

The impacts of comparative ads used by retailers to compare their store brands with national brands

Impacts of
comparative
ads

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Abstract

Purpose – The research aim is to investigate the impacts of comparative ads used by retailers to compare the prices of their store brand (SB) products with those of equivalent national brand (NB) products. More specifically, this research examines if consumers perceive retailers as legitimate when they use comparative ads to compare the prices of their SB products to those of equivalent NB products, and how effective are these comparative ads in terms of actual purchases. This research also explores for which SB type (economy, standard or premium) and consumers are comparative ads most effective.

Design/methodology/approach – This research investigates consumers' reactions to comparative ads used by retailers to compare the prices of their SB products with those of similar NB products through an experiment within a store laboratory. A between-subject design has been used. The participants of the first/second/third group ($n_1 = 93/n_2 = 92/n_3 = 91$) were exposed to ads comparing the prices of retailer's economy/standard/premium SB food products with their equivalent NB food products, in the same product category. The participants of each group carried out a shopping trip in the store laboratory.

Findings – Consumers consider retailers legitimate when they use comparative ads. This favourable evaluation improves their attitude towards these ads. However, the impact of retailers' legitimacy of (1) means, (2) objectives and (3) historical legitimacy on consumers' attitude towards comparative ads depends on the SB type (economy, standard and premium). By contrast, comparative ads are effective in terms of consumers' attitude towards these ads and towards SBs, along with purchase intention and actual purchases of these brands, whatever the SB type. Lastly, this research highlights that comparative ads for SBs are mainly directed at consumers with high levels of price consciousness and resistance to NBs.

Research limitations/implications – This research only tested the impact of direct comparative advertising and an extrinsic attribute (price). The research experiment was conducted on a convenience sample, which limits its external validity.

Practical implications – This research encourages retailers to use comparative advertising for their SBs (economy, standard and premium) for several reasons. First, this study suggests that comparative advertising is an effective tool for retailers to shape or improve consumers' attitude towards SBs, via their attitude towards comparative ads. Second, this research proposes that comparative advertising contrasting the prices of SB products with those of NB products could increase retailers' in-store sales of their SBs. Lastly, this research underlines that comparative advertising is particularly effective for consumers with high levels of price consciousness and resistance to NBs.

Originality/value – This research supplements previous research in the field of SBs and comparative advertising. Previous research on comparative advertising has examined NBs exclusively (Dianoux *et al.*, 2013; Beard, 2018). Comparisons between SBs and NBs are lacking. This research thus validates the use of this specific form of communication for SBs, given the paucity of studies of the effects of the use of mass media communication on SBs (Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk, 2014; Gendel-Guterman and Levy, 2017).

Keywords Store brand, Comparative advertising, Legitimacy, Attitude towards the ad, Attitude towards the brand, Actual purchase, Consumers' price consciousness, Consumers' resistance to national brands

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Store brands (SBs) are “brands owned, controlled and sold exclusively by retailers” (Sethuraman and Cole, 1999, p. 340). SBs have several benefits (Hyman *et al.*, 2010). They



increase retailers' profits, as they offer higher margins (McNeill and Wyeth, 2011), and their bargaining power relative to manufacturers (Chambolle and Villas-Boas, 2015). They also differentiate competing retailers from one another (Dawes and Nenycz-Thiel, 2013) and participate to the building of their brand identity and branding (Keller *et al.*, 2016). Lastly, SBs increase consumers' loyalty to retailers and their stores (Corstjens and Lal, 2000), as they propose distinctive products (Sayman *et al.*, 2002).

In the marketing literature and practice, store brands, private labels or retailer brands are all used as synonyms (Nenycz-Thiel, 2011; Mauri *et al.*, 2015). Thus, in this article, the expression "store brands" is to be intended as "private labels", whose name clearly identifies their link with the retailer (Burt, 2000). However, SBs may be conceived, named and managed differently, with different degrees of association with a retailer. Two main strategies exist (Nenycz-Thiel, 2011; Geyskens *et al.*, 2018): (1) to use the retailer's name for the SB (i.e. store-banner branding) and (2) to use a brand name that is separate from the retailer name (i.e. stand-alone branding) (a separate umbrella brand across all categories vs independent brands that vary across categories). In this article, the SBs studied use the retailer's naming.

SBs compete directly with manufacturer brands also called national brands (NBs). However, some attributes differentiate SBs from NBs. The prices and quality-price ratio of SBs are perceived to be better than those of NBs (Nenycz-Thiel *et al.*, 2010; Hökelekli *et al.*, 2017). By contrast, the quality of NBs and consumers' trust in these brands are perceived to be higher than those of SBs (Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk, 2009; Wang *et al.*, 2020). In many developed countries, the market share of SBs is high and increasing, albeit more slowly than before, to the detriment of NBs. At the beginning of 2020, in Europe's largest retail markets, the market share of SBs stay above 40% in Spain, UK and Germany. In France, the market share of SBs in units and value is respectively equal to 31 and 25%. Thus, SBs account for nearly one of every three products sold in this country [1].

SBs compete with NBs at different levels: in consumers' memory (Cuneo *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2020) and for consumers' choice (Dawes and Nenycz-Thiel, 2013). SBs compete with NBs for consumers' choice in stores as both brand types appear next to each other on store shelves. However, SBs occupy a larger proportion of store shelf space than do NBs (Nogales and Suarez, 2005; Schmittka, 2015). It is thus easier to find and buy them. SBs have also to compete with NBs in consumers' memory (Cuneo *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2020). However, there is far less mass media communication on SBs than on NBs (Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk, 2014; Gendel-Guterman and Levy, 2017). This may have a negative impact on SBs. Beneke and Carter (2015) showed that the more consumers are exposed to ads for SBs, the more they are familiar with these brands and the more they consider SB products as appealing based on their quality-price ratio.

