

# **TOWARDS A TAXONOMY OF BRAND ASSOCIATION STATEMENTS: THE IGNORANCE OF MEASUREMENT OR A MEASUREMENT OF IGNORANCE?**

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## **Abstract**

A taxonomy of brand association categories is built based on statements used in a variety of brand research studies through coding by four judges. A poor degree of correspondence between the judges' categorisations is observed. Two main factors are identified as contributing to this poor consensus: the ambiguity of meaning of the brand association statements and the conflicting usage of consumer behaviour terminology by the judges.

The implications of this are discussed for both academics and commercial practitioners. The lack of clear and standardised workable definitions in consumer behaviour and positioning research in particular is highlighted, together with the problems caused by such inconsistencies. The issues of decision-making based on misinterpretations of brands' images are also discussed. The case is made for formal bodies in the discipline to standardise definitions to minimise such inconsistencies of interpretation.

## **Introduction**

Anything linked to a specific brand in a consumer's memory is a brand association (Aaker 1991). Commercial researchers conducting brand image studies generally generate a list of statements that are believed to capture the essence of the key possible brand associations in the market. They then determine the extent to which consumers believe brands are associated with these statements, with questions like "I'm going to read you a list of things that people have said about different brands of [PRODUCT]. When I read each statement, I'd like you to tell me which brands come to mind" (see Barnard and Ehrenberg 1990). The germination of this paper was a project with the goal of developing a taxonomy of brand association statements. The resulting taxonomy is shown in Table 1. All of the taxa have previously been identified in reviews of the marketing literature and marketing practice (Aaker 1991; Burke and Stewart 1999; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1997). While the four authors of this paper had "broad" agreement about the names and definitions of these twelve categories, attempts to classify a list of association statements resulted in a little more than 50% agreement level. This was well below the 80% benchmark for an acceptable level of inter-judge reliability (Keaveny 1995), which raised a new question of interest: Why was the inter-judge reliability was so poor?

The reasons for the difficulty in arriving at a reliable taxonomy are specified following a discussion of the brand association taxonomy study.

## Methodology

A convenience sample of 73 batteries of statements was taken from commercial and academic studies. The criteria for selecting these studies was that they were used to explicitly compare two or more brands on a series of “statements”, and that they were not satisfaction statements. After removing identical statements, 1104 items remained.

**Table 1: A Taxonomy of Brand Association Statements**

Code	Statement type	Description
1	Features	Characteristics of the brand (e.g., “low price”, “leather interiors”)
2	Benefits	Outcomes of consumption/purchasing of the brand (e.g., “convenience”)
3	Attitude	How a consumer thinks or feels about a brand or attribute, or how they behave towards it (e.g., “good taste”, “my favourite brand”, “poor value for money”, “my main brand”).
4	Others’ attitudes	Others’ attitudes towards a brand or attribute (e.g., “children love it”, “a brand my mechanic recommends”).
5	Users	Descriptions of the typical users of the brand (“children”, “show-offs”, “the whole family”)
6	Situation	The occasions and situations in which brands are used (e.g., “when hungry”, “with friends”, “headaches”)
7	Customer and community relationships	How the brand treats its customers and the community (e.g., “they love their customers”, “they put profit before customers”, “they’re good for Australia”)
8	Market position	The role of the company in the market (e.g., “market leader”, “a brand everybody knows”)
9	Uniqueness	Whether the brand is similar or different to other brands in the market (e.g., “one of a kind”, “the same as the rest”)
10	Feelings	The way the brand makes the consumer feel (e.g., “happy”, “bored”)
11	Personality	Traits that the brand would possess if it was “alive” (e.g., “sincere”, “fun”)
12	Image	A brand’s position in a sociological context (e.g., “trendy”, “youthful”, “traditional”, “modern”)

Traditionally “expert panels” are used when developing taxonomies through coding. For example, when attempting to understand the correlates of mental illnesses, expert panels of psychiatrists are

used to determine which people have various illnesses (Fleiss 1981). For this research problem, the relevant experts may have been academic researchers with an extensive number of publications dealing with brand image. However, the wide range of users of brand image terminology and research – from research respondents and ad agency creatives through to academics – suggests that such an expert panel may be inappropriate, leading to an artificial consensus. Consequently, the first author selected the other three authors with the goal of ensuring as diverse a group of researchers as pragmatically possible, to reduce the likelihood of developing a taxonomy that was biased due to the background of the researchers. The researchers originated in three different continents, had their highest levels of qualification ranging from an honours degree through to a PhD, had tenures as full time academics ranging from four months through to more than ten years, and research foci as diverse as taxation, the consumer behaviour of children, consumer self-regulation and quantitative modelling.

The first two authors independently developed mutually exclusive and exhaustive classifications of the brand association statements. The degree of correspondence between the resulting classifications was low, but above chance. The adjusted Rand statistic (Hubert and Arabie 1985), which takes a value of near 0 when the relationship between two classifications is as expected by chance and a value of 1 when there is a perfect correspondence, took a value of 0.12. An eleven category classification was then developed by the researchers, who then independently classified 100 randomly selected statements into the eleven categories. As only 55% of the statements were classified correctly, the researchers examined the reasons for the discrepancies, resulting in the addition of a twelfth category, and the revision of some of the definitions. When classifying the 100 statements again, the researchers were able to obtain 90% inter-judge reliability. The third and fourth researchers then classified all 1104 statements into the classifications resulting in an interjudge reliability of 58%. Some minor changes were then made to the definitions of the categories (See Table 1). As the researchers were of the opinion that the likelihood of obtaining a satisfactory level of inter-judge reliability was low, the process was terminated at this point.

