

THE MODERATING EFFECT OF BRAND COMMITMENT ON THE EVALUATION OF COMPETITIVE BRANDS

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ABSTRACT: In this research, we examine whether brand commitment has a negative effect on competitor brands. We find that committed consumers systematically underrate competitive brands. We find that the process by which this negative evaluation of the competitor brand occurs depends on the extent to which counterarguments are generated about the competitor brand message. Therefore, by using argument strength (Study 1), the number of arguments (Study 2), and a combination of both of these factors (Study 3), we propose and test two advertising techniques that may help the competitor brand overcome these negative evaluations.

Commitment to a brand has been shown to be an important determinant of attitudinal resistance when counterattitudinal information about the brand is present (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000). However, the effects of attitudinal commitment may not be limited to only those situations where counterattitudinal information is present. For example, a highly committed Mac user not only defends Apple computers against criticism, but also denigrates Microsoft Windows, despite Microsoft not making any reference to Mac. The extent to which brand commitment has an effect on competitive brands has not received adequate research attention. Therefore, the first question we address in this research is whether brand commitment has negative effects on other (competitor) brands.

Next, and more important, we attempt to understand how marketers can avoid the negative effects of brand commitment on competing brands. Prior literature has identified strength of the arguments as a key variable in mitigating counterarguments. However, the findings in the literature regarding the use of argument strength to limit counterarguments are mixed. Some researchers have found that as the strength of the arguments increase, committed consumers are more likely to relent and change their attitude (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000). Other researchers have found that irrespective of the strength of the arguments used, consumers committed to a brand seem to be equally opposed to a preference-inconsistent option (e.g., Jain 2003; Jain and Maheswaran 2000). Therefore, the second question we address is whether argument strength does indeed limit the negative effects of brand commitment on competing

brands. We then extend the findings by examining the effect of number of arguments on committed consumers. Since it is logical to expect that most advertising messages would use strong message arguments, having a strategy that does not rely solely on the strength of the message arguments is important.

To summarize, the objective of our research is to examine differences in how consumers who are highly committed versus those who are less committed to a brand process advertising information about a competitor brand. Furthermore, we attempt to clarify existing findings in the literature on strength of arguments and identify an additional variable, number of arguments, which marketers may use to limit the negative effects of commitment on competing brands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Commitment and Attitudinal Resistance

Commitment is viewed as a feeling of psychological attachment to an attitude object or an attitudinal position (Kiesler 1971). A committed individual feels “tied” to the brand or position and is less willing to change that position compared to a less committed individual. This sense of being tied to a position results in the tenaciousness of the attitude, resulting in increased resistance to attitude change (Ahluwalia 2000; Petty and Krosnick 1995). In marketing, commitment has also been studied outside of a specific brand experience and has been an important construct in examining how brands shape people’s lives (e.g., Fournier 1998). According to this view, commitment is driven by a consumer’s experience with a brand, as well as various forces around an individual (e.g., social networks, culture). Thus, a brand is interpreted across situations and usage experiences in terms of how it seems to fit into overall life patterns and goals rather than how effective it is in satisfying a specific need (e.g., Mick and Buhl 1992). Because commitment is deeply rooted within a person, it is

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difficult to change an individual's attitude toward a brand to which he or she is committed. Notably, research on commitment converges on the central premise that committed individuals resist attitude change and continue to behave favorably toward the brand to which they are committed.

Commitment and Processing Information About Competitive Brands

Some research has suggested that the effects of commitment also extend to situations where no explicit counterattitudinal information about the committed brand is present. For example, Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly (1989) observe that individuals may actively resist information that "supports non-preferred positions." This implies that a consumer who is committed to a brand will not only defend his or her committed brand against attacks, but may also view positive information about a competitive brand unfavorably, a circumstance that is likely to manifest itself in lower competitive brand evaluations. Thus, committed consumers will not only resist changes to their attitudes, but they may systematically underrate competitive offerings compared to less committed consumers.

Some support for this contention exists in the psychology literature. For example, Lydon, Fitzsimons, and Naidoo (2003) found that dating participants with a high commitment to their current relationship rated a person of the opposite sex less positively than dating participants with a low commitment to their current relationship. This behavior occurred even when participants faced no threat of having to desert their current companion or to explicitly compare their companion with the other person. Similarly, in a study of Japanese consumers, Kosugi, Kato, and Fujihara (2003) found that individuals highly patriotic to their own town evaluated out-of-town visitors less favorably than less patriotic individuals. Once again, this behavior was exhibited even when these individuals were not put in a position of defending their attitudes; they were simply rating out-of-town visitors. In sum, committed individuals appear to both defend their attitudes when challenged and systematically undervalue other competing options.

Looking at the issue more broadly, the cognitive reactance literature (Brehm 1972) provides some reasons why committed consumers may be biased against a competitive brand regardless of whether that brand makes a direct comparison to the committed brand. Both comparative and noncomparative competitive brand advertisements may be viewed by committed consumers as an option or opinion that is being forced on them. The perceived pressure to agree with the competitive message is likely to result in increased reactance and an unwillingness to accept the position taken by the competitive brand (Sherman, Crawford, and McConnell 2004). As a consequence,

committed consumers are likely to generate a greater number of counterarguments to the competitive brand message, resulting in less favorable attitudes toward the competitive brand. For less committed consumers, however, the position taken by the competitive brand is not likely to be perceived as an attempt to change any strong prior position, so they are less likely to face reactance. This is expected to result in fewer counterarguments and, thus, more favorable attitudes toward the competitive brand. In sum, by changing the difficulty with which counterarguments are generated, the evaluation of the competitor brand may be altered. The next section discusses this issue in greater detail.

Reducing Biased Processing

As discussed, researchers agree that counterargumentation is the first line of defense for committed consumers defending their attitudes (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000; Jain 2003; Jain and Maheswaran 2000; Petty and Krosnick 1995). It follows from this finding that the negative impact of commitment on evaluations of competitive brands can be mitigated if the competitive brand advertising is constructed to reduce the proportion of counterarguments and/or increase the proportion of support arguments. Because of the defensive nature of their processing, though, reducing counterarguments and/or increasing support arguments in committed consumers may not be an easy task (e.g., Jain and Maheswaran 2000). Researchers have noted, however, that commitment effects may not be sustainable in the presence of relatively strong and irrefutable evidence (Ditto and Lopez 1992; Kiesler 1971). Kunda (1990) has similarly argued that information processing leading to a biased attitude is sustainable only to an extent. When new information unambiguously supports an inconsistent position, consumers will find it very difficult to disregard the information despite its contradiction of prior attitudes. Therefore, when committed consumers face strong and convincing arguments, they are less likely to dismiss the position advocated by the message.

