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

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Summary

Introduction

The notion of brand image is a key interest for advertisers and brand managers. With the growing awareness that it is not only the financial side of brand sales that needs to be managed, but also the consumers’ relation and feelings with the brand, advertisers get more and more focussed on the creation and maintenance of a favorable brand image. And with that comes the tracking of it. Advertisers have a need for information that shows them how their brands are perceived by the consumers and how these perceptions relate or differ to those of competitive brands, in order to adjust or continue brand communication strategies and brand developments. Market research agencies recognize this need and make a good part of their profit out of conducting brand image related research. Brand image research is conducted all over the world by order of companies of all sizes, and involves huge amounts of money.

In attempts to share in the profit new market research agencies and new methods frequently enter the market. And with the rise of competition between research agencies comes the need to distinguish. Each market agency needs to develop measurement methods that uniquely distinguish from those of competitors. Well over 70 different methods are available within The Netherlands only. In recent years, brand image measurements have become fancier and more creative, for one obvious reason in order to more effectively capture consumer knowledge, yet evenly so as a mean of attracting advertisers and to distinguish from competitors. For example, measurements are offered to the market wherein brands are rated as being either introvert or extravert, or metaphorically imagined as being a planet within a universe. With these approaches, the question rises to what extent these methods still relate to the consumers’ world of thought and actually capture consumer knowledge. Or do they drift away from the consumer and loose contact with the consumers' perceptions and knowledge of the brand. Nowadays measurements seem in first instance to be developed based on all kinds of seemingly related theories, derived from scientific disciplines like psychology and sociology. As a result, instead of focussing on the consumer, the central focus is directed to the instrument itself, as the validity and applicability of its underlying theory is taken for granted. Based on whatever theory underlies the measurement, perceptions can be more or less imposed upon respondents by the method, as they are asked to comply with the measurement instead of the other way round.

Now it must be acknowledged that for some brands these more creative approaches may work out fine. Particular brands have a history of communication in abstract terms like, for example, personality or values. Brands like Benetton,
Nike, Marlboro, and Mercedes can imaginably be pictured in an abstract, symbolic way. However, it is striking that from the thousands of brands existing in the world only a handful set the example when it comes to showing the applicability or validity of measurement methods. Unfortunately, presenting these as example serves a false legitimization of the methods' validity for all those other brands that are not or not yet at the same level of abstraction. Fed by (popular) literature on brand management and advertising, brand managers who are not fully aware of the state of the art of brand image measurement might get the impression that brands need to have, for example, a personality or an expressive function. And with that need comes a next need to have that fictional image established using related measurements. As such, brand image measurements become false legitimization of good brand management in themselves, instead of reliable information providers.

Naturally what is fancy at the time should not lead brand image research, nor should a restricted range of methods available from a specific research agency. In order to obtained information accurately, an advertiser would ideally want to know which methods are best suitable for establishing his/her own brand, instead of for brands in general (or even only the world famous brands). When an advertiser is in need of information on his/her brand perception by consumers the question raises which research agency to approach and which available method to apply. However, because each research method is the unique selling proposition of its research agency, comparative studies that would show which method is best to use under what circumstances have never been conducted. Commercial research agencies are for obvious reasons not very willing to have their methods critically evaluated by third parties. As an independent party, academia could pick up the addressed topic.

The present study explores the nature of brand representations and its establishment, and by that addresses the validity of presently applied methods. The main criticism addressed is that a number of presently applied, standardized methods hold assumptions on the presence of attributes that underlie brand representations in memory. However, before any statement on the validity of methods can be made some sort of theoretical foundation needs to be laid out. A first thing that we need to know is what the possible attributes are that can indeed underlie brand representations in memory. This would give an idea of whether the 'assumed' attributes already make up the total collection of possible brand representation elements, or whether there are other, equally probable candidates that are not yet recognized or neglected. Next it should be explored whether the presentation of assumed attributes embedded in measurements do have an impact on the obtained result of a measurement. If for one brand a similar result would be obtained on any method, than apparently it would not matter which method is chosen. If there is a difference, however, the conclusion must be that it does matter which method to choose. For larger companies this might be a lesser problem than for smaller companies, as the former might have more resources for conducting research and can opt for more than one method. Companies with a restricted research budget do not have this freedom and can as such become quite dependent and blinded by results obtained by one specific method.
Research

Theory
This dissertation addresses brand representations in memory and their establishment. The main question addressed is: what are the constituents of the representation of a brand in memory, and how is the activation of this representation influenced by factors embedded in research methods? In answering this main question the dissertation is comprised of four parts.