Recently, in France, Lidl, a retailer operating internationally, has claimed in its mass media campaigns that it sells its SB products at lower prices than equivalent NB products. The main objective of this communication was to gain market share against well-established retailers in France such as Carrefour (21.6%), Leclerc (20.3%), Intermarché (14.5%), Casino (11.5%), Auchan (11%) and Système U (10.4%). Before its mass media campaigns, the market share in value of Lidl was equal to 4.9%. This practice is innovative in that retailers generally claim to sell products at lower prices than other competing retailers (Bambauer-Sachse and Heinzle, 2018).

According to Beard (2018), comparative advertising is appropriate in this specific case: SBs vs NBs. It is the correct approach when the competition is intensifying in static or slow-growth markets characterized by two or more "me-too" competitors and that a corresponding need for brand differentiation arises. Such ads could therefore develop in the coming years because SBs are major competitors of NBs. However, previous research on comparative advertising has examined NBs exclusively (Dianoux *et al.*, 2013; Beard, 2018). Comparisons between SBs and NBs are thus lacking.

Considering this new and innovative trend in the retailing industry and the lack of research on the use of comparative advertising to compare SBs with NBs, the research aim is to investigate consumers' perceptions of comparative ads contrasting the prices of the products of different SB types with those of equivalent NB products and the effectiveness of these ads according to several consumers' profiles. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Do consumers perceive retailers as legitimate when they use comparative ads to compare the prices of their SB products to those of equivalent NB products? This research thus investigates retailers' legitimacy (Louis and Lombart, 2018) when they use comparative advertising to demonstrate that they are adopting "customer norms" by offering low prices (Arnold *et al.*, 1996).
- (2) How effective are these comparative ads? The effectiveness of these comparative ads will be studied in this research through their effects on consumers' attitude towards such ads (e.g. Auschaitrakul and Mukherjee, 2017; Walrave *et al.*, 2018), towards SBs (e.g. Ozelik and Varnali, 2019; Rhee and Jung, 2019) and their purchase intention and actual purchases of these brands (e.g. van Esch *et al.*, 2018; Stewart *et al.*, 2019).
- (3) For which SB type (economy, standard or premium) are these comparative ads most effective? Retailers offer consumers three main quality/price levels of SBs: economy SBs, standard SBs and premium SBs (Steenkamp and Kumar, 2007; Geyskens *et al.*, 2018). Given that consumers' responses depend on the peculiar characteristics of each SB (Martos-Partal and González-Benito, 2011; Diallo *et al.*, 2015; Rubio *et al.*, 2019), this research will consider these three types of SBs separately.
- (4) For which consumers are these comparative ads most effective? Because consumers drawn to SBs have specific characteristics (González-Benito *et al.*, 2014; Martos-Partal *et al.*, 2015), personal moderating variables (Yucel-Aybat and Kramer, 2018) will be integrated in this research on the use of comparative ads by retailers to compare the prices of their SB products with those of equivalent NB products.

This study will supplement previous research in the field of SBs given that the use of mass media communication on SBs has been understudied (Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk, 2014; Gendel-Guterman and Levy, 2017). This study will also extend research in the field of comparative advertising by investigating the use of such ads to compare the prices of SB products and equivalent NB products (Dianoux *et al.*, 2013; Beard, 2018). Moreover, this study will provide retailers with detailed insights into which SB type is the most appropriate for comparative advertising, and for which consumers.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, the conceptual frameworks used are presented and the hypotheses posited are discussed. Then, the experiment conducted and the measurement scales used are described. Lastly, the results, their contributions and the limits of the research are discussed. Future research avenues are also proposed.

Theoretical frameworks and research hypotheses

Three important theories and their key constructs will be considered in this research: the institutional theory (Ruef and Scott, 1998), advertising effectiveness (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) (Figure 1).

Institutional theory focuses on the needs of an organization to survive economically and establish legitimacy within its environment (Ruef and Scott, 1998). Organizations seek support and legitimacy by conforming their structures and procedures to widely accepted

cultural models or rules (Ruef and Scott, 1998). Legitimacy is thus a key theme of the institutional theory perspective (Handelman and Arnold, 1999). According to Arnold *et al.* (1996) and Handelman and Arnold (1999), legitimacy is also a variable of interest in the field of retailing to understand consumers' intention (Chaney *et al.*, 2016) and effective behaviour (Arnold *et al.*, 1996). Consequently, we will integrate this interesting, but understudied variable (Chaney *et al.*, 2016), in our research on comparative advertising for SBs. Indeed, as this practice is rather new, the question of the legitimacy of the retailer who adopt it seems important as well as its impact on consumers' attitude towards the comparative ad.

The research dedicated to advertising effectiveness investigated the impacts of attitude towards an ad on attitude towards a brand and purchase intention of this brand (i.e. MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). As this study focuses on how consumers react to comparative ads used by retailers to compare the prices of their SB products to those of equivalent NB products, research on the modelling of the relationships between Aad (attitude towards the ad), Ab (attitude towards the brand) and PI (purchase intention of this brand) has to be considered.

Lastly, the TPB (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) assumes that people's specific actions are largely guided by their beliefs, attitude and their behavioural intention which is, in turn, the immediate antecedent of actual behaviour. Given the previous findings that TPB is appropriate to understand consumers' voluntary behaviour linked to advertising in general (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Sanne and Wiese, 2018), we can reasonably argue that it can be useful to understand consumers' voluntary behaviour linked to comparative advertising.

Retailers' legitimacy to use comparative ads to contrast SBs with NBs

To explore if consumers perceive retailers' use of comparative ads to compare the prices of their SB products with those of equivalent NB products as legitimate, we will consider institutional theory (Ruef and Scott, 1998) and its key construct of legitimacy (Handelman and Arnold, 1999). Previous studies have mainly considered social legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) or retailers' demonstration that they adopt "social norms" through different actions such as their CSR activities (Kim *et al.*, 2014) and the in-store educational activities implemented (Chaney *et al.*, 2016). To our knowledge, no research has investigated the legitimacy of retailers that adopt "customer norms" (Arnold *et al.*, 1996) and the actions used, such as comparative advertising, to demonstrate the adoption of these norms.

