Comparative Claims: Definition and Typology

Comparative advertising is defined as advertising that “identifies the competition for the purpose of claiming superiority or enhancing perceptions of the sponsor’s brand,” rather than promote a product on its own merits (James and Hensel 1991, p.54). The comparison may refer to a specific attribute of the product or it may be a general, all-encompassing comparison. The comparison may be subtle or it may directly address a specific competitor, usually the market leader (Beller 1995; James and Hensel 1991). Researchers have generally distinguished between comparative claims that name the comparison brand (direct comparative ads) and claims that only indirectly refer to the competition (incomplete comparisons, e.g., Shimp 1978; Droge and Darmon 1987; Neese and Taylor 1994; Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991; Muehling, Stoltman and Grossbart 1990). Other typologies distinguish comparative claims on the basis of the intensity and direction of the comparison. Intensity refers to the degree of specificity of the claim, while direction refers to the positioning of the advertised brand in relation to a competitor (Neese and Taylor 1994; Barry 1993). Specifically, the direction of a comparative claim refers to whether an association or differentiation strategy is being pursued. Parity claims, for instance, are used to emphasize similarities between the sponsor and the comparison brand, while superiority claims are intended to emphasize important differences (Pride, Lamb and Pletcher 1979; Muehling and Kangun 1985; Droge and Darmon 1987; Pechmann and Ratneshwar 1991). Combined comparatives may feature claims of different direction or specificity (Barry 1993), while partial comparatives are

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2 Neese and Taylor (1994) use the term intensity to refer to the specificity of comparative claims. The term specificity will be used instead in the remainder of the text.