

CONTENT AND MEDIA FACTORS IN ADVERTISING

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Edited by:

Peter Neijens
Constanze Hess
Bas van den Putte
Edith Smit



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Another reason for both the increase in visual prominence and openness may be that advertisers like to impress their professional peers (Phillips & McQuarrie 2002). Open ads seem to be highly appreciated in the advertising branch, perhaps because open ads deviate from what is expected. Many open and visual ads win international advertising awards and are often selected and discussed in advertising magazines (e.g., *Luerzer's Archive*).

Finally, the trend towards openness can be explained because some advertisers expect open ads to be more effective. They feel that less open ads, in which the message is spelled out, may cause irritation among the present generation of ad-wise consumers who might feel that their intelligence is being underestimated. Advertisers hope that openness in ads not only reduces irritation, but also increases ad appreciation when the search for meaning is rewarded. In addition, because of the increased cognitive effort that consumers spend on these ads when searching for an interpretation, they may devote more attention to the ads, have better retention, and they may not engage in counter argumentation so readily (Berger, 2001; Leiss et al., 1990; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Phillips, 2000). However, these claims about the effects of open advertisements have hardly been addressed in empirical research (Dingena, 1994; Ketelaar, Gisbergen & Bosman, 2004; McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Mick & Politi, 1989; Phillips, 2000). Considering the overall trend towards openness in ads, as shown in this study, these ads should not be overlooked in future research.

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Consumer, manufacturer and ad-related antecedents of ad skepticism

Peter Kerkhof, Bob M. Fennis & Ylva van der Meijden

The news media portrays 21st century consumers as highly educated, purposeful, and suspicious of advertising claims. This might give the idea that consumer skepticism towards advertising has risen dramatically during the last decades. Calfee and Ringold (1994) show that this is not the case: the number of skeptical consumers remained stable throughout a large part of the last century. According to Calfee and Ringold's analysis of public opinion data, about 70% of consumers think that advertisements often do not contain the full truth, although they may still be informative about a product.

The stability of ad skepticism is surprising given the growing number of ads people encounter in their daily lives: one would expect skepticism to rise with the number of times ads are encountered. The stability of ad skepticism raises several questions about its origins. For instance, do the effects of regulation of advertising strategies and tactics counterbalance the effects of the growing number of advertisements? Is skepticism the result of stable individual differences? Are differences in skepticism caused by differences in attributes of the manufacturer? In this paper we will compare the effects of three groups of possible antecedents of ad skepticism: antecedents related to stable personality characteristics of the receiver, those related to manufacturer characteristics, and those related to characteristics of the ad.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Research on the roots of ad skepticism

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) define ad skepticism as "the tendency to regard ad claims as more or less believable" (p. 160). Consumers who are skeptical of ads typically believe that advertisers are dishonest in the claims they present about the quality of their products. The term ad skepticism can be

used for both a general disposition to regard ad claims as less believable (e.g., Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998) and for the response to a specific ad (e.g., Ford, Smith & Swasy, 1990). Forehand and Grier (2003) label these two kinds of ad skepticism dispositional skepticism and situational skepticism.

In this paper we focus on situational skepticism, but aim to combine insights from both literatures. The literatures on dispositional and situational skepticism are quite segregated in terms of the hypothesized antecedents and consequences of ad skepticism. Research on dispositional skepticism typically uses individual characteristics as antecedents of skepticism and employs survey methods. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998; 2000) showed that dispositional ad skepticism is positively related to self esteem, age, and to more general attitudes like those toward marketing and advertising. In a study among adolescents, Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) established relationships between ad skepticism and susceptibility to peer influence, family communication fostering the development of consumer competence, and extent of television viewing. Another study among adolescents showed that skeptical adolescents possess more knowledge of advertising tactics, have higher self-esteem, and are generally less susceptible to interpersonal influence (Boush, Friestad & Rose, 1994).

