Self-Deprecating Advertisements Enhance Consumers' Perception of Experience-Related Product Attributes

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Abstract:

Brands must ensure their advertising effectively conveys how their product performs on attributes assessable through actual consumer experience. While traditional strategies often rely on self-promoting claims to highlight positive product experiences (e.g., Energizer's "It keeps going, and going, and going…"), our research demonstrates that consumers sometimes infer more positive product experiences when brands employ self-deprecating advertising. Drawing on the theory of compensatory reasoning and across three studies, we show that self-deprecating advertisements, by acknowledging product flaws, prompt consumers to infer compensatory strengths in experience-related attributes. Study 1 demonstrates that self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements encourage consumers to generate more experience-focused inferences when brands highlight deficiencies in search attributes. Study 2 replicates these findings using a different product category. Study 3 directly measures consumers' experience-related perceptions and shows that self-deprecating advertisements enhance these perceptions. This research offers insights into how consumers interpret, rationalize, and cognitively "fill in the gaps" for advertisements.

Keywords: *self-deprecating advertisements, compensatory reasoning, search and experience attributes*

Track: *Consumer Behavior*

1. Introduction

Advertisements are critical tools for brands to communicate product information (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). They often highlight product benefits using cues such as performance metrics (e.g., "visible improvement in 7 days"), before-and-after visuals (Cian et al., 2020), and competitive comparisons. These cues aim to persuade consumers about the product's performance on attributes typically assessed through direct experience. However, as claims of superior performance become increasingly ubiquitous, their persuasive impact diminishes (Johnson, 2013). Consumers perceive these messages as manipulative, resulting in heightened skepticism (Wu & Geylani, 2020). Consequently, brands adopt alternative techniques, such as self-deprecating advertisements, which deliberately acknowledge product flaws. Examples include *Citröen's "Surprisingly, we haven't fired the designer yet,"* and Listerine's *"The taste people hate. Twice a day."* Recent marketing research suggests that self-deprecating advertisements can enhance consumers' brand-related perceptions by fostering trust while reducing skepticism (Kale & Sayin, 2024).

Self-promoting advertisements align closely with consumers' expectations of advertising, which is to highlight product strengths. Self-deprecating advertisements break these norms by deliberately highlighting negative aspects of the product or brand. We suggest that this unconventional approach can prompt consumers to rationalize why the brand would voluntarily disclose its flaws. In doing so, consumers may infer that the brand possesses compensatory strengths. For example, they might assume that shortcomings in easily observable, search-related attributes (e.g., design or appearance) are offset by superior performance in experience-related benefits (e.g., comfort or functionality), which become evident only through use. This research primarily examines whether self-deprecating advertisements, versus self-promoting ones, enhance consumers' experience-related perceptions by encouraging them to justify the brand's acknowledgment of flaws through compensatory reasoning.

2. Conceptual Background

Advertisements primarily convey product information (Chernev, 2007), serving as a medium through which brands highlight product attributes (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). These typically emphasize how products meet consumer needs (Batra & Keller, 2016). Positive claims about quality or effectiveness help consumers assess value and make informed decisions. For example, 'before-and-after' visuals (Cian et al., 2012) or comparisons enhance perceived credibility. Product attributes differ in evaluability: search attributes (e.g., price, design) can be assessed pre-purchase, while experience attributes (e.g., taste, comfort) require use (Nelson, 1970; Ford et al., 1990). Experience attributes, which often constitute a product's core benefit, are challenging to effectively communicate through advertising (Brechan, 2006). To address this, brands often resort to self-aggrandizing claims to highlight these attributes. For instance, Ford's slogan "Built to last" underscores durability, while KFC's tagline "Finger lickin' good" emphasizes taste. Some consumers may accept these claims, particularly when they align with positive prior brand experiences (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007). However, the growing prevalence of such claims in advertising, particularly for attributes that require direct experience to evaluate, has fostered skepticism, undermining their credibility and impact (Wu & Geylani, 2020).