The above discussion raises an interesting possibility for committed brands and competitor brands. If a competitor brand is able to present evidence that strongly suggests that the competitor brand is better overall than the committed brand, then even committed consumers will relent in the face of such evidence. This is likely to occur because committed brand consumers will find it difficult to generate sufficient counterarguments to overcome the evidence presented by the competitor brand.

When the competitor brand suggests that it is better than the committed brand, but the evidence shows that the competitor brand is only slightly better than the committed brand, a different outcome may occur. Under such

circumstances, even if the competitor brand is slightly better than the committed brand, committed consumers will be able to counterargue such evidence more effectively. Thus, despite the competitor brand's comparability to the committed brand, high-commitment consumers will perceive the competitor brand to be less attractive.

Specifically, we manipulate the strength of the evidence by suggesting that a competitor brand is much better than the committed brand (strong superiority evidence) or by showing that the competitor brand is slightly better than the committed brand (weak superiority evidence). We expect that low-commitment consumers will rate a competitor brand favorably in both the strong and weak superiority evidence conditions because they will not perceive a competitor brand advertisement as an attempt to change their prior position. Instead, they will perceive the competitor brand as better than or as good as the original low-commitment brand, resulting in favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand. However, we expect that high-commitment consumers will perceive a competitor advertisement as an attempt to change their prior position, resulting in a biased evaluation of the information presented in the advertisement. As a result, if a competitor brand is described as comparable to the committed brand, we expect that high-commitment consumers will likely resist this information, resulting in less favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand. On the other hand, if a competitor brand is described as superior to the committed brand, we expect that high-commitment consumers will find it very difficult to generate sufficient counterarguments to denigrate the competitor brand, resulting in more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand. Thus:

H1: When the competitor brand presents weak superiority evidence, high-commitment consumers will have less favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than low-commitment consumers. When the competitor brand presents strong superiority arguments, both high- and low-commitment consumers will have equally favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand.

H2: When the competitor brand presents weak superiority evidence, high-commitment consumers will generate a greater number of counterarguments than low-commitment consumers. When the competitor brand presents strong superiority arguments, both high- and low-commitment consumers will generate an equally low number of counterarguments toward the competitor brand.

H3: Counterarguments will mediate the effects of brand commitment on competitor brand attitude.

To summarize, Study 1 attempts to test two expectations: (1) to empirically show that committed consumers negatively evaluate competitor brands, and (2) to show that this nega-

tive evaluation will be mitigated when the competitor brand is able to present strong arguments to support its advertising message claims of superiority. It is important to note that we show the competitor brand to be slightly better than the committed brand in the weak superiority evidence condition. We believe this is a much stronger test of the theory that high-commitment consumers are biased against competitor brands.

STUDY 1

Design

To test for the effects of commitment on evaluations of the competitor brand on viewing a competitive advertisement that varies in the strength of the evidence used in the message claims, a 2 (target brand commitment: high versus low) \times 2 (evidence strength: strong versus weak) between-subjects design was implemented. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. Sixty-nine students from an introductory marketing class participated in this experiment in exchange for course credit and participated individually in the experiment. Each session lasted for approximately 25 minutes.

Stimuli

We chose athletic shoes as the product context in which our hypotheses were tested. Since brand commitment was manipulated in this research, we ensured that participants had little familiarity with and no prior commitment to the target brand. To assess prior brand knowledge, a pretest with 80 students from an introductory marketing course was conducted. They were asked to complete a free recall and cued recall of athletic shoe brands of which they were aware. Based on our pretest, we decided that Wave Phoenix athletic shoes (made by Mizuno Corporation) was a sufficiently unfamiliar brand to participants in our target population. Therefore, this brand was chosen as the target brand toward which participants' commitment would be manipulated. An advertisement and additional supporting material (product literature, consumer review articles, etc.) were developed for this target brand.

The manipulation of the evidence strength was conducted by having the competitor brand claim that it was superior to the target brand through two direct comparison advertisements. In the weak-argument condition, the evidence to support the claims that the competitor brand was better than the target brand were weak (e.g., the competitor brand was rated as being superior to the target brand on only two of six features and as being slightly better overall compared to the target brand). In the strong-argument condition, the evidence

to support the competitor brand claims that it was superior was much stronger (e.g., the competitor brand was rated as being superior on four of the six features and was rated as being significantly better overall compared to the target brand). The rest of the information was identical for the two advertisements (see Appendix 1 for a description of the advertisement claims).

A pretest asking participants to indicate the overall strength of the evidence on two, seven-point scales (weak/strong; unconvincing/convincing) indicated that the weak-evidence advertisement was rated as being significantly weaker ($M = 4.33$) than the strong-evidence advertisement, $M = 5.87$, $F(1, 27) = 15.13$, $p < .001$. Thus, advertising evidence was manipulated by changing the comparability of the competitor and committed brands.

Procedure

The procedure to induce brand commitment followed the technique used by Ahluwalia (2000) and Agrawal and Maheswaran (2005). Brands from two product categories—shoes (target) and clothing (filler)—were displayed, and participants were led to believe that the study was a market research study for potential future launch of the brands in the local market. Participants were handed the two folders containing product/company information about the brands. After they had finished reading the brand information, participants were encouraged to talk about the positive qualities and suggest a slogan for each brand; their comments were recorded.

The manipulation of commitment took place after this recording. High commitment to the shoe brand was induced by asking participants if their slogan, testimonials, and photograph could potentially be used by the shoe brand for its advertising. Upon agreeing, participants were photographed and asked to sign a release statement granting permission to use their photograph/testimonials in the brand's advertising. Low commitment was induced by asking participants to undergo an identical procedure for the filler brand (clothing brand). It is important to note that all participants underwent an identical procedure, except that the brand they believed was interested in their testimonial was either the target brand (high commitment) or the filler brand (low commitment). The identical procedure was used to ensure that the recording/photograph did not introduce confounds between the conditions.

The competitor brand was introduced at this point by handing over another folder containing the advertisement for the competitor brand (either the strong- or weak-argument advertisement). Participants were told that this brand was a competitor brand to the target brand. After reading through the advertisement, they completed a questionnaire. Participants were subsequently debriefed and quizzed to see if anyone

suspected the true nature of the study—none did. They were then thanked and dismissed.

Consistent with previous research, the commitment manipulation was tested on a separate group of 25 participants from the same population and at the same time as the main study to avoid potential demand effects. They underwent the same procedure as participants in the main study, except that they were not exposed to the competitor advertisement. Participants answered questions on brand attitude, commitment, knowledge, and task involvement.