Research on situational ad skepticism typically employs experimental methodologies and focuses on ad and manufacturer characteristics. Ford et al. (1990) showed that consumers are more skeptical of subjective ad claims and of claims that refer to experience attributes of a product: attributes that cannot be determined prior to purchase. Jain and Posavac (2001) showed that verifiable (vs. non-verifiable) product claims lead to less skepticism. Muthukrishnan, Warlop, and Alba (2001) found that comparison ads, where different attributes of a product are compared with those of several competing products, are more believable than ads in which the superiority of the product is presented explicitly. Campbell (1995) also focused on characteristics of the advertisement, and found that inferences of manipulative intent, a concept related to situational ad skepticism, are enhanced by attention-getting advertising tactics.

Personality characteristics as predictors of situational ad skepticism

Only a few studies have used individual characteristics to predict situational ad skepticism, usually about the effect of dispositional ad skepticism. In a longitudinal study, Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) showed that dispositional ad skepticism predicts brand attitudes and the attitude toward the ad. However, only one item in their measure of attitude toward the ad could be labeled as a measure of situational ad skepticism. In a study by Hardesty, Carlson, and Bearden (2002) dispositional ad skepticism moderated the relation between

brand familiarity and the evaluation of several aspects of advertisements. Forehand and Grier (2003) showed that dispositional ad skepticism predicted the evaluation of whether the business practices of a firm were motivated by self (rather than the public) interest.

Studies using receiver characteristics other than dispositional ad skepticism are rare. The results of a study conducted by Forehand and Grier (2003) showed that the need for cognition, the tendency of people to engage in effortful thinking (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), had a positive effect on ad skepticism: individuals with a high need for cognition were more skeptical of advertising than those with a low need for cognition. In the Campbell (1995) study, neither need for cognition nor dispositional cynicism (Kanter & Wortzel, 1985) affected inferences of manipulative intent.

In this paper we will use a combination of both personal, ad, and manufacturer characteristics to test their relative strength in predicting situational ad skepticism. For personal characteristics, we will use self-esteem, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, dispositional trust and advertising knowledge as predictors. Self-esteem refers to the attitude people hold toward themselves and has been shown to affect influenceability (Rhodes & Wood, 1992). Individuals with low self esteem pay less attention to persuasive messages than those with high self esteem, whereas individuals with high self-esteem yield to persuasive messages less readily than those with low self esteem (McGuire, 1968). As a result, both individuals with very low and very high self-esteem are more difficult to persuade than those with intermediate levels of self esteem. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) and Boush et al. (1994) showed that self esteem is positively related to dispositional ad skepticism: individuals with high self esteem are more skeptical of advertisements than those with low self esteem. We predict that self esteem also affects situational ad skepticism.

Both Mangleburg and Bristol (1998) and Boush et al. (1994) showed that adolescents' dispositional skepticism is related to their general susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Mangleburg and Bristol followed the distinction made by Deutsch and Gerard (1955) between susceptibility to normative versus informational interpersonal influence. Susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence refers to the tendency to conform to social norms, whereas susceptibility to informational interpersonal influence refers to the tendency of individuals to depend on others as a source of information. Mangleburg and Bristol showed that adolescents who are more susceptible to informational social influence are dispositionally more skeptical of advertisements. Boush et al. did not distinguish between informational and normative social influence and found a negative relationship between skepticism and susceptibility to social influence. Following Mangleburg and Bristol's hypotheses, we expect to find a positive relationship between situational ad skepticism and susceptibility to informa-

tional social influence, and a negative relationship between situational ad skepticism and susceptibility to normative social influence.

A personality trait that has not yet been included in studies on ad skepticism is dispositional trust. Doney and Cannon (1997) define trust as the perceived credibility and benevolence of a target of trust. Credibility refers to the expectation that the promises of the trustee can be relied on, whereas benevolence refers to the degree to which the trustee is perceived as genuinely interested in the trustor's welfare. Dispositional trust refers to a stable tendency of an individual to trust rather than to distrust (Rotter, 1967). We expect that individuals high in dispositional trust are less skeptical of a specific advertisement.

The last receiver characteristic we will include in our study is advertising knowledge. Boush et al. (1994) showed that the more adolescents know about advertising tactics, the more skeptical they are about advertisements. We think that advertising knowledge also predicts specific ad skepticism.