Firstly, it is established by what a brand is stored in memory. The 'by what' question leads to a search for all types of associations that possibly underlie a brand in memory. The dissertation starts off with a theoretical exploration into the types of associations that are believed to represent brands in memory. As the result of a thorough literature review the Inventory of Brand Representation Attributes (IBRA) is presented. The IBRA covers all association types, defined as attributes, which are assumed to play a role in the memory representation of brands. The IBRA covers a total of 57 specific attributes, which relate to ten main types. Firstly, two main groups of product-related attributes are identified, being product characteristics and product usage attributes. Secondly, six main groups of brand-related attributes are included, being brand identifiers, price & quality, brand personification, market, organization, and advertising. Finally, two main groups of consumer-related attribute groups are distinguished, covering attitude & purchase behavior attributes, and personal references. The attributes listed in the IBRA serve as starting point for research on brand representations.

The second part concerns the question how a brand is represented in memory. The 'how' question asks for a cognitive-psychological approach to the storage of knowledge in memory. Cognitive theories on the representation of knowledge in general are explored. Historical developments in memory theories lead up to a recent theory on the organization of knowledge in memory, called frame theory. In short, following this theory the representation of a brand is conceptualized as a set of attributes, organized within a so-called frame. The actual set of attributes that make up the content of a frame, and the relative importance of attributes within the frame, is flexible. Depending on activation cues and on the context in which the concept is perceived, a brand representation becomes manifest.

The third part concerns the actual activation and establishment of a brand representation. One of the main criticisms on presently applied methods is that most of them hold assumptions on the types of attributes that underlie brand representations in memory. Especially standardized measures do not take an open approach to the establishment of what types of attributes underlie the memory representation of a specific brand, but a more narrow, closed approach by presenting respondents with cues that reflect certain presupposed attributes. This practice can have three consequences. Firstly, the assumption is right and there is no reason to worry about the validity of the results. The knowledge activation cues in the method realistically reflect stored memories and match respondents' brand representation.
Secondly, the brand is not primarily represented in memory by the assumed attributes, although they do play part. The method cues do activate stored information, yet this information is not the core of the brand representation. There are other, more relevant attributes that are missed out by the method. Thirdly, the representation of the brand in memory is not at all based on the assumed attributes, and even if respondents do react to the cues provided by the method, the results do not reflect actual stored memories. In the latter case, one can doubt the validity of the results, for if the research method does yield responses from consumers, these responses may only reflect respondents’ willingness to comply with the method demands instead of reflect the actual state of the brand representation.

If the criticism on standardized methods is that they only focus on and cue a subset of attributes, the implication would be that each method would yield a unique image for a particular brand. And with that, the advertiser would come to different brand strategies, depending on the method with which consumer insights have been obtained. To explore this, ideally all different methods are researched and compared simultaneously. This thesis, however, takes an open approach to brand representation measurement by starting from scratch. The basic idea is that respondents should not be restricted in their activation process during the establishment of their personal brand representation. So cues that are provided must not reflect presupposed attributes, but be as unobtrusive as possible. The focus is on identifying which attributes underlie the representation of the brand under study. Once it is known by which attributes the brand is represented, more in-depth, and even standardized methods can be applied that explore these representatives in more detail. In the present studies, the effect of providing cues in general is explored, in particular the difference between presenting a minimal versus a maximal number of cues on a resulting brand image is established. The general idea behind this approach is that, if there is a difference between the images resulting from providing either few cues or a multitude of cues on a resulting brand image is established. The general idea behind this approach is that, if there is a difference between the images resulting from providing either few cues or a multitude of cues, any combination within this range will generate a specific result. It is expected that more concrete, product-related attributes will result when few cues are provided, whereas more abstract, symbolic attributes will result when respondents are presented with a multitude of cues in evaluating a brand.

In addition to cue dependency, frame theory further explicitly states that the activation of concepts is context-dependent. This notion is also addressed in the thesis, because if this were also true for brand representations, it would have implications for the measurement of brand images. The present research distinguishes between a neutral evaluation context and a purchase-related evaluation context. If there is no difference in resulting brand images between these contexts, than it would imply that it does not matter to consider under what circumstances respondents evaluate brands. However, if there is a difference, brand image research should take this into account.