Participants' commitment to the target brand was measured using a three-item brand commitment scale used in previous research (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Ahluwalia 2000; Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001). The three items were (1) if (brand name) were not available at the store, it would make little difference to me if I had to choose another brand; (2) I can see myself as being loyal to (brand name); and (3) I will more likely purchase a brand that is on sale than (brand name). Participants expressed their agreement with each statement using a nine-point scale anchored by agree/disagree. Brand attitude and task involvement were measured using the same scales as in the main study. Knowledge was measured by asking participants to rate the extent to which they agreed that the target brand possessed the attributes claimed in the stimuli material.

Dependent Variables

The questionnaire measured participants' attitudes toward the competitor brand (measured using four, nine-point semantic differential scales: very bad/very good, very harmful/very beneficial, very undesirable/very desirable, very nice/very awful). The scales were appropriately reverse coded and summed to form a single attitude measure ($\alpha = .74$). Next, cognitive responses were captured by asking students to list all thoughts they had while they were reading the competitor advertisement. Two judges coded the thoughts into four categories: support arguments (e.g., "The Racer looks just as good as the Wave brand"; "This is a better brand"), counterarguments (e.g., "The difference between the two brands is not big"; "The ad agrees that the Wave Phoenix is better on one attribute"), neutral (e.g., "The ad compares both the brands"; "Durability is important to me"), and irrelevant thoughts (e.g., "It is hot in this room"). There was 89% agreement between the judges ($\kappa = .85$). Disagreements were resolved through discussion (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Finally, participants answered questions relating to their involvement using four, nine-point scales (uninvolved/involved, not concentrating/concentrating, not paying attention/paying attention, did not carefully consider the claims/carefully considered the claims; $\alpha = .87$). The involvement questions were included to help

us eliminate a potential alternative explanation that our commitment manipulation might have caused differential levels of involvement in the participants. Participants were then debriefed before being dismissed.

Results

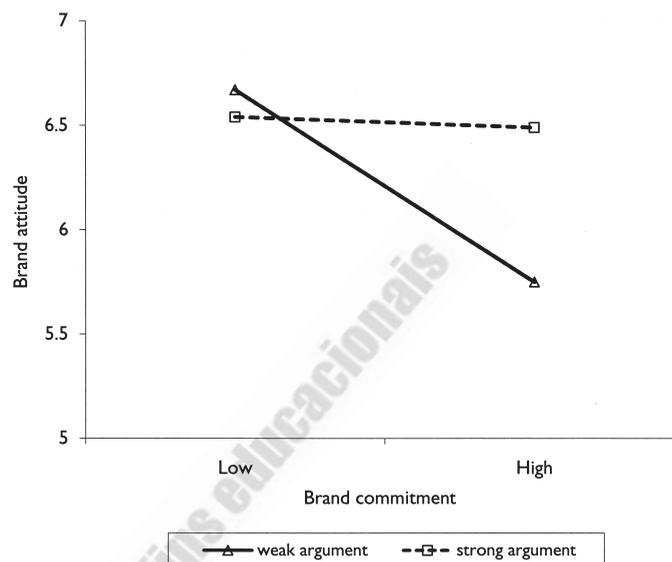
Commitment Manipulation Check

The manipulation check data revealed that high-commitment participants reported a significantly higher level of brand commitment ($M = 5.22$) than low-commitment participants, $M = 3.70$; $F(1, 24) = 7.85, p < .01$. However, they did not differ in their reported target brand attitude, $M_{\text{low}} = 7.75$ versus 7.46 ; $F(1, 24) = 2.81, p > .20$, knowledge about the target brand, $M_{\text{low}} = 7.42$ versus 7.77 ; $F < 1, p > .20$, or in their task involvement ($M_{\text{low}} = 5.93$ versus 6.14 ; $F < 1, p > .20$), indicating that the commitment manipulation effectively changed the level of brand commitment without changing other potential confounding variables. We now turn our attention to the results of the main experiment.

Competitor Brand Attitude

We hypothesized an interaction between participants' commitment and evidence strength, such that the negative effects of brand commitment on the competitor brand would be present when the evidence in the competitor brand advertisement was weak, but not when it was strong. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of participants' attitude scores with commitment and evidence strength as the independent factors revealed a significant main effect of commitment, $F(1, 65) = 5.53, p < .03$. Participants in the low-commitment condition expressed significantly more positive attitudes ($M = 6.61$) than participants in the high-commitment condition ($M = 6.12$). This main effect, however, was qualified by a significant interaction between commitment and evidence strength, $F(1, 65) = 4.28, p < .05$. A priori contrasts between the mean attitude scores of high- ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.75; n = 17$) and low- ($M_{\text{low}} = 6.67; n = 18$) commitment participants revealed that attitudes in the weak-evidence condition were significantly different from each other, $t(65) = 3.15, p < .01$. In the strong-evidence condition, on the other hand, the mean attitude scores did not differ between the high- ($M_{\text{high}} = 6.49; n = 17$) and low- ($M_{\text{low}} = 6.54; n = 17$) commitment participants, $t(65) = .20, p > .50$. Thus, when participants were highly committed to the target brand, their evaluations of a competitor brand were lower than the low-commitment participants only when the arguments supporting the advertising claims were weak. When the claims were strong, both high- and low-commitment participants rated the competitor equally positively, supporting H1 (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Study 1: Effect of Argument Strength and Brand Commitment on Competitor Brand Attitude



To understand the process by which commitment affects the competitor brand, the cognitive responses were analyzed.

Cognitive Response

As hypothesized, high-commitment participants were expected to counterargue the competitor information more than low-commitment participants when the evidence was weak. When the information was more difficult to refute (strong evidence), it was expected that high-commitment participants would find the evidence too compelling and would be unable to successfully counterargue. Therefore, the number of counterarguments would decrease to a level similar to that of low-commitment participants.

An ANOVA of mean number of counterarguments with commitment and evidence strength as the independent factors revealed a significant main effect of brand commitment, $F(1, 65) = 5.35, p < .05$, and a marginally significant main effect of evidence strength, $F(1, 65) = 3.34, p < .10$. Participants in the high-commitment condition generated significantly more counterarguments ($M = 1.53$) than participants in the low-commitment condition ($M = .97$). Similarly, participants in the weak-evidence condition generated marginally more counterarguments ($M = 1.46$) than participants in the strong-evidence condition ($M = 1.03$). However, these main effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction between commitment and evidence strength, $F(1, 65) = 4.22, p < .05$. Planned contrasts were conducted to examine differences between different experimental conditions in detail.

In the weak-evidence condition, a contrast between the mean number of counterarguments for the low- and high-commitment participants revealed a significant difference, $t(65) = 3.10, p < .01$. Participants in the high-commitment condition generated significantly more counterarguments ($M = 2.00$) than participants in the low-commitment condition ($M = .94$). In the strong-evidence condition, a contrast between high- and low-commitment participants revealed no significant differences, $t(65) = .17, p > .50$. High- and low-commitment participants generated the same number of counterarguments about the competitor ($M_{\text{low}} = 1.00, M_{\text{high}} = 1.06$). Thus, the negative effects of brand commitment on the competitor brand appear to have been mitigated by an inability of participants to generate arguments against the competitive brand, supporting H2.