Thus, our hypotheses regarding the effect of receiver characteristics on situational ad skepticism are the following:

- H1:* Participants with high self esteem will be more skeptical of an advertising claim compared to low self esteem participants.
- H2:* Participants who are more susceptible to informational interpersonal influence will be more skeptical of an advertising claim compared to participants less susceptible to informational interpersonal influence.
- H3:* Participants who are more susceptible to normative interpersonal influence will be less skeptical of an advertising claim compared to participants less susceptible to normative interpersonal influence.
- H4:* Participants with a high degree of dispositional trust will be less skeptical of an advertising claim compared to participants with a lower degree of dispositional trust.
- H5:* Participants with a high level of knowledge of advertising will be more skeptical of an advertising claim compared to participants with a low of advertising knowledge.

Advertisement and manufacturer characteristics as predictors of situational ad skepticism

Probably the most robust finding regarding the effect of ad characteristics on skepticism is that a factual presentation of a claim leads to less ad skepticism than a more general claim. For example, describing a computer as fast leads to more ad skepticism than stating that the computer contains a 2.40GHz processor. Different labels have been used to describe this effect. Darley and Smith (1993) speak of claim objectivity, Nelson (1974) and Ford et al. (1990) speak of search and experience claims, and Jain and Posavac (2001) talk about

claim verifiability. We will use the latter term and predict that claim verifiability leads to less situational ad skepticism.

Another robust finding is that an advertisement by a credible source leads to less skepticism than a non-credible source (e.g., Jain & Posavac, 2001; Muthukrishnan, Warlop & Alba, 2001). A determinant of source credibility in the context of advertising is the reputation of a company. Reputation is defined by Fombrun (1996, p. 37) as "the overall estimation in which a company is held by its constituents." According to Doney and Cannon (1997) reputation enhances trust, and trust in the manufacturer may lead to less situational ad skepticism. Kerkhof, Lapaix, and Caljé (2003) showed that, in the context of internet shopping, a good reputation on the part of both the owner of an internet store and that of an advertiser on the site of an internet store makes consumers more willing to buy at that store. We think that reputation may also have a positive effect on situational ad skepticism.

Interestingly, both Jain and Posavac (2001), and Muthukrishnan et al. (2001) found that the effect of verifiable (vs. non-verifiable) claims on ad skepticism is enhanced when the claims are presented by a non-credible source. In the two studies that Jain and Posavac report, a non-verifiable claim presented by a non-credible source was evaluated as less believable than ads with either a verifiable claim, a credible source, or a combination of both. In Muthukrishnan et al.'s study, comparison ads exerted a positive effect on believability when presented by the manufacturer of the focal product, whereas the manner of presenting had no effect when presented by a presumably more objective and credible consumer magazine. This leads us to the following predictions about the effects of ad and manufacturer characteristics on ad skepticism:

- H6:* Verifiable claims lead to less ad skepticism than non-verifiable ones.
- H7:* A reputable manufacturer evokes less ad skepticism than a non-reputable one.
- H8:* Participants will be less skeptical of an ad when a claim is verifiable or delivered by a reputable manufacturer, compared to a non-verifiable claim delivered by a non-reputable manufacturer.

EXPERIMENT I

Design and participants

We conducted an experiment using a 2 (manufacturer reputation: non reputable vs. reputable) x 2 (claim verifiability: non verifiable vs. verifiable) between-group factorial design. Before our manipulations, the participants filled in several questionnaires regarding individual differences (self esteem, suscepti-

bility to normative and informational interpersonal influence, advertising knowledge, and dispositional trust). Next, the participants received a booklet containing three ads, one of which was the manipulated target ad. The dependent variable consisted of a measure of situational ad skepticism. A sample of 120 students participated in the experiment, 44.2% of the participants were male and 55.8% female. The participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

Experimental stimuli

We used two car brands and their safety reputations to manipulate manufacturer reputation. As a car company with a strong safety reputation we used Volvo, and for one without a strong reputation, we used KIA. The ad showed a picture of a car that was difficult to recognize as either a Volvo or a KIA. In the slogan accompanying the ad we referred to the car as either Volvo or KIA.