The legitimacy of an advertiser (a retailer in this research) can be defined as the recognition by consumers of the advertiser's right to evoke a specific message (a comparison between a SB and an NB in this research) (Louis and Lombart, 2018). The legitimacy of an advertiser is composed of three dimensions. The first dimension is the legitimacy of the means used, which refers to consumers' perceived effectiveness of the communication in general and of the message in particular. The second dimension is the legitimacy of the objectives, which is based on consumers' assessment of the congruence between the advertiser's goal and its message. The third dimension is historical legitimacy, which concerns consumers' evaluation of the advertiser's message in light of its past actions. Previous studies have mainly investigated the antecedents of retailers' legitimacy (e.g. retailers' CSR activities; Kim *et al.*, 2014). By contrast, this research will tackle the direct

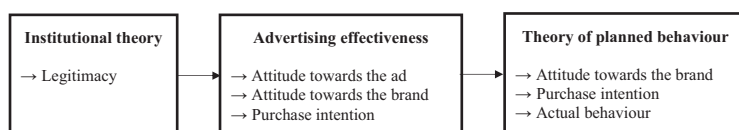


Figure 1.
Theories and key
constructs

consequence of the concept of retailer's legitimacy on attitude towards comparative ads (H1), along with its indirect consequences, namely attitude towards SBs, purchase intention and actual purchases of these brands (see the next section), i.e. support behaviour (Arnold *et al.*, 1996; Handelman and Arnold, 1999; Louis and Lombart, 2018).

Accordingly, we posit the following hypothesis:

- H1. Retailer's legitimacy of (a) means, (b) objectives and (c) historical legitimacy has a positive influence on consumers' attitude towards comparative ads.

The effectiveness of ads comparing SBs and NBs

To investigate consumers' reactions to ads used by retailers to compare the prices of their SB products with those of equivalent NB products, previous research on the modelling of the relationships between Aad (attitude towards the ad), Ab (attitude towards the brand) and PI (purchase intention of this brand), i.e. advertising effectiveness, will be considered (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Attitude can be defined as consumer's tendency to respond positively or negatively to an object (Ajzen, 2005; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010). Attitude causes an object to be liked or disliked. Consequently, attitude towards the ad represents a person's favourable or unfavourable evaluation of an ad, in this study a comparative ad, developed during a specific period of exposure to the ad. Similarly, attitude towards the brand represents a person's favourable or unfavourable evaluation of a brand, in this study, a SB. A positive evaluation of an ad by a consumer can be transferred to the brand by creating a positive attitude towards the brand for which the ad is made (Varnali, 2014; Ozcelik and Varnali, 2019; Rhee and Jung, 2019). Beliefs about a brand are shaped by ads, and these beliefs affect the advertised brand. A positive evaluation of an ad by consumers can also increase their purchase intention of the brand shown in the ad (Wang and Sun, 2010; van Esch *et al.*, 2018).

Accordingly, we posit that for comparative ads for SBs:

- H2. Consumers' attitude towards comparative ads has a positive influence on their attitude towards SBs (a) and their purchase intention of these brands (b).

The impact of attitude towards SBs on actual purchases

Since the founding work of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), studies on TPB have provided strong empirical support for the utility of this approach. They have identified a significant and consistent relationship between attitude towards the brand and purchase intention and lastly actual purchasing behaviour of this brand (Lee *et al.*, 2017; Ozcelik and Varnali, 2019). In their meta-analysis, Armitage and Conner (2001) found that TPB generally explains 39% of variance in behavioural intention and 27% of actual behaviour. These authors also encourage researchers to consider actual behaviour and not only self-report data. Moreover, a link may exist between behavioural intention and actual behaviour (Armitage and Conner, 2001; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010).

Accordingly, we posit that:

- H3. Consumers' attitude towards SBs has a positive influence on their purchase intention of these brands (a) and their actual purchases of these brands (b).
- H4. Consumers' purchase intention of SBs has a positive influence on their actual purchases of these brands.
- H5. Consumers' purchase intention of SBs partially mediates the relationship between their attitude towards SBs and their actual purchases of these brands.

Both the attitude towards the ad and the attitude towards the brand influence purchase intention (Wang and Sun, 2010; Varnali, 2014; van Esch *et al.*, 2018; Ozcelik and Varnali, 2019; Rhee and Jung, 2019). An indirect relationship may therefore exist between the attitude towards the ad and purchase intention, via the attitude towards the brand. This situation can arise if the consumer develops a positive attitude towards the ad, which may lead to a positive attitude towards the brand, prior to developing a positive purchase intention.

Accordingly, we posit that for comparative ads for SBs:

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- H6.* Consumers' attitude towards SBs partially mediates the relationship between consumers' attitude towards comparative ads and their purchase intention of these brands.

Moderation of SB type

Martos-Partal and González-Benito (2011) showed that a SB's positioning that prioritizes quality rather than price (i.e. copycat) has a more favourable effect on store loyalty than positioning that prioritizes price over quality (generic SBs). Recently, Rubio *et al.* (2019) indicated that in portfolios with economy, standard and premium SBs, SB associations have a stronger effect than SB awareness in the formation of SB loyalty. Portfolios with a standard SB show balanced effects of SB associations and SB awareness on SB loyalty formation. Lastly, Diallo *et al.* (2015) affirmed that different brand types exert distinct effects on the value-creation process. They also find that appealing prices of regional SBs reduce the emotional value of the store and that low prices for organic SB products increase social value creation significantly.

Considering these works, this research proposes a moderating role of SB type on the relationships posited. The fact that this analysis is exploratory in the field of comparative advertising warrants only a general hypothesis.

- H7.* The SB type moderates the relationships previously posited.

Moderation of consumer segment

Recently, Yucel-Aybat and Kramer (2018) stressed the need to integrate personal (vs situational) moderating variables in the field of comparative advertising. Consequently, the impacts of two personal moderating variables on the links aforementioned will be studied: consumers' price consciousness (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 1993; Mostafa and Elseidi, 2018) and their resistance to NBs (Burton *et al.*, 1998; Muruganatham and Priyadharshini, 2017).

