

COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Comparative advertising had been traditionally banned in most EU countries and was allowed by the European law just relatively recently. That is why in the EU this form of advertising is relatively new, as opposed to the situation in the US, where comparative advertising has been widely used and well accepted by consumers for decades. The literature has been silent on the topic of the effectiveness of comparative advertising in the Czech Republic, as well as in other Central and Eastern European countries. The goal of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of comparative advertising campaigns in the Czech Republic. Using an online survey with 160 Czech respondents, we found that the attitude towards comparative advertising is rather positive in the Czech Republic. We also identified that the gender of the recipient influences the general perception of comparative advertising. On the other hand, the age of the recipient does not seem to be a moderator of the attitude towards comparative advertising, in general. The results also do not signal any impact of the gender and the age of the recipient on the change of the perception of any of the brands involved in the campaign. Managerial implications target mainly marketing and advertising managers responsible for Central European markets.

JEL classification: M31, M37

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1. Introduction

Advertisements that directly compare a firm with its competitors (comparative advertising) had been traditionally considered to be unethical and therefore banned in most countries of the European Union (EU) and were allowed by the European law just relatively recently. That is why, in the EU, this form of advertising is relatively new, as opposed to the situation in the United States, where comparative advertising has been widely used and well accepted by consumers for decades.

The usage of this form of advertising in EU countries is thus connected with two main problems that deserve further attention. The first problem is represented by strict and extensive regulations which limit the usage of comparative advertising by companies. The second problem is represented by the unknown attitudes of the public towards comparative advertising campaigns. The academic literature has so far been silent on the topic of the effectiveness of comparative advertising in the Czech Republic, as well as in other Central and Eastern European countries. In order to fill this gap, the goal of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of comparative advertising campaigns in the Czech Republic.

The remainder of this article is organized in the following manner. First, we provide a review of the relevant literature. Subsequently, we formulate the research hypotheses and present the methodology. Then, we present and discuss the results. Finally, concluding remarks and managerial implications are presented.

2. Literature Review

Comparative advertising is defined by the European directive 2006/114/EC as any advertising which explicitly or by implication identifies a competitor or goods or services offered by a competitor. While this advertising practice was already commonplace in the USA by the 1970s, it is still quite new in Europe. Levy (1987) suggests that comparative advertising accounts for approximately one-half of all ads in the United States. On the contrary, in most of the EU member states, comparative advertising was banned for a long time and was allowed relatively recently by the implementation of the European Directive no. 1997/55/EC by the member states.

The aforementioned EU directive allows comparative advertising in the entire EU as a general principle, but sets relatively strict requirements for it to be considered legitimate. Comparative advertising must not be misleading, it has to compare goods or services meeting the same need or intended for the same purpose, it has to objectively compare one or more material, relevant, verifiable and representative features of those goods and services, it must not discredit or denigrate the trademarks, trade names etc. of the competitor etc. (EU Directive 1997/55/EC). Comparative advertising must also identify the sponsor of the ad, and in case of products with the protected designation of origin, it must compare products with the same designation only.

Due to the strict regulation and its novelty in Europe, comparative advertising is not widely used in the EU and comparative campaigns are still rare, with the exception of the UK where the usage of comparative claims is rather high (Shao et al., 2004). The same is true for the research related to this topic. Comparative advertising has been extensively researched in the US market but studies from other countries are rather rare. But the existing studies from markets other than the USA proved that there could be significant differences in the effectiveness of comparative advertising among the countries. On one hand, in some countries researchers did not identify any relevant differences in potential effectiveness of comparative ads compared to the US market, such as in Thailand (Polyorat & Alden, 2005). However, in some countries, such as in Korea (Choi & Miracle, 2004) or Chile (Manzur et al., 2012), the effectiveness of comparative advertising seems to be lower than in the USA. In Europe, the research on comparative advertising is very limited but proved that differences in the effectiveness of comparative advertising exist compared to the USA but also among European countries.