In order to manipulate claim verifiability, we varied the slogan that was used in the ad. As a non-verifiable claim we used the slogan 'Volvo/KIA stands for safety.' As a verifiable claim about safety we used the slogan 'Volvo/KIA. Airbags for all passengers.'

Measures

Dependent Measure

Ad skepticism was assessed using a three-item measure: 'This ad tells the truth,' 'You can depend on getting the truth from this ad,' and 'I am highly skeptical about the claims made in this ad.' Items 1 and 2 were adapted versions of items used in the study by Boush et al. (1994). Item 3 was taken from the study by Ford et al. (1990). The item responses were averaged to form a scale ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.44$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$, 1 = low skepticism, 7 = high skepticism).

Measures of individual differences

Dispositional trust was assessed using 10 items taken from the NEO-PI-R Trust subscale (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1999; International-Personality-Item-Pool, 2001). Sample items are 'I trust others,' and 'I believe that people are basically moral.' The item responses were averaged to form a scale ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.77$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$; 1 = low trust, 7 = high trust).

Self esteem was measured using the 10-item Dutch translation of the Rosenberg scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to measure aspects of self esteem (e.g., 'On the whole I am satisfied with myself'). The item responses were averaged to form a scale ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.45$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$; 1 = low self esteem, 4 = high self esteem).

Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence was assessed using items from a scale by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989; see also Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998).

Susceptibility to normative influence was assessed with three items (e.g., 'When buying products, I usually buy the ones that I think my friends will approve of'). Again, we averaged the item responses to form a scale ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.22$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$; 1 = low susceptibility to normative influence, 7 = high susceptibility to normative influence).

Susceptibility to informational influence was assessed with 3 items (e.g., 'I often get information from friends before I buy'). We averaged the item responses to form a scale ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.20$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$; 1 = low susceptibility to informational influence, 7 = high susceptibility to informational influence).

Advertising knowledge was assessed using a three-item scale (e.g., 'I recognize advertising tactics when I see an ad'). The items were averaged to form a scale ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.34$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$; 1 = little advertising knowledge, 7 = much advertising knowledge).

Manipulation checks

To check whether our manipulations worked as intended, we assessed the perceived reputation of the advertiser and the perceived claim verifiability. We used one item to check the perceived reputation of the advertiser: 'This advertiser has a good reputation' ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.49$; 1 = disagree very much, 7 = agree very much). Two items were used to assess the perceived claim verifiability: 'It is hard to verify the claims in this ad,' and 'Only an expert can tell whether this ad tells the truth.' The item scores were reversed and summed to form a scale ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.67$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$; 1 = low verifiability, 7 = high verifiability).

Results

Manipulation Checks

To check whether the manipulations worked as intended, we conducted two 2 (Claim Verifiability) x 2 (Manufacturer Reputation) ANOVA's on the manipulation checks. The verifiability manipulation worked as planned. Participants who were exposed to a verifiable claim rated the ad as more verifiable than the participants who were exposed to a non-verifiable claim ($M = 5.65$ vs. $M = 3.70$, respectively; $F(1,116) = 62.69$, $p < .001$). There were no other main or interaction effects. The ANOVA on our manufacturer reputation check yielded the expected main effect on perceived reputation: Participants who were exposed to a reputable manufacturer rated the manufacturer as more reputable than the participants who were exposed to a non-reputable manufacturer ($M = 5.97$

vs. $M = 4.07$, respectively; $F(1,116) = 94.22, p < .001$). Interestingly, the analysis also yielded a verifiability main effect and an interaction effect. Participants who were exposed to an ad containing a verifiable claim rated the manufacturer as more reputable than those who were exposed to an ad containing a non-verifiable claim ($M = 5.37$ vs. $M = 4.67$, respectively; $F(1,116) = 12.79, p < .001$). This unexpected verifiability main effect was qualified by a verifiability x reputation interaction effect ($F(1,116) = 8.38, p < .01$). Separate t-tests revealed that within the reputable manufacturer condition, verifiability yielded no effect, whereas within the non-reputable manufacturer condition verifiability had a positive effect on perceived manufacturer reputation ($M = 4.70$ for the verifiable ad vs. $M = 3.43$ for the non-verifiable ad; $t(58) = -4.48, p < .001$).

