

COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING: A FACTUAL CLAIM OR AN EVALUATIVE CLAIM

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**Title**

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota  
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**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Comparative advertising is widely used in the U.S and much remains to be learnt about when comparative advertising is used with the two forms of verbal claim; factual and evaluative claim. An experimental design with the 2 forms of verbal content (factual vs evaluative) and the two forms of comparative advertisements (direct vs indirect) were examined to identify the form of verbal content and comparison that would be most persuasive. In measuring the persuasiveness, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention were included as dependable variables. Results show that there was no significant difference between the two types of verbal content and the two types of comparisons which indicate that any forms of verbal content under any form of comparative advertisements is equally persuasive.

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## INTRODUCTION

After the FTC rulings in the early 1970's, comparative advertising has been widely used in the United States (Hwang, 2002; Kalro, Sivakumaran, & Marathe, 2010; WoonBong, Youndseok, & Marshal, 2006). Comparative advertising happens when a product or service is compared to one or more brands of the similar product or service, and makes comparisons in one or more product attributes (Choi and Miracal, 2004; Kalro, Sivakumaran, & Marathe, 2013; Miniard, Barone, Rose, & Manning, 2006). From an advertising perspective, comparative advertisements (ads) provide a good reason for the product or service to get popularized over the competitors (Putrevu & Lord, 1994). Some of the classic comparative ads on television are the Chevy Silverado commercial, which compares the Chevy Silverado to the Ford F-150 truck and the Verizon commercial, which compares the Verizon coverage to the Sprint coverage. The Chevy Silverado commercial is portrayed in an apocalyptic environment, in which a Silverado truck rolls off rubble. This truck drives through adverse conditions and meets two other Silverado trucks. The driver of the Chevy Silverado inquires about Dave, another truck driver. The reply he receives is; "Dave didn't drive the most dependable long-lasting truck, he drove a Ford." Likewise, the Verizon commercial opens with Jamie Foxx narrating against the backdrop of the Verizon coverage map. In contrast, another guy impersonating Foxx is introduced with the Sprint coverage map in the background. The viewers observe the low coverage of Sprint compared to the coverage of Verizon, which is the focus of the commercial. Comparative advertising has been identified as a good persuasive tool (Kalro et.al., 2013) and has been widely used in the United States of America and around the world (Donthu, 1998; Shao, Boa & Gray, 2004).

As stated in previous studies, it is important to study the forms of comparative advertising as each form of comparison brings out different effects (Grossbart, Muehling, & Kangun, 1986; Minard et.al., 2006). The verbal content influences attitude formation or changes persuasive communication; it is important to identify the best form of verbal claim for a comparative advertisement (Hoolbrook, 1978). Iyer (1988) studied factual and evaluative content under comparative advertising, but did not clearly specified the form of comparison. However, each form of comparison is very important since they have a significant difference against each other. Direct comparisons promote exemplar-based processing and indirect comparisons promote prototype-based processing (Snyder, 1992; Walker & Anderson, 1991). This study explored the two forms of verbal content/claim, factual and evaluative content, based on comparative advertising to determine the most effective form of verbal communication in terms of attitude and intention towards the product/service. As the factual and evaluative content have different approaches in making the claim, this study investigated the better form of verbal content, which could be more effective, in conjunction with the two different forms of comparisons. Attitude towards the brand and purchase intention towards the brand would be considered as outcome variables for examining the effects of factual and evaluative content, under direct and indirect comparisons. Thus, this study examines both forms of verbal content under both forms of comparative advertising, direct and indirect comparisons.



## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Previous research states the contrast between factual and evaluative content is the basic difference for decoding of a verbal message (Darley & Smith, 1993; Holbrook, 1978). Also, factual and evaluative dimensions of verbal content is vital, since it builds attitude formation or an increase in persuasiveness (Furnham, Gunter, & Green, 1990; Holbrook, 1978; Paul, Dussart, & Perrien, 1985). Thus, it is of utmost importance to decipher the appropriate form of verbal content, to make comparative advertising most effective. It is important to carry out this investigation in both forms of comparisons while addressing previous research which limited the study only to the direct comparative advertising (Iyer, 1988). Previous research indicates factual claims reduce counterargument and increases visual imaging, but these factors have only been tested within, direct comparative advertising (Edell & Staelin, 1983; Iyer, 1988). Consumers' attitude towards the brand would be regarded as a vital element and an influential determinant of the effectiveness of the advertisement (Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989). Thus, measuring the effectiveness of the verbal content in conjunction with the two forms of comparison would indicate the effectiveness of each message.