An analysis of the support arguments revealed only main effects of commitment, $F(1, 65) = 4.49, p < .05$, and evidence strength, $F(1, 65) = 4.02, p < .05$, indicating a greater number of support arguments when brand commitment was low and when the competitor brand advertisement used strong evidence. Similarly, the analysis of the total number of thoughts revealed only a main effect of commitment, $F(1, 65) = 3.99, p = .05$. No other effects were significant.

Mediation Analysis

Since our argument was that the inability to generate counterarguments was responsible for more favorable brand attitudes in high-commitment participants, it was expected that counterarguments would mediate the relationship between commitment and brand attitude. To test this expectation, a mediation analysis was conducted. As expected, the interaction of commitment and evidence strength significantly predicted competitor brand attitude ($t = 2.07, p < .05$) and counterarguments ($t = -2.12, p < .05$). With both commitment and counterarguments in the regression equation, only counterarguments significantly predicted brand attitude ($t = -2.80, p < .01$). The interaction term was nonsignificant ($t = 1.39, p > .10$), indicating partial mediation by counterarguments on brand attitude (Sobel test statistic = 1.69, $p < .10$), supporting H3.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine the negative effects of brand commitment on the competitor brand and to clarify the results of previous findings in the literature by examining the role of evidence strength in overcoming these negative effects. As expected, brand commitment had a negative effect on the competitor brand, with high-commitment consumers displaying less favorable attitudes to the competitor brand. However, this negative effect on the competitor brand

dissipated when the evidence strongly suggested that the competitor brand was indeed superior to the committed brand. The cognitive response data and the mediation analysis further suggest that a reduction in the counterarguments generated by high-commitment consumers in response to a competitor brand's message was primarily responsible for the evaluations of the competitive brand becoming more favorable.

Another important finding in this research is that high-commitment consumers were less likely to perceive a comparable competitive brand favorably if the competitor brand's claims were not supported by strong evidence. Although the competitor brand was portrayed as being slightly better than the committed brand, high-commitment consumers were less likely to accept such information. Only when the evidence was overwhelmingly in favor of the competitor brand did high-commitment consumers rate the competitor brand more favorably. This indicates that making a claim that is weakly supported may not be sufficient to remove the negative effects of high commitment on evaluations of the competitor brand.

While suppressing counterarguments with strong evidence that the competitor brand is superior to the committed brand is one option to mitigate biased processing by committed consumers, presenting evidence that clearly demonstrates that the competing brand is superior to the committed brand may not always be possible due to a lack of such distinguishing product features. Given the findings of Study 1, which indicate that even slightly better brands may not be sufficient to convince committed consumers, we examine another advertising option available to competitor brands to reduce the negative information processing from committed consumers. We address this issue in Study 2 by manipulating the number of arguments rather than the strength of the evidence. Specifically, we examine the impact of using three arguments in the advertising message versus using seven arguments. Therefore, by changing the number of arguments used, we attempt to provide marketers with another practical option to reduce the negative effects of brand commitment on competitor brands.

Study 2 also includes two other critical changes from Study 1. Instead of manipulating commitment, we measure it. This allows us to test brand commitment effects under both manipulated and measured situations. Second, the advertisement was changed from a comparative advertisement to a noncomparative advertisement. Recall that in Study 1 we used a comparative advertisement format. It may be argued that the only reason the negative effects of commitment were noticed in Study 1 was because of the direct comparison drawn between the competitor brand and the committed brand. Absent such direct comparison, high-commitment consumers may feel less threatened by information about their committed brand, and the negative effects may not be present (e.g., Raju and Unnava 2006). To provide a stronger test of the theory that

the negative effects of brand commitment exist even when a direct comparison is not present, we decided to change the competitor advertisement to a noncomparative format (Putrevu and Lord 1994).

STUDY 2

Prior research has suggested that the number of arguments used to support a message claim plays an important role in reducing the negative thoughts associated with a message (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1984). Furthermore, it has been argued that under some circumstances, the number of arguments that make up the claims may be more important than the actual quality of the claims (Petty and Cacioppo 1984). The findings from Study 1 show that high-commitment consumers need strong evidence before they are convinced to hold a more favorable attitude toward the competitor brand. The results from Jain (2003) and Jain and Maheswaran (2000), however, suggest that even strong arguments sometimes do not increase the favorability of the attitude toward the competitor brand. Thus, we argue that not only is the strength of the arguments important, but also the number of such arguments. We extend prior research in two ways: first, by examining the negative effects of brand commitment even when the competitor brand makes no reference to the commitment brand, and second, by understanding how the number of arguments used in an advertisement affects high-commitment consumers.

In our context, when committed consumers face strong arguments, they may find it more difficult to argue against the information when the arguments presented are numerous. However, if the information is strong but relatively few such arguments are present, consumers may be able to isolate the arguments to a few attributes and prevent the favorable effects of these attributes from affecting the overall assessments of the competitor brand (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001). That is, consumers may be willing to accept that the competitor brand is good on some attribute, but they may perceive that the overall brand is still not good. However, if many arguments are presented to suggest that the competitor brand is good on several attributes, high-commitment consumers may find it difficult to isolate such a large number of favorable attributes, which could lead to a positive impact on their overall rating of the brand. Under such circumstances, high-commitment consumers may not be able to generate a sufficient number of counterarguments to maintain less favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand. Low-commitment consumers are less likely to avoid the spillover from the favorable brand features to the overall competitor brand rating. Thus, even with a few strong arguments, low-commitment consumers are likely to hold more favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001). They are also likely to generate relatively fewer counterarguments irrespective

of whether the number of strong arguments is few or many. Therefore:

H4: When few arguments are presented, high-commitment consumers will have less favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand than low-commitment consumers. When many arguments are presented, both high- and low-commitment consumers will have equally favorable attitudes toward the competitor brand.

H5: When few arguments are presented, high-commitment consumers will generate a greater number of counterarguments than low-commitment consumers. When many arguments are presented, both high- and low-commitment consumers will generate an equally low number of counterarguments toward the competitor brand.

Finally, as in Study 1, we expect that the less favorable attitude toward the competitor brand is mediated by the counterarguments generated (same as H3).