Ad skepticism

We conducted a regression analysis to test our hypotheses regarding the effects of consumer, manufacturer and ad-related antecedents on ad skepticism.

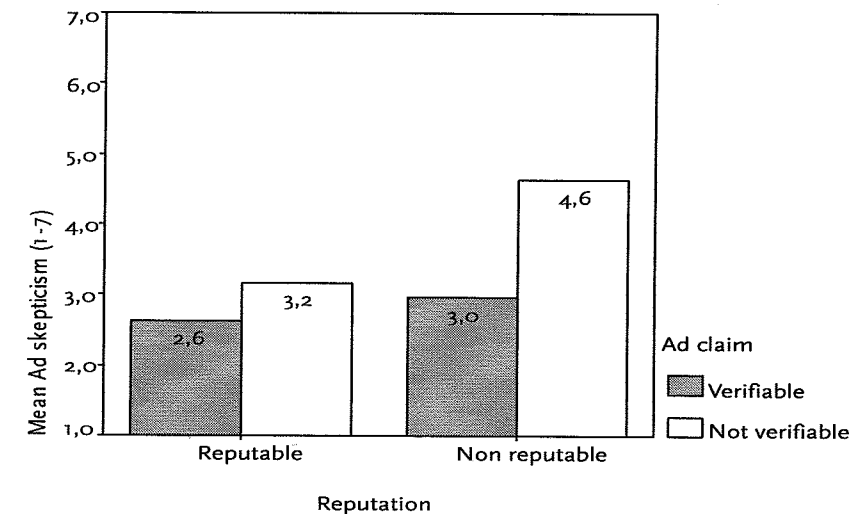
TABLE 1 Regression of ad skepticism on predictors (Study 1)

<i>Ad- and advertiser characteristics</i>	
Reputation	.30***
Claim verifiability	-.37***
Reputation x Claim verifiability	.22***
<i>Consumer characteristics</i>	
Self esteem	-.05
Susceptibility to normative influence	-.11
Susceptibility to informational influence	.18*
Dispositional trust	-.07
Advertising knowledge	.10
	$R^2(\text{adj.})$.28
	$F(8, 111)$ 6.87***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

As can be seen in Table 1, the antecedents explain 28% of the variance in ad skepticism. However, this is almost entirely due to the effects of claim verifiability, manufacturer reputation and the verifiability x reputation interaction. The only consumer characteristic that reached significance is susceptibility to informational influence: participants who were more susceptible to informational influence were somewhat more skeptical about the ad than participants less susceptible to informational influence. Thus, the only hypothesis about the effect of consumer characteristics on ad skepticism that was confirmed is H2. The other hypotheses (H1, H3-H5) have to be rejected.

FIGURE 1 Means of ad skepticism as a function of advertiser reputation and claim verifiability (study 1)



The hypotheses concerning the main and interaction effects of claim verifiability and manufacturer reputation (H6-H8) were all confirmed. First, participants were less skeptical of ads containing a verifiable claim than of ads containing a non-verifiable claim ($M = 2.80$ vs. $M = 3.90$, respectively; $\beta = -.37, p < .001$). Second, participants are less skeptical of ads by a reputable rather than a non-reputable manufacturer ($M = 2.90$ vs. $M = 3.80$, respectively; $\beta = -.30, p < .001$). Third, the regression analysis revealed the predicted interaction effect ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$). As can be seen in Figure 1, participants who saw an ad where a non-verifiable claim was presented by a non-reputable organization were more skeptical than respondents in the other three conditions. Separate t-test confirmed that given a reputable manufacturer, claim verifiability yields no effects on ad skepticism ($M = 2.63$ for the verifiable ad vs. $M = 3.17$ for the non-verifiable ad; $t(58) = 1.70, ns$). Given a non-reputable manufacturer, claim verifiability does yield the predicted effect on ad skepticism ($M = 2.97$ for the verifiable ad vs. $M = 4.63$ for the non-verifiable ad; $t(58) = 5.21, p < .001$).