Purchase intention, the second variable, measures the extent to which the consumers would be intending to purchase the brand/service (Brucks, 1985; Hoch & Ha, 1986). The current study is helpful for professionals in the advertising and marketing world; seeking comparative advertising to promote their products or services. This study of comparative advertising, together with the two forms of verbal content, based on the Heuristic Systematic Model depict how the Heuristic Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1980) could be effective, within the two forms of comparisons, which promote different processing systems, that has not been studied in previous research.

## **Direct vs Indirect Comparative Advertisements**

Among the comparative ads there are two types of comparisons: a) indirect comparisons in which the product or service refers to the entire market or competitor/s very subtly, and b) direct comparison, which refers to one or more brands openly (Kalro et al., 2013; McDougall, 1978; Muelhing Stoltman, & Grossbart, 1990). Direct Comparison happens when a comparative advertisement makes a direct reference to a well-known competitor (Kalro et al., 2013; Muelhing et al., 1990). Additionally, a relatively unknown brand would compare itself to a well-known market leader (Muelhing et al., 1990). Indirect comparisons implicitly refer to the competitor/s without naming it. Indirect comparisons refer to a specific brand/s by a common attribute such as the “leading brand,” visual comparison of the competitor or by comparing itself to most/all brands in the market place (Kalro et al., 2013; Miniard et al., 2006). Looking at an example of indirect comparative advertisements, “Motorola smartphone is better than all other smartphones” would be an example of comparing the product to the entire market while “Motorola smartphone is better than most smartphones above \$650” would be an example of comparison to leading brands.

Direct and indirect comparative ads could be associated with the Heuristic Systematic model (HSM). HSM is a theory of persuasion that indicates the two approaches of processing information of a message (Chaiken, 1980). Systematic processing is whereby people carefully consider and analyze given situation, before arriving at a conclusion. Systematic processing requires an effort to be utilized in processing the information (Chaiken, 1987; Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Heuristic processing on the contrary, requires less cognitive effort and is considered a restricted mode of processing information (Chaiken, 1987; Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Compared to systematic processing, heuristic

processing validates a message by relying more on the non-context cues such as the source and other exterior features. Systematic processing validates a message based on the message characteristics (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Direct comparative ads would be very relevant with the heuristic processing because the relatively new brand compares itself to the leading brand, which is familiar to the consumers. The likeability of the leading/best brand by the customer would lead to heuristic processing. As Chaiken (1987) states, the resemblance of the target case to a prototypical case acts as a powerful cue in bringing out attention on the target case. Indirect comparative ads could be relevant to systematic processing where the consumers would carefully analyze the cue before making the decision. The two forms of comparison are processed differently and the HSM could be connected more clearly to the two forms of comparisons based on how each form of comparison is processed.

Direct comparative advertising and indirect comparative advertising are processed differently as direct comparisons promote exemplar-based processing while indirect comparisons promote prototype-based processing (Walker & Anderson, 1991; Snyder, 1992). The exemplar category is where the new thinking is compared in a holistic manner which indicates that the category is represented by an instance that has been previously encountered. A new item is assumed to judge an instance which has similar representations stored in memory (Elio & Anderson, 1981; Medin, Altom, & Murphy, 1984; Storms, De Boeck, & Ruts, 2000). The exemplar-based processing could be associated with the heuristic processing of the HSM. The prototype is a category where the new stimulus is compared in an analytical manner. A category is represented by a set of features and accepted as a new member if they are similar enough to the prototype (Elio & Anderson, 1981; Medin, Altom, & Murphy, 1984; Smith & Minda, 2002). The prototype based processing could be associated with the systematic processing. Thus, as the

two forms of comparisons produce two different ways of processing the advertisement, this study would first examine which form of comparison, direct or indirect, is more persuasive to the consumer.

Although previous research examined direct versus indirect comparisons in terms of effectiveness through many variables, previous research has not measured the two forms of comparisons through the attitude towards the brand and the purchase intention. Affective measures are used to identify established or created attitudes towards an advertisement stimuli, and attitudes towards the brand would be an appropriate measure to identify the effectiveness of the two forms of variables (Fazio, Powell, & Williams 1989; Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989; Choi & Miracal, 2004). Conative measures are used to measure a response behavior from the advertising stimuli. This involves a behavior intention such as the need for more information on the product or the intentions to purchasing the product (Brucks, 1985; Hoch & Ha, 1986; Choi & Miracal, 2004). Purchase intention could be identified as an effective measure on the two forms of comparison. Since the two forms of comparison are processed differently it is vital to identify which form of comparison, direct or indirect comparison, creates a more effective attitude towards the brand and purchase intention.

