

The Hidden Cost of Warmth: Examining the Compensation Effect in a Cluttered Advertising Context

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Abstract

This study investigates the negative consequences of warmth appeal in advertising, particularly in competitive cluttered contexts where consumers encounter multiple advertisements with varying warmth levels. Drawing upon the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), which suggests an inverse relationship between perceptions of warmth and competence, the study explores the "compensation effect", where increased perceptions of warmth lead to reduced perceptions of competence. Specifically, this study explores how advertisement exposure conditions (single advertisement vs. competitive clutter) with varying warmth levels affect consumer perceptions and purchase intention. The findings reveal that advertisements with high warmth appeal, when presented alongside advertisements with low warmth appeal, result in lower purchase intention owing to reduced perceptions of brand competence. Additionally, consumers' self-monitoring was found to moderate these effects, with high self-monitoring exhibiting more pronounced negative reactions in a cluttered advertising context. These findings highlight the importance of strategically using warmth appeal, especially in competitive settings, and considering individual differences in consumer behavior, such as self-monitoring. This study offers valuable insights for advertisers and marketers to optimize warmth-based strategies in cluttered advertising environments.

Keywords: warmth, competence, compensation effect, advertising, SNS, self-monitoring

1. Introduction

People perceive others through various lenses and perspectives. Although numerous traits and attributes are used to assess others, social psychology research has identified two universal dimensions, warmth and competence. Warmth describes whether a person has good intentions toward others and includes traits such as kindness, sincerity, and friendliness. Conversely, competence, which is characterized by traits such as intelligence, capability, and assertiveness, refers to the ability to carry out these intentions (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). According to advertising and branding research, consumers often anthropomorphize brands and perceive them in the same way as they perceive other people, that is, through the lenses of warmth and competence (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012).

When a brand is considered warm and competent, it tends to generate higher purchase intention and more favorable evaluations. Furthermore, when perceiving people and brands, warmth is often more important than competence because people tend to value warmth more highly than competence, and warmth has a greater impact on emotional and behavioral responses. Consequently, many companies incorporate warmth appeal, such as warmheartedness, into their advertising strategies to project an image of warmth for the brand and foster positive brand associations (brand warmth) (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2022).

Although warmth advertising appeal can result in favorable brand evaluations, they do not always yield positive outcomes for brands. Based on previous studies, warm advertising appeals can often decrease a brand's perceived competence (brand competence), which can negatively affect purchase intention (Kim & Ball, 2021; Peter & Ponzi, 2018). However, most earlier studies focused on the conditions in which consumers are exposed to a single ad. Departing from prior research, the present study examines the negative effects of warmth appeal in competitive advertising clutter, that is, when consumers are simultaneously exposed to multiple advertisements with different levels of warmth (high vs. low).

In addition, this study analyzes the role of consumers' self-monitoring levels as a moderating variable. Given that consumers' self-monitoring levels can shape how they evaluate advertisements and brands, particularly on social media where behaviors are visible to other users, it is important to consider self-monitoring in this context (Chiu, 2022). By examining the role of consumers' self-monitoring levels, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how their self-awareness in social settings influences their responses to warmth-based advertising appeal.

1.1 The Stereotype Content Model (SCM)-Warmth and Competence

The stereotype content model (SCM) posits that two fundamental dimensions, warmth and competence, shape how individuals perceive social groups and individuals. Warmth reflects good intentions and encompasses traits such as kindness and sincerity, whereas competence denotes the ability to act on these intentions, which are represented by traits such as intelligence and capability (Fiske et al., 2007; Wojciszke & Abele, 2008). These dimensions influence others' perceptions, evaluations, and behaviors (Fiske et al., 2007; Ivens, Leischnig, Muller, & Valta, 2015; Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

SCM has been extensively applied in stereotyping research across various social groups and contexts (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Kervyn et al., 2012b; Sevillano & Fiske, 2016). For instance, elderly individuals are often stereotyped as being high in warmth but low in competence, whereas wealthy individuals are stereotyped as being highly competent but low in warmth (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Ivens et al., 2015). Generally, the higher a person's perceived competence and warmth, the more favorable the attitudes toward them (Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryl, 2009; Wortman & Wood, 2011).

Moreover, SCM has been applied in marketing and consumer research to investigate various topics such as branding (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kervyn et al., 2022), consumer perceptions of organizations (Aaker et al., 2010; Peiffer, Villotti, Vantilborgh, & Desmette, 2020), brand evaluation (Aaker, Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012; Kolbl, Diamantopoulos, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, & Zabkar, 2020), and brand anthropomorphism (Liu, Wei, Zhu, & Chen, 2022). For example, Aaker et al. (2010) found that consumers employ warmth and competence stereotypes to form impressions of companies, often perceiving nonprofit companies as warmer but less competent than for-profit ones (Ivens et al., 2015). Positive perceptions in both dimensions are known to enhance purchase intention and brand loyalty (Kervyn et al., 2022).