When advertisements do not provide direct information about experience attributes, consumers often infer them from search attributes using heuristics like "price equals quality" (Gneezy et al., 2014) or relying on brand reputation (Erdem et al., 2006). For instance, a costly perfume may be seen as long-lasting or assume a reputable athletic brand like Nike offers more comfortable and higher performance gear. These inferences help consumers assess experience attributes, which are crucial to purchase decisions but challenging to evaluate before use (Ford et al., 1990). Beyond the explicit information brands convey, consumers also draw insights from what brands omit or acknowledge as drawbacks. Research on compensatory reasoning suggests that people believe that strengths in one attribute can offset and compensate for weaknesses in another (Chernev, 2007; Kramer et al., 2012). Chernev (2007) showed that consumers infer a lack in one attribute when another excels. Similarly, pharmaceutical products with severe side effects are perceived as more effective (Kramer et al., 2012), as the side effects are seen as compensating for greater potency.

Building on this, we argue that self-deprecating advertisements, which intentionally highlight a product flaw without offsetting it with any mention of a positive attribute, may encourage compensatory inferences. When consumers encounter self-deprecating advertisements, they may rationalize the brand's decision to reveal negative information by inferring that the product compensates for the criticized attribute through other attributes. For instance, Citröen's self-deprecating advertisement stating, *"Surprisingly, we haven't fired the designer yet,"* may lead consumers to infer that despite an unconventional design, the car must excel in other attributes such as convenience or reliability. In contrast, self-promoting advertisements, which emphasize a single attribute as the product's benefit, do not require consumers to make inferences about other unmentioned product attributes.

When brands self-deprecate on observable search attributes (e.g., design), consumers may rationalize the flaw by inferring superior performance in experience attributes (e.g., comfort), which often represent the product's core benefit (Brechan, 2006; Ford et al., 1990). We hypothesize that consumers exposed to self-deprecating (versus self-promoting) advertisements on a search attribute will form stronger experience-related perceptions of the product, as they are encouraged to rationalize why the brand would disclose a negative attribute. This justification process leads consumers to infer that the product compensates for its flaw by excelling in other, more valuable areas, such as experience-related benefits. Similarly, when brands self-deprecate on experience attributes, as in Listerine's tagline, *"The taste people hate. Twice a day,"* consumers may infer compensatory strengths in another experience attribute (e.g., germ killing effectiveness), especially if the latter represents the product's core value. For products where search attributes represent core value (e.g., home décor items), we believe that self-deprecation on these attributes may result in immediate negative evaluations, as the brand is perceived to fail at delivering its core promise, making it difficult for consumers to infer more important attributes. Similarly, self-deprecation on a core experience attribute (e.g., the comfort of a mattress) could lead consumers to penalize the brand, as it undermines the primary value they expect.

3. Study 1

This study investigated whether consumers are more likely to make inferences about experience attributes of a product when exposed to a self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisement focusing on a search attribute. 105 UK residents (51% females, M_{age} = 46.8 years) from Prolific were randomly assigned to view either a self- deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement for a fictitious brand of office chairs known as *'Zenith'*. The self-deprecating advertisement was, *"This office chair is not easy on the eye,"* while the self-promoting one was, *"This office chair is so easy on the eye."* Participants were asked to imagine they could add to the tagline and to write phrases to complete it.