Design

A 2 (commitment: high versus low) \times 2 (argument number: three versus seven) design was employed. Participants at different levels of commitment were exposed to an advertisement for a fictitious brand of shoes. Ninety-five students from an introductory marketing class participated in this experiment in exchange for partial course credit. Each session consisted of up to eight participants and lasted approximately 25 minutes. The participants in the study were selected from a mass pretest of over 600 students who responded to questions on brand attitudes (good/bad, positive/negative, favorable/unfavorable, nice/awful, desirable/undesirable; nine-point scale), brand knowledge (not knowledgeable/knowledgeable, uninformed/informed; seven-point scale), and brand commitment (similar to Study 1) on four brands, each from a different product category. Nike was one of the brands used in the pretest that exhibited a significant dispersion in students' level of commitment to it and was chosen as the target brand for this study. The high- and low-commitment participants chosen for the study differed in their level of commitment to Nike shoes, $M = 7.5$ versus 3.4 ; $F(1, 94) = 245, p < .001$, but not in their attitude toward the brand, $M = 7.75$ versus 7.64 , $F(1, 94) < 1, p > .2$, or in their level of brand knowledge, $M = 5.4$ versus 5.7 , $F(1, 94) < 1, p > .2$.

Two pretests were conducted to aid in the development of the advertising message arguments. In the first pretest, 40 students were asked to write down the important arguments they could think of if they were to promote a brand of athletic shoes. The arguments were sorted into attribute categories, and a list of 15 arguments was derived from them. In a second pretest, students rated the strength and importance of each argument on a seven-point scale (not at all strong/very

strong). Seven arguments, each with equivalent mean strength ($M = 5.2$) and importance ratings ($M = 5.6$), were chosen for the seven-argument condition. A random subset of three arguments from the same group served as the advertising claims for the three-argument condition (see Appendix 2 for the claims used in the study). Our expectation was that committed participants would be better able to counterargue three arguments than seven arguments. Two versions of an advertisement for the competitor brand, “Altra shoes” (a fictitious brand), were prepared. Both advertisements had a headline (“Why You Should Consider the Altra”), a picture of a shoe, and the claims below the picture with the brand name at the bottom of the advertisement. The advertisements were noncomparative in nature and only promoted the competitor brand. The two advertisements differed only on whether they used three or seven arguments to promote the brand.

Procedure

Participants were provided a booklet containing seven advertisements with the competitor advertisement placed in the fourth position. After reading through all of the advertisements, participants responded to a set of questions included in a questionnaire. Participants’ attitude toward the competitor brand (same items as pretest; $\alpha = .93$), cognitive responses, argument quality (unconvincing/convincing, not persuasive/persuasive; seven-point scale; $\alpha = .91$), and attention paid to the advertisement (involved/uninvolved, paid a lot of attention/paid little attention; seven-point scale; $\alpha = .87$) were measured. Two judges, blind to the experimental condition, coded the responses into four categories: supportive (e.g., “I like it that these shoes come in different widths”; “The Altra sounds good; I will buy this shoe”), counterarguments (e.g., “All the shoes seem to claim the same things”; “I would rather go with Nike than this brand”; “Looks like a cheap shoe”), neutral (e.g., “The ad was not in color”; “Claimed it was trendy”), and irrelevant thoughts (e.g., “Too many ads”; “Nothing to say”). They agreed over 89% of the time, and disagreements were resolved through discussion ($\kappa = .85$).

Results

Manipulation Checks

An ANOVA of number of arguments revealed a main effect, $F(1, 91) = 4.36, p < .05$, indicating that participants exposed to seven arguments rated the advertisement as being relatively more persuasive ($M = 4.54$) than participants exposed to three arguments ($M = 3.85$). No other effect achieved significance. Attention paid to the advertisement did not differ between the conditions ($p > .2$).

Competitor Brand Attitude

Our expectation was that low-commitment participants would rate the competitor brand favorably in both the three- and seven-argument conditions, whereas high-commitment participants would rate the competitor brand more favorably in the seven-argument condition than the three-argument condition. Thus, an interaction between commitment and number of arguments was predicted.

An ANOVA of the mean attitude score of participants with commitment and argument number as the independent factors produced a main effect of argument number, $F(1, 91) = 7.31, p < .01$, qualified by the expected interaction, $F(1, 91) = 4.15, p < .05$. The interaction, as hypothesized, emerged from statistically equivalent brand attitudes in the low-commitment conditions, $M_{\text{seven}} = 6.33, n = 23; M_{\text{three}} = 6.13, n = 21; t(91) < 1, p > .20$, and significantly different attitudes in the high-commitment conditions, $M_{\text{seven}} = 6.42, n = 26; M_{\text{three}} = 4.96, n = 25; t(91) = 3.49, p < .01$. High-commitment participants rated the brand relatively unfavorably when the advertisement contained only three claims versus seven claims. Thus, presenting seven arguments in support of the competitor brand mitigated the negative effects of high commitment and produced brand ratings that were comparable to the low-commitment conditions, supporting H4 (see Figure 2). The cognitive responses of participants were examined next to see if the greater persuasion of high-commitment participants in the seven- versus three-argument condition was attributable to their inability to generate counterarguments.

Cognitive Response

As in Study 1, the counterarguments were analyzed to understand the process by which commitment affects competitor brand attitudes. An ANOVA of mean number of counterarguments with commitment level and argument number as the independent factors revealed a significant interaction, $F(1, 91) = 5.30, p < .05$. Given the nature of our expectation, a priori contrasts were performed between the high- and low-commitment conditions within the argument number conditions. As expected, in the three-argument condition, a significant difference in the counterarguments was observed between the low- ($M = 2.10$) and high-commitment participants, $M = 3.08, t(91) = 2.00, p < .05$. However, no differences were observed for the low- ($M = 2.70$) and high-commitment participants, $M = 1.96, t(91) = 1.34, p > .1$, in the seven-argument condition, suggesting that the high-commitment participants were able to successfully counterargue when the competitor advertisement had only three arguments, but found it more difficult to counterargue when the advertisement had seven arguments, thus supporting H5.

Mediation Analysis

The predicted mediator role of counterarguments on brand attitudes was tested using mediation analysis. As expected, the interaction of commitment and argument number significantly predicted brand attitude, $t(91) = 2.04, p < .05$, and counterarguments, $t(91) = -2.30, p < .05$. With both terms in the regression equation, only counterarguments significantly predicted brand attitude, $t(90) = -5.02, p < .001$. The interaction term was not significant, $t(90) = 1.05, p > .25$, indicating complete mediation by counterarguments on brand attitudes (Sobel test statistic = 2.09, $p < .05$). This mediation further supports the argument that the attitude to the competitor brand is affected by counterarguments (H3), replicating the findings of Study 1.