Consumers' price consciousness represents their tendency to focus on prices when they choose a brand and its products. Price consciousness is an attitude-like enduring predisposition (a cross-situational, evaluative tendency) that varies in intensity across individuals (Sinha and Batra, 1999). Consumers' resistance to NBs, which is an avoidance behaviour (Fournier, 1998), corresponds to their tendency to avoid purchasing products of these brands (Daniel and Sirieux, 2012). Consumers' resistance to NBs is one of the four forms of consumer resistance proposed by Peñaloza and Price (1993). It recognizes the importance of the consumer's relationship to marketing institutions and agents, acknowledging that consumer resistance may appropriate marketing institutions and agents as their tools of resistance or may try to stand outside these institutions or far from these agents.

Consumers' price consciousness and resistance to NBs have been suggested by previous research on SBs. According to González-Benito *et al.* (2014), SB shoppers are price sensitive and less interested in NBs. Similarly, Martos-Partal and González-Benito (2011) and

Muruganatham and Priyadharshini (2017) demonstrated that price sensitivity and quality perceptions relate positively to private label consumption.

Considering these works, the following hypothesis is posited:

H8. The higher consumers' levels of price consciousness (a) and resistance to NBs (b), the stronger the relationships previously posited, whatever the SB type.

Figure 2 presents the research model.

Methodology

Data collection

We investigated consumers' reactions to comparative ads used by retailers to compare the prices of their SB products with those of equivalent NB products through an experiment within a store laboratory. This store laboratory is the exact replica of several food shelves (pasta and rice, food cans, fruit juices, etc.) of a standard supermarket of the Système U retailer in France.

A convenience sample of 276 business school students (58% female, between ages 20 and 25) took part in our laboratory experiment. This kind of homogeneous sample increases the internal validity of the research as the observed differences result only from the manipulation tested in the experiment and not from individuals' differences (Ashraf and Merunka, 2017). This sample was randomly split into three groups. We used a between-subject design.

The participants of the first/second/third group ($n_1 = 93/n_2 = 92/n_3 = 91$) were exposed to ads comparing the prices of retailer's economy (Bien Vu) /standard (U) /premium (U Bio/Organic) SB food products with their equivalent NB food products, in the same product category. These groups are homogeneous on the following variables: gender ($\chi^2 = 0.211$, p -value = 0.900), age ($F = 0.625$, p -value = 0.536), frequency of economy SB product purchasing ($\chi^2 = 3.188$, p -value = 0.527), frequency of standard SB product purchasing ($\chi^2 = 7.157$, p -value = 0.128), frequency of organic SB product purchasing ($\chi^2 = 2.173$, p -value = 0.704) and frequency of NB product purchasing ($\chi^2 = 7.336$, p -value = 0.119).

The participants of each group carried out a shopping trip in the store laboratory. At the beginning of this trip, participants were asked to read the experiment scenario, which invited them to shop at the store laboratory as they would do at a real store, for one week's personal consumption or more if they wished. After shopping, participants paid for their purchases at a cash register and completed a questionnaire on a computer.

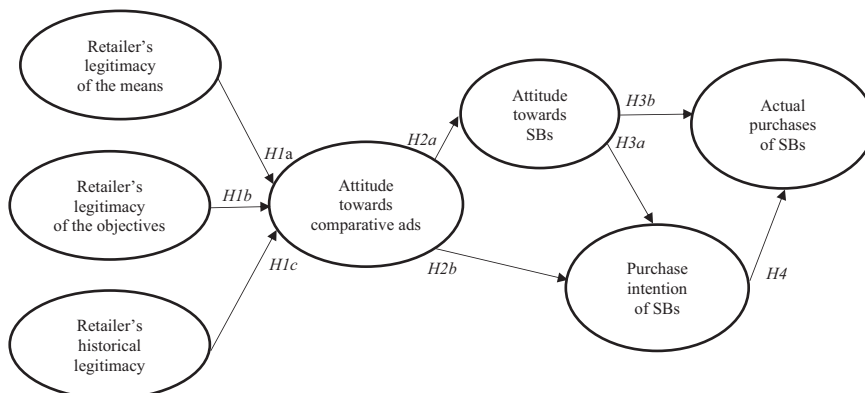


Figure 2. Research model

Measures used

Seven items derived from the study by [Louis and Lombart \(2018\)](#) were used to measure retailer legitimacy (three items for legitimacy of the means and two items for legitimacy of the objectives and historical legitimacy). Consumers' attitude towards comparative ads and towards SBs were measured by three items adapted from the works of [Zhang et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Burton et al. \(1998\)](#) respectively. The items of these five measurement scales are available in [Appendix 1](#). Consumers' intention to buy SB products was measured by one item ([Zeithaml et al., 1996](#)), and their actual purchases of these products were measured at the end of their shopping trip in the store laboratory. Consumers' price consciousness and resistance to NBs were measured by three items adapted from the works of [Lichtenstein et al. \(1993\)](#) and [Burton et al. \(1998\)](#) respectively. The items of these two measurement scales are presented in [Appendix 2](#). For each item of the measurement scales used (excluding actual purchases), consumers were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a six-point Likert scale ranging from "disagree completely" to "agree completely."

Statistical analyses

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with a bootstrap procedure with 5,000 replications ([Tenenhaus et al., 2005](#)) has been used for the following reasons, stated out by [Hair et al. \(2012, 2014\)](#). These reasons are: (1) it does not require the variables to follow a multivariate normal distribution (computed Mardia's coefficient $> |3|$ in this research); (2) it lets one work with small samples (close to 100 or below for the different subsamples considered in this research); (3) it lets one work with models that include a large number of latent variables (with an average number of 7.94 in the marketing field and 7 in this research); (4) it permits the unrestricted use of a single item (for purchase intention of SBs in this research).

First, the measurement and structural models are tested separately. We followed the recommendation of [Hair et al. \(2019\)](#) to report our results. Then, to test the mediating effects postulated, the procedure advocated by [Cepeda et al. \(2018\)](#), specifically developed for PLS-SEM, is used. The significance of a direct effect (c') and an indirect effect ($a \times b$) is estimated. Lastly, to test the moderating effects of the SB type and the consumer segment, multi-group analyses are performed ([Henseler and Fassott, 2010](#)).

