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

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Conclusion

Advertisers spend huge amounts of money on research in order to gain insight into what consumers know of their brands. Most of this research is commissioned to external research agencies. Choosing the most appropriate agency can be difficult, given the vast amount of available methods. A multitude of research methods has been developed over the years, mainly due to research agencies’ need to distinguish from competitors. This multitude is fed by the fact that brand image research is often based on personal opinions or creative thoughts about the way brands are represented in memory, rather than on fundamental, scientific orientations.

The multitude of methods and corresponding definitions on brand representation reflect the lack of fundamental knowledge in the consumer behavior literature regarding the way brands are represented in memory. One general critique about the wide range of methods is that each one holds certain explicit or implicit assumptions on how brands are stored in memory, and assumptions on what kinds of cues are necessary to elicit the attributes that underlie the brand representation. However, this assumption is not necessarily valid. A specific method may presuppose certain attributes to be related to a particular brand, yet respondents might never have related that particular attribute to that brand before, or maybe not to the same degree as the method assumes. From the wealth of information respondents have stored in memory about the brand, only a subset will become activated, depending on the way questions are asked and the context in which this takes place. If this subset is taken as a final result and communicated to a client as the image of the brand, it might in fact only be part of the story. A worst-case scenario would be if it told no part of the story at all, if these responses had merely been extorted from respondents by the method, thereby not actually reflecting the consumer’s thoughts.

A related issue is the way brands are compared using standardized methods. Applying standardized methods assumes that certain attributes underlie all the brands under study. However, although a single brand may be well represented by the method-assumed attributes, this does not automatically mean that another brand from the same product category is also represented by those attributes, nor to the same degree. Yet all too often do research methods firstly suppose that a certain attribute can be taken as a measure to compare brands against, and secondly that this attribute is equally relevant to all brands under study. It is again questionable whether or not such assumptions are valid, yet these questions are hardly ever raised. This is because the practice of market research has a strong competitive element in it and hence insights obtained by individual research agencies are hardly ever shared, let alone reviewed or validated by independent parties. So far little independent research has fundamentally addressed the issue of brand representations in memory.
This thesis firstly addresses brand representations in memory, and secondly the elicitation of this representation. The main aim of the study is to identify what composes the representation of a brand, and how its elicitation may change over research methods. An open approach is taken towards exploring the onset and content of brand representations in memory, and towards their measurement, with the notion of consumer brand equity as a starting point. Consumer brand equity refers to the role consumers play in establishing brand equity, by acting upon a brand through the manifestation of certain behavior. Behavior towards a brand originates in part from the memory representation of this brand. The collection and nature of the attributes that underlie the brand representation direct the consumer's evaluation of the brand. In turn, the degree of favorability of this evaluation influences the manifestation of consumer behavior. As such, knowing how and by which measures a consumer evaluates a brand provides useful information for among others brand communication and brand management. If we want to know how and by what the memory representation of a brand is comprised, we first need to investigate the nature of memory storage and what the brand-related content of memory is. To further understand how this representation can be established we need to explore the way it is retrieved from memory.

The present dissertation addresses these three questions. Firstly, an exhaustive inventory of all types of knowledge consumers can possibly have with a brand is presented. Acknowledging all the attributes listed in the inventory as possible candidates for brand representations in memory avoids focussing a priori on pre-selected attributes, taking an open-minded approach to research on brand representations. Secondly, in addressing the how-question, this inventory is set within a cognitive theoretical perspective on memory by accepting frame theory as the cognitive theoretical fundament. In essence, this means that it provides a theoretical base for looking at brand representation at different levels, being the level of brand attributes and the level of brand attribute values. Moreover, frame theory provides an explicit account for the flexible nature of brand representations, in terms of the impact of cues and context during their activation. Thirdly, regarding the establishment of brand representations, factors influencing its activation are both theoretically and empirically explored. Although there may be numerous influential factors, the two factors explored specifically in this dissertation concern the number of activation cues presented to respondents, and the context in which respondents are asked to evaluate a brand. Also, differences in representational structure between brands within a similar product category are explored, in order to challenge standardized brand comparative studies. Finally, the evaluation of consumer responses on brands is related to brand attitude and purchase intention, in order to explore the relation between memory content and behavior determinants. In the following paragraphs, the main conclusions and implications of this study will be stated and discussed.
8.1 Conclusions

8.1.1 Inventory of Brand Representation Attributes
Brand image measurement is an area that is particularly susceptible to a kind of ‘flavor of the month’ phenomena. Branch-related magazines or popular literature reflect whatever is fancy at the time. If advertisers and brand managers keep their knowledge up to date by reading these sources, their view may unfortunately get restricted. Take for example the popularity of the notion of brand personality nowadays. It is easy to get carried away with the idea of a brand having a personality, and loose sight of the actual consumers’ perceptions of the brand. In research applications this enthusiasm may have an important influence by focussing on, and putting unconditional confidence in, the method applied to the consumer. Yet the consumer and his/her perceptions of the brand should still be the central focus in brand image studies. So whatever a certain (standardized) method suggests measuring, the question that always needs to be answered first is whether the method suits the consumers’ world of experience. If it does, then this method should be used. If it does not, using the method might yield biased rather than reliable results.

A first deliverable of this thesis is the Inventory of Brand Representation Attributes (IBRA), in relation to the question of what underlies brand representations in memory. The IBRA covers 57 different types of attributes, distributed over ten main attribute groups: product-related attributes (product characteristics and product usage), brand-related attributes (brand identifiers, price & quality, brand personification, market, organization, and advertising), and consumer-related attributes (attitude & purchase behavior and personal reference). The function of the IBRA is twofold. Its primary function is to make both advertisers and researchers aware of the multitude of attributes consumers can have with brands, and to create an awareness of the complexity of brand representations. The IBRA shows that there are far more association types than the few that get embedded in standardized methods. It also shows that brand representations in memory can consist of a great number of attributes. Taking that into account, research on brand representations should not be confined in advance to some presupposed attributes, as this might lead to equally relevant attributes unfortunately not being considered, thereby biasing the results.

