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Rajagopal · Ramesh Behl

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Editors

Rajagopal
EGADE Business School
Mexico City, Mexico

Ramesh Behl
International Management Institute
Bhubaneswar, India

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Effect of Exaggerated Claims on Brand Evaluation

Isbpreet Viridi

INTRODUCTION

Is belief independent of comprehension? Descartes asserted that comprehension proceeds, and is independent of, belief. As humans come into contact with claims or opinions, they comprehend them automatically, and then decide whether to accept or reject the information (Gilbert 1991; Gilbert et al. 1993). Spinoza, on the other hand, believed that comprehending and accepting were part of the same process. "According to Spinoza, the act of understanding is the act of believing. As such, people are incapable of withholding their acceptance of what they understand. They may indeed change their mind after accepting the assertions they comprehend but they cannot stop their minds from being changed by the contact with those assertions" (Gilbert et al. 1993, p. 222). Government policymakers allow advertisers to use puffery, defined as wildly exaggerated, fanciful, or vague claims for a product or service, because they believe that nobody could possibly treat puffery seriously or be misled by it. Two critical assumptions underlay the policy. First,

I. Viridi (✉)
Mata Sundri College for Women, Delhi University, Delhi, India

consumers can identify puffed claims as not credible. Second, consumers will not incorporate a puffed claim into their evaluations or beliefs because they understand that the puffery is a "wild" exaggeration. Although policymakers use Cartesian logic, empirical evidence supports Spinoza's view. Gilbert et al. (1993) show that interrupting the processing of false claims results in participants believing the claims to be truer. The disturbing implication of the findings by Gilbert et al. (1993) is that every encounter with misinformation or an exaggerated claim can potentially affect future behavior, even if the consumer realizes that the claim is false. The research presented here demonstrates that although consumers are able to identify an exaggerated claim as less credible, exposure to the puffed claim still shifts the evaluation of the brand to be more positive.

Government policymakers allow advertisers to use wildly exaggerated, fanciful, or vague claims for a product or service because they believe that nobody could possibly treat the claims seriously or be misled by them. The results demonstrate that although consumers are able to identify exaggerated claims as less credible than factual claims, their brand evaluations are inflated after exposure to exaggerated claims. The explanation is that during the process of comprehension, claims are accepted before being discredited. The temporary acceptance of the claim affects memory, even after the claim is understood as an exaggeration.

PROCESSING EXAGGERATED CLAIMS

Cartesian Approach

Government policymakers have taken the position that consumers recognize that puffery lacks credibility, even though very little empirical evidence has been presented to support this assumption. Policymakers assume that when consumer process exaggerated claims they understand the lack of credibility and ignore the claims. Cartesian logic is implicit in this assumption, as there is no concern for partially processed claims.

Previous academic research has focused on conditions under which consumers believe exaggerated claims (Kamins and Marks 1987; Olson and Dover 1978; Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980; Wyckham 1985). Most research has shown that consumers do form beliefs based on specific puffed claims such as "the fastest headache relief possible." Two explanations are offered for the deception. First, consumers believe the claims (Kamins and Marks 1987; Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980; Shimp and Preston