The self-deprecating advertisement (M=6.72, SD=1.76) was rated as significantly more self-deprecating than the self-promoting one (M=3.10, SD=1.92, $t(103) = 10.05$, p<.001). Three independent coders ($ICC(2,3) = .83$), blind to our hypotheses, first reviewed the definitions of search and experience attributes (Lee & Hosanagar, 2021) and then categorized the phrases completed by participants as search attributes, experience attributes, or neither. For example, a phrase that was coded as focused on an experience attribute was: *"it is however exceptionally easy on your back*"; and a phrase that was coded as focused on a search attribute would be: *"Bring the style to your workplace.*" A phrase coded as neither search nor experience would be: "you'll love it." For each completed phrase, we calculated the percentage of coders identifying a focus on experience attributes. Higher percentage scores reflected a stronger emphasis on experience attributes in participant-generated phrases (protocol adapted from Mittelman et al., 2014). A Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) analysis examined the likelihood of participants generating experience-focused phrases in response to self-deprecating versus self-promoting advertisements. The dependent variable was whether a phrase was experience-focused (1=yes, 0=no), and the independent variable was advertisement type (1=self-deprecating, 0=self-promoting). Results showed that participants exposed to self- deprecating advertisements were significantly more likely to generate experience-focused phrases to complete the tagline (75%) compared to those exposed to self-promoting advertisements (45%; B=1.31, $\chi^2(1)$=80.75, p<.001). By prompting participants to add their own words to self-deprecating and self- promoting taglines, this study examines real behaviour related to how consumers rationalize self-deprecation through inferences about experience attributes. Self-promoting advertisements do not elicit such an inference-making process, as participants perceive the positive claims as the primary attribute the brand wants to highlight, leaving no need to rationalize the brand's message.

4. Study 2

This study replicated Study 1 by using a different product category, orthopedic shoes. 200 UK residents (53.5% female, M_{age} = 45.32 years) recruited from Prolific randomly viewed either a self-deprecating or a self-promoting advertisement for a fictitious brand of orthopedic shoes known as 'Bukin.' The self-deprecating tagline was *"The least photogenic pair of shoes you will ever own,"* while the self-promoting one, *"The most photogenic pair of shoes you will ever own.*" Participants were prompted to add to the tagline and then responded to a manipulation check (as in Study 1)

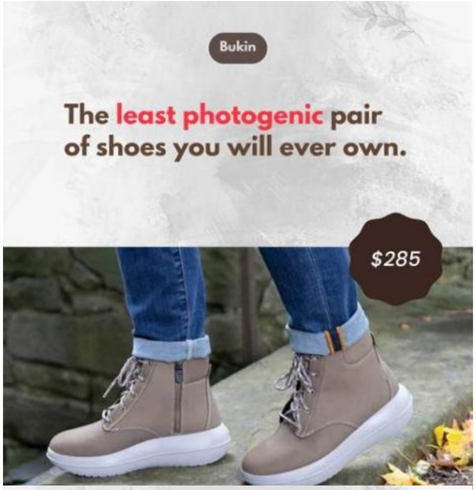
Advertisement type manipulation was successful ($M_{self\text{-}deprecating}$=7.11, $SD_{self\text{-}deprecating}$=1.53; $M_{self\text{-}promoting}$=3.88 $SD_{self\text{-}promoting}$=2.28; $t(198)$=11.821, p<.001). As in Study 1, three independent coders ($ICC(2,3)$ = .88) categorized the completed phrases as focusing on a search attribute, an experience attribute, or neither. A GEE analysis showed that participants exposed to self-deprecating advertisements were significantly more likely to generate experience-focused phrases to complete the tagline (65.05%) compared to those exposed to self-promoting advertisements (45.83%; B=0.79, $\chi^2(1)$=49.20, p<.001). The findings of Study 1 were replicated, further supporting the conclusion that self-deprecating advertisements prompt consumers to infer compensatory strengths in experience attributes when the advertisement highlights a deficiency in search attributes. While Studies 1 and 2 focused on participant-generated taglines to infer compensatory reasoning, Study 3 directly measures whether consumers' inferences about experience attributes are greater when brands self-deprecate (vs. self-promote) on a search attribute.