Results*Test of the measurement model*

First, confirmatory factor analysis validated the unidimensional factor structures of the measurement scales used. The loadings, which are greater than 0.708 and statistically significant at the 1% level, are satisfactory ([Hair et al., 2019](#)) ([Appendix 1](#)). Then, Jöreskog's ρ coefficients determined the reliability of these measurement scales (>0.7) (see [Appendix 1](#)). The methods proposed by [Fornell and Larcker \(1981\)](#) and [Henseler et al. \(2015\)](#) established the convergent (see [Appendix 1](#)) and discriminant validity respectively of the measurement scales. Lastly, multi-group analyses and permutation tests ([Chin and Dibbern, 2010](#)) indicated the total invariance of the measures used for the different subsamples formed, considering the SB type and the consumer segment.

Descriptive statistics

Consumers consider retailers to be legitimate when they use comparative ads. Their evaluation of the retailer's legitimacy of the means (13.974/18) and of the objectives (9.285/12), along with historical legitimacy (9.649/12), is positive (i.e. above the means). Their attitude

towards comparative ads (11.721/18) and SBs (13.402/18) is also positive. Their purchase intention of SBs is equal to 4.178/6, and they bought 3.606 SB products on average.

Test of the structural model

Retailer’s legitimacy of the means has a significant and positive influence on consumers’ attitude towards comparative ads (Path Coefficient (PC) = 0.582, $p < 0.01$) (Table 1). By contrast, retailer’s legitimacy of the objectives and historical legitimacy do not affect this variable for the total sample. Hypothesis 1 is partially supported by our data. Thus, this research supplements previous studies on the concept of legitimacy (Arnold *et al.*, 1996; Handelman and Arnold, 1999; Louis and Lombart, 2018) as it indicates that consumers’ attitude towards comparative ads is a direct consequence of retailer’s legitimacy.

Consumers’ attitude towards comparative ads has a positive and significant impact on their attitude towards SBs (PC = 0.412, $p < 0.01$) and their purchase intention of these brands (PC = 0.300, $p < 0.01$). Hypotheses 2a and 2b are supported by our data. Thus, this research confirms previous studies on the links between attitude towards the ad and attitude towards the brand for which the ad is made (Varnali, 2014; Ozcelik and Varnali, 2019; Rhee and Jung, 2019) and attitude towards the ad and purchase intention of the brand shown in the ad (Wang and Sun, 2010; van Esch *et al.*, 2018) and extends it to the field of comparative research.

Consumers’ attitude towards SBs has a positive and significant influence on their purchase intention of these brands (PC = 0.571, $p < 0.01$). By contrast, consumers’ attitude towards SBs does not influence their actual purchases. Hypothesis 3a is supported by our data but hypothesis 3b is not supported. Thus, this research partially corroborates previous studies on the links between attitude towards the brand and purchase intention and lastly actual purchasing behaviour of this brand (Lee *et al.*, 2017; Ozcelik and Varnali, 2019). However, our last result is not surprising because behavioural intentions are often a prerequisite to actual purchases (Armitage and Conner, 2001; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010).

Consumers’ purchase intention of SBs has a positive and significant impact on their actual purchases of these brands (PC = 0.404, $p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 4 is supported by our data. Thus, this research confirms that a link exists between behavioural intention and actual behaviour (Armitage and Conner, 2001; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010).

Test of the mediating effects

Consumers’ purchase intention of SBs is a full mediator of the relationship between their attitude towards SBs and their actual purchases of these brands. As suggested previously, behavioural intentions are a prerequisite to actual purchases (Armitage and Conner, 2001;

	PC	<i>t</i>	R ²
Legitimacy of the means → attitude towards comparative ads	0.582	11.631***	0.383
Legitimacy of the objectives → attitude towards comparative ads	0.089	n.s.	
Historical legitimacy → attitude towards comparative ads	0.031	n.s.	
Attitude towards comparative ads → attitude towards SBs	0.412	6.176***	0.254
Attitude towards comparative ads → purchase intention of SBs	0.300	5.374***	0.545
Attitude towards SBs → purchase intention of SBs	0.571	12.012***	
Attitude towards SBs → Actual purchases of SBs	0.090	n.s.	0.177
Purchase intention of SBs → actual purchases of SBs	0.404	4.993***	

Note(s): SBs, Store Brands; PC, Path Coefficient; ***, Coefficient significant. Student’s *t*-test values higher than |2.575| indicate PC significant at the 1% level and n.s. stand for non-significant coefficient

Table 1. Results of the structural equation model – total sample

Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010). Consequently, hypothesis 5, which postulated partial mediation, is not supported by our data.

Consumers' attitude towards SBs is a partial mediator of the relationship between consumers' attitude towards comparative ads and their purchase intention of SBs. Hypothesis 6 is supported by our data. As indicated by the literature, both the attitude towards the ad and the attitude towards the brand influence purchase intention (Wang and Sun, 2010; Varnali, 2014; van Esch *et al.*, 2018; Ozcelik and Varnali, 2019; Rhee and Jung, 2019).

The procedure developed by Cepeda *et al.* (2018) confirms these significant mediating effects because the confidence intervals (CI) do not include the 0 value. This means that these mediating effects are significantly different from 0. Moreover, when the direct effect is not significant and the indirect effect is significant, as for H5, mediation is full. This means that only the indirect effect via the mediator exists. When both the direct effect and the indirect effect are significant, as for H6, mediation is partial.

Test of the moderating effect of SB type

Descriptive statistics. The ANOVAs performed indicate that retailer's legitimacy of the objectives is higher for premium SBs (9.164/12; $F = 4.247$, p -value = 0.015), and historical legitimacy is higher for standard SBs (9.880/12; $F = 9.268$, p -value = 0.000). By contrast, the differences between the three SBs studied for retailer's legitimacy of the means are not significant ($F = 0.788$, p -value = 0.456). Further, the differences between the three SBs studied are not significant for consumers' attitude towards comparative ads ($F = 1.984$, p -value = 0.139). Given that we used the same ads and only changed the products and prices according to the SB type, this result is logical. Consumers' attitude towards SBs (14.286/18; $F = 5.936$, p -value = 0.003) and purchase intention (4.648/6; $F = 15.200$, p -value = 0.000) are higher for premium SBs. Lastly, consumers bought more standard SB products (2.951 on average; $F = 85.333$; p -value = 0.000).