Many studies used brand attitude as a dependable variable to measure the effectiveness of comparative ads, versus noncomparative ads (Hwang, 2002; Miniard et al.2006; WoonBong, Youngseok and Marshall, 2006). Just one study on comparative advertisement did use brand attitude as a dependent variable within the two forms of comparisons (Choi & Miracle, 2004). However, Choi and Miracle (2004) compared attitude towards the brand of Korean and American consumers through each form of comparison, instead of finding the better form of comparison within a low context communication culture, such as the American culture. Thus,

previous research has not clearly specified as to which form of comparison would be more effective in terms of attitude towards the brand in a low context communication culture.

Therefore, this study tested brand attitude through each form of comparison.

The second dependent variable, purchase intention, had been extensively used throughout comparative advertising literature but had not on the two forms of comparison. WoonBong, Youndseok, and Marshal (2006) measure the effectiveness of indirect comparisons and substantiated claims through purchase intentions. Many other studies used purchase intention as a dependable variable in measuring the effectiveness of comparative advertising in other dimensions (Hwang 2002; Pechmann & Stewart, 1994; WoonBong, Youndseok, & Marshal, 2006) while Choi and Miracal (2004) compared purchase intention of the Korean and American consumers through both forms of comparison separately instead of finding the better form of comparison within a low communication context culture, just as stated above with the attitude towards the brand. Pechmann and Stewart (1994) used purchase intention as a variable in measuring the two forms of comparison, and found out that positive purchase intentions exist when a new brand directly compares itself to a high share brand but there was no significant difference in purchase intention within an indirect comparison, where a new brand compares itself indirectly or subtly to a high share brand.

Shao, Boa, and Gray (2004) examined the persuasiveness of the two forms of comparative advertising within a high context communication culture and a low context communication culture and found the direct form of comparison to be more persuasive in a low context culture. Thus, as the U.S is identified as a low context culture (Shao et al., 2004) direct comparative ads should be effective in terms of persuasiveness over indirect comparative ads. Another study revealed that direct comparison outperforms indirect comparisons in positioning

itself against the competitor/s (Minard et al., 2006). Pechmann and Stewart (1994) found the direct comparisons produce greater effect when brands with new market share are compared to a high share brand. The high share brand could serve as the attention grabber. The label of the high share brand could serve as the index and attract attention (Pechmann & Stewart, 1994). Thus, consistent with previous studies, this study posits that direct comparative advertising would be more effective over indirect comparison, based on attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions. The first and second hypothesis are as follows:

H1 – Attitude towards the brand will be more positive in direct comparative advertisements than indirect comparative advertisements

H2 – Purchase intention will be higher in direct comparative advertisement than indirect comparative advertisements

### **Factual Content and Evaluative Content**

As the second stage of this study, the more persuasive form of verbal content is identified. As stated by Holbrook (1978), a fundamental measurement of verbal communication, based on its semantic properties, is the degree to which the message becomes mainly factual or evaluative. Thus, the contrast between factual and evaluative content is the basic decoding of any verbal message that makes a claim (Holbrook, 1978). Within persuasive communications factual content is designed as “logical objectively verifiable descriptions of tangible product features” (Holbrook, 1978, p.547) and evaluative content is defined as “emotional, subjective impressions, of intangible aspects of the product” (Holbrook, 1978, p.547). As a different explication has not been offered on factual and evaluative content, all subsequent research had adopted Holbrook’s explication and the current study uses Halbrook’s (1978) definitions of factual and evaluative content.

Factual and Evaluative content can also be associated with the Heuristic Systematic model. Systematic processing can be associated with evaluative content as it demands and consumes cognitive processing whereas heuristic processing can be associated with factual content as heuristic processing makes only a few cognitive demands. According to the principal of information-processing parsimony, a person's limited cognitive capacity limits their decisions, relying on heuristics which results in processing little data as possible when making decisions. The principal of information-processing parsimony also suggests that no consumer will acquire all content in the environment.