Secondly, the IBRA can be used practically as a tool for coding brand evaluative responses. Whenever consumers are asked to evaluate brands, the obtained responses can be related to the attributes listed in the IBRA. This provides a detailed insight into what kind of attributes underlie the representation of the brand under study. The conducted empirical studies showed the IBRA to be a useful tool for exploring brand representations in memory. It covered 96.8% of all 1318 free association responses obtained in the first study and 98.7% of the 4583 free association responses obtained in the second study. This result shows that the IBRA covers a wide range of attributes and thereby provides a good overview of brand representation attributes. As stated in chapter one, there are quite a number of authors describing the elements that underlie the representation of a brand in memory, or brand image as they refer to it. Yet none of these are as exhaustive
as the total collection that resulted after combining all published insights, supplemented with further empirical findings. Therefore the IBRA can be considered to be the most extensive inventory of brand representation attributes found in the literature.

8.1.2 Frame theory

Having answered the question of what underlies brand representations in memory, the next question to address concerned how all these attributes are stored and organized in memory. Whereas the vast majority of published brand representation/image-related research does not make any statement on its cognitive-theoretical frame of reference, those rare publications that do explicitly refer to cognitive theories include views that have progressed over the years. It has become standard in consumer behavior literature that consumer knowledge structures for a product or brand simply consist of associative networks of concepts. What then exactly 'makes' a concept is not explicated in this view. Within the accepted idea of associations as the foundation of concept representation, there have been developments in cognitive science over the years that have introduced specific theories on knowledge structures. As this thesis is concerned with the structure of brand representations it has tried to identify an up to date theory on the organization of knowledge. Frame theory provides a promising cognitive-psychological basis for research on brand representations in memory.

Frame theory is one of the few theories on knowledge representation that makes explicit statements on the nature of concepts and on their flexibility in manifestations at times of activation. The theory holds at least three interesting features for the conceptualization of brand representations. Firstly, it assumes that knowledge storage in memory is based on attribute-value sets. An attribute is a concept-like, higher order category that is defined by a specific value. Although a specific attribute might underlie the memory representation of all exemplars of a concept, the attribute value is unique for each specific exemplar. For example, airline-brands can be represented by attributes like service-level (with values like high or low), color of the brand logo (with a value 'blue' in the representation of KLM and 'red' for Martinair), and country of origin. A second interesting feature of the theory is that, regarding the manifestation of a concept, the configuration of activated attributes within a frame is context-dependent. In other words, which attributes specifically represent a concept and what their values are depends on the context in which the concept is activated. For example, when the brand Nike is evaluated during an athletics tournament, it is likely that more product-beneficial related attributes will be activated. In the context of purchasing leisure clothes, however, its expressive function may be of more interest to the evaluator. These model features underlie the present approach to the establishment of brand representations.

Brand representations are conceptualized to consist of product-, brand-, and/or consumer-related attributes, with specific values for each specific brand. Their manifestation depends partly on the way activation occurs (i.e. the cues that are provided, referred to as the cue effect), and on the situation in which this happens.
(referred to as the context effect). In the present dissertation the first theory feature, on attribute-value sets, has served as a theoretical starting-point for the construction and function of the IBRA. The latter two theoretical features are investigated and supported by the empirical studies on brand representations in memory.

8.1.3 Cue effect

It has been observed that there is a large number of methods available on the brand image research market. As all these methods opt to be distinct from competitors’ methods, they offer a specific way of measuring the content of consumer memory. Each method presents a unique set of cues to respondents, which means that the ensuing results are method dependent. This is particularly the case with standardized methods. These are offered to any customer (i.e., advertiser) and applied to brands of very different product categories and nature. The extent to which results obtained by different methods resemble each other is questionable. Ideally the different methods should converge into a similar result. However, taking into account the range of methods, this is unlikely. The challenge then is to find the method that is most suitable to a specific brand. Unfortunately, in the literature no report can be found describing direct comparisons of methods applied in market research. This is not surprising, as in-house developed research methods are the source of income for an agency, and sharing gathered results from these methods implies sharing income. The only reports that occasionally get published or that are available from research agencies describe one specific method and its application. These reports often serve more of an advertising role than a critical review. In the present dissertation different available methods have not been compared directly, but rather a more general approach has been taken. The general concern is that each method presents a unique set of cues to respondents, and therefore different results may be obtained. Hence, instead of directly comparing methods, the conducted empirical studies identified, in a general sense, the influential role that presenting cues has on the manifestation of a brand representation. By showing that it is important to consider which cues are presented to respondents, the present study intends to make advertisers in particular aware that the results that are presented to them are always method-dependent. Although these results are not necessarily bad or unreliable, advertisers-as-customers should take in consideration the way in which these results are obtained.

To explore the cue effect, results gathered from two different methods were compared. The methods differed in the number of cues that were presented to respondents. The first method used free association (FA) wherein only the brand name was presented as a cue to respondents. This method can as such be considered a minimal cue method. In contrast, informed association (IA) presented respondents with a large number of cues. Derived from the IBRA, a total of 35 attributes were presented as cue, therefore the IA method can be considered a maximal cue method. Both methods had respondents list responses, and did not assume in advance any specific attribute to underlie the representation of the brand in memory. They were openly oriented methods in which respondents had the freedom to react as they liked. As such it may equally be the case that both methods would yield similar results on a specific brand. However, the methods yielded different results.
Although these differences were not equal over each of the fourteen brands included in the two studies, there appeared to be a cue effect. One of the hypothesized and confirmed differences was that relatively more concrete attributes resulted from FA, and relatively more abstract attributes resulted from IA. Hence the presentation of cues altered the manifestation of the brand under study. So it can be seen that, even when respondents are ‘in charge’ of providing responses, the method used has an influence. FA seems to restrict the activation of certain attributes and/or the listing of attributes that are hard to verbalize. As such FA mainly yields attributes that are of a relatively concrete nature and easy to verbalize. IA leads respondents through a variety of attributes and hence activates a great deal of what is stored in memory. The manifestations that result from the IA method differ from those obtained by FA as more abstract attributes are considered.