Another interest in the dissertation relates to a common, yet too often unrecognized assumption in the practice of market research. Until now the discussion has been that in researching one single brand, standardized measurement methods
assume certain attributes to underlie its memory representation. Now in present practice, a brand is often not researched in isolation, but simultaneously with other, competitive brands. So now the criticism stated above not only applies to each of the brands under study, but there is another, bigger assumption. Namely the assumption that all brands under study are to an equal degree represented by the attributes embedded in the method. If this assumption holds then all brands under study can be established in a similar way (apart from the question if the method is at all suitable for the product under study). If, however, this assumption does not hold, and brands do differ with respect to the types of attributes that underlie them, it may well be that the method applies to none or only some of the brands under study, and not to others. In a way, the brands on which the method does apply will benefit from the method as these are represented by the attributes evoked by the method, whereas the other brands will have a disadvantage, as they are not represented by these attributes. The results that are gathered will as such be biased. Before this last implication of biased data gathering can be empirically explored, however, first it needs to be shown that brands within a similar product category can indeed differ with respect to the attributes that underlie their representation. This is referred to as brand representation structure differences. This dissertation also addresses that topic.

The last point addressed in this thesis considers not only the evaluation of brands in terms of types of attributes that underlie their representation, but takes into account the evaluation of these attributes in terms of favorability and relevance. It can be expected that certain responses that respondents list may be more favorable in evaluating the brand than others. Equally, some responses might be considered of more relevance in evaluating the brand than others, according to the respondent. Looking at the evaluation of brands from this perspective raises the question of how the evaluation of brands relates to brand attitude and purchase intention. It is expected that certain types of attributes may underlie a favorable attitude towards a brand, and with that a positive purchase intention. Moreover, it is expected that favorably and relevantly evaluated responses also positively relate to brand attitude and purchase intention.

In the fourth part of the dissertation, the memory representations of a number of brands are empirically explored in two studies. Goal of these studies is to show the influence of the measurement factors activation cues and activation context on the result of a brand representation establishment. Another goal is to show that, when brands from a similar product category are researched, their representation structure may differ, which has implications for the comparison of these brands on standardized methods. A final goal is to relate the structure of brand representations and the evaluation of responses to brand attitude and purchase intention scores.

**Methods**

In two empirical studies, two different methods are applied to establish brand representations in memory from a start from scratch, open-minded perspective. Both methods ask respondents to evaluate a given brand. The first method is a minimal cue method. The method only presents one cue to respondents, being the brand
name. Respondents are asked to list all thoughts that occur when the cue is presented. This method is referred to as the free association method. It is the least obtrusive method, yet it may lose out on getting to information that is hard to verbalize for respondents. Therefore, the second method presents multiple cues. The IBRA lists the most probable attributes that underlie brand representations in memory. Cueing all these has the advantage of activating also the more abstract, symbolic attributes, and at the same time faces the criticism of activating only presupposed attributes. The method informs respondents on all types of attributes they might possibly relate to the brand. This method is referred to as the informed association method. In the informed association method, respondents are asked to list thoughts on a range of cues. After having done that, chances are that all stored attributes are activated to a certain degree, including those that would not be activated by free association. Then respondents are asked to select those attributes that to their opinion describe the brand at best. With the application of these two different methods, each on an extreme side with respect to the number of cues provided, the objective is first to obtain an unbiased insight in what kind of attributes underlie brand representations in memory. A second objective is to show that different brand representation manifestations result from the different methods, referred to as the cue effect. If support for a cue effect is found than this result can be taken as indicator for the notion that for each method that presents a certain cue within the range of possible cues, a method-specific result is obtained.

