Researching brand images: The nature and activation of brand representations in memory

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Executive summary

About this research
Regular research into how consumers represent advertisers' brands is crucial to modern brand management. A great number of methods are available from market research agencies, some quite concrete and down to earth, others more creative and symbolic. The fact that a lot of quite different methods are available reflects the general absence of an agreed understanding of what types of knowledge actually represents a brand in memory, how this knowledge is organized in memory, and how this knowledge can be retrieved from it at times of measurements. The present study aims to take a common understanding forward. This thesis contributes to the field of practical and academic consumer behavior research by firstly exploring what the underlying knowledge elements are of a brand representation in consumer memory. An exhaustive inventory of brand representation attributes (the IBRA) is developed and presented. Secondly, after reviewing theories developed in cognitive science, a particular theory on the organization of knowledge called frame theory is proposed as theoretic basis for research on brand representations. Thirdly, the influence of activation cues and evaluation context on the manifestation of a brand representation is theoretically explored. Next, using the IBRA as basis, and borrowing terminology and conceptualization from frame theory, two studies are conducted to study empirically the influence of cues and context in brand representation measurements in general. The brand representations of a total of fourteen brands from different product categories (beer, coffee, detergents, TV sets, and automobiles) are investigated. Two different methods are applied. Firstly, a free association method, in which the respondent evaluates a brand by only reacting to one cue, which is the brand name. Secondly, a so-called informed association method, in which the respondent evaluates a brand by going through a multitude of cues, being the total set of cues provided by the IBRA. Both methods have been framed in both a neutral evaluation context and a purchase-related evaluation context.

The results show that the results of brand representation measurements differ over methods that present different numbers of cues, and also differ over the evaluation context. Furthermore, it is shown that, with respect to brand comparative studies, product-related brands can differ from each other with respect to their brand representational structure, making direct brand comparisons on standardized methods questionable. Finally, it is shown that the evaluation of brand evaluative responses in terms of favorability and relevance yields valuable information, which has the potential of predicting brand attitude and brand purchase intention scores. Main conclusion of the study is that brand representations in memory are flexible structures, and their manifestation is dependent on the number and kinds
of cues that the respondent is presented with, and also on the evaluation context. The main take-out is that advertisers should be aware that the results obtained from a certain measurement method is a blink view, dependent on the exact method that has been applied. Before aligning brand strategies with research results, advertisers should realize that the applied method might not reflect the actual representation of the brand in consumers' memory, but reflect either a subset of all stored knowledge, or even only reflect its own assumptions. Other methods may yield different pictures (which could lead to different brand strategies).

**Hands-on recommendations for advertisers and market researchers**

- Advertisers (especially of low involvement products) should assure themselves that, when symbolically oriented measurement methods are offered by agencies, these methods do realistically meet their consumers' world of experience. As it is generally assumed that symbolic meanings are at the core of brand representations and brand differentiation strategies, it is tempting to measure each and every brand on its degree of symbolism. However, a general outcome of this study is that respondents only recognize this symbolism for a small number of brands. Hence, the measurement of the symbolic meanings of brands may run the risk of measuring associations that are constructed 'on the spot', due to the particular research cues that are provided by the applied method, and as such not realistically reflect the brand representation.

- Advertisers (especially of high involvement products) should be aware that, in brand comparative studies, chances are that competitive brands differ from each other with respect to their representational structure, and therewith the applied method might meet some brands more than others, which creates bias in results.

- Research into the mental representation of brands should preferably include methods that reveal the structure of these representations. Before applying standardized methods, market researchers could think about offering such methods as pre-scan studies, in order to make sure the right balance is found between those attributes that underlie the brand representation, and those that are assumed to underlie the/any brand according to their standardized method. One specific option for this is the use of the informed association method as developed in this thesis, which aims to cue the lot of brand knowledge without a focus on certain assumed attributes by presenting respondents with an exhaustive range of attributes.

- Advertisers and market researchers should take the evaluation of responses up as easy to get yet highly valuable information, on top of studies into the structure of brand representation.

- In market research, attributes are normally framed positively (e.g. cleans well, smells good, enjoyable advertising). When respondents do not pick such phrases in research settings, one could conclude that this attribute is not applicable to the brand. However, this research showed that brands could still be highly represented by attributes that the consumer evaluates as neutral. Moreover, certain attributes can even be perceived as being negative.
Standardized, quantitative measurements will not pick up such evaluations, due to the aforementioned focus on positively framed attributes. Still, these non-positive attributes make up a substantial portion of the brand's representation. Advertisers, together with their market research agency, should try to step back, and take a realistic view on their brands (i.e. a consumer perspective) and as such allow for negative evaluations to result from measurements.

- The context in which consumers evaluate brands and products has been known to influence brand attitude and purchase intention. This research contributes to this knowledge by showing that this is due to the context's influence on the activation of attributes. Different types of attributes are activated in a purchase context compared to a neutral context. As most market research takes place in a neutral context setting (i.e. no explicit context is specified), transferring findings obtained in those settings onto purchase situations might not reflect the actual 'at the moment' process of brand evaluations. So when the goal of research is to understand consumers' purchase behavior, a relevant context will better elicit the matching and relevant attributes compared to another, unrelated context, and as such will yield more valid results.