A notable aspect of the SCM is the compensation effect, which refers to an inverse relationship between perceptions of warmth and competence (Kervyn, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2009). This effect suggests that when a brand or individual is perceived as highly warm, they may simultaneously be viewed as less competent and vice versa (Kervyn et al., 2022). This study explores the conditions under which compensation effects arise, particularly in the context of advertising, where warmth appeal may shape consumers' inferences about a brand's competence and influence their behavioral intentions.

1.2 Compensation Effect between Warmth and Competence

Advertising is crucial for conveying brand values, building brand image, and highlighting product features (Liu-Thompkins, 2019). Warmth appeal is a prevalent advertising strategy aimed at enhancing brand evaluations by portraying the brand as caring and generous (Choi, Chang, Lee, & Chang, 2016; Kolbl et al., 2020; Zhang, Zheng, & Zhang, 2020). Consequently, many companies increasingly use warmth appeal in their advertisements. However, not all warmth appeal achieves the desired outcomes (Jin, Zhang, Wu, & Zhu, 2022). While warmth appeal can create a positive halo effect (Asch, 1946; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), it does not always produce positive results (Li, Lu, Bogicevic, & Bujisic, 2019). Specifically, warmth appeal can reduce people's perceptions of brand competence, a phenomenon known as the compensation effect. This, in turn, decreases positive brand attitudes and purchase intention (Jin et al., 2022). Zawisza and Pittard (2015) further argued that the effectiveness of warmth appeal varies with product involvement levels, suggesting that non-warmth appeal might be more beneficial for high-involvement products.

This phenomenon also relates to the social perception innuendo effect, in which negative assumptions are made regarding the missing dimension (Kervyn et al., 2012a). The same effect is observed in brand communication, where emphasizing one dimension exclusively can lead to negative inferences about the other (Kervyn et al., 2022; Peter & Ponzi, 2018). For example, Kim and Ball (2021) suggest that high-warmth messaging may harm brand evaluations by reducing perceptions of competence, particularly when a strong, competent image is essential for the product category.

The compensation effect is more likely to occur in contexts where two entities are evaluated simultaneously or when information is provided about only one dimension of the two (warmth and competence), prompting inferences about the other (Kervyn et al., 2009; Kervyn et al., 2012b). This phenomenon is also related to social perception and the innuendo effect (Kervyn et al., 2012a), where negative inferences are made about the missing dimension. This effect is also observed in brand communication (Kervyn et al., 2022; Peter & Ponzi, 2018), where focusing solely on one dimension can lead to negative inferences about the other (Kervyn et al., 2022; Peter & Ponzi, 2018). Kim and Ball (2021) suggested that

messages with high warmth might harm brand evaluation by reducing perceived competence, especially when a strong image is valued in the product category.

Thus, context plays a critical role in examining the compensation effects of warmth and competence on consumer judgment and behavior. In competitive advertising contexts, the compensation effect may occur when two competing advertisements are presented simultaneously (Kervyn et al., 2009). This study investigates the boundary conditions and mechanisms that determine the effectiveness of warmth appeal by comparing single-advertisement exposure to competitive clutter conditions. In single-advertisement exposure, consumers may not actively infer the brand's competence; however, in competitive clutter, the juxtaposition of high- and low-warmth messages may trigger the compensation effect, reduce perceived competence, and negatively impact brand evaluations. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: When consumers are exposed to an advertisement employing warmth appeal alongside another advertisement using non-warmth appeal (i.e., in a competitive clutter condition), their purchase intention for the brand in the warmth-focused advertisement will be lower than when only the warmth-based advertisement is presented (i.e., in a single-advertisement exposure condition).

1.3 The Moderating Role of Self-Monitoring

Psychological studies have indicated that the effectiveness of advertising strategies, including warmth appeal, can vary significantly based on individual differences (e.g., Kim & Ball, 2021). Self-monitoring, a concept developed by Snyder (1974), refers to an individual's ability to regulate behavior and self-presentation based on social situations. Self-monitoring theory distinguishes between high self-monitors, who are highly attuned to social cues and adapt their behavior accordingly, and low self-monitors, who act more consistently according to their internal states, regardless of the social context (Snyder, 1974; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986).

