

# THE IMPACT OF INVOLVEMENT AND ARGUMENT TYPE ON THE PERSUASIVENESS OF POPULARITY CLAIMS IN ADVERTISING

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## ABSTRACT

Research in social psychology suggests that comparison is a basic human motive and that individuals attend to and act on the beliefs, thoughts, and expectation of others (Allen 1965; Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Jolson, Anderson, and Leber 1981; Lennox and Wolf 1984; Levy 1959; Miniard and Cohen 1983; Nord and Peter 1980; Pettigrew 1967; Solomon and Schopler 1982). According to this perspective, advertising messages that stimulate social comparison with persons depicted or mentioned in the advertisement should have an impact on consumers' product evaluations, choices, and usage. Social comparison theory (Bearden and Rose 1990; Festinger 1954; Wood 1989) is especially applicable to the notion that consumers compare their own opinions and evaluations with those portrayed in ads. Festinger proposed that humans have a drive to evaluate their abilities and opinions, and that they evaluate themselves by comparison with others, often shifting toward the majority view out of desire to hold the correct opinion.

The focus of this research is on the "popularity claim," a commonly used but seldom researched advertising strategy that implies superiority of a given brand based on its popularity among consumers. We use the term "popularity claims" to represent those broad declarative statements in advertising which purport that a majority of consumers prefer or use the sponsor's brand of a product or service. An example of a popularity claim is, "Three out of four consumers prefer Evian bottled water."

In this study, we empirically investigate when, if ever, popularity claims are persuasive tools in advertising. Specifically, we examine how two potential moderating variables, Involvement and Argument Type, influence the persuasiveness of popularity claims on ad and brand evaluations. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), more highly involved message recipients will undertake a deliberate assessment of the message arguments, and knowledge about the number of people advocating a position will have little value as a simple acceptance cue. As such, for more highly involved

individuals, popularity claims which are lacking information that is salient to brand selection will be not as persuasive as those that are. Conversely, lower involvement individuals will not expend the effort required to think about the product-relevant arguments in the ad, and will not fully utilize the information advantage they provide over other irrelevant arguments. Rather, they may make a simple inference about the merits of the advocated position based on simple cues in the ad. For example, lower involvement individuals may use knowledge about the number of others who support an issue as a heuristic for the worth of the proposal. Hence, these individuals are likely to associate popularity claims with superiority and encode this as a positive cue. Furthermore, while individuals at lower levels of involvement may regard popularity claims containing central arguments as slightly more positive than those containing peripheral arguments, we do not expect this difference to be as marked among lower involvement individuals as it is among more highly involved individuals.

Results of the empirical study provide support for this prediction and suggest that, by considering the level of consumer involvement in the purchase and use of their products and services, advertisers can select message arguments better suited for the processing style needed to maximize the persuasiveness of popularity claims. Our study found that popularity claims for the stimulus product elicited the *most* favorable ad and brand evaluations when involvement was high and central arguments were presented in the popularity claim. This suggests that advertisers might employ popularity claims in a like manner when processing is likely to occur and they seek to promote similar products.

This research provides interesting insights for both researchers and practitioners. From a theoretical standpoint, this research utilizes social comparison theory in a marketing context to explain the mechanism underlying popularity claims. The study also makes a practical contribution, in that we investigate an implementable way of prompting social comparison in advertising, and demonstrate the conditions under which popularity claims may be persuasive tools.

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