

An exploration of the propensity of consumers to recall brand associations for fabricated brands

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Abstract

This conceptual paper discusses the investigation of the recall of brand associations of consumer for brands of high and low salience, as well as for fabricated brands. There has been research on brand associations for “fake” or counterfeit brands, and also for brands with low residual awareness, but there has been little research on the role of brand associations for fabricated brands. This study will investigate the role of brand associations and the propensity of consumers to recall brand associations for brands that do not exist. It is proposed that consumers may revert to recalling associations for the product category when they are confronted with a brand name that does not exist. It is proposed to test this with an experimental method, utilising high salience, low salience and fabricated brands from a fast-moving consumer good and a service category. This study will have implications for the manner in which respondents utilise information related to a brand, and also the manner in which marketers advertise their brands, in order to differentiate the brand from others.

Keywords: Branding, brand associations, consumer behaviour

Track: Consumer behaviour

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Introduction

Brand associations, or the information that consumers store in memory about a brand and can recall during purchase situations, are seen as an important brand asset. Marketers spend vast amounts of money building brand associations with consumers, and building associations in a variety of situations, and for a variety of usages for the brand. The research reported in this paper investigates the role of brand associations in relation to the high salience, low salience and fabricated brands for consumers. There has been previous research on counterfeit brands (Berger and Fitzsimmons 2010) and unknown online brands (Delgado-Ballester and Hernandez-Espallardo 2008). Brand associations have been tested across product categories (Romaniuk and Gaillard 2007) and have been shown to benefit from leveraging partner brand equity (Uggla 2004). However, there is a paucity of research on brand associations for fabricated brands. A fabricated brand is a brand that has been made up. It is a brand that does not currently exist in the market place, and it is a brand for which consumers should have no brand knowledge. This research highlighted the need to understand the role that associations play in retrieval of information from consumer memory, and the manner in which advertising is designed to elicit brand associations.

Brand associations

Keller (1993) defined brand associations as informational nodes linked to the brand nodes in memory, which contain the meaning of the brand for customers. Marketers use brand associations to differentiate, position and extend brands (Pitta and Katsanis 1995). Customers use brand associations to help process, organise, and retrieve information in memory to aid in making purchase decisions (Aaker 1991; Low and Lamb 2000). The network of nodes and associations is a fuzzy structure that can take many forms based on the cues used to access the network (Barsalou 1983). Ease of processing leads to higher product evaluation and purchase likelihood (Lee and Labroo 2004; Berger and Fitzsimmons 2008). In addition, brands that have been purchased recently are more likely to be recalled and chosen (Shapiro 1999). In addition, it is thought that unique brand associations may assist consumers with choice and brand managers with differentiating their products in the market (Romaniuk and Gaillard 2007).

Fabricated Brands

There has been a vast body of research on brand associations for a range of products (see Krishnan 1996; Romaniuk and Gaillard 2007). Brand associations have been tested for fast-moving consumer goods (Krishnan 1996), services (Dawes et al. 2009; Romaniuk 2007), sports (Ross 2006) and for online brands. There has also been work on counterfeit or fake brands (Commuri 2009, Wilcox, Kim and Sen 2009) but there appears to be a gap with regard to brand associations for fabricated brands. A fabricated brand is a non-existent brand, or a brand that does not currently exist in the market. This is an area of interest as it is important to analyse what consumers are recalling when they access brand associations. It would be expected that consumers may recall some categorical brand associations for fabricated brands, but it would be expected that consumers would also recall a greater total number of brand associations, as well as unique and positive brand associations for brands that are not fabricated. The term fake brands was not used as this refers to a separate area of enquiry, that of counterfeit brands.

Number of associations

Over time, customers build up various associations about a brand. Some associations are related to brand attributes and benefits, whereas others represent individual customer experiences (usage episodes) with the brand. One point of contention deals with the most desirable number of associations that a brand may have (Krishnan 1996). A large number of associations may be desirable as customers might recall the brand from many cues and situations, increasing the accessibility of the brand in memory, and the memory structure for the brand becomes richer, but also more complex. However, with regard to the literature on inhibition, increasing the number of associations might decrease memory for a brand as the level of interference increases (Meyers-Levy 1989). Proposition P_{1a-b} speculate about the relationship brand salience and the number of brand associations recalled.

- **P_{1a}**: Mean total recall of brand associations for the higher salience brands will be higher than for the low salience brand.
- **P_{1b}**: Mean total recall of brand associations for the low salience brand will be higher than for the fabricated brand.
- **P_{1c}**: Mean total recall of brand associations for the high salience brand will be higher than for the fabricated brand.

