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- 11 Organizational Culture and Its Impact on Student Engagement: A Study Based on Private and Public Universities in Rajasthan**
Preeti Mishra and Sourabh Sharma 201
- 12 Corporate Social Responsibility Informing Business Analytics: New Standards for Engagement and Performance**
Andrée Marie López-Fernández 219
- Part IV Global Business**
- 13 Effect of Exaggerated Claims on Brand Evaluation**
Ishpreet Viridi 243
- 14 Religion and Marketing**
Satyendra Singh, Michael B. Pasco, and Tapas R. Dash 259
- Part V Education, Entrepreneurship, and Organizational Behavior**
- 15 Study the Role of Personality Traits on Academic Stress: A Comparative Study of Male and Female University Students**
Sourabh Sharma and Megha Sharma 285
- 16 Influence of Entrepreneurship Education and University Ecosystem on Individual's Entrepreneurship Readiness**
Sumit Kumar, Zahoor Ahmad Paray, Neha Sharma, and Amit Kumar Dwivedi 305
- 17 Perceived Organizational Fit: Analyzing Negative Effect of Work Stressors on Employee Outcomes**
Bindu Chhabra 323

Is belief independent of comprehension? Descartes asserted that comprehension proceeds, and is independent of, belief. As humans come into contact with claims or opinions, they comprehend them automatically, and then decide whether to accept or reject the information (Gilbert 1991; Gilbert et al. 1993). Spinoza, on the other hand, believed that comprehending and accepting were part of the same process. "According to Spinoza, the act of understanding is the act of believing. As such, people are incapable of withholding their acceptance of what they understand. They may indeed change their mind after accepting the assertions they comprehend but they cannot stop their minds from being changed by the contact with those assertions" (Gilbert et al. 1993, p. 222). Government policymakers allow advertisers to use puffery, defined as wildly exaggerated, fanciful, or vague claims for a product or service, because they believe that nobody could possibly treat puffery seriously, or be misled by it. Two critical assumptions underlay the policy. First,

INTRODUCTION

Ishpreet Virdi

Effect of Exaggerated Claims on Brand Evaluation

consumers can identify puffed claims as not credible. Second, consumers will not incorporate a puffed claim into their evaluations or beliefs because they understand that the puffery is a "wild" exaggeration. Although policymakers use Cartesian logic, empirical evidence supports Spinoza's view. Gilbert et al. (1993) show that interrupting the processing of false claims results in participants believing the claims to be truer. The disturbing implication of the findings by Gilbert et al. (1993) is that every encounter with misinformation or an exaggerated claim can potentially affect future behavior, even if the consumer realizes that the claim is false. The research presented here demonstrates that although consumers are able to identify an exaggerated claim as less credible, exposure to the puffed claim still shifts the evaluation of the brand to be more positive.

Government policymakers allow advertisers to use wildly exaggerated, fanciful, or vague claims for a product or service because they believe that nobody could possibly treat the claims seriously or be misled by them. The results demonstrate that although consumers are able to identify exaggerated claims as less credible than factual claims, their brand evaluations are inflated after exposure to exaggerated claims. The explanation is that during the process of comprehension, claims are accepted before being discredited. The temporary acceptance of the claim affects memory, even after the claim is understood as an exaggeration.

PROCESSING EXAGGERATED CLAIMS

Cartesian Approach

Government policymakers have taken the position that consumers recognize that puffery lacks credibility, even though very little empirical evidence has been presented to support this assumption. Policymakers assume that when consumer process exaggerated claims they understand the lack of credibility and ignore the claims. Cartesian logic is implicit in this assumption, as there is no concern for partially processed claims.

Previous academic research has focused on conditions under which consumers believe exaggerated claims (Kamins and Marks 1987; Olson and Dover 1978; Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980; Wyckham 1985). Most research has shown that consumers do form beliefs based on specific puffed claims such as "the fastest headache relief possible." Two explanations are offered for the deception. First, consumers believe the claims (Kamins and Marks 1987; Rotfeld and Rotzoll 1980; Shimp and Preston