**First study**

In the first empirical study the proposed methodology was applied to the Dutch beer brands Heineken and Grolsch. Using free association and informed association, brand evaluations were gathered from 53 respondents. Comparing the results of both methods showed that there is indeed a cue effect. For Heineken and Grolsch respectively 8.5% and 10.0% more concrete attributes resulted from free association compared to informed association. This multitude of concrete associations related to the even lack of abstract attributes on the free association method, as compared to informed association. Especially the percentage of brand personification attributes differed significantly over both methods (increasing from 8.6% to 15.3% for Heineken and from 11.9% to 24.1% for Grolsch). With respect to brand representation structure differences, the results showed that the frequency of free association responses differed significantly between the two brands on six main attribute groups. More product usage, market, and organization attributes resulted on Heineken compared to Grolsch. Likewise, significantly more brand identifiers, brand personification, and brand attitude attributes resulted on Grolsch compared to Heineken. Looking at the data obtained by informed association, only on one specific attribute group, brand personification, the difference over brands was substantial. More brand personification attributes were selected for Grolsch (24.1%) compared to Heineken (15.3%). Apart from the conclusion that there are indeed differences between the brands, another conclusion is that these brand representation structure differences are more apparent when established by free association compared to informed association.
Second study

In a second study twelve brands from four different product categories were examined, in order to generalize the findings obtained on the beer brands. The study included three brands from the product categories coffee (Van Nelle, Kanis & Gunnink, Max Havelaar), detergents (Persil, Omo, Ariel), TV sets (Philips, Sony, Grundig), and automobiles (Volvo, BMW, Nissan). Approximately 30 respondents evaluated each brand. In total 368 respondents from all over The Netherlands formed the sample. In addition to the cue effect and the brand representation structure differences, three further research questions were explored in this study. The first one relates to the notion of context. The study set out to show that different manifestations of a brand representation result from different contexts, because, by directing the activation process to a certain context, specific attributes get more activated than others do. Specifically, the contexts included in this study were a neutral, unspecified context, and a context of product purchase. Both the free association and the informed association method were framed in a neutral context and a purchase context. The second added question related to the evaluation of responses. According to the literature, attributes are said to hold a certain degree of favorability, uniqueness and strength. In this dissertation the degree of relevance that an attribute has to the image of the brand is added to these three features. As these features yield important and interesting information, in researching brand representations ideally they are taken into account. With respect to the managerial relevance of conducting brand representation research, next to listing all attributes that underlie the representation of a brand, the interest is in identifying those attributes that are considered either negative or positive, and at the same time of relevance to the brand. In the second study the respondents rated the relevance (unimportant, neutral, important) and favorability (negative, neutral, positive) of each of the obtained response obtained from free association method. On informed association, only the favorability of responses was directly rated (relevance was derived from the selection of attributes). The third added question related to the prediction of attitude and purchase intention scores from the structure of brand representations and response evaluations. In many research methods, only the attributes that consumers relate to brands are established. However, the evaluation in terms of favorability of these attributes to the brand is less commonly established. One interesting thing to explore is how scores on brand attitude and purchase intention can be predicted from the actual presence of certain attributes, as also from the evaluation of these.

Results showed again that there was a cue effect. In general, within a neutral context less product-related attributes resulted from informed association compared to free association. In contrast, more abstract, brand personification attributes resulted from informed association, compared to free association. Although this second result was statistically significant, it was less strong than the first. Within a purchase context it was hypothesized that again less concrete, product-related attributes would result from informed association compared to free association. This expectation was again supported by the data. Next it was expected that more price & quality attributes would result from informed association compared to free association. This hypothesis was also supported. With respect to the context effect,
suppor tt  wa s  onl y  foun d  i n  th e  fre e  associatio n  data . Al l brand s  bu t th e  detergen t 
brand ss  showe d  significan t difference s  i n  th e  type s  o f attribute s  tha t wer e  elicited . 
Lookin gg  a t th e  respons e  distribution s  ove r  th e  mai n  attribut e  groups , les s  produc t 
usag ee  attribute s  resulte d  fro m  evaluation s  withi n  a  purchas e  contex t compare d  t o 
aa  neutra l context . Mor e  attribute s  relate d  t o  pric e  &  qualit y  an d  attitud e  &  pur -
chas ee  behavio r  resulte d  fro m  a  purchas e  contex t compare d  t o  a  neutra l context . 
Th ee  evaluatio n  o f response s  promise d  t o  yiel d  additiona l informatio n  t o  frequenc y 
of  occurrence . Th e  result s  showe d  that , althoug h  response s  ca n  b e  frequent , thi s 
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it yy  t o  th e  brand . Th e  othe r  wa y  round , i t als o  occurre d  tha t certai n  attribute s  wer e 
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influence ss  th e  occurrenc e  o f attribute s  bu t als o  thei r  evaluation . Thes e  finding s 
indicate  tha t there is a subtle balance between the presence of attributes on the 
one hand, and the evaluation of attributes on the other. When the prediction of 
brand attitude and purchase intention scores was considered, the results surpris- 
ingly showed that there is no relationship between the absence or presence of 
attributes (i.e. the structure of a brand representation) and brand attitude nor pur- 
chase intention. However, scores on these variables could reasonably well be pre-
dicted from the mere evaluation of attributes. Apparently, both brand attitude 
and purchase intention have more to do with the simple trade-off between nega-
tive and positive evaluation of attributes than with the 'amount' of associations 
one has with a brand. Finally, looking at brand representation structure differ-
ences, it appeared again that product-related brands differ from each other when 
brand evaluative responses are gathered by either free association or informed 
association. Within the groups of product explored in the study the coffee and 
automobile brands seemed particularly different with respect to their brand rep- ensation structures. Detergent brands did not show any differences in brand rep- resentation structure at all. Apparently detergent brands are quite generic. TV set 
brands only showed a marginal yet significant difference in a neutral context. This 
difference disappeared when evaluations were made within a purchase context. 
Additionally, by including the evaluation of response the results showed that, 
although brands may be represented to equal degree by certain attributes (and 
hence do not differentiate on this ground), the evaluation of this part of the rep- resentation might be a differentiating factor. So when, for example, the aim of a 
study is to compare the uniqueness of product-related brands, the evaluation of 
responses needs to be taken into account.