5. Study 3

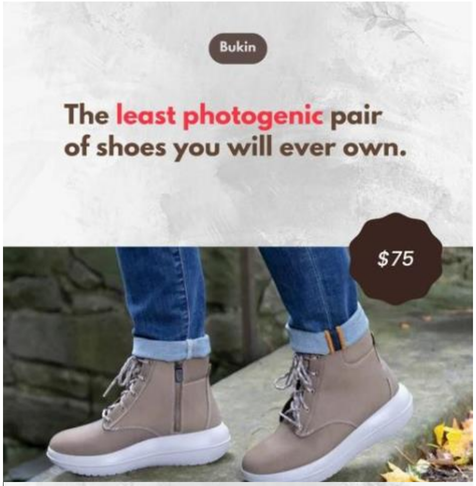
This study investigated whether self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements focused on search attributes affects participants' perceptions of how well the product delivers on experience attributes. 488 female participants (M_{age}=42.45 years; US residents) were recruited through Connect by CloudResearch. We specifically recruited females, since the advertisement featured women's shoes (To & Patrick, 2021). Since price can influence product experience expectations (Kurz et al., 2023), we varied the product price across conditions— either $285 or $75—to explore the interaction between advertisement type and price on participants' experience-related perceptions. Thus, the study employed a 2 (advertisement type: self-deprecating vs. self-promoting) by 2 (price: low vs. high) between-subjects design, with participants randomly assigned to view an advertisement for a fictitious orthopedic shoe brand called 'Bukin' (see Figure 1 below). After viewing the advertisement, participants rated the experience-related perceptions of the orthopedic shoes by stating their agreement with five statements (e.g., "Bukin shoes would be comfortable," "Bukin shoes would promote a better posture," α = .874). These attributes, sourced from the official website of the orthopedic shoe brand 'Kybun,' represent experience- related benefits typically associated with this product. Finally, participants responded to a manipulation check (as in previous studies, r = .89) and mentioned their age.

Figure 1. Study 3 Stimuli: Self-deprecating ad with high-price (A), Self-deprecating ad with low-price (B), Self-promoting ad with high-price (C), Self-promoting ad with low-price (D)

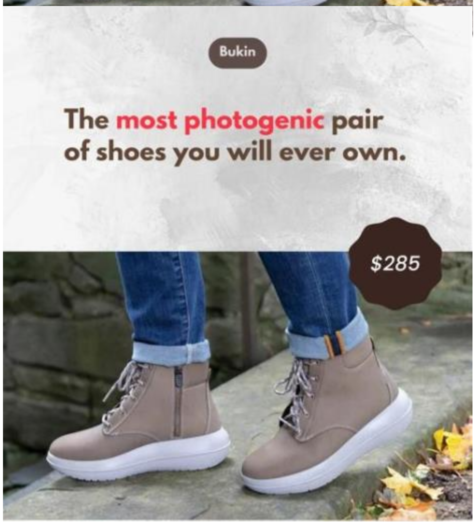
A)



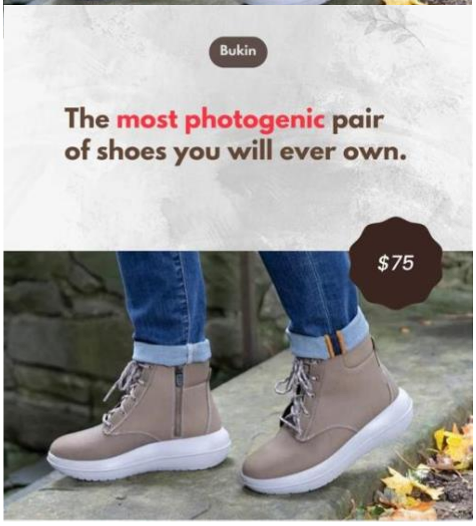
B)



C)



D)



A two-way ANOVA test on perceived self-deprecation found only a significant effect of advertisement type such that the self-deprecating advertisement was perceived as significantly more self-deprecating than the self-promoting advertisement ($F(1, 484) = 648.91$, $p<.001$). The effects of product price and its interaction with advertisement type were not significant (p's>.05). Another two-way ANOVA test on price perception revealed only a main effect of product price. $285 was perceived as a significantly higher price than $75 ($F(1, 484)=375.81$, $p<.001$). Further, advertisement type significantly affected participants' experience-related perceptions ($F(1, 484) = 14.33$, $p<.001$). The main effect of price ($F(1, 484) = 1.44$, $p = .231$) and the interaction effect of advertisement type and price ($F(1, 484) = 1.86$, $p = .173$) were not significant (Means reported in Table). In price conditions, self-deprecating (vs. self-promoting) advertisements increased experience- related perceptions, with a significant effect observed in the high-price condition ($F(1, 484)=12.49$, $p<.001$) and a marginally significant effect in the low-price condition ($F(1, 484)=7.13$, $p=.078$). These findings suggest that self-deprecating advertisements enhance consumers' experience-related perceptions, regardless of price, though the impact is more pronounced for higher-priced products. This may be due to participants being more inclined to rationalize self-deprecation when an additional search cue, such as price, signals higher quality.