Discussion

In our first study we aimed to establish the relative strength of consumer, ad, and manufacturer characteristics as determinants of situational ad skepticism. Clearly, characteristics of the ad and the manufacturer are more important in

determining ad skepticism than individual differences of consumers. The effect of the one individual difference that did affect ad skepticism, susceptibility to informational influence, was substantially weaker than the effect of both manufacturer reputation and claim verifiability.

It remains unclear from this study whether the advantage of having a strong reputation only matters when the competitors lack a good general reputation, or whether the communicative advantage of a good reputation also remains when a competitor has a strong general reputation, but not one with regard to the claim being made. In other words, we want to rule out the possibility that the results obtained in this study are due to the generally poor reputation of the non-reputable brand we used, rather than to a specific reputation with regard to the claim. We therefore conducted a second study in which the competing brand does have a good general reputation but not with regard to the claim in the ad.

In our second study we also tested the effect of another individual difference variable, the need for cognitive closure. According to Kruglanski and Webster (1996) this refers to "individuals desire for a firm answer to a question and an aversion toward ambiguity" (p. 264). We think that individual differences regarding need for closure may interact with claim verifiability to determine ad skepticism. The aversion toward ambiguity may lead individuals with a high need for closure to be skeptical of claims that are non-verifiable and, therefore, ambiguous. Thus, we expect individuals with a high need for closure to be more skeptical than those with a low need for closure when they encounter a non-verifiable claim.

EXPERIMENT 2

Design and participants

We conducted an experiment similar to the first experiment, again using a 2 (manufacturer reputation: non reputable vs. reputable) x 2 (claim verifiability: non verifiable vs. verifiable) between-group factorial design.

Before our manipulations, the participants filled in a questionnaire to assess their need for cognitive closure. Next, the participants received the ad that contained our manipulations. The dependent variable consisted of a measure of situational ad skepticism. A sample of 160 students participated in the experiment; 53.1% of the participants were male and 46.9% female. Again, the participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

Experimental Stimuli

We used two car brands and their reputation for speed to manipulate manufacturer reputation. As a car company with a reputation for speed we used Alfa Romeo. As a company with a generally good reputation, but not when it comes to speed, we used Opel, the best selling car brand in the Netherlands, known more for its dependability than its speed. In this study, the picture of the car was not manipulated. Thus, the participants saw a picture of a real Alfa Romeo and a real Opel. In order to manipulate claim verifiability, we varied the slogan that was used in the ad. As a non-verifiable claim, we used the slogan 'Opel /Alfa stands for sportiveness.' As a verifiable claim we used the phrase 'Opel /Alfa, from 0-100 in 8.5 seconds: Fastest in its class.'

Measures

Dependent Measure

Ad skepticism was assessed using the same three-item measure as in Experiment 1. The item responses were averaged to form a scale ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.47$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Measures of individual differences

Need for cognitive closure was assessed using 42 items taken from the Need for Closure scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Sample items are 'I like to have friends who are unpredictable,' and 'I tend to struggle with most decisions.' The item responses were averaged to form a scale ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.55$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$; 1 = low need for cognitive closure, 7 = high need for cognitive closure).

Manipulation checks

To check whether our manipulations worked as intended, we included two manipulation checks. We used one item to check the perceived reputation of the advertiser: 'This advertiser has a good reputation regarding what the ad is about' ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.35$; 1 = disagree very much, 7 = agree very much). One item was used to assess the perceived claim verifiability: 'It is easy to verify the claims in this ad' ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.96$; 1 = disagree very much, 7 = agree very much).

Results

Manipulation Checks

First we conducted manipulation checks. The claim verifiability manipulation worked as intended. A 2 (verifiability) x 2 (reputation) ANOVA yielded the expected main effect for verifiability ($M = 4.63$ for the verifiable ad vs. $M = 2.99$

for the non-verifiable ad; $F(1,156) = 33.49, p < .001$). There were no other main and interaction effects. Unexpectedly, the reputation manipulation was not successful: the 2x2 ANOVA yielded no significant main or interaction effects. The overall good reputation of Opel may have overshadowed its lack of reputation in speed.

Ad Skepticism

As in Experiment 1, we conducted a regression analysis to test the effects of consumer, manufacturer and ad-related antecedents on ad skepticism. The pattern of results is very similar to those in the first experiment (see Table 2).