Specifically, high self-monitoring is characterized by their adaptability and sensitivity to social environments. They often modify their opinions and behaviors to align with those around them, effectively playing different roles based on the social context. This adaptability makes them more concerned with social acceptance and likely to prioritize appearing favorable to others (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000). In contrast, low self-monitors tend to be more consistent in their behavior across different situations, valuing authenticity and acting according to their internal beliefs and feelings. They are less influenced by social approval and more likely to behave in ways that are true to their personal values and internal beliefs, regardless of social expectations (Snyder, 1987). Previous findings have highlighted the role of self-monitoring in shaping consumer responses to advertising (Chiu, 2022; Kurt, Inman, & Argo, 2011; Snyder & DeBono, 1985, 2014). Therefore, this study posits that self-monitoring moderates the effect of advertising exposure on purchase intention. Specifically, for high self-monitors, who are more sensitive to social cues and concerned with social acceptance, the presence of a high-warmth message in advertising may be more impactful. They are likely to perceive high-warmth messages positively, as these messages align with their desire for approval and favorable social interactions. Consequently, high self-monitors may show greater purchase intention when exposed to high-warmth advertisements, particularly when these are presented in a context comparable to low-warmth advertisements. This is because high self-monitors are adept at navigating social comparisons and may infer that brands with high warmth are socially desirable and trustworthy (Snyder & DeBono, 1985).

By contrast, low self-monitors, who prioritize authenticity and are less influenced by social cues, may not differentiate between high- and low-warmth advertisements. Their purchase intention is likely to be more stable across different advertising contexts as they base their decisions on internal criteria rather than social comparisons. Therefore, the negative impact of the compensation effect, in which high-warmth messages lead to perceived lower competence, may be less pronounced for low self-monitors. They are less likely to be swayed by the social implications of warmth appeals and are more focused on their intrinsic perceptions of the brand's competence and functionality (Snyder, 1987). Therefore, this study posits that self-monitoring moderates the effect of advertising exposure on purchase intention. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis.

H2: The effect of advertising exposure on purchase intention is moderated by consumers' self-monitoring levels. Specifically, consumers with a high level of self-monitoring showed lower purchase intention than those with a low level of self-monitoring in competitive clutter conditions.

2. Method

The objectives of this study are two-fold. First, it investigates whether different advertising exposure conditions influence the effectiveness of high-warmth messages (H1). Next, this study examines the moderating role of self-monitoring levels on the impact of high-warmth messages across different advertising exposure conditions (H2). To test the proposed hypotheses, a 2x2 between-subject factorial design (ad exposure condition: single advertisement vs. comparative advertisement exposure; self-monitoring level: high vs. low) was employed. The advertisement exposure condition was

manipulated and self-monitoring and purchase intention were measured. Age served as a covariate to control for its possible influence on the participants' responses.

2.1 Stimulus Development

Two fictitious social media advertisements for food delivery services were developed to explore the effects of advertising exposure under controlled conditions. Each advertisement was designed to project either a high or low level of warmth: one conveyed a high level of warmth, using phrases like "Very warm-hearted", "Friendly delivery service", and "Kind and likeable service", while the other conveyed a low level of warmth, highlighted by customer testimonials such as "Very great", "Outstanding delivery service", and "Awesome!". To eliminate any influence stemming from pre-existing brand knowledge and attitudes toward real brands, we created two fictional brands: BiteDrop and FoodieFlash. The high-warmth message was paired with BiteDrop, whereas FoodieFlash featured the low-warmth message. Additionally, in scenarios in which comparative advertising conditions were examined, the FoodieFlash ad was displayed alongside the BiteDrop ad to assess interaction effects. All other aspects of the advertisements, such as visuals and layout, were standardized to ensure uniformity (see Appendix).

2.2 Measurements

The *level of self-monitoring* was assessed as an independent variable on a 14-item 5-point Likert scale. The sample items are: "I can make impromptu speeches even on topics about which I have almost no information", "I guess I put on a show to impress or entertain people", "I may deceive people by being friendly when I really dislike them" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$) (citation). *Purchase intention* was measured as a dependent variable on a 4-item 5-point Likert scale. The sample questions are as follows: "It is likely to purchase this brand", "It is possible to purchase this brand", "I will try this brand" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). (Snyder, 1974).

2.3 Sample and Procedure

Participants in the U.S. were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and compensated with USD 1 for their participation. A total of 120 participants completed the experimental study, but six participants were disqualified because they either failed the attention check or recognized the fictitious brand name used in the stimuli. Thus, 114 participants were selected for analysis (female: 37.7%, male: 62.3%, $M_{Age} = 33.3$).