Table. Results – Study 3

Measures	***High-price***		***Low-price***		***Interaction Effect***		***Ad Type – Main Effect***		***Price***	
	Self-deprecating ad (N=124)	Self-promoting ad (N=121)	Self-deprecating ad (N=122)	Self-promoting ad (N=121)	*p*	η_p^2	*p*	η_p^2	*p*	η_p^2
Perceived Self-deprecation	6.99^{a} (2.23)	2.64^{b} (2.04)	7.19^{a} (1.94)	2.42^{b} (1.66)	.247	.003	<.001	.529	.932	.000
Price Perceptions	7.38^{a} (1.39)	7.67^{a} (1.29)	4.49^{b} (2.10)	4.60^{b} (1.88)	.555	.001	.195	.003	<.001	.437
Perceived Product Experience	5.05^{a} (1.76)	4.20^{b} (1.94)	5.02^{a} (1.65)	4.62^{a} (1.81)	.173	.004	<.001	.029	.231	.004

Note: Standard deviations reported in the parentheses. Cell means with different superscripts within the columns "High-price" and "Low-price" denote significantly different means (*p*'s < .05).

6. Discussion

The findings across three studies provide compelling evidence that self-deprecating (versus self-promoting) advertisements prompt consumers to form stronger experience-related perceptions of products. We believe this effect stems from the compensatory reasoning process triggered by self-deprecation. While self-promoting advertisements direct attention toward the highlighted positive attribute (e.g., the "photogenic" nature of shoes), self- deprecating advertisements encourage consumers to rationalize the criticized attribute. In doing so, consumers infer that the product compensates for its flaw by excelling in other and experience-related benefits, such as comfort or performance. Study 1 demonstrated that self- deprecating advertisements lead consumers to generate experience-focused inferences when brands highlight deficiencies in search attributes. Study 2 replicated this effect in a different product category, strengthening the robustness of the findings. Study 3 directly measured experience-related perceptions and revealed that self-deprecating advertisements enhance these perceptions across price conditions, with a stronger effect for higher-priced products.

Future studies are planned to further investigate the underlying mechanism driving the compensatory reasoning process observed in self-deprecating advertisements. Additionally, we aim to examine the circumstances under which consumers may not rationalize self- deprecation in an advertisement. While the current research focused on self-deprecation targeting peripheral search attributes, such as the ‘photogenic’ quality of orthopedic shoes, future research will examine whether self-deprecation on core attributes—whether search or experience—yields different outcomes.By doing so, this research aims to contribute to the growing literature on self-deprecating advertising (Kale & Sayin, 2024), which demonstrates that when focused on less critical attributes, self-deprecating advertisements enhance a brand’s social attractiveness and trustworthiness while reducing skepticism and advertisement avoidance. We also contribute to extant research on compensatory reasoning (Chernev, 2007; Kramer et al., 2012) by showing how it operates in the context of advertising. Specifically, we provide evidence that consumers rationalize the self-deprecation of search attributes by inferring superior performance in experience attributes. In terms of practical implications, our research provides managers with valuable insights regarding how consumers infer product benefits in the absence of direct claims (Chernev, 2007). We demonstrate the importance of understanding consumers’ inference-making processes in response to advertising. By recognizing how consumers rationalize product flaws, managers can design advertisements that strategically shape perceptions, even in the absence of direct claims. Further, our findings suggest that price can amplify the effectiveness of self-deprecating advertisements. Managers of premium-priced brands may find this strategy particularly effective, as higher prices seem to intensify consumers’ compensatory reasoning processes

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