Iyer (1988) states, that the use of factual information responds to criticism and create a positive attitude on the advertised brand while Holbrook (1978) stated that factual content should be seen as more credible information, and should exert a positive effect on important beliefs that can be associated with the principal of information-processing parsimony. This situation further indicates that a receiver will not acquire all information in the message but instead acquires information they identify as primary information, referring to the attributes, they regards as important (Haines, 1974; Wright, 1973; Kim & Lee, 2015). Shimp & Preston (1981) identify evaluative content as a feature that emphasizes on attributes of the product added by the seller's claim into the consumer's mind, which could turn out to be very beneficial in selling a product. As further stated by Shimp and Preston (1981), consumers are susceptible to interpreter evaluative claims as constituting factual claims. Evaluative content could be a process of implications wherein the consumer accepts an unstated factual claim in which the consumers may be persuaded to believe facts about the advertised brand nonexistent in the competitive brand/s (Shimp & Preston, 1981). An evaluative advertising claim is ideal to influence a target belief of the consumer (Shimp & Preston, 1981). Thus, as factual content and evaluative content

have different approaches towards making claims on the product or service, examining the best form of verbal content would be important for both practitioners and scholars.

Previous studies have indicated that factual content supports a strong argument and builds favorable attitude (Iyer, 1988; Kim & Lee, 2015; Polyorat, Alden, & Kim, 2007). Iyer (1988) studied the two types of verbal content: factual and evaluative content through the variables of attitude towards brand and purchase intention which identifies that factual content builds a positive attitude towards the brand and stronger purchase intentions than evaluative content. This is further established by previous studies that tested factual and evaluative content under other variables (Rossiter & Percy, 1980; Holbrook, 1978; Golden & Johnson, 1983; Schindler & Yalch, 2006). However, Shimp and Preston (1981) argue that there could always be a chance that consumers perceive evaluative claims as factual claims or factual claims as evaluative claims. For example, the claim “X dishwasher cleaner is an excellent degreaser than Y dishwasher cleaner” is an evaluative claim that could be regarded as a constituting factual claim by some consumers. This dynamic could encourage advertisers to prefer evaluative content over factual content, especially since an evaluative claim has the ability to outsell a factual claim. However, as most of the previous studies indicated that factual content builds up stronger attitude and intention, this study focuses on attitude towards product and purchase intention, the following hypothesis are proposed:

H3 – Attitude towards the brand will be more positive in factual content than in evaluative content

H4 – Purchase intention will be higher in factual content than in evaluative content



## **Factual and Evaluative Content Under Direct and Indirect Comparative Ads**

Although previous research had been carried out on direct and indirect comparative ads (McDougall, 1978; Muelhing et al., 1990; Minard et al., 2006; Pechmann & Stewart, 1994; Pechmann & Esteban 1994), and factual and evaluative content in comparative advertising (Iyer, 1988) the effects of factual and evaluative content under the two different forms of comparative ads have not been examined in past research which is a major shortcoming in past research. Most scholarly work on comparative advertising has employed direct comparisons as the default form to examine the effects of comparative advertising. The researcher's assumption of comparative advertisement as a direct form of comparison was a negative factor overlooked in many scholarly research of comparative advertising as the two forms of comparisons are processed differently and could have different results (Polyarat & Alden, 2005; Belch, 1981; Donthu, 1998; Dorge, 1989; Etgar & Goodwin, 1982; Iyer, 1988; Jain & Hackleman, 1978; Jeon & Beatty, 2002; Lord & Putrevu, 1994; Shimp & Dyer, 1978). Only a few studies stated the form of comparison against the default mode of testing variables: in many instances a direct comparison. As stated earlier in this manuscript, factual and evaluative content are associated with the HSM where systematic processing can be associated with evaluative content, and heuristic processing with factual content. Thus, it is important to identify the ideal form of verbal content combined with the appropriate form of comparison, direct or indirect, which brings out the best results in terms of attitude towards the brand and purchase intention.

