

Warmth Paradox: The Interplay of Warmth Ad Exposure Contexts and Construal Levels on Consumer Responses

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Abstract

This study investigates the conditions under which the compensation effect occurs in advertising, focusing on the influence of warmth messages on consumer perceptions and responses. By comparing single-ad and comparative ad exposure contexts, the research reveals how warmth messages affect perceived brand competence and the intention to like ads. High warmth messages, when viewed in a comparative ad setting, lead to lower perceived brand competence compared to a single-ad setting, emphasizing the need for strategic message placement in competitive environments. The study further explores how consumers' construal levels—whether considering near-future or distant-future purchase decisions—moderate these effects. The negative impact of high warmth messages on perceived competence is amplified in a comparative context at low construal levels, while high construal levels mitigate this negative impact. These results provide both theoretical and practical insights, highlighting the importance of ad context and construal level in advertising strategies.

Keywords: *Warmth, Competence, Stereotype Content Model, Compensation Effect, SNS*

1. INTRODUCTION

Warmth messages are a prevalent strategy in advertising, spanning from product promotions to corporate advertisements. Advertisers use these messages to foster a positive brand image and stimulate purchase intentions. For example, warmth messages can enhance consumer-brand relationships and boost sales by making the brand seem more approachable and friendly. They are also effective in crisis situations, helping to restore or improve a brand's image [1].

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However, warmth messages do not always yield positive effects. Recent studies indicate that in certain contexts, warmth messages can negatively impact perceived quality and purchase intentions. For instance, when a product category is perceived as strong or competent, warmth messages may reduce the brand's perceived competence, thus lowering perceived quality and purchase intentions [2]. This phenomenon, known as the compensation effect, suggests a trade-off between perceptions of warmth and competence. While previous research has examined these trade-offs, it has primarily focused on product categories and the specific types of warmth messages, rather than external factors and the context of advertising exposure [3].

This study aims to explore the specific conditions under which the compensation effect occurs in advertising exposure. Specifically, it investigates the impact of an advertisement using a warmth message when viewed alongside another advertisement with a low warmth message. The study compares the effects of the warmth message in a single-ad versus a comparative ad exposure context. Given that consumers are exposed to numerous advertisements daily, from outdoor billboards to social media, focusing on the advertising exposure context provides practical implications for marketers and contributes to academic research. In addition, unlike prior studies that assumed homogeneous consumer responses, this research proposes that consumers' construal levels moderate the effects of warmth messages between two conditions.

2. LITERATURE

Stereotype Content Model and Compensation Effect

Extensive research has examined how people perceive and evaluate others, identifying key traits associated with these evaluations. Prior research found that people primarily use two fundamental dimensions—warmth and competence—to evaluate others [4]. The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) also posits that warmth and competence are universal dimensions of social perception. Warmth is associated with intentions (e.g., friendliness or harm), while competence is linked to the perceived ability to act on those intentions. A person perceived as kind, approachable, and caring is considered warm, whereas a person viewed as capable, organized, and intelligent is deemed competent [5].

Abele and Wojciszke (2007) supported this dichotomy, categorizing various trait terms into warmth and competence [6]. They found warmth correlated with masculinity, individualism, agency, and capability, while competence was related to femininity, collectivism, communion, and warmth. According to the SCM, warmth and competence are not only universal dimensions of social perceptions, there often is an inverse correlation between the two dimensions. For example, Asians are often seen as competent but not warm, while older people are perceived as warm but incompetent. This inverse relationship can also occur when people perceive others and social groups, known as the compensation effect. It implies that a strong perception of warmth can lead to a perception of incompetence, and vice versa [7, 8].

Previous studies have identified conditions under which the compensation effect is likely to occur. First, there should be an explicit comparative context, where two entities are evaluated simultaneously. Second, the effect occurs when information about only one dimension (warmth or competence) is provided, prompting inferences about the other dimension [9].