Shao et al. (2004) compared the effectiveness of comparative advertising in high- and low- communication context cultures, including nine EU countries, and concluded that comparative advertising is potentially more effective in low-communication context cultures than in high- communication context cultures. Those results were confirmed by Schwaiger et al. (2007) for Germany (low-communication context culture) who concluded that comparative campaigns should work in the same way in Germany as in the USA, despite their novelty in Germany.

Nye et al. (2008) compared France and Netherlands (countries where comparative advertising is still a novelty) to the US market (where comparative advertising is well established) and found that in those two European countries, the effectiveness of comparative advertising could be higher than in the USA. Surprisingly, despite the cultural differences between France and Netherlands, the authors did not identify any significant difference of the potential effectiveness of comparative campaigns.

The situation in the Czech Republic is similar to other EU countries. Comparative advertising had been banned as an unfair business practice for a long time and was permitted only in the nineties. Thus, research in this area is missing as well and the Czech Republic was investigated only in one of the aforementioned studies presented by Shao et al. (2004) as one of the low- communication context cultures. That is why further research in this field is needed.

Thus the goal of this paper is to investigate the perception and the potential effectiveness of comparative advertising in the Czech Republic. The paper will not analyze the potential effectiveness of comparative advertising in the Czech Republic in general only, but also its effectiveness on specific target groups (based on demographic characteristics – such as gender and age, and the brand that the consumer currently uses, i.e. the sponsor brand or “attacked” brand or “neutral” brand).

In particular the perception and potential effectiveness of the concrete comparative advertising campaign, which was held in the Czech Republic in September 2013, will be analyzed. The sponsor of the campaign, the Korean car maker Hyundai “attacked” with this campaign the Czech car maker Škoda Auto. The campaign portrayed a Hyundai’s model i30 with a claim “Hyundai is not afraid of any comparison! Come and see which Czech car maker really offers spacious and high-quality cars. You can decide yourself.” The advertising campaign invited customers to Hyundai dealerships where direct comparisons were prepared. The Hyundai dealers were asked to rent Škoda cars and to place them in their stores directly next to Hyundai cars to enable the direct comparison of the two brands. This particular campaign was one of the first campaigns ever used in the Czech Republic which included direct comparison of two brands, as such campaigns are in general very rare in the country.

The “attacked” brand Škoda has been the clear market leader in the Czech market for decades, while Hyundai is a relatively new brand on this market. In 2013 Hyundai was number two in the Czech Republic and its total sales stayed approximately at one third of Škoda’s level (Strategie, 2013). Since 2008 when Hyundai opened its first European production plant in the Czech Republic, Hyundai has always been trying to attack Škoda’s leading position, also stressing the fact that its cars were produced locally (that is why the campaign invited customers to compare two Czech car makers).

The existing literature on the topic of comparative advertising does not only suggest that there are some differences in the effectiveness and acceptance of comparative advertising among countries (see above), but that different target groups could respond differently to comparative claims. The majority of this research addresses the US market, as it is the most developed market in this field but research in other countries exist as well.

Despite the fact that the majority of the research agreed that comparative advertising was an effective advertising technique in the USA, some doubts on its effectiveness appeared already in the past. Already in 1983 David Ogilvy stated that advertisements in which competing products were mentioned directly could be less trustworthy and more confusing than those which did not name the competing products. Targeted consumers could even get the impression that the “attacked” brand was the “hero” of the comparative advertising campaign (Ogilvy, 1983).

More recent research on this topic also confirmed Ogilvy’s statement. Beard (2013) in his study of the opinions of American marketing experts concluded that comparative and non- comparative advertising claims could both be effective but that the effectiveness

of comparative advertising claims was probably not higher than the effectiveness of non-comparative claims.