The applied methods are each at an extreme end of the numbers of cues that can be presented to respondents. The majority of available methods lies within these extremes. Some focus only on a subset of all possible attributes (like product-related attributes), others only on one attribute (like brand personality or brand relation). So it is easy to imagine that whenever a certain applied method restricts respondents in advance in their activation process by presenting pre-selected attributes as cues, the manifestation of the brand representation will vary accordingly. Results that are obtained may be biased in two ways. Firstly, the resulting ‘brand image’ accurately reflects that the method-assumed attributes underlie the representation of the brand in memory, yet overstates the relevance of these attributes for the brand’s representation. Other omitted attributes might also underlie the brand representation, yet at the same time be of far more relevance. For example, the results of the second study showed that, although a brand like Van Nelle is to some degree associated with brand personification attributes, its evaluation relies largely on product usage attributes and advertising attributes. So although results will have been obtained on brand personification-oriented methods, the very application of such a method overstates the relevance of this type of attributes, in detriment to the more relevant attributes. Secondly, a resulting brand image may incorrectly reflect attributes that do not actually underlie the representation of the brand, since by presenting them as cues, these attributes are imposed upon respondents. In other words, the method actually extorts responses and only reflects itself. Its application is then without any foundation and will consequently lack validity. For example, from both FA and IA it appeared that the detergent brands were not represented by brand personification attributes like brand personality, values or user image. So whenever a brand personifying measurement method is presented to a consumer evaluating detergent brands, it is likely that apparent results are mere reflections of the method than actual reflections of the representation of the detergent brands in memory.

The overall conclusion is that cues direct activation and thereby the results of a measurement. Presenting a minimal cue like the brand name results mainly in attributes that are of a concrete, verbalizable nature. Presenting more cues results in a more diverse picture of a brand, and includes in general more abstract attributes, albeit dependent on the product under study. The implication of this direct-
ing cue effect with respect to standardized methods should be empirically investigated in future research. These implications are that a method may extort responses from respondents that do not or only marginally reflect brand representations in memory, but merely the method itself. One way to tackle this issue is to first conduct an exploratory study to identify the attributes that underlie the representation of the brand in memory. The proposed informed association method is ideal for this purpose. Informed association yields a rich amount of brand evaluations in valuable consumer language yet also lays out the structure and relevance of all different attributes in representing the brand. Once established which attributes are most representative of the brand, a more in-depth method may be applied. For example, if the results of such a first study show that the brand is represented by a fair amount of personality associations, then applying a personality scale to establish the brand’s personality might be a perfectly valid exercise.

8.1.4 Context effect
Alongside the cue effect, the activation of concept representations is also dependent on the evaluation context. According to frame theory, concept representations consist of context-dependent attributes and context-independent attributes. The manifestation of a concept differs depending on the evaluation context. The practical implications of this are that it is important to consider the circumstances in which the results of a measurement are established, and also, the validity of measurement results obtained in a specific context when applied within a different circumstance. As stated in the introduction it is clear that brands serve several functions to consumers. These can be purely instrumental, or they can play a more expressive role. The context of usage can be considered to be a determinant for the function a brand serves and the evaluation of the brand. For example, when one is looking for soft drinks on holiday in a foreign country, Coca-Cola is an attractive alternative to other unknown brands, because it is familiar. This familiarity serves as a guarantee function. Yet in the social context of a party, Coca-Cola may serve a more expressive function for the user in that choosing it reduces feelings of rejection from peers who like the brand. As far as the practice of market research is concerned, it would enrich a study to actively take into account the context in which evaluations are made. One specifically interesting context is that of purchase. In a purchase situation consumers evaluate brands with an explicit goal. It is highly likely that in such a situation specific attributes become relevant for evaluation, whereas in a more neutral context they would not. For example, for a specific brand evaluation in a purchase context, attributes related to prior purchase behavior or those of an attitudinal nature could be more relevant for evaluation than attributes like packaging.

In the conducted studies, the differential effect that providing a purchase context has on the manifestation of a brand representation was investigated. Before collecting brand evaluative responses by free association, a quite simple purchase-oriented context was induced by use of scenarios. A differential effect was found to exist. When brand evaluative responses are obtained within a purchase context, more values on attitude & purchase behavior related attributes are obtained compared to a neutral context. It can be imagined that in a real-life purchase context
these attributes might even get more weight when brands are evaluated. When a purchase context was induced within the informed association method, no differential effect was found. The explanation for this is that the way the context manipulation was operationalized was too weak for the informed association method. Within the free association method, the fact that even a quite simple manipulation led to a context effect strengthens the idea that context has an effect on the manifestation of brand representations. For market research practices the consequence of this context effect is that it is important to consider the circumstances under which brand representation research is conducted. Firstly, the context in which respondents are asked questions might interfere with the activation process and consequently the obtained results. It should be recognized that the result of a measurement is always context-dependent, that is to say, if the measurement was conducted within a different context, then a different result might be obtained. A second implication is that the appropriateness of the evaluation context to the ultimate goal of the research needs to be considered. For example, if the prime research interest concentrates on the expressive function of brands, the creation of a social context in which evaluations are made might favorably direct the activation process. Alternatively, if the prime research question is related to attitudes and purchase behavior it might be worthwhile to induce a purchase mood for respondents by creating a relevant context. Brand evaluations obtained in such contexts would more closely fit the research interest.