As Grossbart and colleagues (1986) stated, when reference to the competitor is visual the recall and attitude is lesser than when the reference to the competitor is verbal. Therefore, it is important to identify the best form of verbal content that works well with the specific form of comparison in persuading the consumer. As stated earlier in this manuscript, direct comparisons

involve exemplar based processing and indirect comparisons involve prototype based processing. The two types of verbal content, factual and evaluative content, vary in the manner the message is decoded, and causes processing differences. Thus, it would be important to identify the form of verbal content which is more effective under exemplar based processing and proto-type based processing. Grossbart and colleagues (1986) call for further research by studying various verbal cues within both forms of comparative advertisements. Thus, it would be important to study the interaction of the two forms of verbal content under the two forms of comparisons and comprehend the effective form of verbal content, and its specific mode of comparison. Gaining knowledge on the effective form of comparison and its specific verbal content, is a vital aspect in comparative advertising research which has not been identified in past research, and seen as a major shortcoming. Thus, because of the absence of research on the interaction of the two types of verbal content and the two forms of comparisons, the precise nature of this interaction is unclear, and nothing stronger than two research questions are warranted.

R1: How does the two forms of verbal content (factual/evaluative) interact with the two forms of comparisons (direct/indirect) in terms of attitude towards the product?

R2: How does the two forms of verbal content (factual/evaluative) interact with the two forms of comparisons (direct/indirect) in terms of purchase intention?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

A sample of 200 students at North Dakota State University between the ages of 18 to 26 years ( $M = 19.82$ ,  $SD = 12.39$ ) participated in the study. The participants were recruited through the COMM 110 class which was a first year Communication class. The students were randomly assigned into four experimental conditions in a 2 (form of comparison: direct/indirect)  $\times$  2 (verbal content: factual/evaluative) between subject experimental design. Each experimental condition had a sample size of 50. Of the 200 participants, 77 (38.%) were males and 119 (59.5%) were females. Participants identified themselves as Caucasians (88%), African Americans (3%), Asians (3%), Latinos (1%), American Indians or Alaskan natives (.5%), others (1.5%) and 3% did not identify themselves. The participants reported more than 50 different majors they were enrolled in. 68.5% of the participants were freshman and 24.5% of the participants were sophomore. All participants received credit for participating in the study.

### **Procedures**

A questionnaire was used to gather data on the participants attitude towards the advertised product and purchase intention towards the advertised product in each of the four experimental conditions. After the IRB approved this study, data was collected using an online questionnaire distributed through Qualtrics. The participants were directed to first go over the advertisement that represents one of the four experimental conditions. Thereafter, the participant would answer a questionnaire based on the advertisement, which would measure participant's attitudes towards the advertised product and the intention towards purchasing the advertised product. The questionnaire remained the same over all four experimental conditions although the advertisement stimuli was manipulated to satisfy each experimental condition.

## **Stimuli**

Four print advertisement were used as stimuli for this study. Four different ads represented the four experimental conditions. When selecting the brand it was decided that this study would incorporate an unknown fictitious brands as the advertising brand which was also found in previous studies on comparative advertising (Gotlieb & Sarel, 1991; Minard et al., 2006; Muehling et al., 1990; Putrevu & Lord, 1994). When using an unknown fictitious brand, participants are not influenced by their pre-existing attitudes. If the study is tested upon known brands there could be a tendency for the participants to be biased towards certain brands. Sources indicate that electronic products are a top product purchased by millennials (13 devices college students actually need, n.d.). Most used electronic products by young adults were reported as Electronic Tablets (Paranada, 2014; Donnelly & Scaff, n.d.). Therefore, it was decided to have Electronic Tablets as the advertising product since the participants of this study were college students. In the direct advertising stimuli, the advertising product will compare itself to a leading product being Apple tablets.

## **Measures**

Attitude towards brand is composed of six sub-measures as follows; (a) “In my opinion Force Pro N72 is good,” (b) “In my opinion Force Pro N72 is positive” developed by Mitchel & Olson (1981), (c) “I like Force Pro N72,” (d) “I think favorably about Force Pro N72” taken from previous research studies (Lutz & Belch, 1983; Mitchel & Olson, 1981), (d) “Force Pro N72 is an excellent product,” (e) “I would recommend Force Pro N72 to my friends,” developed by Moreau, Markman, & Lehmann (2001). All six questions were on a seven-point bipolar Likert scale and were highly reliable ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Purchase intention composed of five sub-measures as follows: (a) “I intend to purchase a Force Pro N72 during the current school year,” (b) “I intend to purchase a Force Pro N72 tablet for my schoolwork and other activities,” (c) “I intend to purchase a Force Pro N72 as often as possible,” (d) “I plan to purchase a Force Pro N72 in the future,” (e) “I expect my purchase of a Force Pro N72 to continue in the future” (Shroff, Deneen, & Ng, 2011). All five questions were on a seven-point bipolar Likert scale. This measure was reliable ( $\alpha = .61$ ).