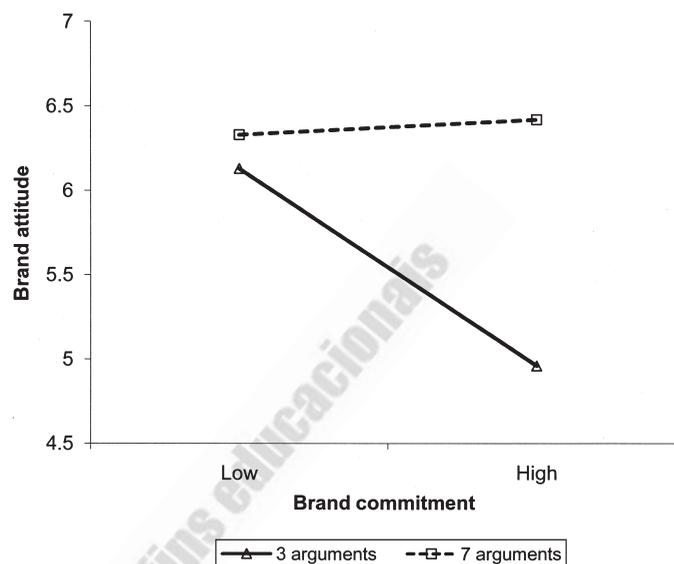
Discussion

Study 2 shows that high-commitment participants seem to negatively rate a new competitor brand even when that brand's advertisement does not compare against or even reference the committed brand, suggesting that the defensive processing of committed consumers extends beyond those where explicit negative information about the committed brand is present. Furthermore, counterarguments seem to be the primary mechanism by which committed consumers devalue other brands. When high-commitment participants are less successful at generating counterarguments due to the presence of numerous arguments supporting the superiority of the competitor brand, their evaluations are enhanced. Thus, committed consumers seem to accept and agree with favorable advertising information about a competitor brand only when the evidence irrefutably suggests that the advertised brand is good. Presumably, when the competitor brand is good on only a few important attributes, the impact of the favorable attributes on high-commitment consumers' perceptions of the competitor brand is limited, thus leaving their overall attitude toward that brand unaffected.

Study 3 seeks to further our understanding of the impact of commitment on evaluations of competitor brands by jointly considering the effects of strength of arguments and number of arguments in an advertisement on high-commitment and low-commitment consumer evaluations. Furthermore, a different product category was chosen to increase the generalizability of the results.

Consistent with the findings in Studies 1 and 2, we argue that low-commitment participants will rate a competitor brand relatively favorably regardless of the strength of the arguments or the number of arguments presented in an advertisement. However, for high-commitment participants to rate the competitor brand favorably, the arguments must be

FIGURE 2
Study 2: Effect of Number of Arguments and Brand Commitment on Competitor Brand Attitude



numerous and strong; otherwise, they were likely to rate the competitor brand less favorably. Therefore,

H6: When brand commitment is low, the competitor brand will be rated more favorably, irrespective of the strength or number of arguments. When brand commitment is high, the competitor brand will be rated more favorably only when there are many strong arguments and less favorably when arguments are few or weak.

Thus, the predicted pattern of results suggests two-way interactions between commitment and strength of arguments and commitment and number of arguments. This expectation was tested in Study 3.

STUDY 3

Design

A 2 (commitment: high versus low) \times 2 (argument strength: strong versus weak) \times 2 (argument number: three versus seven) between-subjects design was utilized. As in Study 2, commitment was measured rather than manipulated. Participants at high versus low levels of commitment to Toyota automobiles were exposed to an advertisement for a fictitious brand of automobiles called "Gen." One hundred seventy-three students from an introductory marketing class participated in this experiment in exchange for course credit. The experiment was conducted on-line by individual participants and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The participants in

the study were selected using a procedure identical to that used in Study 2. Respondents from a mass pretest completed the same measures for brand attitudes and brand commitment on four brands from different product categories. Toyota, one of the brands used in pretest, was chosen as the target brand for this study due to respondents' dispersion in commitment. An analysis revealed that high- and low-commitment participants chosen for the study exhibited significant differences in their level of commitment to Toyota automobiles, $M = 4.97$ versus 1.86 , $F(1, 171) = 725$, $p < .001$.

Stimuli

Because we were manipulating both the number and the strength of the arguments contained in the advertisement for the competitive brand (Gen), we created four versions of the advertisement. Two pretests were conducted to aid in the development of the advertisements. In the first pretest, 50 students were asked to write down the important arguments they could think of if they were to promote an automobile. The arguments were sorted into attribute categories, and a list of seven arguments was derived from them. The seven arguments obtained from the pretest were used to create the advertisements. One of the target ads contained the seven strong arguments, while another ad contained a subset (three) of these arguments. Two additional ads were created using a variation of the arguments (seven versus three) that were much weaker (see Appendix 3 for arguments). All of the ads were comparative in nature and consisted of a headline (Gen is better than Toyota) followed by a picture of the Gen automobile. Below the picture, the arguments for that particular ad were listed; the competitive brand name was listed at the bottom of all of the ads.

A second pretest was conducted to evaluate the four versions of the advertisement. Sixty students were randomly assigned to read one of the versions of the target ad, after which they were told they would evaluate the ad on several dimensions. After exposure to the ad, participants were asked to complete questions on the strength of the arguments and the number of arguments contained in the ad. Argument strength was measured using four, seven-point scales (weak/strong, unconvincing/convincing, not persuasive/persuasive, not at all important/very important; $\alpha = .90$). The results from the pretest indicated that the weak-argument advertisements were rated as being significantly weaker ($M = 3.71$) than the strong-argument advertisements, $M = 4.53$, $F(1, 56) = 5.85$, $p < .05$. Number of arguments was measured using three, seven-point scales (not substantial/substantial, few/numerous, limited/extensive; $\alpha = .80$). The analysis revealed that the "seven" argument advertisements were rated as having more arguments ($M = 4.62$) than the "three" argument advertisements, $M = 4.02$, $F(1, 56) = 4.15$, $p < .05$.

Procedure

Participants were exposed to seven advertisements, and the randomly selected version of the target competitor advertisement was placed in the fourth position. Participants read through all of the advertisements at their own pace, after which they responded to a set of questions. Participants' attitudes toward the competitor brand (same items as pretest; $\alpha = .95$) and knowledge about the committed brand ($\alpha = .95$) were measured using the same questions as in Studies 1 and 2.

Results

Unlike in the previous studies, committed brand attitude and knowledge were not experimentally controlled. Therefore, both of these variables were used as covariates in the analysis to control for their effects on the dependent variable. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) of the mean attitude score of respondents with commitment, argument strength, and argument number as the independent factors and committed brand attitude and committed brand knowledge as covariates produced a main effect of argument strength, $F(1, 163) = 5.55$, $p < .05$. However, this main effect was qualified by the expected two-way interaction between commitment and argument strength, $F(1, 163) = 4.43$, $p < .05$, and a significant interaction between commitment and argument number, $F(1, 163) = 4.32$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, both of the covariates were significant (both $ps < .01$).