After completing the consent form, participants filled out a questionnaire assessing their self-monitoring levels. They were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Initially, they reviewed information on food delivery services. Subsequently, the participants viewed a Facebook advertisement featuring a high-warmth message about the food delivery service, either alone or paired with a comparative advertisement using a low-warmth message. Subsequently, they responded to the manipulation check questions, addressed the dependent variable, and completed demographic inquiries. The session concluded with a debriefing and a note of thanks for participation.

3. Result

3.1 Manipulation Check

An independent sample t-test was conducted to assess the success of the level of warmth (high vs. low) for the two advertisements in the competitive clutter condition. As expected, an advertisement using a high-warmth message was perceived as warmer than one using a low-warmth message ($M = 3.42$; $SD = 0.8$; $t(144) = 83$; $p < .05$). Thus, manipulation of the warmth level was successful.

3.2 Hypotheses Testing

This study investigates the main effect of advertising exposure condition, and its interaction effect with consumers' self-monitoring level on purchase intention. Given that self-monitoring is a continuous variable, a moderation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro (Model 1) in SPSS Version 4.1. The advertising exposure condition was entered as the independent variable and the self-monitoring level was the moderating variable, with age as a covariate (5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI). The purchase intention was the dependent variable. As shown in Table 1, the result revealed that the advertising exposure condition had a significant effect on the purchase intention ($b = -0.2834$, $SE = 0.0952$, $t = -2.98$, $p < .01$). In other words, participants' purchase intention was lower in the competitive clutter condition than in the single-advertisement exposure condition.

In addition, the result showed that there was an interaction effect between the advertising exposure condition and self-monitoring on the purchase intention ($b = -0.3963$, $SE = 0.1306$, $t = -3.04$, $p < .05$). This suggests that the effect of advertising exposure on purchase intention was moderated by the level of self-monitoring.

Table 1. Effects of the advertising exposure condition and self-monitoring on the purchase intention

	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	4.0286	0.2106	19.13	< .001
Advertising exposure condition (AEC)	-0.2834	0.0952	-2.98	< .01
Self-monitoring	-0.0578	0.0799	-0.72	0.471
AEC x self-monitoring	-0.3963	0.1306	-3.04	< .05

To further explore this interaction, the conditional effects of advertising exposure on purchase intention at different levels of self-monitoring were examined. As shown in Table 2, the results indicated that the effect of the advertising exposure condition was not significant at low levels of self-monitoring ($b = 0.0152, SE = 0.1357, t = 0.11, p = .9107$). However, at the medium level of self-monitoring, participants in the competitive clutter condition showed significantly less purchase intention compared to those in the single-advertisement exposure condition ($b = -0.2834, SE = 0.0952, t = -2.98, p < .01$). High self-monitoring participants in the competitive clutter condition also showed less purchase intention compared to those in the single-advertisement advertising condition ($b = -0.5819, SE = 0.1381, t = -4.21, p < .001$).

Table 2. Conditional effects of the advertising exposure condition on the purchase intention at different levels of self-monitoring

Self-monitoring level	Effect	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
-0.7535	0.0152	0.1357	0.11	.9107	-0.2530	0.2835
0.0000	-0.2834	0.0952	-2.98	.0034*	-0.4716	-0.0951
0.7535	-0.5819	0.1381	-4.21	< .001**	-0.8550	-0.3088

* $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$

4. Discussion

The study results revealed that an advertisement featuring a high level of warmth appeal has a negative impact on purchase intention when consumers are exposed to it, as does an advertisement featuring a low level of warmth appeal. In other words, when an advertisement with a high-warmth message is presented along with an advertisement using a low-warmth message (that is, in a competitive clutter condition), it attenuates consumers' purchase intention compared to when the former advertisement is presented alone (that is, in a single-advertisement exposure condition). Additionally, this study investigates the moderating role of consumers' self-monitoring levels on these effects. The results showed that the effects of the advertisement exposure condition were more pronounced for those with high self-monitoring levels than for those with low self-monitoring levels.

These findings have several implications for both marketers and advertisers. Although warmth appeal can enhance brand evaluation, marketers should strategically consider their use, particularly in competitive environments. The findings of this study suggest that warmth appeal may diminish perceptions of brand competence and reduce purchase intention when used in a competitive advertising context. Thus, marketers should be cautious about the potential negative impacts of warm messages, especially when considering the individual differences among consumers. With the increasing prevalence of simultaneous exposure to multiple advertisements on social media feeds, marketers should use warm messages strategically, consider advertising exposure contexts and individual consumer differences.