Some studies also identified possible differences in the effectiveness and acceptance of comparative advertising based on personal characteristics of the recipients of the claim. The receiver's gender was identified by Pfau (1994) as one of the factors that influences the likelihood of purchasing the brand supported in the comparative message. Pfau's statement was supported by Barone et al. (2004) who also concluded that gender plays an important role in processing the comparative advertising claim. Barone et al. (2004) also suggested that the usage or non-usage of the sponsoring brand by the recipient could be an important factor which influenced the effectiveness of the comparative claim.

For our case, the following findings could be of high importance as well. Murphy and Amundsen (1981) examined the effectiveness of comparative advertising for new and established brands and came to the conclusion that new and less well-known brands appear to have the most to gain by comparing themselves with the dominant brand in their category. Their results supported the previous findings of Shimp and Dyer (1978) who concluded that comparative ads were more effective for new brands, while for the established brands non-comparative ads should to be more effective.

Product category was also identified as a factor which influences the effectiveness of comparative advertising. Pfau (1994) identified that comparative ads were more effective for low-involvement products than for those with high-involvement. Schwaiger et al. (2007) concluded that the effectiveness of comparative claims was less convincing for products which were assessed on a more emotional level than for campaigns based on price comparisons. Those studies could be of high relevance for the analyzed case because cars, in general, represent a high-involvement product category and also a product category in which emotions play an important role in consumer's decision making.

A recent study by Neese and Haynie (2015) investigated the attitudes of American consumers towards comparative advertising for cars on a particular case of imported vs. American products. Despite the usual belief that such campaigns could raise the ethnocentric sentiment of consumers, the study concluded that American consumers favored best an available product, regardless of where it had been produced. Also this study is relevant for the investigated case as we investigate the advertising campaign sponsored by a foreign brand which attacked a domestic competitor.

3. Methodology and Hypotheses

Based on a literature review on the topic of comparative advertising and the fact that there has been no research on it related specifically to the Czech Republic, we developed the following hypothesis:

The first hypothesis is based on the results of existing studies, which suggest that comparative advertising is more effective in countries where it is relatively novel (Nye et al., 2008) and in low-context communication cultures (Shao et al., 2004).

H1: The attitude (and potential effectiveness) towards comparative advertising is rather positive in the Czech Republic.

The second hypothesis is based on the research results of Pfau (1994) and Barone et al. (2004) who all identified that the recipient's gender was a factor influencing the acceptance of

comparative claims. We decided to extend the existing research of moderators of effectiveness of comparative advertising by another category. The age of the consumer was selected as a potential moderator because comparative advertising is still a new and innovative form of advertising in the Czech Republic. Several studies suggest that younger consumers are more open to adopt innovations than older consumers (Herbi & Day, 1992). The assumption therefore is that younger consumers will be more open to this new form of advertising. Based on the above mentioned arguments, we assume that:

H2: The attitude towards (and the potential effectiveness of) comparative advertising differs based on the demographic profile of the consumer (such as gender and age).

The third hypothesis is based on the aforementioned results of the study conducted by Barone et al. (2004) who concluded that (together with their gender) the brand that the recipient of the message uses influenced the effectiveness of comparative advertising campaign.

H3: The attitude towards (and potential effectiveness of) comparative advertising differs depending on the brand the recipient of the message currently uses.

In order to confirm or reject these hypotheses, a quantitative online survey was conducted among Czech consumers. The survey was conducted immediately after the execution of the campaign (October-December 2013) in order to ensure that the respondents still re-call the campaign. Additionally, a copy of the printed ad (depicted at Figure 1) was also presented at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Figure 1 | Comparative advertising copy of Hyundai i30



Source: Authors

Besides questions which targeted the demographic profile of the respondent (age, gender, family status and the car brand the recipient currently uses) the questionnaire consisted of five questions addressing the opinion of the respondent regarding the campaign. In these questions we used scales to enable the recipients to express their opinions about the campaign or the extent to which they changed their attitude towards one of the brands.