## RESULTS

As a manipulation check, participants had to answer three items which asked if the stimuli was believable, convincing, and trustworthy. All three questions used a five-point bipolar Likert scale. The three questions were included to assess if participants viewed the stimuli in all four conditions as a credible source. The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA on the four conditions was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 196) = .04, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0$ . This study also assessed two other questions asking the participant (a) the competition brand in the ad, and (b) the type of claim in the ad. 95% of the participants correctly answered the competition brand while 77% of the participants correctly answered the type of ad claim. Thus, it is clear that when completing the questionnaire, the participants had processed the stimuli. However, across all four conditions the overall believability of the ad stimuli was relatively low. The three items which measured the overall believability; believable, convincingness, and trustworthiness were relatively low across all four conditions ( $M = 9.34, SD = 2.72$ )

To examine the hypothesis and the research questions in this study, a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA was conducted for the two independent variables of the study. Hypothesis 1 and 2 were examined by the main effects of comparative advertising while hypothesis 3 and 4 were examined by the main effects of the verbal content. The two research questions were examined by looking at the interaction effect of comparative advertising and verbal content.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that direct comparative advertisements would have a positive attitude to indirect comparative advertisements. The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA on the comparative advertising produced a main effect that was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 196) = .43, p > .05, \eta^2 = .002$ . Hypothesis 2 predicted that direct comparative advertisements would have a higher purchase intention than indirect comparative advertisements. The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA on comparative

advertising main effect was significant,  $F(1, 196) = 10.75, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$ . This showed that direct comparative ad ( $M = 26.43, SD = 7.33$ ) created a higher purchase intention than indirect comparative ad ( $M = 22.71, SD = 8.61$ ).

Hypothesis 3 was found to be nonsignificant. The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA on the verbal content produced a main effect that was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 196) = .07, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0$ , with evaluative content ( $M = 20.61, SD = 6.96$ ) and factual content ( $M = 20.36, SD = 6.52$ ). Hypothesis 4 predicted that factual content would have a higher intention to purchase the product than evaluative content. The  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA on the verbal content produced a main effect that was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 196) = .18, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0$ , with evaluative content ( $M = 24.81, SD = 8.74$ ) and factual content ( $M = 24.33, SD = 7.64$ ) but it was nonsignificant.

The first research question looked into the interaction effects of the form of comparisons and the verbal content on the attitude towards the brand. Interpreting the two main effects, comparative ad  $\times$  verbal content interaction, it was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 196) = .83, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0$ . The second research question looked into the interaction effects of the form of comparisons and the verbal content on the purchase intention. Interpreting the two main effects, comparative ad  $\times$  verbal content interaction, it was nonsignificant,  $F(1, 196) = .63, p > .05, \eta^2 = 0$ . Table 1 shows the means associated with the interactions for attitude towards the product and table 2 shows the means associated with the interactions for the purchase intention.

Table 1

*The mean and standard deviation of the experimental conditions for the attitude towards the brand*

	<b>DIRECT</b>	<b>INDIRECT</b>
	20.48	20.24
<b>FACTUAL</b>	(6.10)	(6.96)
	19.86	21.36
<b>EVALUATIVE</b>	(6.73)	(7.15)

Table 2

*The mean and standard deviation of the experimental conditions for the purchase intention*

	<b>DIRECT</b>	<b>INDIRECT</b>
	26.64	22.02
<b>FACTUAL</b>	(7.02)	(7.60)
	26.22	23.40
<b>EVALUATIVE</b>	(7.70)	(9.55)



## DISCUSSION

This study was designed to examine four conditions, (a) direct comparison/factual, (b) direct comparison/evaluative, (c) indirect comparison/factual, and (d) indirect comparison/evaluative. Evaluation for the best condition, was examined by testing the two different types of comparative ad forms, and the two types of verbal content, associated with the attitude, towards the brand and the purchase intention.