This study contributes to the research on SCM by applying it to a competitive advertising context because it focuses on the boundary conditions under which the compensation effect between warmth and competence occurs. Specifically, warmth advertising appeal in a particular condition can result in attenuated purchase intention and how this negative effect is amplified by individual differences in consumers' self-monitoring levels. Contributing to the knowledge of the role of consumer self-monitoring is also significant, as it demonstrates that consumers with high levels of self-monitoring are more vulnerable to the detrimental effects of warm advertising messages in the context of competitive advertising. This study sheds light on the relationship between warmth advertising appeal, competitive advertising context, and self-monitoring level. These relationships offer important insights for optimizing advertising strategies that increase consumer purchase intention.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that highlight areas for future research. First, the use of fictitious brands ensures internal validity by controlling for confounding factors. However, this approach may limit the external validity and generalizability of the findings. Future studies could address this issue by employing real brands with varying reputations for warmth and competence, thereby offering a more practical understanding of consumers' interactions with actual brands. Second, the sample consisted of U.S. participants recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk, which may not reflect broader cultural diversity. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research should include participants from diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds to examine cross-cultural variations in the

responses to warmth appeal in advertising. Third, while this study focused on self-monitoring as a moderating variable, exploring additional individual differences, such as the need for cognition or demographic factors (e.g., age and ethnicity), could provide deeper insights. These factors may influence the effects of warm messages and advertising exposure conditions, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of their relative impact. Finally, this study relied solely on quantitative methods. Incorporating qualitative approaches, such as post-experiment interviews or focus groups, can provide richer insights into consumer motivations and cognitive processes related to warmth appeal. A mixed methods approach offers a more holistic perspective of consumer responses to warmth advertising strategies.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Kim and Dr. Lee jointly contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, as well as to the subsequent revisions of the research framework. Dr. Kim took primary responsibility for data collection, ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the gathered data. Both Dr. Kim and Dr. Lee were involved in drafting the initial manuscript and refining its content during the revision process. All authors reviewed the final version of the manuscript in detail and provided their approval prior to submission.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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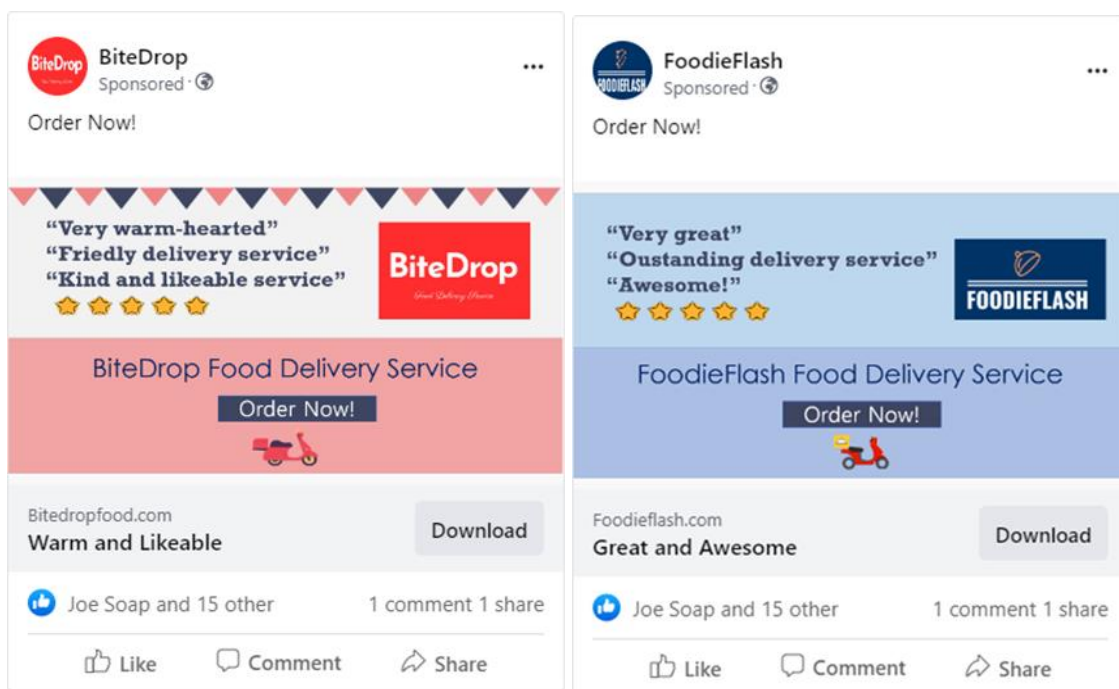
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Appendix

Stimuli: social media advertisements for food delivery services



A high level of warmth ad (BiteDrop)

A low level of warmth ad (FoodieFlash)