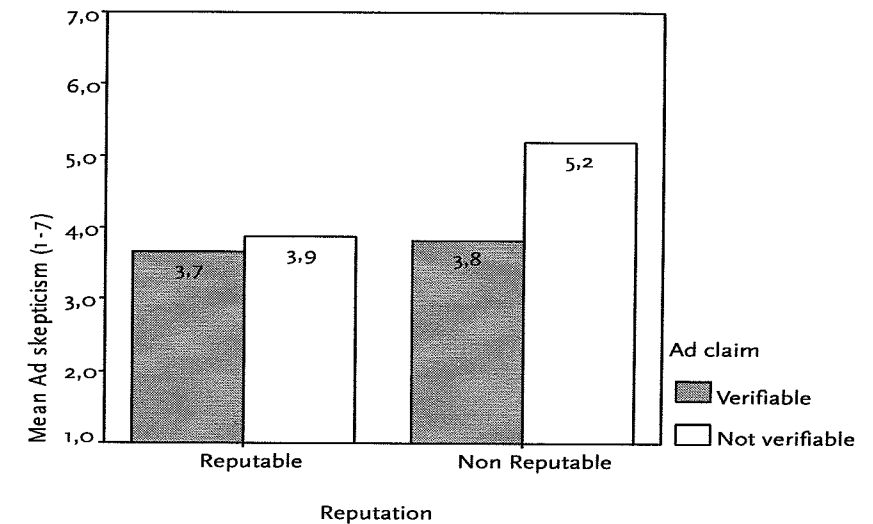
TABLE 2 Regression of ad skepticism on predictors (Study 2)

Ad- and Manufacturer characteristics	β
Reputation	-.25***
Claim verifiability	-.27***
Reputation x Claim verifiability	.21**
<i>Consumer characteristics</i>	
Need for closure	-.02
Need for closure x Reputation	.07
Need for closure x Claim verifiability	-.00
Need for closure x Claim verifiability x Reputation	.03
	R^2 (adj.) .14
	$F(8, 111)$ 4.76***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Again, the individual difference variable does not explain any variance in ad skepticism. Participants low or high in need for closure were no more or less skeptical about the ads that were shown to them. And once again, claim verifiability and manufacturer reputation show the predicted main and interaction effects. Participants were less skeptical of ads containing a verifiable claim than they were of ads containing a non-verifiable claim ($M = 3.74$ vs. $M = 4.53$, respectively; $\beta = -.27, p < .001$). Moreover, the participants were less skeptical of ads for a reputable manufacturer rather than a non-reputable one ($M = 3.77$ vs. $M = 4.50$, respectively; $\beta = -.25, p < .001$). Third, the regression analysis revealed the predicted interaction effect ($\beta = -.20, p < .01$). Figure 2 shows that participants who saw an ad where a non-verifiable claim was made by a non-reputable organization were more skeptical than respondents in the three other conditions. Separate t-test confirms again that, given a reputable manufacturer, claim verifiability yields no effects on ad skepticism ($M = 3.66$ for the verifiable ad vs. $M = 3.89$ for the non-verifiable ad; $t(78) = .65, ns$).

FIGURE 2 Means of ad skepticism as a function of advertiser reputation and claim verifiability (study 2)



Given a non-reputable manufacturer, claim verifiability does yield the predicted effect on ad skepticism ($M = 3.82$ for the verifiable ad vs. $M = 5.18$ for the non-verifiable ad; $t(78) = 5.20, p < .001$).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Using two studies, we explored the extent to which situational ad skepticism is caused by individual differences of consumers, the verifiability of the claims that are made, and the reputation of the manufacturer. We also tested whether claim verifiability and manufacturer reputation effects interact to predict ad skepticism. Moreover, we tested whether the effect of reputation on ad skepticism is due to differences in a generally good (vs. poor) reputation, or to differences in the specific reputation of a manufacturer with regard to the claim made in the ad.