Test of the structural model. The research model proposed (see Figure 1) has been tested for the three SB types considered (economy, standard and premium) and multi-group analyses performed (Henseler and Fassott, 2010). These analyses indicate that the relationships between Aad, Ab, PI and actual purchases, previously highlighted for the total sample, are also confirmed for economy, standard and premium SBs (Table 2). Similarly, retailer's legitimacy of the means has a significant and positive influence on consumers' attitude towards comparative ads for these three SBs (economy (PC = 0.752, $p < 0.01$), standard (PC = 0.632, $p < 0.01$) and premium (PC = 0.361, $p < 0.01$)). However, this impact is stronger for economy (at the 0.05 level) and standard (at the 0.05 level) SBs than for premium SBs.

While retailer's legitimacy of the objectives and historical legitimacy did not have an impact on consumers' attitude towards comparative ads for the total sample, these results vary according to the SB type. Retailer's legitimacy of the objectives has a significant and positive impact on consumers' attitude towards comparative ads but only for premium SBs (PC = 0.258, $p < 0.01$). The differences between premium SBs vs. economy and standard SBs are significant at the 0.05 level. Retailer's historical legitimacy has a significant and positive influence on consumers' attitude towards comparative ads but only for standard SBs (PC = 0.161, $p < 0.05$). The differences between standard SBs vs economy and premium SBs are significant at the 0.10 and 0.05 levels respectively.

However, the multi-group analyses performed indicated that not all the differences computed are statistically significant. While we found some significant differences for the three SB types considered (economy, standard and premium) for the legitimacy construct, no differences were found for the links between attitude towards the comparative ad and

	Economy SBs (<i>n</i> = 93)			Standard SBs (<i>n</i> = 92)			Premium SBs (<i>n</i> = 91)			Results (<i>p</i> -value) of tests of differences between the two PC		
	(1)			(2)			(3)			(1) vs. (2)	(1) vs. (3)	(2) vs. (3)
	PC	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> ²	PC	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> ²	PC	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> ²	(2)	(3)	(3)
Legitimacy of the means → attitude towards comparative ads	0.752	9.749***	0.548	0.632	7.597***	0.480	0.361	3.746***	0.208	0.166	0.002	0.004
Legitimacy of the objectives → attitude towards comparative ads	0.040	n.s.	n.s.	0.047	n.s.	n.s.	0.258	2.656***	n.s.	0.393	0.002	0.040
Historical legitimacy → attitude towards comparative ads	0.002	n.s.	n.s.	0.161	2.069**	n.s.	0.028	n.s.	n.s.	0.062	0.830	0.034
Attitude towards comparative ads → attitude towards SBs	0.528	4.075***	0.333	0.374	2.879***	0.237	0.434	4.057***	0.220	0.447	0.639	0.776
Attitude towards comparative ads → purchase intention of SBs	0.478	4.150***	0.562	0.326	2.940***	0.499	0.209	2.540**	0.618	0.425	0.082	0.098
Attitude towards SBs → purchase intention of SBs	0.492	5.666***	n.s.	0.545	6.242***	n.s.	0.661	8.709***	n.s.	0.627	0.170	0.317
Attitude towards SBs → actual purchases of SBs	0.195	n.s.	0.255	0.159	n.s.	0.152	0.125	n.s.	0.140	0.333	0.752	0.148
Purchase intention of SBs → actual purchases of SBs	0.432	3.205***	n.s.	0.505	3.719***	n.s.	0.327	2.059**	n.s.	0.727	0.605	0.365

Note(s): SBs, Store Brands; PC, Path Coefficient; ***/**, Coefficient significant. Student's *t*-test values higher than |2.575/1.96| indicate PC significant at the 1%/5% level and n.s. stand for non-significant coefficient

Table 2.
Results of the structural equation models – the three SBs studied

Impacts of comparative ads

towards SBs, purchase intention and actual purchases of these brands. Hypothesis 7 is therefore partially supported by our data. Thus, this research partially confirms previous studies (Martos-Partal and González-Benito, 2011; Diallo *et al.*, 2015; Rubio *et al.*, 2019) that indicated that SBs' positioning has an impact on consumers' behaviour (e.g. their loyalty to the SBs/the store or the value of the store).

Test of the moderating effect of consumer segment

Split-half analyses were first performed on the final score of the measurement scales of consumers' price consciousness and resistance to NBs (the Cronbach's alpha coefficients are 0.929 and 0.809 respectively (Appendix 2)) to compare low and high groups of consumers for these two moderators (low level of price consciousness vs high level of price consciousness and low level of resistance to NBs vs high level of resistance to NBs). Then, multi-group analyses were performed on the groups formed (Henseler and Fassott, 2010).

Descriptive statistics. The ANOVAs performed highlight some significant differences. For standard SBs, the levels of retailer's historical legitimacy are higher for high level of price consciousness consumers (9.109/12 vs 7.947/12; $F = 6.983$, p -value = 0.010) and for high level of resistance to NBs consumers (10.294/12 vs 9.366 $F = 4.737$, p -value = 0.032). For premium SBs, the levels of retailer's legitimacy of the objectives are higher for high level of price consciousness consumers (9.055/12 vs. 7.8767/12; $F = 7.878$, p -value = 0.006) and for high level of resistance to NBs consumers (8.597/12 vs. 7.737 $F = 4.435$, p -value = 0.038).

Test of the structural model. The research model proposed (see Figure 1) has been tested for consumers with high levels of price consciousness (vs low levels) and high levels of resistance to NBs (vs low levels) for each of the SBs considered (economy, standard and premium) and multi-group analyses performed (Henseler and Fassott, 2010). These analyses indicate that the relationships previously highlighted are significant (vs non-significant) or stronger (vs weaker) for consumers with high levels of price consciousness and high levels of resistance to NBs (as opposed to low levels) for economy, standard and premium SBs.