It is proposed that the high salience brand will have the highest number of brand associations, followed by the low salience brand, and that the fabricated brand will have the fewest total brand associations recalled by the respondents. Therefore, for overall total brand associations recalled High salience ba > Low salience ba > Fabricated brand ba.

Valence (direction) of associations

Consumers store both negative and positive associations in memory. Dacin and Smith (1994) argued that the favourability of consumer predispositions to a brand is the most basic of all brand associations and is the core of many conceptualisations of brand equity. A strong brand would be expected to have a high level of positive associations, as brands with net negative associations might not make it to the customer's consideration set (Alba and Chattopadhyay 1985; Crowley and Williams 1991). Propositions P_{2a-2c} speculate about the relationship between brand salience and the number of positive brand associations recalled.

- **P_{2a}**: Mean positive brand associations for high salience brand will be higher than mean positive brand associations for the low salience brand
- **P_{2b}**: Mean positive brand associations for low salience brand will be higher than mean positive brand associations for the fabricated brand
- **P_{2c}**: Mean positive brand associations for high salience brand will be higher than mean positive brand associations for fabricated brand

Uniqueness of associations

Utilising the Associative Network Model of Semantic Memory, information about a brand may be shared with information about a product category as well as with other brands in the category. For example, when a customer recalls comfort/exercise, the customer may recall Nike, running shoes, and Asics. As the number of associations increases, the brand becomes more prototypical of the product category. The generic use of the brand name helps the brand by making it easier to recall and include in a purchase consideration set (Nedungadi and Hutchinson 1985). Unique brand associations are considered desirable for a brand, and are related to brand performance (Romaniuk and Gaillard 2007). Thus, a brand would need to have many shared associations to be classified correctly as a member of the product category,

but also have unique associations that enable it to stand out (Krishnan 1996). Propositions P_{3a-3c} conjecture about the relationship between brand salience and the number of unique brand associations recalled.

- **P_{3a}**: Mean unique recall of brand associations for the high salience brand is greater than mean unique recall of brands for the low salience brand.*
- **P_{3b}**: Mean unique recall of brand associations for the low salience brand is greater than mean unique recall of brands for the fabricated brand.*
- **P_{3c}**: Mean unique recall of brand associations for the high salience brand is greater than mean unique recall of brands for the fabricated brand.*

Origins of associations

Associations can be distinguished between direct experience (usage) and indirect experience (e.g., advertising, word-of-mouth). Burnkrant and Unnava (1995) indicated that brand associations based on direct experience are likely to be more relevant, to be held with greater certainty, and to form vivid autobiographical memories. This increases the probability of being recalled (Baumgartner et al. 1992). If rehearsal occurs across multiple occasions, encoding variability is enhanced, providing more access pathways to locate the associations in memory (Barsalou 1992). Activating favourable brand associations facilitates rehearsal, which is a process that strengthens and reinforces associative linkages, thereby allowing associations to be retrieved more readily (Fazio, Chen, McDonel and Sherman 1982; Fazio et al. 1986; Roehm et al. 2002). It is proposed that brand associations for brands with which consumers have direct experience will have greater brand associations, more positive and more unique brand associations. The respondents will be asked if they have used the brand under investigation. This means that the consumers will have direct experience with the brand.

- **P_{4a}**: Mean total recall of brand associations for a brand that respondents have used previously will be greater than for brands with which respondents do not have experience.
- **P_{4b}**: Mean positive brand associations for a brand that respondents have used previously will be greater than for brands with which respondents do not have experience.
- **P_{4c}**: Mean unique brand associations for a brand that respondents have used previously will be greater than for brands with which respondents do not have experience.

Brand knowledge

In addition to brand associations, the brand knowledge of the respondents will be tested via a multi-item brand knowledge measurement tool. Consumer brand knowledge relates to the cognitive representation of the brand (Peter and Olson 2001), and can be defined in terms of the personal meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory, that is, all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information (Keller 2003). Research from consumer behaviour and psychological literature suggests that knowledge influences the cost and content of thinking (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Gregan-Paxton and John 1997; Moreau, Lehman and Markman 2001).

Consumer knowledge is extremely complex, and only a portion of its richness has been investigated (Alba and Marmorstein 1987). Brand knowledge, a subset of consumer knowledge, captures both the aspects of the interest in the brand and the consumer's previous experience level with the brand, suggesting that more knowledgeable consumers are more engaged with both the brand and the brand community (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005). Conversely, novice consumers are more likely to be in the learning process about the brands, and forming relationships with the brand. The more participants know about the

brand, the more confident they are expressing their (positive or negative) opinions about the brand, leading to greater opportunity for engagement (Algesheimer et al. 2005).