Snowball sampling was used in order to receive as many responses as possible within a short time frame and also to achieve populations which could normally be hard-to-reach by random sampling, such as the young generation, elderly people, or population from remoter regions of the country. In these cases, snowball sampling could be a useful method of sampling as stated by Baltar and Brunet (2012). E-mail and social networks were used to distribute the questionnaire.

Altogether we were able to collect 160 valid responses from all regions of the Czech Republic and of all age groups. Even though the research sample does not fully correspond with the structure of the Czech population (underrepresented women and older respondents compared to the general population of the Czech Republic), we still believe that the analysis could bring some interesting insights to understand the potential effectiveness of comparative advertising in the Czech Republic and could therefore be relevant as an initial study of the Czech market for researchers as well as for marketing practitioners. Our study analyses the reactions and opinions on real advertising campaigns on all demographic groups (in contrary to some of the aforementioned studies, which analyzed hypothetical campaigns and some of them used student populations only as a sample).

4. Results and Discussion

To examine the first hypothesis, we formulated two questions in which respondents had to choose on a scale from 1 to 5 and state their level of agreement/disagreement. The first question aimed to examine the general attitude of respondents towards comparative advertising. Figure 2 demonstrates that majority of respondents (55%) disagree with the statement that comparative advertising campaigns generally bother them. Only 34.4% of respondents agreed with this statement.

Figure 2 | Attitudes towards comparative advertising

[I generally dislike campaigns with direct comparisons between competing brands.]

Opinion	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Totally agree	20	12.5%	12.5%
Partly agree	35	21.9%	34.4%
No opinion	17	10.6%	45.0%
Partly disagree	33	20.6%	65.6%
Totally disagree	55	34.4%	100.0%
Total	160	100	

Source: Authors

Figure 3 shows the distribution of answers to the second question, which dealt with the attitude of the respondents towards this particular campaign. Once again, a slim majority of respondents (53.1%) stated that they liked the campaign and that it was appealing; 22.5% did not appreciate the campaign of Hyundai. Results indicate that it is likely that H1 “The attitude (and potential effectiveness) towards comparative advertising is rather positive in the Czech Republic” might be valid.

Figure 3 | Attitudes towards the Hyundai campaign

[I like this particular campaign (it is appealing to me).]

Opinion	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Totally agree	34	21.25%	21.25%
Partly agree	51	31.88%	53.13%
No opinion	39	24.38%	77.51%
Partly disagree	22	13.75%	91.26%
Totally disagree	14	8.75%	100.0%
Total	166	100	

Source: Authors

To examine more in detail whether there is a relation between demographic variables (gender, age) and the shift in attitudes towards brands, we used logistic multinomial regression and Chi-Square test. First we examined the shift in attitudes towards the sponsoring brand Hyundai and in the second step attitudes towards the attacked brand Škoda. Figure 4 shows that no statistically significant correlation between the dependent variable (attitude towards Hyundai brand) and independent demographic variables (gender, age) can be observed as p-values of all independent variables are greater than 0.05 (no significant variable).

Figure 4 | Multinomial regression: Change of attitude towards Hyundai brand

Dependent variable: Change of attitude towards Hyundai brand

Independent variable: Gender, age, occupation

Effect	Coefficient	χ^2	df	Sig.
Intercept	138.526	.000		
Gender	145.770	7.244	6	.299
Age	143.417	4.891	15	.993

Source: Authors

Similar results can be observed for the Škoda brand (Figure 5). We therefore cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no relation between variables. No statistically significant values representing the demographic profile of the customers were found using the statistical method multinomial logistic regression.

Figure 5 | Multinomial regression: Change of attitude towards the Škoda brand

Dependent variable: Change of attitude towards the Škoda brand

Independent variable: Gender, age

Effect	Coefficient	χ^2	df	Sig.
Intercept	137.282	.000	0	.
Gender	128.613	.	6	.996
Age	125.985	.	15	.774

Source: Authors

To examine the hypotheses H2 and H3, we applied once again logistic multinomial regression and the Chi-Square test but before running the test we re-coded the responses on the brand the recipient currently uses. We considered only three possible answers: Hyundai user, Škoda user and user of another brand.