These results indicate that consumers with high levels of price consciousness (as opposed to low levels) and high levels of resistance to NBs (as opposed to low levels) are the most receptive to the comparative ads used by retailers to contrast the prices of their SB products with those of equivalent NB products, for the three SBs studied (economy, standard and premium). Thus, our research confirms previous studies (Martos-Partal and González-Benito, 2011; González-Benito *et al.*, 2014; Muruganatham and Priyadharshini, 2017) that suggested that SB shoppers are price sensitive and less interested in NBs. However, the multi-group analyses performed indicated that not all the differences computed are statistically significant. Hypothesis 8 is therefore partially supported by our data.

Conclusion

Discussion of the results

The aim of this research was to investigate consumers' perceptions of comparative ads contrasting the prices of the products of different SB types with those of equivalent NB products and the effectiveness of these ads according to several consumers' profiles. More specifically, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Do consumers perceive retailers as legitimate when they use ads to compare the prices of their SB products with those of equivalent NB products?

Consumers consider that ads comparing the prices of SBs (economy, standard and premium) products with those of equivalent NB products give informative, relevant and striking information (i.e. legitimacy of the means). Thus, consumers consider retailers as legitimate

when they use comparative ads. This favourable evaluation positively affects their attitude towards these ads. However, this impact is stronger for economy and standard SBs than for premium SBs. This result may be explained by the fact that the comparative ads studied in this research focused only on one extrinsic attribute: price (Richardson *et al.*, 1994). With premium SBs (organic in this research), consumers might also consider an intrinsic attribute (e.g. the contribution of the SB products to consumers' health thanks to the quality of their ingredients) (Misra and Singh, 2016).

Consumers also believe that comparative ads for standard SBs are consistent with retailers' previous campaigns (i.e. historical legitimacy). This result may be explained by the fact that retailers highlight standard SBs in stores (Nogales and Suarez, 2005; Schnittka, 2015) and advertisements. Lastly, consumers believe that comparative ads are an interesting tool to improve retailers' image and the image of their premium (organic) SBs (i.e. legitimacy of the objectives), which are often considered more expensive (Rana and Paul, 2017). Considering these first results, comparative ads with a mix of extrinsic and intrinsic attributes (Richardson *et al.*, 1994) could be an interesting solution for premium SBs. In essence, this study implies that the links between retailer's legitimacy of (1) means, (2) objectives, and (3) historical legitimacy and consumers' attitude towards comparative ads are influenced by the SB type (economy, standard and premium).

(2) How effective are these comparative ads?

When consumers develop a positive attitude towards comparative ads, their positive attitude towards SBs will increase as well as their purchase intention and actual purchases of these brands, whatever the SB type. These unexpectedly similar results could be explained by a halo effect. Thorndike (1920) coined the term "halo effect" to explain the perceptual bias culminating from the influence of a salient characteristic on overall impressions formed about a person or object. Han (1989) enhanced the work, noting that there are two key implications of the halo effect in terms of consumers' judgments. First, consumers make inferences about underlying product qualities (e.g. product qualities that consumers are unable to perceptually detect) based upon a signal or cue. Second, the signal or cue directly affects consumer ratings of various product attributes.

In the specific field of retailing, a retailer's image is likely to serve as a halo on its SBs, for instance when consumers have insufficient information and knowledge about the retailer's SBs offering (Park *et al.*, 2011; Loureiro, 2017). Considering SBs specifically, Nenycz-Thiel and Romaniuk (2009) and Nenycz-Thiel *et al.* (2010) advanced that, in consumers' memory, SBs are a superordinate category label. Consumers perceive SBs as similar, and this perceived similarity could influence their purchasing behaviour. Thus, if consumers are convinced that SB products have particular attributes (intrinsic or extrinsic), they may extrapolate this information to other SBs, which they perceive to be similar.

(3) For which SB types (economy, standard or premium) are these comparative ads most effective?

This research demonstrates that comparative advertising is most effective for standard SBs. Consumers consider the retailer legitimate, from a historical perspective, when it uses this specific form of communication, which fits well with previous campaigns. Moreover, consumers find the information given in comparative ads for standard SBs informative, relevant and striking. Comparative advertising is also appropriate for economy SBs. As for standard SBs, consumers find the information given in the ads, comparing the price of economy SB products with those of equivalent NB products, informative, relevant and striking, but they do not link these ads with previous campaigns. To a lesser extent, comparative advertising is appropriate for premium SBs. If consumers evaluate the

information provided in the ads positively, albeit to a lesser extent than for economy and standard SBs, they also believe that retailers use comparative advertising to improve their image as well as the image of these specific SBs (organic in this research). The risk of greenwashing thus arises (Sirieix *et al.*, 2013).

(4) For which consumers are these comparative ads most effective?

Consumers with high levels of price consciousness and high levels of resistance to NBs are the priority targets of retailers' comparative ads for economy, standard and premium SBs. Previous research indicated that SB shoppers are price sensitive (Martos-Partal and González-Benito, 2011; González-Benito *et al.*, 2014) and less interested in NBs (González-Benito *et al.*, 2014). We highlight in this research that they are also the most receptive to comparative ads contrasting the prices of SBs (economy, standard and premium) products with those of equivalent NB products.

Theoretical contributions

On a theoretical level, this research makes several contributions to research on SBs and comparative advertising.

First, while previous studies focused on comparisons between NBs (Dianoux *et al.*, 2013; Beard, 2018), this research indicates that comparisons between a SB and an NB are effective (in terms of consumers' attitude towards comparative ads, towards SBs, their purchase intention and actual purchases of these brands). This research also validates the usefulness of comparative advertising to demonstrate the adoption of "customer norms" (Arnold *et al.*, 1996), while previous works have mainly focused on retailers' demonstration that they adopt "social norms" through different actions (e.g. in-store educational activities implemented; Chaney *et al.*, 2016).