Alba and Hutchinson (1987) proposed and measured knowledge as a multi-dimensional construct, consisting of familiarity (the number of product-based experiences with a brand), and expertise (the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully). Alba and Hutchinson (1987) proposed five dimensions of consumer expertise. The five dimensions are cognitive effort and automaticity, cognitive structure, analysis, elaboration, and memory systems used.

The composition of the brand knowledge construct will be different for fast-moving consumer goods than for services.

P_{5a}: The composition of the brand knowledge construct for the fmeg category will be different to the composition of the brand knowledge construct for services.

In addition to the recall of brand associations, the order effects for recall will be altered, with high salience brand, low salience brand and fabricated brand recall being randomised. It is proposed that respondents recalling brand associations for a higher salience brand first will increase brand association recall for the next brand, as compared to recalling a lower salience brand first. It is proposed that recalling brands with higher brand salience will activate brand associations for further brands in the same category.

P_{5b}: Recalling brand associations for a higher salience brand first will increase recall of brand associations for the next brand recalled.

Method

A three (high salience, low salience and fabricated brand) by two (good vs service) experimental design will be employed. Free response was chosen as the method for generation of important attributes based on the work of Barnard and Ehrenberg (1990) and Steenkamp et al. (1994) who that found no detriment to using free choice as a method compared to repertory grid and scaling and ranking methods. Respondents will be cued with a brand name, and then asked to recall all associations that they can for that brand name in a one-minute period. After each association is recalled, respondents will be asked to focus on the brand name before moving on to the next association (Krishnan 1996). This has been found to ensure greater consistency and focus on associations related to the brand name, with fewer peripheral associations recalled, and to reduce response chaining as respondents thought about the brand after each response (Nelson et al. 1993). This method incorporates the strengths of both the direct method (quantifiable summary) and the indirect method (listing associations from the customer perspective). Once the brand association recall exercise has been completed, respondents will be asked to complete a multi-item brand knowledge measure derived from Kleiser and Mantel (1994) and Smith and Park (1992). Respondents will then be asked to repeat the brand association measure for another brand (either high or low salience or fabricated) from the same category, and then finally, complete a brand recognition exercise for the product category. Respondents will complete brand association recall for either a high salience and low salience brand, high salience and fabricated brand, or low salience and fabricated brand. The brands for recall will be randomised between respondents, as will the order of brand association recall. This will provide an order effects study. Measures of association valence will be undertaken by asking subjects to code their own responses. At the end of the free association tasks, subjects will be instructed to examine each brand association and code it based on whether it was a positive, negative, or neutral association. A composite measure of net valence will be used to represent

the proportion of positive versus negative associations. Uniqueness is measured with respect to the product category and the competing brands. For each brand, the number of associations shared by the brand was counted. Then the proportion of unique associations was represented as one minus the proportion of shared associations.

Sample

It is known that users of a product tend to have greater brand knowledge than non-users (Romaniuk and Sharp 2003). The sample for this research was chosen on the basis that the respondents are active purchasers or consumers of the chosen product categories. The population of interest for this research is male or female consumers residing in Australia, and who are aged 18 years or older. A sample of approximately 300 respondents will be recruited to participate in the research from the student body at a mid-sized Australian university. The respondents will be drawn from undergraduate and post-graduate students who are undertaking studies in the Business and Law faculty. The product categories will be ones that are used by students such as shampoo (fmcg) and banks (services).

Discussion and Conclusion

This research highlights the need to understand the derivation of brand associations and the manner in which brand associations are accessed in memory. If there is not a significant difference in the total number of brand associations and the number of unique and positive brand associations for a fabricated brand as opposed to a high and low salience brand, then the information being accessed by consumers must be examined in greater detail. In addition, this research may pose questions for the design of integrated marketing communications, and the role of communications in forming associations in memory. If broad category associations are triggered and result in further recall of other associations, then the manner in which advertisers form associations, and the cues used to access associations may need to be considered. This may indicate that advertising primarily creates category level demand or primary demand and secondary demand is harder to generate through brand advertising, and maybe experience is a requirement to generate brand level recall.

Finally, it is said that marketers should look to build both the breadth and depth of brand associations with their advertising, to increase accessibility, retrieval and potential brand purchase likelihood (Lee and Labroo 2004; Berger and Fitzsimons 2008), but the effects of this on fabricated brand associations may prove interesting.

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