Our results indicate that there is a statistically significant relation between the gender of the respondent and the attitude towards comparative advertising on the level of significance 95%. The variable age has no statistically significant effect on attitudes of respondents.

Figure 6 demonstrates that there is also a statistically significant effect of the current brand which the respondent uses on the attitude towards comparative advertising on the level of significance of 95%. The brand of the car therefore can have an effect on the attitudes of respondents. Thus, the hypothesis H2 was partially supported by the results of the research. The results indicate that the gender of the recipient influences the general perception of comparative advertising with male consumers having a more positive approach towards this type of advertising. On the other hand, the age of the recipient does not seem to be a moderator of the attitude towards comparative advertising in general. The hypothesis H3 was also confirmed by our research.

Figure 6 | Multinomial regression: Attitudes towards comparative advertising

Effect	Coefficient	χ^2	df	Sig.
Intercept	275.190	.000	0	.
Gender	585.435	310.245	10	.000
Age	283.551	8.361	25	.999
Current brand of car	6398.628	6123.438	25	.000

Source: Authors

In order to derive implications that could be useful for academics and practitioners we continued our analysis researching how gender and the brand the respondent currently uses influence the respondent's attitude towards comparative advertising.

Using the method of relative frequency and Chi-square test, we can observe that whilst the campaign was appealing to the majority of respondents regardless of their gender, the attitude towards comparative campaigns in general seems to be dependent on gender at the 0.05 level as shown in figure 7. The implication of this finding could mean that brands targeting primarily male consumers can use this type of advertising without alienating their consumers, whilst more "feminine" brands should probably consider a different communication strategy.

Figure 7 | Gender of respondents and attitudes towards comparative advertising

I generally dislike campaigns with direct comparisons between competing brands.				
	Male	Female	χ² test	
I agree	31.404	22.596	p-value	0.009
I disagree	50.595	36.404	dependence	
I like this particular campaign (it is appealing to me).				
	Male	Female	χ² test	Sig.
I agree	53.706	29.294	p-value	0.338
I disagree	23.294	12.706	independence	

Source: Authors

Further on we analyzed whether the campaign changed the attitudes of respondents towards the competing brands Škoda and Hyundai based on the brand of the car the respondent currently uses. The results are presented in figure 8.

Figure 8 | Effects of the campaign on the perception of respondents

	All respondents	Of them Škoda users	Of them users of another car brand	Of them Hyundai users
Škoda positive change	11%	61%	39%	0%
Hyundai negative change	9%	47%	53%	0%
Hyundai positive change	15%	24%	68%	8%

Source: Authors

Eleven percent of respondents changed their attitude towards Škoda brand, but in the opposite direction than Hyundai probably intended. Respondents claimed that as a result of the campaign, they now perceive the Škoda brand in a more positive light. 61% of

those respondents however currently possess a Škoda car, while 39% possess a brand other than Škoda and Hyundai. The campaign therefore seems to strengthen the bond between the “attacked” brand and part of its current consumers. In this case, 21% of Škoda customers from the total sample changed their attitude towards Škoda in a positive way after the campaign, compared to only 9% of other brand users. Fifteen percent of respondents from our sample changed their attitude towards Hyundai in a positive way after the campaign, of which 24% were Škoda users, 68% used other car brands and 8% were Hyundai users. Taken into consideration the total sample, the campaign was able to change the opinion in a positive way of 12% of Škoda car users, 22% of other brand users and 33% of Hyundai users. Detailed results are presented in figure 9.

Figure 9 | Effects of the campaign on perception of respondents by the brand the respondent uses

	Škoda users	Other car users	Hyundai users
Škoda positive change	21%	9%	0%
Hyundai negative change	13%	10%	0%
Hyundai positive change	12%	22%	33%
Unchanged opinion	54%	59%	67%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Authors

As figure 8 shows, the campaign also had a slightly negative effect on the “attacking” brand with 9% of consumers changing their attitude towards Hyundai in a negative way. Forty-seven percent of those respondents currently possess a Škoda brand, while 53% of them possess a brand other than Škoda or Hyundai.