In the context of brands and advertising, warmth and competence perceptions also play a crucial role. Brands are often anthropomorphized, leading consumers to perceive and evaluate them similarly to how they perceive people. The compensation effect may occur when two competing advertisements are presented simultaneously, creating an explicit comparative context. For instance, if consumers see an ad for Brand A with a high warmth message alongside an ad for Brand B with a low warmth message, they may infer Brand

A's lower competence. Previous studies suggested that when the involvement level of a product category is low, warmth is more important for purchase intention and brand attitude, while competence is more important when the involvement of a product category is high [3]. Kim and Ball (2021) suggested that a high warmth message can harm brand evaluations by reducing perceived competence of the brand when the strong image is valued for the product category of the brand [10].

This study examines the comparative context of simultaneous ad exposure on social media, where users often encounter multiple ads from competing brands. It aims to compare single-ad exposure with comparative ad exposure. In single-ad exposure, consumers may not actively infer the brand's competence. However, in a competitive clutter condition, the comparison between high and low warmth messages may trigger the compensation effect, reducing perceived competence and negatively impacting brand evaluations. Thus, the following hypotheses are posited.

H1: When an ad using a high warmth message is used, the perceived competence of the brand in a comparative ad exposure condition will be lower compared to a single-ad exposure condition.

In addition, prior research suggested that warmth and competence are important predictors of consumers' brand evaluations. Brands that are perceived as both warm and competent are more likely to increase brand evaluations, especially brand competence significantly drives brand evaluations while the combination of warmth and competence generates an additional boost that can surpass the effect of each dimension individually [11]. In this study, a high warmth message is kept between the two exposure conditions, thus attenuated brand competence in a comparative ad exposure condition will decrease brand evaluations of the brand more compared to a single-ad exposure condition.

H2: When an ad using a high warmth message is used, intention to like the ad will be lower in a comparative ad exposure condition compared to a single-ad exposure condition.

Construal Level as a Moderating Variable

Construal Level Theory (CLT) examines how psychological distance influences people's thoughts and behaviors. This theory posits that greater psychological distance results in more abstract thinking, whereas lesser psychological distance leads to more concrete thinking. Psychological distance can be temporal, spatial, or social [12]. For example, when an object is perceived as near, people engage in low-level construal, focusing on specific, concrete details. Conversely, when an object is perceived as distant, people engage in high-level construal, thinking more abstractly and focusing on overarching goals, purposes, and the 'why' aspects.

In consumer behavior, CLT plays a significant role in how consumers perceive, interpret, and respond to advertising messages. When making purchase decisions for the distant future, consumers tend to adopt high-level construals, concentrating on desirability and broader goals related to the product. In contrast, when purchase decisions are imminent, consumers adopt low-level construals, emphasizing feasibility and practical considerations [13].

This study posits that psychological distance, or construal level, significantly influences how high warmth messages impact consumers' brand evaluations across different ad exposure conditions. For near-future

purchase decisions, consumers prioritize the feasibility of the product, which is closely linked to product quality and superiority. These aspects are more relevant to perceptions of brand competence. For instance, when making immediate purchase decisions, consumers tend to focus on the product's features and the purchasing process rather than the broader reasons for buying it. Consequently, competence perceptions become more critical in their evaluations of the brand compared to warmth perceptions in near-future purchase decisions. In a comparative advertising exposure condition, high warmth messages are more likely to diminish perceived competence of the brand compared to a single ad exposure condition. Therefore, consumers with a low construal level are likely to respond less favorably to the ad in a comparative setting. In contrast, consumers in a high construal level state, who consider distant-future purchase decisions and focus on broader, overarching goals, are less influenced by the context of the ad exposure. As a result, these consumers are more likely to appreciate the warmth attributes, leading to consistent responses to the ad regardless of the ad exposure condition. Based on this understanding, the following interaction effect between construal levels and ad exposure conditions is posited:

H3: There is an interaction effect between consumers' construal levels and advertising exposure conditions on intention to like the ad.

H3a: The intention to like the ad in a comparative ad exposure condition will be lower when consumers are in a low construal level state compared to a high construal level state.

H3b: This difference will not occur when consumers are in a high construal level state.