The results show that claim verifiability and manufacturer reputation are more important than individual differences of consumers in predicting ad skepticism. Thus, individual differences appear to play a modest role at best in explaining situational ad skepticism. One individual difference variable, which we did not include in our studies, is a likely exception: several authors (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Hardesty et al., 2002; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998) have shown that dispositional ad skepticism directly or indirectly affects

(measures similar to) situational ad skepticism. The effect of other individual difference variables on situational ad skepticism is probably at least partly associated with dispositional ad skepticism. Further studies should incorporate dispositional ad skepticism as a possible mediator of the effect of individual differences on situational ad skepticism.

In both our studies claim verifiability and manufacturer reputation affected situational ad skepticism. Ads containing claims that are verifiable (e.g., '...goes 80 mph') received less skepticism than ads with claims that are non-verifiable (e.g., '... is fast'). Moreover, participants reacted less skeptically to ads from a reputable manufacturer than to ads from one without a good reputation. As predicted, claim verifiability has no effect when the manufacturer has a good reputation: in both studies claim verifiability reduced skepticism only when used by a non-reputable manufacturer. On the one hand, this confirms similar findings by Jain and Posavac (2001) and Muthukrishnan et al. (2001). On the other hand, it adds to those findings in two ways. First, we did not use both experience and search claims as Jain and Posavac did in their study. Both claims used in our studies (about car safety and car speed) can be considered search claims, ones that can be verified before purchase, for example by reading articles about car tests. We manipulated the ease of verification of search claims: a factual claim about car speed (e.g., '...goes 80 mph') is easier to confirm or disconfirm than a more general claim (e.g., '...is fast'). Thus, our findings indicate that the effect that Jain and Posavac reported also applies to verifiability within one category of claims.

Our findings add to the existing literature in a second way. Our second study indicates that having a good general reputation is not enough to enjoy the communicative advantage of source credibility. In Study 2 we used a car brand with a good reputation (Opel) to compete with Alfa's specific claim about speed. Data showed that, even though Opel's solid reputation seems highly relevant in the context of car ads, this brand did not enjoy the communicative advantage that Alfa did with its very specific reputation for speed. Thus, the reputation of a manufacturer has to fit the specific claim being made in an advertisement.

It is important to note that verifiable claims do not necessarily lead to more correct judgments by consumers. Muthukrishnan et al. (2001) show how verifiable claims can be used to mislead consumers. In the comparison ads that were the focus of their study, the advertiser provided verifiable claims only about the attributes of its product that outperformed those of the product it was compared to. No verifiable claims were made about less favorable comparisons. Thus, verifiable claims can be used in a manipulative way, and claim verifiability should be considered an advertising tactic rather than a way of providing consumers with objective information.

4

Open and closed advertisements: Moderating effects of comprehension on appreciation

Paul E. Ketelaar, Marnix S. van Gisbergen & Jan A.M. Bosman

In the last decades there has been a shift towards ads with less guidance towards a specific message (Dingena, 1994; Gisbergen, Ketelaar & Beentjes, 2004; Warlaumont, 1995). Different terms have been used to denote these ads, for instance, complex image ads (Phillips, 1997; 2000), implicit ads (Dingena, 1994), and ambiguous ads (Warlaumont, 1995). We will use the terms 'open' and 'closed' ads, as these terms include all of these denotations. Open ads have the common characteristic that consumers are not manifestly directed toward a certain message. Compared to traditional 'closed' ads, the message in these open ads is relatively complex, implicit, and ambiguous. In this article, we will focus on the possibility that open ads yield more appreciation than closed ads.

THEORY

Given the increasing appearance of open ads in the media, advertisers obviously expect to influence consumers. For instance, the self-generated interpretations caused by open ads might be more persuasive than the cut and dried arguments offered in closed ads (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Also, open ads might enhance attention because they deviate from consumers' expectations about ads (Heckler & Childers, 1992).

According to Smit and Neijens (2000) and Schreurs (2001), the current ad overload, the repetitious nature of ads and their obvious content, causes consumers to judge the commonly used closed ads as obtrusive and as an assault on their intelligence. It is possible that open ads do not suffer this fate, but only if consumers derive pleasure from searching for a plausible interpretation in open ads (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). Of course, the eventual discovery of a satisfactory interpretation seems conditional for positive ad appreciation (McQuarrie & Mick 1999).