Those results therefore indicate that the brand possessed by respondents does have an effect on the way they perceive the “attacking” and “attacked” brand. When “their” brand is under attack, there seems to be a strengthening effect on the relation between certain consumers and their brand. Also, being attacked can negatively affect their perception of the attacking brand.

5. Managerial implications, limitations and further research

This study extends previous research by analyzing specifically the issue of comparative advertising in the Czech Republic as such a study does not exist so far. Also it contributes to the knowledge of the role of gender and age as moderators of processing comparative advertising claims.

In general, the research confirmed our expectations that the Czech consumers do not seem to be opposed to comparative advertising. This result corresponds with previous findings of Nye et al. (2008) who suggested that comparative advertising was more effective in countries where it is relatively novel and of Shao et al. (2004) who found that comparative advertising was more effective in low-context communication cultures. Marketing practitioners could thus use this type of advertising claims in their campaigns for the Czech market.

Regarding the gender of the recipient of the advertising message, our research results confirmed previous findings of other researchers who identified that the gender of the recipient was a factor influencing the acceptance of comparative claims (e.g. Pfau, 1994 and Barone et al., 2004). Our results indicate that male consumers tend to be more open to comparative advertising campaigns than female consumers. Therefore, brands targeting primarily male consumers can use this type of advertising without alienating their consumers, whilst more “feminine” brands should probably consider a different communication strategy.

On the other hand, the age of the recipient of the advertising message was not confirmed as a moderator influencing the acceptance of comparative claims. Thus, marketers could use comparative advertising in the Czech Republic regardless the age of their target audience.

Our research also indicated an important limitation of the usage of comparative advertising. On one hand, the analyzed campaign of Hyundai (sponsoring brand) was able to change the attitudes of 15% of respondents in a positive way towards Hyundai. However, on the other hand, there was an opposite, undesired effect of the campaign which seemed to strengthen the “attacked” brand Škoda among some of its core consumers and users of other brands as 11% of our sample change their attitude towards the Škoda brand in a positive way. Managers planning this type of campaigns should therefore carefully consider this possible negative effect of comparative advertising.

We are aware of several limitations of this study. Firstly, the sample analyzed was relatively small and thus does not enable the generalizations of the results of the study. Also the sampling method used (namely snowball sampling) could potentially deliver biased results.

Secondly, only one advertising campaign was investigated in this paper. Also the product advertised in this campaign (namely the car) is a special product category. The results therefore may not be relevant for other product categories. Cars are products with high-involvement for which comparative advertising should be less effective than for low-involvement product categories (Pfau, 2014). Cars also represent a product category which is assessed on an emotional level by consumers. For these product categories, comparative advertising could be less effective than for those in which consumer decisions are based on price comparisons (Schwaiger et al., 2007).

Thirdly, the market positions of the two brands involved in the analyzed campaign could have influenced the results delivered by this study. The sponsor of the campaign, Hyundai, is a relatively new brand on the Czech market, while Škoda has been a clear market leader for decades. Existing studies show that comparative advertising should be more effective for new and less-established brands than for those that are already well-established (Murphy & Amundsen, 1981), because the features of old products are well-known to the consumers.

Given the limitations of this study, there are several directions for future research we can think of. First, further research should concentrate on different product categories than cars, as well as on other countries in the Central European region. Second, further research should investigate the effectiveness of the comparative campaign in which less prominent brands would be “attacked.” Third, further research is needed for European markets in which comparative advertising still represents a relatively novel advertising technique. Such studies would enable country comparisons and better understanding of

the effectiveness of comparative advertising among marketing managers who deal with EU markets. Last but not least, a comparative study investigating the differences between male and female attitudes toward comparative advertising for different product categories could be highly relevant, especially for the professionals.

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