The interactions were next examined to test our predictions. As expected, respondents in the low-commitment conditions, regardless of the argument number or argument strength, showed no statistical difference in their evaluations of the competitor brand, $M_{\text{weak-three}} = 6.27$, $M_{\text{weak-seven}} = 5.86$, $M_{\text{strong-three}} = 6.08$, $M_{\text{strong-seven}} = 6.17$, all $ps > .1$. Respondents in the high-commitment conditions, however, exhibited differences in their attitude ratings depending on the competitor ad to which they were exposed. Specifically, and as predicted, high-commitment participants rated the brand favorably only when the advertisement contained seven strong arguments ($M_{\text{strong-seven}} = 6.66$). When the arguments were strong, but only a few arguments were present, high-commitment respondents rated the competitor brand less favorably, $M_{\text{strong-three}} = 5.94$, $t(163) = 2.01$, $p < .05$, and no differently from respondents in the seven weak arguments condition, $M_{\text{weak-seven}} = 5.61$, $t(163) < 1$, $p > .1$. Respondents that were exposed to the competitor advertisement containing few weak arguments rated the brand the least favorably ($M_{\text{weak-three}} = 4.92$). Taken together, these results support H6 (see Figure 3).

Thus, presenting three or seven arguments in support of the competitor brand, whether weak or strong, resulted in a favorable attitude toward the competitor brand for low-commitment consumers. However, only when the arguments

were strong and numerous did the high-commitment consumers hold a favorable attitude toward the competitor brand. Combined, these two results provide additional support for H1 and H4.

Discussion

Study 3 further examines the impact of commitment on evaluations of competitor brands by jointly considering the effects of strength of arguments and number of arguments in an advertisement on high-commitment and low-commitment consumer evaluations. Specifically, Study 3 demonstrates that high-commitment participants rate a competitor brand unfavorably when the brand's advertisement contains few strong arguments or weak arguments, irrespective of the number. When a competitor brand has a large number of strong arguments, however, evaluations improve to a level that is comparable to evaluations made by low-commitment participants.

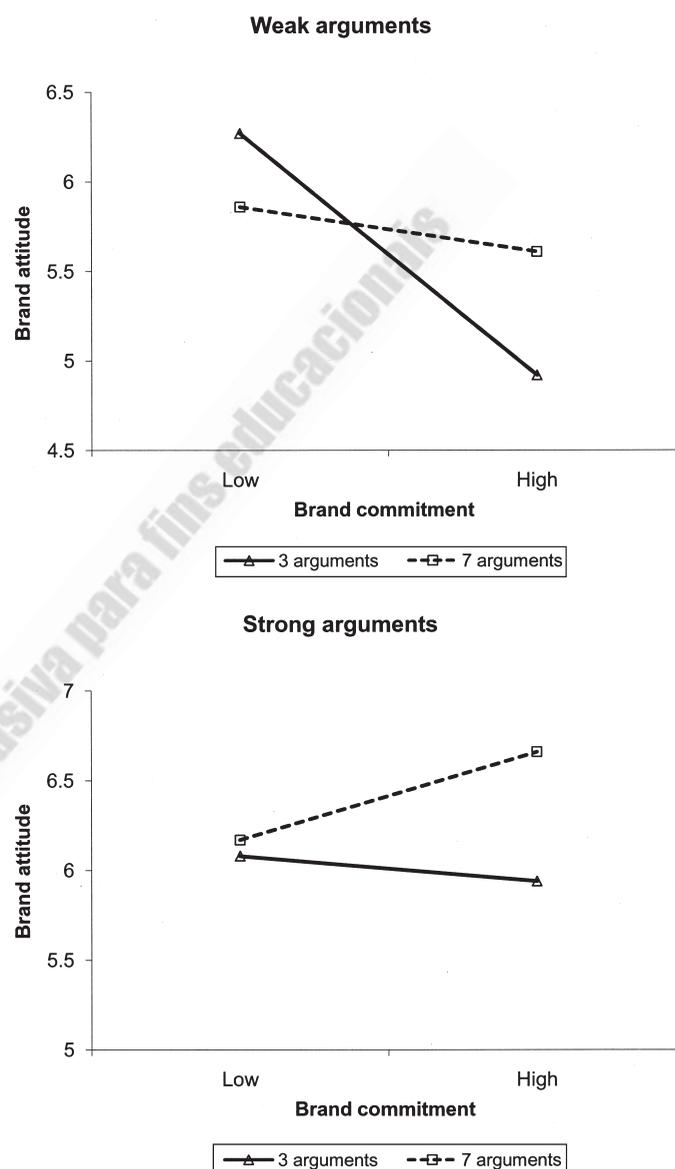
GENERAL DISCUSSION

The literature on brand commitment effects on information processing suggests that highly committed consumers employ biased processing techniques when their attitudes are challenged (Ahluwalia 2000). These effects do not simply occur because the information is counterattitudinal. Very often in commitment studies, the attitudinal extremity of high- and low-commitment participants is balanced (as was done in this research). Differences between participants, therefore, are due to differences in how committed they are to their positions, not because the message is perceived as more counterattitudinal to one group versus the other.

Although the use of argument strength and number of arguments is not entirely new to the literature, the contribution of this research lies in extending our current understanding of commitment effects in four important ways. First, we show that committed consumers not only defend their brands from attack, but also systematically underrate competitive brands. In all of the studies, we find that committed consumers perceive an advertisement for the competitor brand relatively unfavorably whether the advertisement is comparative or not. Most of the previous research on commitment in consumer behavior has focused on how consumers committed to a brand protect the brand when it faces a crisis in the form of some negative information (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001). We broaden this framework by showing that commitment not only plays a protective role for the committed brand, but also seems to extend and negatively affect potential competitors.

Second, the brand commitment literature has mostly confined itself to studying the consequences of commitment. The issue of how a competitive brand can overcome the ef-

FIGURE 3
Study 3: Effect of Brand Commitment, Number of Arguments, and Strength of Arguments on Competitor Brand Attitude



fects of brand commitment through advertising has received very little attention. In the three studies reported in this research, we show that advertising techniques that reduce counterargumentation are helpful in reducing the negative effects resulting from commitment.

While counterargument reduction sounds intuitive, our Study 1 shows that simply having a brand that is comparable to the committed brand is not sufficient to achieve this objective with high-commitment consumers. However, such arguments are sufficient to enhance competitor brand evaluations for low-commitment consumers whose attitudes are

initially equivalent to those of high-commitment consumers. In other words, marketers who are responsible for enhancing consumers' evaluations of a competitive brand will likely see less success with consumers that are highly committed to another brand versus consumers that are not. Thus, while the persuasion literature suggests that the use of strong arguments is one way by which persuasion can be accomplished with preference-inconsistent information (e.g., Ahluwalia 2000; Jain and Maheswaran 2000; Petty and Cacioppo 1986), we show that commitment moderates this effect.