Second, this research confirms, in the field of comparative advertising, the links proposed between attitude towards the ad, the brand and the purchase intention of this brand in the four alternative structural specifications of the mediating role of Aad proposed by MacKenzie *et al.* (1986). It also validates the appropriateness of the TPB (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) to understand consumers' voluntary behaviour linked to comparative advertising (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Sanne and Wiese, 2018). In addition, it highlights that consumers' purchase intention of SBs is a full mediator of the relationship between their attitude towards SBs and their actual purchases of these brands. This variable is thus highly important for retailers, as previously suggested by the literature (Armitage and Conner, 2001; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010).

Lastly, while the literature has considered consumers' purchase intention exclusively (Rogers and Williams, 1989; Grewal *et al.*, 1997; Beard, 2018), this research integrated actual purchases. Further, whereas previous works have mainly considered situational moderating variables (Rogers and Williams, 1989; Grewal *et al.*, 1997; Beard, 2018), this research incorporated two personal moderating variables (Yucel-Aybat and Kramer, 2018), i.e. consumers' price consciousness and resistance to NBs, to identify which consumers are the most receptive to comparative ads contrasting SBs to NBs.

Managerial contributions

On a managerial level, this research encourages retailers to use comparative advertising for their SBs (economy, standard and premium) for several reasons.

First, this study suggests that comparative advertising is an effective tool for retailers to shape or improve consumers' attitude towards SBs, via their attitude towards comparative ads. SBs are highly important for retailers because they increase consumers' loyalty to their stores (Corstjens and Lal, 2000) and their differentiation from other retailers (Dawes and Nenycz-Thiel, 2013).

Second, this research proposes that comparative advertising contrasting the prices of SB products with those of equivalent NB products could increase retailers' in-store sales of their SBs. In France, after its mass media campaigns (and other investments as the integration of organic products in its assortment), the market share in value of Lidl was equal to 5.40%. This retailer gained 0.5 points (its market share before its mass media campaigns was equal to 4.9%). Independently of the personal mediating variables considered, this research highlights the homogeneity of the results, whatever the SB type (economy, standard and premium). Comparative advertising thus affects consumers' attitude towards SBs, their purchase intention and their actual purchases of these brands.

Lastly, this research underlines that comparative advertising is particularly effective for consumers with high levels of price consciousness and resistance to NBs. Retailers have already increased SBs' shelf spacing to convince such consumers to buy these products (Nogales and Suarez, 2005; Schnittka, 2015). Now, they should invest the resources needed (Stanton *et al.*, 2015) to heavily advertise SB products, through comparative advertising, to attract such consumers to their stores.

Limits and research avenues

This study has limitations that nonetheless open new research avenues.

First, we only tested the impact of direct comparative advertising. Further research could supplement our results by integrating indirect comparative advertising or non-comparative advertising (Kalro *et al.*, 2013; Jewell and Saenger, 2014). Similarly, we considered only an extrinsic attribute (price). Further research could integrate intrinsic attributes (Richardson *et al.*, 1994). Other premium SBs than organic SBs (e.g. *terroir*) (Lacœuilhe *et al.*, 2018) could also be studied, as could other products than food products (e.g. healthcare products) and other retailers. In the same vein, other countries, where Lidl operates should be considered, as consumers' behaviour regarding SBs might vary depending on the country (for instance, SB market share in units are higher in Spain (50%) and lower in Italy (22%) compared to France (31%) [1]).

Second, laboratory experiments have lower external validity than field experiments. Consequently, further research should use a field experiment (i.e. a real store) to validate the results of the experiment conducted in a store laboratory. In addition, the experiment was conducted on a convenience sample. Although it increased the internal validity of the laboratory experiment (Ashraf and Merunka, 2017), caution should be exerted with regard to the external validity of the study findings. Consequently, this study could be replicated with a more diverse sample of consumers.

Lastly, longitudinal measures could be implemented to focus on consumers' repeat purchases, or within-subject design could be used to investigate the impacts of comparative ads for different SB types with the same consumers. Measures of consumers' involvement and familiarity with the product category could also be included because these variables may influence their purchases of SBs vs NBs.

Note

1. <https://www.plmaininternational.com/industry-news/private-label-today>.

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Appendix 1

Impacts of comparative ads

Constructs	Items	Loadings	<i>t</i>	CR	AVE
Legitimacy of the means	These ads projects the image of a retailer that . . .				
	gives informative information	0.824	31.896	0.865	0.682
	gives relevant information	0.867	32.216		
Legitimacy of the objectives	gives striking information	0.785	36.196		
	posts these ads to improve its image	0.905	69.100	0.901	0.820
	posts these ads to improve the image of its store brand	0.905	69.100		
Historical legitimacy	has been making such comparisons for a long time (between store brands and national brands)	0.948	64.833	0.947	0.899
	sends message that are consistent with its previous campaigns	0.948	64.833		
Attitude towards comparative ads	My overall impression of these ads is that . . .				
	they are good ads	0.870	41.022	0.882	0.714
	I like these ads	0.897	37.678		
Attitude towards SBs	I would mention these ads to people I know (word of mouth)	0.763	40.023		
	I appreciate this store brand (i.e. the store brand under study: economy vs. standard vs. premium) because when I buy these products. . .	0.798	39.456	0.870	0.690
	I pay for the products and not for the brand	0.869	34.145		
	I am a smart shopper	0.824	37.207		
	I get a good deal	0.824	37.207		

Note(s): Student's *t*-test values greater than |2.575| indicate loadings significant at the 1% level; CR, Composite Reliability; AVE, Average Variance extracted

Table A1.
Results of confirmatory factor analysis – total sample

Appendix 2

Moderating variables – results of exploratory factor analysis

	Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Table A2. Moderating variables – results of exploratory factor analysis	Price consciousness	I am willing to make an extra effort to find lower prices	0.903	0.929
		I think that the money saved by finding low prices is usually worth the time and effort	0.903	
		I would never shop at more than one store to find low prices*	0.995	
	Resistance to NBs	I minimize the purchases of national brand products	0.781	0.809
		I only buy national brand products*	0.812	
		I avoid buying national brand products as much as possible	0.994	
Note(s): *Reversed item				

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