3. METHOD

This study employs an experimental method to test the hypotheses, examining how construal levels moderate the effects of a high warmth message under different advertising exposure conditions.

Experimental Design

To test the hypotheses, a 2 (ad exposure condition: single-ad vs. comparative ad exposure) x 2 (Construal level: high vs. low) between-subject factorial design was implemented.

Sample and Procedure

Participants were recruited by using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). They were limited to US residents and granted USD 1 in exchange for participation. A total of 120 participants completed the experimental study, but six participants were removed due to not passing the attention check question and familiarity with the fictitious name of the brand used in the stimuli. Thus, 114 participants were selected for analysis (Female: 37.7%, Male: 62.3%, $M_{Age} = 33.3$).

The experiment was conducted via online using a web-based questionnaire service tool: Qualtrics. After completion of a consent form, participants were randomly assigned one of the four conditions. First, participants reviewed an instruction about purchase timing about food delivery service. The purpose of this instruction is to manipulate participants' construal levels. Second, participants reviewed an ad using a high warmth message about a food delivery service brand on Facebook either alone or along with a comparative ad using a low warmth message. Lastly, they answered manipulation check questions, a dependent variable, and demographic questions.

Stimuli

Two fictitious social media ads promoting food delivery services were created, each emphasizing either a high or low level of warmth. The low warmth ad highlighted consumers' positive mentions of overall service quality (e.g., "Very great", "Outstanding delivery service", "Awesome!"). In contrast, the high warmth ad emphasized warmth-related attributes (e.g., "Very warm-hearted", "Friendly delivery service", "Kind and likeable service"). To avoid the influence of pre-existing knowledge and attitudes toward real brands, two fictitious brands, BiteDrop and FoodieFlash, were created. The ad for *BiteDrop* used the high warmth message while an ad for *FoodieFlash* used the low warmth message. Aside from the messages, all other elements of the ads, such as images and layout, remained consistent.

Measures

The independent variables are construal levels and advertising exposure conditions. The dependent variables are perceived competence of the brand (brand competence) and intention to like the ad post on Facebook. Brand competence was measured with three items on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree to strongly agree*), and like *the advertised brand is competent and the advertised brand is intelligent*. (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$) [10]. Intention to like the ad post was measured with three items on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree to strongly agree*) like *I intend to press like on the ad post* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$) [14].

4. RESULTS

Manipulation Check

The manipulation checks were conducted by measuring how distant their purchase timing was using a 7-point item ("How near / distant do you think that your purchase timing is?"). A *t*-test showed that participants in the high construal level group reported further distant future ($M = 6.43$) than those in the low construal level group ($M = 4.74$, $p < .01$). Thus, manipulations were successful.

Interaction Effect

To test H1, an independent *t*-test was performed, and the result showed that brand competence in the comparative ad exposure group was lower ($M = 4.03$) compared to the single-ad exposure group ($M = 4.28$), and this difference is statistically significant ($t = 2.17$, $p < .05$). Thus, H1 was supported.

To test H2 and H3, a two-way ANCOVA was conducted to measure the effect of two independent variables (construal level and ad exposure condition) on the intention to like the ad post, with age, gender, and product involvement controlled (see Table 1 and Table 2). The result showed that intention to like the ad post was not different between a single-ad and a comparative ad exposure group. Thus, H2 was not supported. In addition, as shown in Figure 1, the results indicated that there was a statistically significant interaction effect between construal level and ad exposure condition on the dependent variable ($F(1, 107) = 6.86$, $p < .05$). Specifically, in the case of the near purchase timing (low construal level), the intention to like on the ad post was lower in a comparative ad exposure ($M = 3.92$) compared to a single-ad exposure ($M = 4.21$). For the distant purchase timing (high construal level), intention to like the ad post was greater in a comparative ad exposure ($M = 4.12$) compared to a single-ad exposure ($M = 3.82$). This showed that H3a was supported, but H3b was not supported even though the interaction effect was found. Thus, H3 was partially supported.