8.1.5 Brand representation structure differences

So far influential factors on the manifestation of single brand representations have been explored. Both the cue effect and the context effect are theoretically discussed and empirically supported for a number of individual brands. However, in the practice of brand image measurement, it is also common to compare competitive brands simultaneously, since advertisers are interested in gauging, among other issues, how their brand performs compared to competitor brands. In order to gain insight in the relative position of the brand and its competitors, standardized research methods are applied to a number of brands simultaneously. Again these standardized methods hold assumptions on the types of attributes that underlie brand representations in memory in general. In the preceding paragraph on the cue effect, the main criticism related to the possible misfit between method assumptions and the actual brand representation on an individual brand level. The same criticism applies to an even greater extent to the case of brand comparative studies, because applying standardized methods to compare product-related brands (i.e. brands within one product category) might induce bias. The reason behind this is to be found in brand representation structure differences (BRSD).

BRSD stem from a wide range of different, brand-specific communication strategies. Since brands communicate differently from each other with their consumers, some brands are comprised of a certain set of attributes, whereas other brands are comprised of a different set of attributes. Of course these image differences might in fact be favorable for individual advertisers, as they distinguish the one brand from its competitors. Indeed, from a selling perspective, the fact that brands can have different representation structures does not present a problem. However,
these differences can pose problems when brands are researched simultaneously. Using standardized methods for brand comparisons means that brands are all lumped together. BRSD are neglected if it is assumed that the applied method relates to all brands under study to an equal degree. As a result, brands may be incorporated in comparative studies, even if they do not relate to the other brands in the study with respect to the attributes that are embedded in the method. Some brands will connect with the method and yield reliable data, whereas others will not, and hence the data will be extorted. However, before this implication can be supported empirically, such differences need firstly to be identified.

The results of both the first and second study showed that brands within a product category can indeed differ from each other according to the types of attributes that underlie them. Brands within the product categories beer, coffee, TV sets and automobiles showed these differences, particularly when responses were obtained from free association. The set of attributes and its configuration that underlie the representation of the product-related brands both differ. For example, looking at the coffee brands, Max Havelaar was represented to a fair degree by brand personification attributes. On Van Nelle and Kanis & Gunnink, however, hardly any such attributes resulted from free association. Even when informed association aided respondents, significantly less brand personification attributes featured on the latter two brands compared to the former. Hence, applying standardized methods that appeal to brand personification will possibly relate more to Max Havelaar than to Van Nelle and Kanis & Gunnink. Since consumers do not represent the latter two brands with such attribute types, the method imposes these upon the consumer-as-respondent, thus merely extorting rather than establishing brand personification responses. The comparison of scores on each brand will be less reliable, and brand comparisons should not be interpreted without recognizing this potential bias. The extent to which this practice actually yields biased data should be explicitly investigated in future research. Yet for the time being it should be acknowledged that the practice of comparing brands using standardized research methods is not without objections.

Ideally all brands to be included in a comparative study should be pre-investigated to ascertain what types of attributes underlie each of them. Should this first exploration show that there are no structural differences between the brands, then the second phase would be to select an appropriate method that does justice to those attributes that represent each of the brands. However, should it turn out that the brands do differ with regard to their respective brand representation structure, it would be wise to conduct comparative research only for those attributes on which the brands do resemble each other. If they do not resemble each other on attributes at all, comparisons should be very carefully conducted and interpreted. In general, if this is the case, there are two options to consider. Firstly, comparisons should be restricted to the attribute level, and not try to identify differences at a value level. Identifying those attributes on which brands differ provides in itself the essential information for brand comparisons. Secondly, comparisons should be restricted to only the most common attribute(s), consciously acknowledging and wherever possible correcting the identified differences between brands.
The notion of BRSD primarily relates to the types of attributes that underlie brand representations in memory. It is the nature of the attributes rather than their content that is particularly interesting. According to the definition of brand representations provided in paragraph 2.5.3, a brand is represented in memory by a subset of attributes, each of which is defined by a specific value. Besides exploring which attributes make up the representational subset, it is also of interest to consider the values that define each attribute, because these are the values that underlie the evaluation of a brand, and determine the status of the brand compared to its competitors. According to Keller (1993, 1998) attribute values differ with respect to their strength, their favorability, and their uniqueness. The degree of relevance should also be added to these three, since an attribute value can be strong, favorable, and unique, yet not be considered of relevance to the brand when it comes to brand evaluation. When the comparison of product-related brands is the topic under study, the evaluation of responses in terms of favorability, uniqueness, and relevance also needs to be taken into account. The results from the second study showed that although brands may be represented to an equal degree by certain attributes (and hence do not differentiate on these grounds) the favorability of this part of the representation may be a differentiating factor. In contrast, it might also be the case that a specific brand is represented by a certain attribute significantly more than its competitors, without consumers actually attaching any relevance or favorability to this.

8.1.6 Predicting brand attitude and purchase intention
The results presented in chapter 7 showed that, when the aim of research is to predict brand attitude or purchase intention, merely identifying the kind of attributes that underlie the brand representation is not the recommended route to follow. The presence or absence of certain attributes did not correlate at all with brand attitude scores, or with purchase intention scores. However, evaluations of attributes in terms of positive or negative did correlate quite substantially with attitude scores. Even when regression scores were estimated on a (low-involvement) product like detergent, about half of the attitude scores could be reliably predicted from response evaluations. However, it was found that the evaluation of cued responses relates very well with scores on brand attitude, and to a lesser extent with purchase intention. It even transpired that the evaluation of attributes that are not actively considered to be brand representatives (like brand personality attributes on detergent brands) did in fact predict brand attitude scores. This finding may be explained by assuming that simply having a brand representation has a positive effect on brand attitude. Consumers who have a lesser-developed brand representation apparently hold less favorable attitudes. However, the finding that the majority of respondents did not consider symbolic attributes to be representatives of detergent brands, yet that their attitude could be predicted by the very evaluation of these symbolic attributes, leads to the conclusion that it is indeed the very task of evaluating symbolic attributes that accounts for the prediction of attitude scores. It appeared that respondents who have a favorable attitude also react more seriously to abstract attributes than do respondents who have a more negative attitude. So although both groups of respondents do not actively report any symbolic attributes to represent the brand, simply confronting them with the question to evaluate these attributes distinguishes the two groups.
It is worth noting that product-related attributes seem to make up the 'core' of the representation of most brands. If both methods are considered some method-dependent attributes appear as well as some method-independent attributes, the latter including the products' physique and product-indicator related attributes quite consistently across brands. Also on a number of brands the attributes price, quality and advertising are core elements of their representation. It is only for a few brands that more abstract attributes like brand ideology (on Max Havelaar) and brand user image (on BMW) result from both methods as main brand descriptors. This result is particularly interesting because all too many brand researchers and brand managers nowadays feel that it is exactly this abstract type of attributes that form the core representation of brands, and project these convictions onto consumers. Yet consumers may well be regarded more down-to-earth when asked their opinion directly via FA. And even when informed on the more abstract attributes they do not prefer them to concrete product-related attributes as brand descriptors. Hence, if the gathered consumer responses were taken seriously, this would demystify the sphere of symbolism that is linked with brands and brand image research. The results indicate that consumers do not spontaneously attach strong symbolic values to brands and could be expected to run into cognitive dissonance-like problems whenever a measurement method imposes these types of attributes on them (although this last point is not explored in this dissertation).