Focusing on hypothesis 1, the data was nonsignificant between the two types of comparisons. Though inconsistent with previous research (Iyer, 1988), some of the past research had highlighted that the two forms of comparisons could significantly vary when moderated by certain conditions (Karlo et al., 2013; Jeon & Beatty, 2002). As hypothesis 1 tested the attitude towards the brand, it was simply direct and indirect comparisons, and was not moderated by any other conditions such as substantiated/unsubstantiated or analytical/imagery. It was revealed that when substantiated/unsubstantiated moderating conditions are included, indirect comparisons were significant than direct comparisons when not substantiated. When analytical/imagery moderating conditions were included to the two forms of comparative ads, indirect comparisons were significant with analytical processing while direct comparisons were significant with imagery processing. Shao and colleagues (2004) state that even though direct comparative advertising would be more persuasive in a low-context culture, there could be no significant difference in regard to the attitude. Thus, it is reinstated that the two forms of comparison would not be significant in terms of attitude when no moderating condition is present. Considering the consumers strong belief and attitude towards the best or leading brand in the market, in this study which was Apple iPad, could be a possibility for direct and indirect comparative ads to be nonsignificant. McDougall (1978) states that consumers who are loyal to

the competing brand could perceive negative attitudes towards the advertising brand. Specially, in the case of this study where the Apple iPad is used as the competing product, most college students have a strong attitude towards the Apple iPad, and consequently they would not be able to have a higher attitude towards a new brand.

However, the purchase intention of the two different forms of comparisons were significant indicating that direct comparative ads are likely to create a higher purchase intention than indirect comparative ads which supports the prediction of hypothesis 2. This falls in line with previous research that show that direct comparative ads are more persuasive than indirect comparative ads, in terms of purchase intent (Iyer, 1988; Shao et al., 2004; Minard et al., 2006). Direct comparisons, a relatively new brand comparing itself with a leading brand could persuade people to purchase the advertised brand, especially in instances of promoting the product over the leading brand. When the relatively new or unheard product is holistically compared through a previously encountered instance, which is the exemplar based processing, it convinces consumers to purchase the product.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 which tested the higher attitude towards the brand and the purchase intention of the two types of verbal content were not significant. Previous research reports that factual content builds up a strong argument and creates positive attitude (Iyer, 1988; Kim & Lee, 2015; Polyorat, Alden, & Kim, 2007) while research on evaluative content indicate that it would be ideal to influence the target beliefs of the consumers (Shimp & Preston, 1981). Thus, this study reveals that even though factual and evaluative content has their own positive impact on influencing the attitude and intent of consumers a significant difference is not present among the two types of verbal content in building up a positive attitude towards the brand and a higher purchase intention. As factual content brings out positive attitude and a strong argument while

evaluative content brings out emotional subjective impressions, they both have the same effect in terms of persuading the consumer. Some consumers may be persuaded by factual content as it gives out facts or figures bringing out a strong argument over the competitor while other consumers may be persuaded by evaluative content which could influence their targeted beliefs. Also, as stated earlier in this manuscript, there could be instances where consumers perceive evaluative claims as factual claims or vice versa and this could be another reason for the factual and evaluative content to be nonsignificant. Overall, both forms of verbal content are equally persuasive in projecting the sponsored brand over the rival brand.

The two research questions look in to what experimental condition (a) direct comparative ad/factual (b) direct comparative ad/evaluative (c) indirect comparative ad/factual (d) indirect comparative ad/evaluative has a positive attitude toward the brand and a higher purchase intention. The results didn't reveal any significant difference to indicate that all different conditions bring out the identical effect in terms of persuasion. While the two forms of verbal content have their own strategies of persuasion within advertising, and when combined with the two forms of comparisons there was no significant effect meaning that all four claims have equal effect of persuading consumers. Past comparative advertising research added moderating conditions to the two forms of comparison and found significant differences in the data. However, this study shows that direct and indirect comparisons moderated by factual and evaluative have no significant difference which indicates that any form of verbal content, factual or evaluative, could be used with any form of comparison, direct or indirect, in persuading the consumer to seek the product or service.

The main reason for the four conditions to be nonsignificant could be due to the two moderating conditions, factual and evaluative content, not been significantly different. It was

mentioned earlier in this manuscript that only when moderating conditions are added to comparative ads that there could be a significant difference. In this study, the moderating conditions were the two forms of verbal content, and hypotheses 3 and 4 showed that the two forms of verbal content were nonsignificant. Thus, the verbal content used as moderating conditions to the two forms of comparative ads were nonsignificant. The results being nonsignificant could also be associated with the narrow age range of participants. Over 88% of the participants were within the ages of 18 and 19, and at such a young age they may have not been able to feel or identify any unique effects from the four different conditions. Since most young adults have a high involvement with the Apple iPad, they could have mixed feelings about the ad stimuli which could have been a reason for the results of the four conditions to not have a significant difference. Specially, as the young participants have a strong bonding with the Apple iPad, the overall believability of the ads were low which could have an impact on the four different experimental conditions not being significant.