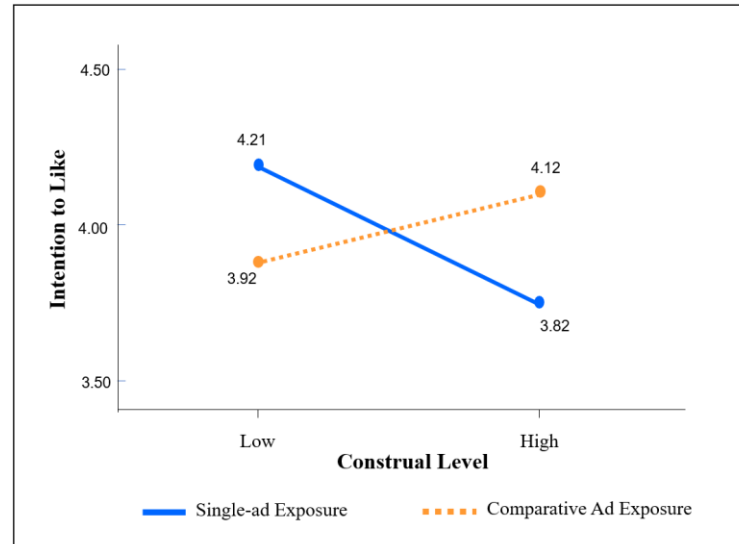


Figure 1. The interaction effect between construal levels and ad exposure conditions

5. DISCUSSION

This study explores the conditions under which the compensation effect occurs in advertising exposure, focusing on the nuanced effects of warmth messages on consumer perceptions and responses. It provides significant insights into how warmth messages influence consumer behavior, demonstrating the role of advertising exposure conditions and construal levels.

Findings revealed that high warmth messages, when used in a comparative ad exposure condition, result in a lower perceived competence of the brand compared to a single-ad exposure condition. This highlights the importance of strategic message placement in competitive advertising environments, especially for brands in competence-valued categories. However, there is no significant difference in the intention to like between comparative and single-ad exposure conditions. This may be because people often click "like" on social media out of habit, driven more by immediate reactions than by careful evaluations of brand competence. More interestingly, the findings showed the interaction effect between construal levels and warmth ad exposure conditions on consumers' responses. Specifically, for consumers in a low construal level state (i.e., those making near-future purchase decisions), the intention to like the ad was lower in the comparative ad exposure condition compared to the single-ad exposure condition. This suggests that when consumers are focused on immediate, concrete details of a purchase, the negative impact of high warmth messages on perceived competence could be amplified in a comparative context. Conversely, when consumers adopt a high construal level, considering more abstract and distant future aspects, the adverse effects of comparative ad exposure on perceived competence could be mitigated. This suggests that abstract, future-oriented thinking may buffer against the negative effect of high warmth messages on perceived brand competence in a comparative setting, making consumers more receptive to the positive emotional tone conveyed by warmth messages.

For marketers, these findings underscore the importance of context and consumers' construal level (expected purchase timeline) in designing advertising strategies. Brands in competence-valued product categories should be cautious about employing high warmth messages in contexts where consumers compare multiple ads directly, such as social media feeds or ad clusters. Instead, these brands might benefit from

emphasizing competence or balancing warmth with competence cues, particularly when targeting consumers likely to make imminent purchase decisions. Conversely, when targeting consumers making distant future purchase decisions, high warmth messages can be effectively utilized even in comparative advertising contexts. This approach can positively influence brand evaluations without significantly detracting from perceived competence.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the focus on a specific product category (food delivery service) may limit the generalizability of the findings to other product types. To enhance the broader applicability of the results, future research should expand its scope to include a wider range of product categories, thereby examining the robustness of the compensation effect across different contexts. Additionally, although this study thoroughly explored the interaction between construal levels and ad exposure conditions, there remains a need to investigate other potential moderating variables that could impact the balance between warmth and competence in advertising strategies. By investigating additional variables, such as cultural differences, individual characteristics, or varying levels of consumer involvement, future studies could achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between warmth messages and perceived brand competence in diverse advertising contexts. This would further strengthen the study's implications and extend its applicability across different settings.

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