### 8.1.7 Informed association: a new approach to brand evaluations

Next to the IBRA, another tangible product to take from this dissertation is the developed technique of informed association. Informed association benefits from the merits of qualitative research and at the same time allows for quantitative analyses. The unique approach to exploring consumer knowledge is based on the fact that no assumptions are made on the kind of attributes that underlie the brand representation. The strength of informed association lies first of all in its realistic, open and transparent approach to brand representation measurement, by acknowledging that each attribute within the range of brand representation attributes listed in the IBRA is a possible candidate for brand representations. Secondly, the strength of this approach is that the consumer is in control when evaluating a brand, in contrast to techniques by which the method dictates his/her thoughts. The whole range of attributes is presented to respondents as cues to their activation process, without any selection in advance. By doing so, no specific attributes are a priori given more weight than others, and as such the method allows the respondent to express his/her brand image in more ways than a standardized, restricted method. Thirdly, the informed association method assists the respondents' knowledge activation process by also cueing those attributes that might be hard to verbalize spontaneously. For example, thinking about a brand might evoke images of brand marks, which are hard to describe spontaneously. However, the method does not insist on respondents to write things on each and every attribute, and as such takes the realistic viewpoint that respondents can have absolutely no thoughts on certain attributes. Cueing each attributes and asking the respondent to list thoughts on them whenever possible, allows for a thorough elaboration on each attribute. Fourthly, asking respondents to list thoughts on all
possible attributes yields a rich set of verbatim responses in consumer language. Consumer language is highly valuable for understanding consumer brand knowledge, as it provides deeper insights than can be gained from responses on standardized methods (like rating scales) and has the potential to deliver creative insights for, and inspire, both product research & development and marketing. Finally, having respondents actively identify those attributes that comprise the brand’s representation to their idea by selecting cards reveals the associative structure of the brand representation as they themselves perceive it. Also, when selections of multiple respondents are aggregated, this allows for quantitative analyses and comparisons between brands.

As stated many times before in this thesis, market research can in times be very occupied with their thinking on the types of attributes that consumers will have in mind when thinking about a certain brand. Taking informed association as a first method to explore the structure of respondents’ brand representations, and identify those areas that the consumers regard as relevant and also evaluate positively (or even negatively) can provide useful information on the kinds of things that consumers use in their thinking about a brand. With that knowledge, more in-depth methods can be applied to explore those attributes that are truly relevant to the brand from a consumer’s perspective.

8.1.8 The relative absence of abstract attributes: where is brand symbolism?
Although the previous paragraph pictured informed association as a valuable new approach to brand representation measurement, one could have some reservations with respect to its validity. One special interesting issue is whether or not the operationalization of informed association, as it was applied in the present studies, is capable of getting to the ‘deeper levels’ of consumer knowledge. In the IA method, the cues that were presented to respondents in the studies were verbal by nature. The attribute cues were written on cards, and respondents had to list their thoughts after reading the words on the cards. The assumption in this way of working is that reading the word (or the short description of the attribute) activates corresponding attribute values, whenever these attribute values are indeed stored in memory. If the cued attribute was not an element of the brand representation, it was assumed that respondents would not react to the cue and therefore would not list any thoughts (or state something like ‘don’t know’). After respondents had processed all the cards, they were asked to select those cards that would best describe the brand. With this last procedure it was assumed that the total set of cards would have activated a vast part of all stored brand-related knowledge, because of the lengthy elaboration phase gone through by respondents and the wide range of attributes that were presented.

However, with respect to the more abstract attributes in particular, it could be suggested that verbal cueing is insufficient for activating all different types of knowledge. The results did indeed suggest that some respondents seemed to be better in listing thoughts on, for example, concrete, product-related cues than on the symbolic, brand personification-related cues like brand personality and ideology. Yet
at the same time it must be acknowledged that this was quite product dependent. Respondents seemed to have less trouble using the abstract cues for the evaluation of coffee and automobile brands than for the detergent and TV set brands. Presumably the nature of advertising and brand communications on the former products have taught consumers over the years to evaluate certain brands using this kind of terminology, and respondents are therefore well capable of reacting to verbal descriptions of abstract attributes. This finding leads to the conclusion that verbally cueing did not pose a problem for the IA method. Moreover, since the interest was in the attributes that respondents would select in describing their brand representation, respondents did not need to list thoughts actively, as long as the cue itself implicitly enabled the activation of some knowledge. For example, although the verbal cue 'brand mark' might not actually have invited respondents to verbally describe the appearance of the brandmark, simply activating the mental picture of the brand mark may make this attribute a candidate for selection. This is illustrated by the significant increase in brand identifier attributes selections for automobile brands on IA (see table 6.2). The conclusion of all this is that abstract, symbolic attributes do exist, yet these do not necessarily underlie the representation of all brands, but only a relative small number of brands.