### **Limitations and Directions for Further Research**

Looking at the limitations of this study, the most outstanding limitation is associated with the low believability of the ad stimuli. There could be a possibility of the results having a significant difference if the participants perceived the stimuli to be more believable; also perceiving the product to be a real-world product. As most of the college students use Apple iPads and have a high esteem towards the Apple iPad, the believability towards a product claiming superiority over the Apple iPad could make the ad less believable. The low reliability of the purchase intention scale could also be another potential limitation of this study. While the reliability of the purchase intention scale was acceptable, there could be a possibility that higher reliability could bring out different results.

The limitation of testing the four conditions through just one form of media, a print advertisement, could be a limitation of this study. In the digital era, advertisements are spread out through many forms of digital media and research have pointed out that young consumers interact with digital forms of advertisement than print ads (Simpson, 2017; Mitchell, 2012). Pew Research also state the 88% of the young adults (18-29) use social media (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Additionally, a print ad has a limited exposure to it's audiences over other forms of ads. By giving the participants more exposure to the ad, there is a possibility for the results to be significant.

Another possible limitation of this study is limiting the participants to young adults. This study consisted of 88% of the participants between the ages of 18 to 19. The results of this study could vary with the inclusion of a diverse age group. Previous advertising research indicate that consumer's age is an important factor in advertising research (Chang, 2008; Kazakova, Cauberghe, Hudders, & Labyt, 2016; Knoll, Matthes, Munch, & Ostermann, 2017). Various age groups could perceive advertising differently (Knoll et al., 2017). Thereby, it would be possible to assess if any of the four message claims had a significant attitude and intention connected to a particular age group.

Thus, further research can expand upon this study and test the two forms of comparisons and the two forms of verbal content through various forms of media. A future study could test the four message claims through other media such as a television ad, an internet banner ad, and an internet video ad (YouTube ad). As mentioned by past research, different media channels gain the attention of the consumer in a different way (Simpson, 2017; Mitchell, 2012). Also by including digital forms of media, there could be a greater level of ad exposure which was minimal in this study. Future research could also look at increasing the believability of the

stimuli, which could be by including a different form of medium and more real-world features of an ad and/or advertising product. Future research could have a pilot study to test the stimuli before collecting data. By having a pilot study, the level of believability of the ad would be revealed before using the stimuli to collect data.

Further research could also include participants of all ages, to see if there would be any significant difference in any condition. The study could also be manipulated by other conditions such as education level, socio-economic status, and gender. This could be very helpful, especially for advertising practitioners to determine, the ideal condition that suits a particular form of message, when advertising a product or targeting a certain consumer group. Improving the purchase intention scale to a high reliability by adopting new questions to assess any significant difference would be another task set for further research. Furthermore, research could also consider moderating conditions of the dependable variables of this study to assess a significant differences of a condition. Conditions such as substantiated/unsubstantiated claims, and other moderating conditions, could determine if any of the four conditions in this study would be significant, when moderating conditions are incorporated.

### **Practical Implications**

Advertising and marketing professionals would find this study to be of great importance. When promoting a product through comparative advertising, advertising practitioners would need to be aware of the form of verbal content, factual or evaluative, that would work more effectively with the form of comparative ad in persuading the consumer. As the results indicates, any form of verbal content, factual or evaluative could be used under any from of comparative ad. This study also shows that there is no significant different between the two forms of verbal content and the two forms or comparative ads, direct and indirect comparisons would not have

any significant difference without any moderating conditions. Overall, this study enlightens practitioners on the factual and evaluative content, the two forms of comparative ads and the interaction effect of the two forms of verbal content and the two forms of comparative ads.

## **Conclusion**

The increased demand for advertisements, stimulates growth for comparative advertisements. This study is the first step in examining the effects of the two forms of verbal content under the two forms of comparative ads. This is an extended study of Iyer's (1988) findings, focused on the factual and evaluative content, pertaining to the two forms of comparative ads. Thus, based on the same concept, this study has generated new knowledge, promoting further growth, on comparative advertising research. Current findings could be further researched to better understand the effects of verbal content and comparative advertising. Thus, this study could be treated as the basis for timely and further advertising research.

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