drawn from Neese and Taylor, 1994). Next, the subjects read the ad of the second product and completed the same measures as those for the first ad. The ad types for the first and second products are always different. The subjects then were asked to complete the NFC scale (Cacioppo, Petty and Kao, 1984). Finally, after providing basic demographic data, subjects were debriefed.

Toothpaste and candy were selected as the focal utilitarian and hedonic products based on a pre-test. The two print ads (CP and NC ads) for each product category type contained the same information, except that CP ads also indicated that the sponsoring brand was better on each attribute than the leading brand.

Results

The two research hypotheses were examined using factorial ANOVA where ad format (CP vs. NC) and NFC (low vs. high) were independent variables and ad attitudes as a dependent variable. An ANOVA model was run for each product category type (utilitarian and hedonic).

Hypothesis testing

For a utilitarian product, the main effect of ad type (CP vs. NC) is significant. A CP (vs. NC) ad elicits more favorable ad attitudes.

For a hedonic product, the main effect of ad type (CP vs. NC) is marginally significant. A NC (vs. CP) ad elicits more favorable ad attitudes.

The interaction effect of ad type X NFC is significant for a utilitarian product but not for a hedonic product. Specifically, for a utilitarian product, CP (vs. NC) ads elicit more favorable ad attitudes for consumers with high NFC. For consumers with low NFC, however, the two ad types produce similar level of ad attitudes.

For a hedonic product, the lack of significant interaction effect of ad type X NFC suggests that, for hedonic products, the impact of NFC is attenuated.

Discussions

Overall, the results reveal the boundary of CP versus NC ad persuasiveness set by product category types (utilitarian vs. hedonic) and level of consumer’s need for cognition.
Our study suggests that marketers may consider using CP ads primarily when their products are utilitarian as opposed to hedonic. Nevertheless, when the product is hedonic in nature, NC ads could be more suitable. Furthermore, to advertise utilitarian products, marketers may consider to use CP ads especially when the target market are high NFC consumers or when the purchase situation encourages more elaborative information processing.

Our study has certain limitations which suggest avenues for future research. First, in addition to ad attitudes, future studies should include other ad effectiveness measures such as ad recalls and purchase intention. Second, the focus of this study was print ads. Other media including television and radio commercials are worth investigating as well. Finally, only indirect comparative ads were examined due to legal constraints, future research may need to verify our findings with direct comparative ad.

References

This research is supported by
The Thailand Research Fund (TRF)