An important question then is: given the wide range of symbolically oriented methods that are available in the market place, are brands at all represented by such abstract attributes? For example, it has become a popular approach in market research to measure the personality of whatever brand by means of a scale (i.e. Jennifer Aaker's brand personality scales) or projective tests (i.e. Heylen's IMPMAP). The studies presented in this thesis, however, suggest that only few brand representations do incorporate abstract, symbolic attributes (like brand personality and ideology on Max Havelaar and BMW), which leads to the conclusion that it would not at all be that appropriate to just measure every brand on its personality. However, an alternative explanation to this finding could of course be that the methods applied in the studies are too explicit, and are not able to measure these abstract attributes adequately. Most abstract attributes like personality and feelings are assumed to be at a low level of consciousness and are therefore hard to reproduce for respondents, yet are assumed to play a role in brand evaluations. In addressing this concern, it needs to be restated that this study set out to explore the evaluative responses that consumers give on brands when they are not

1 An alternative for the activation of attributes is the use of visual cues instead of verbal cues. As an extra to the development of the IA method based on verbally cueing the IBRA's attributes, Fien (2000) developed a (beer-specific) visual version of the IA method. The 35 attributes used in the first study served as a starting point and were to be visualized using pictures. The process of the development showed first of all that it was quite difficult to visualize all attributes that are listed in the IBRA. Twentyfour of the IBRA's attributes could each be visualized by a collage of pictures. The ten attributes that were hard to visualize concerned quite abstract attributes. Among these were attitude, impressive function, expressive function, uniqueness, and reputation. However, some other abstract attributes were visualized, like user image, brand personality, feelings, and values. In a next step each of the collages was validated to see whether consumers connected the collage to the attribute that it intended to represent. The results showed that the respondents could interpret quite well concrete attributes related to product characteristics and product usage, price & quality, market and advertising. Abstract collages, representing for example feelings and brand personality were far less valid. One conclusion could be that Fien did not succeed in creating adequate collages for all attributes. Yet it was clear that respondents recognize only pictures of concrete concepts, whereas collages of a more abstract nature confuse them. So, if visual cues are presented without accompanying verbal explanations they may yield hazy responses and less reliable results.
restricted by the method, and are 'in charge' of giving their meaning as open as possible. The FA method is least obtrusive in this, and the IA presents such a wide range of attributes that there is little chance that certain attributes are over- or under-emphasized. Taking these measures as unobtrusive methods, still symbolic attributes did appear on a number of brands. Even more so, when respondents were cued on abstract attributes (in IA), these attributes received more weight in the description of the brand (see tables 4.8 and 6.2). However, the important issue here is that it are not only these abstract attributes that make up the representation of the brands, they are a part of the total set of attributes that underlie the brand representation. As such, their importance to the brand is relative to the other attributes in the set. This is an important consideration that is often missed out by methods that at forehand assume that abstract attributes are the most important building blocks of a brand representation. The mere fact that an abstract method does yield results cannot be taken as evidence for the core position of these abstract attributes. It might well be that, although they are part of a brand's representation, they are far less relevant for the overall image the consumer holds of the brand that other attributes in the representation.

The popularity of abstract methods could possibly be ascribed to the fact that these well match the daily level of communication of marketers. This might lead to a biased way of thinking about brand images. And in addition, market researchers seem to have an urge to explore human experience into more and more sophisticated levels and to project such new insights on consumers' brand perceptions. This might unfortunately surpass those everyday man's experiences with brands that may still do nothing more than serving that pure identification function for products (especially with respect to low involvement products). The fact that marketers go through a lot of trouble to attach meanings to their brands does not automatically imply that the average consumer thinks and perceives the brand at the same level, and uses this information as the most relevant information in evaluating the brand. For example, it is likely that, although a certain brand communicates a highly personalized message, the mere fact that a consumer's neighbor works at the product factory may be the most important piece of information for him/her that builds the representation of the brand. And it needs to be acknowledged that it are the everyday consumers that market research agencies approach to act as respondents for research. Presenting them with methods that assume that something abstract represents the brand under study might not give a true reflection of the brand representation that the consumer holds. The IA method is more open in this approach by presenting respondents with the wide range of attributes, and have him/her in charge of deciding which attributes are representatives of the brand under study. The finding that abstract, symbolic attributes do result from this approach should be taken as an indication that consumers-as-respondents are indeed capable of making a balanced choice between the different levels of abstractness of attributes and their degree of relevance to a brand.
8.2 Considerations

'Gee koe zo bont, of er zit wel een vlekje op'. Or, in other (non-Dutch) words, no study exists without its weaknesses. Certain points relating to the present approach to the establishment of brand representations need to be addressed, either because they may have had an influence on the presented results, or because they suggest valid alternative viewpoints.

8.2.1 Control on data collection

The first issue relates to the data collection. The data collection condition of the first study was well controlled as only two experimenters dealt with all respondents, each in a similar way. Respondents were invited to come to the University of Amsterdam, where the research was conducted in a quiet room. During the FA task, the experimenter was absent, so each respondent could perform this task without being disturbed. After this step, the experimenter returned to instruct and conduct the IA method. This degree of control was absent in the realization of the second study, as it was a field study. A large number of interviewers, employed by a professional research agency, were randomly appointed. They were informed and instructed on paper about the research objectives and methodology. Each interviewer was asked to personally recruit a respondent. The instructions for the interviewers laid out that respondents could not be a relative or acquaintance, and should be 25 to 55 years of age. They also stated that the interviewer should aim for a calm environment in which to conduct the study, and stressed that his/her influence should be non-existent. Unfortunately, these demands could not be controlled, so the data had to be closely examined to check for inconsistencies or errors that could be due to the interviewer. In two cases the returned research material was not included in the analyses, as it was quite obvious that the interviewer had been fraudulent. From close examination of handwritings and verbatim responses it was assumed that the interviewer had exactly copied one set of responses onto a new set of material. Also, close examination revealed that in a few cases the interviewer had not read the instructions carefully, due to which certain aspects of the research were skipped on the interviewer's own initiative. For example, one interviewer intentionally omitted the card selection phase in the IA method, stating in an accompanying note that respondents used another brand. However, the respondents in these particular cases had all listed quite a number of thoughts during the preceding thought list phase of the method. These experiences firstly focussed attention on the data quality control in this study before actual coding and analyses took place. Secondly, on a more general level, it shows that one sometimes comes across interviewers in the field who are only in it for the money. And bearing that in mind, a researcher should never assume an external interviewer has the same concern for the quality of data, and so data should be closely checked before analyses. However, it needs to be explicitly stated that fraudulent interviewers are beyond the control of research agencies, as it is unfortunately a facet of human nature that can never be controlled.