Conclusion

Brand representations in memory are terribly complex. This might not exactly be 
an earthshaking new conclusion from this research, yet it is once more confirmed 
by looking at all the attributes that are listed in the IBRA. At this moment, the IBRA 
seems to be the most exhaustive overview of brand attributes in the literature on 
brands, and as such is a valuable and tangible result of this research. It also illus-
trates that there are far more attributes that possibly underlie the representation 
of everyday life brands than contemporary brand image research methods can and
do capture. It gives a first indication that focussing on some attributes in research implies the possibility that other, possibly equally or more relevant attributes are missed out on by the research method.

The main conclusion of this research is that the establishment of brand representations, or the measurement of brand images, is clearly under influence of method characteristics. When results are obtained from measurements (i.e. from research agencies), an advertiser needs to realize that this result is just one way of looking at the brand. The method that has obtained the result has had its influence on the respondents’ knowledge activation processes by the cues that were provided and the context in which the evaluations were made. A different image might have resulted if a different method was employed. And as advertisers need to spend their research budgets wisely, it makes more sense to go after the method that most validly elicits the brand representation attributes, than going with the method that looks most fancy. Especially advertisers of low-involvement products need to be wary of methods that make an interesting story on brands by relating them to all kinds of symbolic issues, yet may in fact not realistically connect with the consumers’ world of thought.

A related conclusion is that, in comparative brand research (like positioning studies), the advertiser should be aware that the competitive brands in the study could be structurally different from his/her own. With that in mind, one should carefully interpret results of measurements. Pictured differences between brands might be reflections of actual different brand positions, yet might equally well just be ascribed to the fact that the method only meets the consumers’ brand perceptions for a subset of the brands under study. Hence differences might also stem from the respondents’ different reactions to the different brands following the method’s requirements.

The proposed methodology has the advantage over standardized methods that it is an open approach towards establishing brand representations, without focussing on certain attributes. The method leaves the respondent in charge of providing evaluations, as unobtrusive as possible when employing the free association approach, and at the same time cued to the wide range of attributes when employing the informed association method. In this way the structure of the brand representation is established, or the types of attributes that make up the brand representation, allowing the advertiser to get an idea of how his/her brand is perceived by consumers. Furthermore, it has been identified that the evaluation of brand evaluative response yields further useful information. An interesting finding from this research was that, when it comes to the prediction of brand attitude and purchase intention scores, the mere presence or absence of attributes does not seem to be a good predictor. Having respondents evaluate their brand evaluative responses in terms of their favorability and relevance to the brand, however, seems to better predict brand attitude and purchase intention scores. The implication of this finding is that it does not suffice to establish the attributes that underlie brand representations when data are used to predict attitudes and purchase intention (i.e. in segmentation studies). In fact, it would be more useful to have respondents
evaluate the different types of attributes, as these are more indicative of the evaluation of the total brand perception and with that general attitudes and purchase intention.