## **Discussion**

Two fundamental difficulties made a high level of interjudge reliability extremely difficult. Firstly, many of the brand association statements were ambiguous. Secondly, the researchers were using the relevant consumer behaviour terminology in fundamentally different ways. Each of these issues is now discussed in turn.

### **The Ambiguity of Brand Association Statements**

For a surprisingly large number of the statements it proved extremely difficult to ascertain what exactly was being measured. If a consumer states that a particular brand of prepared meal is “truly authentic”, are they referring to the authenticity of the ingredients, or some personification of the brand; that is, to use the modern vernacular, are they saying the brand is “real”? Needless to say, “real” was itself another statement, which proved more than a little problematic.

Distinguishing between image, personality, users and situation, proved particularly arduous. For example, does “More of a night club image” refer to a man in a white leisure suit with right arm pointed to the sky a la John Travolta (image), a brand that is drunk by people who go to night clubs (users), or a brand that the respondent would drink it at a night club (situation)? “Western” posed

similar problems – Wild West, geographic west (in Sydney, “Westie”), as opposed to Eastern (e.g., “white”, European, etc.), as a mind set and so on.

Research on the effects of usage bias in brand image studies where “big” brands return a higher proportion of responses on both descriptive and evaluative brand attributes, could imply that the underlying nature of the attribute (attitude, feature, benefit, etc) is perhaps irrelevant (see Romaniuk & Sharp 2000). In their study, Romaniuk and Sharp (2000) controlled for usage bias to uncover a pattern of prototypicality, whereby some attributes are more representative of category membership than others. The results of their analysis demonstrate the extent to which users and non-users of a brand agree in their perception of a brand's attributes. Romaniuk and Sharp (2000) note that brand attributes perceived similarly by users and non-users are likely to be descriptive or factual rather than evaluative or attitudinal. However, as the opening examples illustrate, distinguishing between descriptive and evaluative attributes can also be at issue. Therefore, it remains important to determine what brand attribute statements are actually measuring. Indeed, Keller (2000, p 154) in describing how to draw up a “health report” for a brand, suggests that “the brand manager should understand what the brand means to customers ... they should appreciate the totality of their brand’s image – that is, all different perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours customers associate with their brand”. This is an almost impossible task given the ambiguity of brand association statements used in the kind of research that seeks to “understand what the consumer thinks of our brand”. “Brand audits” which compare “what we want the brand to be” to “what the consumer thinks the brand is” are doomed from the beginning if the ambiguity of meaning and interpretation of association statements issue is not resolved.

### **The Many Definitions of Consumer Behaviour Terms**

Determining what the statements were trying to measure was a difficult undertaking. However, an arguably greater challenge was to reach a consensus as to a written definition. The researchers were able to verbally express what it was they believed a particular category represented, but divergence emerged when this was reduced to a written definition. While it would perhaps be easy to dismiss this as the ignorance of the researchers of this paper – hence the third part of its title – a review of the literature and practice suggests a more fundamental problem. Many of the terms in common use in positioning research in particular, and in consumer behaviour in general, have multiple conflicting definitions.

Needless to say, the most common problem of all related to the precise meaning of “attitude”, a taxa which throughout the coding process frequently changed both name and definition. In particular, while two of the authors of this paper sometimes used the term “evaluation” as being synonymous with attitude, another used it as being synonymous with belief (i.e., a component of attitude). The distinction between the components of attitude (the conative, cognitive and affective) and the evaluation of overall attitude was the object of much contention. Such disagreements should perhaps have been anticipated, with more than 100 definitions of attitude existing in social psychology more than 30 years ago (Fishbein 1966; Lutz 1991), and senior marketing scholars such as Bass and Sheth having published papers on the topic that “served only to confuse” (Cohen, Fishbein, and Ahtola 1972, p 456).

When one moves out of the general consumer behaviour literature, into the consumer behaviour equivalent of pop psychology – branding – difficulties in definition become even more pronounced, with terms like “brand image”, “brand personality” and even “need states” being used by practitioners to describe all of the taxa in Table 1. A similar state exists in the academic literature.

For example, while Aaker's (1997, p 347) definition of brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" is a workable definition that is consistent with the research she conducts, many of the statements that she uses do not relate to the concept of personality that exists in the psychology literature, and seem more sociological than psychological in nature (e.g., "dependable" and "domestic" "family-oriented" "feminine" "healthy" "secure" "tough" "urban"). In any event, consumers appear to struggle with the interpretation and application of brand personality characteristics based on the findings of Caprara, Barbaranelli and Guido (2001, p 377) that "descriptors of human personality convey different meanings when attributed to different brands. While the psycholexical approach remains a suitable procedure to identify brand descriptors, the factors used to describe human personalities appear to be inappropriate for describing the brands studied here."

### Conclusions

Ambiguity of the statements and terminology presents a pressing problem for both commercial practitioners and academics. If the statements used are ambiguous, managers risk making inappropriate decisions due to a misunderstanding of how brands actually are positioned in the minds of consumers. Such mistakes are the inevitable result when the basic terminology used is inconsistent. While the problem of statement ambiguity can be limited through vigilance when writing questionnaires, the problem of multiple and conflicting definitions is not as easily solved. One view is that this may only be resolved when marketing goes down the path favoured in the natural sciences and develops formal bodies responsible for defining and standardising key terms which are then applied consistently both in academic and in commercial practice.

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