CHAPTER 7
COMBINED COMPARATIVES OF DIFFERENT SPECIFICITY

As previously discussed, combined comparatives are a series of statements that differ on the specificity and/or direction of comparisons between brands. Recent legal challenges to combined comparatives suggest that some implied parity claims could mislead consumers. Specifically, parity claims made in a negated linguistic format may falsely imply competitive superiority when they are presented alongside superiority claims. Whether combined comparatives are in fact deceptive has not been empirically tested. The purpose of the first study is to investigate the extent to which the combination of superiority statements and negated parity claims leads to misleading inferences. Of particular interest is whether such inferences are contingent upon the level of specificity of the superiority and the parity claims.

General Superiority Statements and Puffery

According to Neese and Taylor (1994), the specificity of a comparative claim ranges “from casual, nonspecific references to the competition to explicit, point-by-point comparisons based on attribute differences and similarities inherent in the brands concerned” (p.2). Combined comparatives may therefore include broad, exaggerated superiority claims or puffery (“the best money can buy”) along with claims that mention specific attributes on which a brand is superior to specific competitors.