Similarly, the persuasion literature has proposed that the use of many arguments may reduce counterargumentation (Petty and Cacioppo 1984), but in our study we show that simply having a few strong arguments is not sufficient to convince high-commitment consumers to change their attitudes toward the competitor brand. Many strong arguments that convince high-commitment consumers of the quality of the competitor brand are needed to reduce counterargumentation, and hence, enhance evaluations. Combined, the results of the three studies suggest that reducing counterargumentation results in high-commitment consumers having more favorable opinions of competitor brands.

Third, some researchers have argued that people with strong attitudes are likely to exhibit a closed-minded reaction to counterattitudinal information (e.g., Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Johnson and Eagly 1990), but our research suggests that highly committed consumers may be open to altering their position when presented with counterattitudinal information. Several researchers have contended that people with strong attitudes are determined to defend their existing attitudinal position and are therefore biased when processing new information that challenges their attitude. Such a close-minded approach is thought to lead to a confirmation bias, whereby the confirming information is oversampled and disconfirming information undersampled (Alloy and Tabachnik 1984). In our research, however, we find that high-commitment participants are close minded only up to a point. When presented with arguments that are cogent, even if supporting a nonpreferred option, they are open to accepting a counterattitudinal position. Yet this acceptance of the counterattitudinal advertising message does not seem to affect their original attitudinal position toward the committed brand; they continue to maintain a favorable attitude to their committed brand. High-commitment consumers only reduce their negative evaluations of the competitor brand. Conversely, low-commitment consumers seem to find the competitor brand attractive, suggesting that marketers may want to use such advertising strategies since they persuade low-commitment consumers and correspondingly reduce biased effects from high-commitment consumers. More research is required to identify the conditions under which a close-minded approach is likely to occur and when it is not.

Fourth, in conjunction with previous studies, this research has the potential to help marketers understand and control for potential negative effects that commitment to another brand may have on their brand advertising. For example, researchers have identified that consumers form consideration sets as a heuristic to screen brands from a large relevant set (Alba and Chattopadhyay 1985). If committed consumers devalue competitor brands, it is possible that competitor brands do not meet the criteria to be included in their consideration sets, thereby reducing the consideration set size for these product categories. On the other hand, commitment may affect the retrieval process from memory through retrieval inhibition effects (Nickerson 1984). Research is needed to identify the effects of commitment on consideration sets and understand the process underlying these effects.

Another area that requires attention is the assumption that the underlying reason for attitudinal resistance is the implied threat to the existing attitude from the counterattitudinal message. Not surprisingly, most previous studies have had some form of threat involved in the counterattitudinal message (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001; Lydon, Fitzsimons, and Naidoo 2003; Petty and Krosnick 1995). In our studies, resistance to the competitive brand was observed even when no threat was present (e.g., a noncomparative advertisement for a competitor brand), suggesting that resistance to attitude change may not require the existence of a threat for biased processing to occur. The incongruity in the attitude that a competing brand creates may be sufficient to evoke a biased response (Heider 1958), or it may be a defensive mechanism of the committed person to forestall a potential future threat. More research is needed to examine the motivations that drive resistance and biased processing, and the role that advertising can play in managing it.

Finally, our studies are limited to situations where biased processing affects new or relatively unfamiliar brands. Future research needs to examine the generalizability of these results to more well-known brands.

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APPENDIX 1

Advertising Stimuli Used in Study 1

Strong Evidence

The result of our recent survey among college students indicates that the **Power Racer™** is rated **very superior** to Wave Phoenix™.

We have been striving continuously to bring you the best in technology. The Power Racer has just about everything you would want in an athletic shoe: a soft heel and a solid forefoot, good arch support and a snug, beautifully designed upper.

If you are seeking a blend of durability, looks and a moderately priced shoe for everyday use, then the Power Racer is your ideal choice.

Weak Evidence

The result of our recent survey among college students indicates that the **Power Racer™** is rated **superior** to Wave Phoenix™.

We have been striving continuously to bring you the best in technology. The Power Racer has just about everything you would want in an athletic shoe: a soft heel and a solid forefoot, good arch support and a snug, beautifully designed upper.

If you are seeking a blend of durability, looks and a moderately priced shoe for everyday use, then the Power Racer is your ideal choice.

SURVEY RESULTS

	Power Racer	Wave Phoenix
Price	Excellent	Good
Durability	Very Good	Good
Comfort	Very Good	Good
Looks	Very Good	Good
Breathability	Good	Good
Stability	Good	Very Good
Overall Rating*	8.9	7.1

* Overall rating is on a 10-point scale.

SURVEY RESULTS

	Power Racer	Wave Phoenix
Price	Very Good	Good
Durability	Very Good	Good
Comfort	Good	Good
Looks	Good	Good
Breathability	Good	Good
Stability	Good	Very Good
Overall Rating*	7.4	7.1

* Overall rating is on a 10-point scale.

APPENDIX 2

Arguments Used in Study 2

Seven-Argument Condition

Uses superior construction technology that increases its durability.

Is exceptionally light and supple, providing unparalleled comfort.

Has heel cushioning for exceptional shock absorption.

Has a cushioned midsole to provide plenty of support.

Has reflectors to provide safety while walking or running at night.

Comes in narrow, medium, and wide widths to fit your feet just right!

Is a trendy, fashionable, and comfortable shoe.

Three-Argument Condition

Uses superior construction technology that increases its durability.

Is exceptionally light and supple, providing unparalleled comfort.

Has heel cushioning for exceptional shock absorption.

APPENDIX 3

Arguments Used in Study 3

Strong/Seven-Argument Condition

- 10-year full-service warranty
- 1.9% financing for 60 months
- 5 out of 5 stars on independent crash test results
- 35 miles per gallon in the city
- 15 exterior colors to choose from to customize the appearance
- 20 cubic feet of rear storage
- AM/FM 6-disc in-dash CD changer with 6 speakers standard

Weak/Seven-Argument Condition

- 3-year full-service warranty
- 3.9% financing for 60 months
- 4 out of 5 stars on independent crash test results
- 25 miles per gallon in the city
- 9 exterior colors to choose from to customize the appearance
- 15 cubic feet of rear storage
- AM/FM single-disc in-dash CD changer with 2 speakers standard

Strong/Three-Argument Condition

- 10-year full-service warranty
- 5 out of 5 stars on independent crash test results
- 35 miles per gallon in the city

Weak/Three-Argument Condition

- 3-year full-service warranty
- 4 out of 5 stars on independent crash test results
- 25 miles per gallon in the city