8.2.2 Subjectivity in response coding

A second issue relates to subjectivity in the coding of responses obtained by free association. The IBRA lists 57 different brand attributes. Although the ten main
attribute groups that are distinguished within these 57 are clearly different, certain attributes within a particular main group are closely related. When coding of responses took place, this subjectivity had an influence on the level of coder agreement. For example, when respondents list sentences such as 'I do not use that', it can be coded as 'use experience', classed under the personal reference attribute group. Yet it also refers to purchase behavior (or more specifically the absence of purchase behavior). When several coders classify responses these slight differences may cause systematic errors. If one coder consistently codes such responses as 'personal reference', and another coder as 'attitude & purchase behavior', the level of agreement drops significantly. Another point to consider concerning coding is the literal interpretation of responses. Linguistic details can provide rich information that can change the interpretation of a response. For example, a response like 'much advertising' refers to an observation about the frequency of advertising for the product or brand under study. Hence the corresponding code would be 'advertising'. If the response would be something like 'too much advertising', this would imply an attitude towards the large amount of advertising and hence the code would be 'advertising attitude'. Such a slight difference can again lead to a low level of agreement between coders when they do not pay the same amount of attention to such literal details. Hence it would be ideal to have agreement on all responses before actual analyses are conducted. Moreover, thorough training of coders would give more reliable results. In the studies carried out in this thesis, the data were closely examined before analyses. By doing so these issues emerged, but were then solved by discussion. Attention should be paid to this point in future studies, as it identifies a requirement for training coders. A third practical and related concern is that sometimes it is hard to ascertain what kind of attribute is referred to by one specific response. For example, in evaluating detergent brands the response 'white sheets' refers to the use of the product. Sheets become white again when washed with detergent. Yet this response could also refer to an element in an advertisement in which the effectiveness of the detergent is shown by picturing a long clothesline with white sheets, fluttering in the wind. It is mainly the context of the other responses that provide the extra information needed to code the response. However, as soon as the context is needed to provide information for coding a response, subjectivity plays a role, because adjacent responses could be falsely interpreted.

8.2.3 Brand awareness and brand salience
A final issue relates to the important notions of brand awareness and salience. In the present study ratings of these notions have not explicitly been included for two reasons. Firstly, it was considered that if brand awareness measures were to be included, it would be necessary to ask these questions in the initial stage of research. However, asking brand awareness questions would probably increase the chances of influencing the results of a free association task. For example, competitor attributes might be activated by the awareness measurements, and hence not result from FA on brand name only, but from some sort of cued association (cued by the brand awareness questions). The second reason is a more practical one. Including brand awareness as a factor in the research design would ideally allow for comparisons between consumers with different levels of brand awareness.
However, a practical concern was that this approach would double the research sample in order for viable comparisons to be made, and also increase costs considerably by adding selection costs. These considerations aside, since the main focus in this study was the differential effect of presenting cues and context on the activation of attributes, the exclusion of user profiles was not considered to be disadvantageous to the results of the study.

8.3 Future research

The considerations raised with the present approach lead to suggestions for future research on brand representations in memory. Several ideas for future research are outlined here. Firstly, it may be useful to further explore the methodology applied to establish the effects of presenting cues. Free association is probably the least obtrusive method currently applied in market research to establish evaluative thoughts. It may be appropriate to consider applying different versions of free association, each with its merits. In this study a decision was taken to minimize influences that could possibly alter the activation process. Respondents received no other cue than the brand name, and were then requested to list thoughts. They were not requested to simultaneously or retrospectively elucidate their responses. It was considered that this approach would yield the most spontaneous responses, and is the least intrusive. However, in future applications, it might be worthwhile to compare this procedure with extended versions of FA. For example, where free association is used as a multiple elicitation technique, in which responses obtained on an initial cue serve in turn as cues on a second-round association procedure. This could provide more information on the nature of each response as it could clarify its context, thereby making coding less subjective. Another variant could be to ask respondents to tell their thoughts to an interviewer, rather than writing them down. Although this procedure might be more susceptible to social desirability bias, it may overcome any concerns held about the writing task. Further developments on the IA methods might include studying the effects of combining verbal cues with pictorial cues. Another interesting exercise would be to study the different levels of attributes. That is to say, in the present approach all attributes were presented at once, with the only distinction made in the actual application (i.e. the presentation of cards to the respondents) between product attributes and branded attributes. Building in the method application a theoretical model of how the different attributes relate to each other with respect to their abstractness level or 'coreness' in the brand representation could provide more insight into the structure of brand representations.

One interesting topic that could be addressed in future research would be to explore brand representation differences across different consumer profiles. As previously stated, consumers differ according to a number of variables like brand involvement, brand awareness, brand usage and so on. Although information on some of these variables was gathered in this study, the size of samples used for evaluation was too small to allow for viable comparisons across different consumer profiles.
It is evident that if the methodology is applied to a greater number of brands from a wider range of product categories this would allow further insight into brand representations. Comparing the representations of more brands within a product category provides further information on the relative position of the different brands. Application of the methodology to more product categories can also contribute to theory on product differences, like, for example, the distinction between products on consumers’ involvement levels. It is also true that extended research might provide further insight into the appropriateness of the informed association method. It is expected that for most products this method will be applicable. However, there is a need to explore how the IA method will yield responses on, for example, service brands (like Randstad) or corporate brands (like Nestlé). Although the IBRA does cover attributes that possibly underlie these kinds of brands, some adjustments of the wording and connotation of attributes used in the IA method will be necessary. It is expected that the connotation of product-related attributes in particular will differ between product brands and service ~ or corporate brands. Since the ‘product’ is at a higher abstraction level, it is less tangible.

It would be most interesting to confirm the implications put forward by the interpretation of the results empirically. Firstly, the approach used in this study was intended to identify the effect of providing cues on measurement results. The results imply that it is important which method is applied when a brand representation is researched, since the result will always be dependent on the assumptions embedded in the method. One could perhaps crudely state that if a client is looking for a specific result in advance, (s)he could match the research method accordingly. However, this match might be artificial, and lead to incorrect conclusions. Similarly, when a research agency establishes a brand’s image by using an obtrusive method that has made too specific assumptions about the presence of certain attributes, the result is of limited value. Empirical research could, for example, include the direct comparison of the results of a number of methods available in the market place applied to one particular brand. It would be interesting to see to what extent these results diverge or converge. Secondly, the context effect implies that results obtained within one research setting may not be transferable into other, perhaps more relevant situations. If an in-house measurement provides a certain picture of a brand, it is possible that the same respondents would sketch a different brand image if asked to evaluate the brand in a purchase context or a social environment. It would be an interesting topic of study to ascertain the extent to which the research context needs to match the final product usage context, or any other context that is of specific interest to the advertiser. Finally, brand representation structure differences imply that brand comparisons within one product category is not valid, if brands differ with respect to their brand representation structure. If a particular research method matches only one or some of the brands under study, and does not apply to the remaining brands, this might lead to positive bias towards these brands, potentially leading to artificial results. As brand comparisons concern a huge part of all market research exercises (i.e. in positioning studies), it would be very worthwhile to explore this theoretical implication experimentally.
Finally, the results of the presented methodologies provided the marketeer with detailed information on how consumers evaluate their brands. However, in predicting future purchase behavior, more research could look into the prediction of consumer behavior using the presented methods. The results presented in chapter 7 showed that the evaluation of responses do link into purchase behavior to some degree. As these results were of an exploratory character, this leaves opportunity for further exploration in that direction.

8.4 Epilogue

Apart from critical considerations raised, and the opportunities for future research, what are the contributions of this study for both consumer behavior science and marketing? Perhaps the main contribution to consumer behavior science lies in the attempt to bypass the easy route with respect to understanding memory, and to explore alternative models of concept representation in understanding brand representations in memory. A review of brand image literature clearly revealed the ease with which one specific cognitive model had been applied (and taken for granted) in consumer research studies for decades, whereas in cognitive science major developments had been published during this time. Yet these have unfortunately never been adopted before by consumer behavior science. Apparently, the crossover between the different scientific fields was once made, after which the paths split once more, and consumer behavior science was left with one enduring, accepted opinion. Whether or not frame theory will be granted the same degree of following is unsure. It is a promising approach towards brand research, yet it is a theory that is in continual development. Even so, making a stand from the group consensus hopefully paves the way for other fruitful crosses between consumer behavior science and cognitive science.

A second contribution to consumer behavior science relates to studies on the influence of context on brand usage and brand choice. As stated in chapter 3 (paragraph 3.3.2), context effects have, in broad sense, been explored. Yet all of these studies, although intending to explore a cognitive phenomenon, used a quite black-box approach. Only the effect of inducing a context on a process outcome like brand choice or preference has been established, without actually addressing what causes these differential outcomes on a cognitive level. In this study, although only partly effective, the manipulation of context set out to explore the 'box', by revealing how respondents direct their attribute activation process to certain specific attributes. Some attributes become more relevant in a purchase context like attitude & purchase behavior and price & quality. It may be this increased relevance or changed attribute activation process that has lead to the changes in choice or preference detected in previously published studies.

With respect to marketing, this dissertation primarily aims to promote an understanding and awareness, both from market researchers and from advertisers, that the use of standardized methods is prone to producing biased results. When methods only meet part of a brand's representation, or no part at all, chances are that the obtained results will not be relevant. Therefore, it is necessary to look for the
core attributes that underlie a brand representation instead of being guided by what a research method assumes to be core attributes. In practice the application of the proposed methodology ideally serves a first-phase research objective, which is to explore the attributes that underlie the representation of a particular brand in consumers' memory. The results obtained by using both FA and IA will identify those attributes that can be considered core representatives of the brand under study, and also those attributes that are cue-dependent. These insights can then act as input for a second research phase in which more in-depth methods can firstly be selected from the wide pool of available methods and, secondly be applied to gain further insight into the attribute values. Apart from the branded products explored in this dissertation, it is expected that, for most brands, the methodology will be suitable to elicit knowledge on brand representations in memory. The combination of FA and IA guarantees an open approach to the establishment of brand-related knowledge. FA yields responses freely and with the least restrictions. It provides the best insight into what respondents can verbally communicate (and presumably what they would communicate to, for example, relatives and friends). IA also covers all those attributes that do not spontaneously result from FA yet do actually represent the brand. By presenting respondents with all possible attributes, no specific focus on certain attributes is imposed upon respondents in advance. Another advantage is that respondents are still in charge of describing thoughts, and not restricted by the method's format. Therefore the end result of IA can be considered to be a thorough evaluation based on an elaboration of all different types of attributes. This leads to a well-considered description of the brand representation structure and, no less importantly, yields a rich source of 'consumer language' descriptions.

The measurement of brand representations in memory is a very complex matter. The fact that there are so many methods available testifies that the ultimate method has not yet been discovered. The extent to which the informed association method presented in this dissertation can be considered to represent that special method (perhaps with some further development), or is simply adding to the multitude of methods, cannot be determined at this phase. What this dissertation does contribute, however, is the identification of some key issues that ideally fulfil a criterion role for future method development. Future method development needs to acknowledge the impact that assumptions embedded in a method can impose upon respondents, and the corresponding unreliability of the results it obtains.