THE EFFECTS OF BRAND ASSOCIATIONS ON BRAND EQUITY, SUBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE AND BRAND INTEREST

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SUMMARY

BRAND ASSOCIATIONS

In 1983, Anderson proposed ACT*, a complex, comprehensive model of memory. In this model, nodes represent concepts stored in long-term memory. These nodes are interconnected by links of varying strength, depending on the proximity of the concepts to which they refer. The brand association concept is directly related to the model presented above, i.e. a brand association is a node linked to a particular brand. They may vary in many dimensions, including type, favorability, strength, uniqueness.

In this research, we tested the effect of brand association characteristics on brand equity, subjective knowledge, and brand interest. Our objective was to pinpoint some of these effects by focusing on specific points rather than presenting a comprehensive model.

BRAND EQUITY

Customer-based brand equity was defined by Keller (1993, p. 2) as "*the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand"*. The background to brand equity consists of consumers' prior experience of the brand, either as a result of marketing or direct contact (Campbell & Keller, 2003). These experiences, or brand familiarity create brand associations in memory. These associations create, in turn, a level of brand equity. A high level of brand equity has considerable impact on consumer behavior.
H1: Favorable, unique brand associations contribute to a superior level of brand equity. Low brand equity results from negative associations.

SUBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

Brand expertise is what a person really knows, subjective knowledge is what they think they know, and familiarity measures their exposure to the brand. Although these measurements are correlated, they are not interchangeable (Cole, Gaeth & Singh, 1986). According to Park, Mothersbaugh, and Feick (1994), «knowledge *assessment is viewed as a judgment process in which individuals scan memory for clues that will help them evaluate their knowledge"*. This scanning process takes a few seconds. It would be logical to think that an individual assessing his/her level of knowledge only scans the strongest associations, ignoring other characteristics, such as uniqueness or favorability.
H2a: The number of brand associations stored in memory has a positive impact on the level of subjective knowledge of the brand.
H2b: The uniqueness and favorability of brand associations stored in memory have no

impact on the level of subjective knowledge of the brand.

BRAND INTEREST

The concept of brand interest was introduced by Machleit, Madden, and Allen in 1990. These authors observed that excessive familiarity with a brand may result in consumers becoming bored with it and being attracted to the competition. They defined brand interest as: "*the level of interest or intrigue the consumer has in the brand and the level of curiosity s/he has to inquire or learn more about the brand*". Brand interest may be stimulated by diversifying consumer experience, in particular by communication activities.
H3a: The favorability of brand associations stored in memory has a positive impact on level of brand interest.
H3b: A brand with unique associations evokes more brand interest than a brand with shared associations, perceived as banal.

METHOD

We set up experiments where we manipulated the favorability (positive or negative) and uniqueness (unique or shared/banal) of associations linked to a fictitious brand. There was also a control group, exposed to a smaller number of associations that were as neutral as possible, in terms of favorability and uniqueness. This gave a 5-cell grid: 2 (unique or banal) x 2 (favorable or unfavorable) + 1 control group (fewer associations, more neutral).

The use of a fictitious brand made it possible to control the number of brand associations and their characteristics. Following a preliminary test, the category "ready-to-wear" and the brand "Manic" were chosen. Five scenarios were created. The interviewee read one scenario at his/her own speed, then answered a set of twenty questions. Every scenario was designed to present a "biased" portrait of Manic in terms of the favorability and uniqueness of associations. The survey was carried out on the Internet (297 interviewees).

Our hypotheses have been validated. Our findings confirmed Keller's statement (1993): a brand with positive and unique associations has a high level of brand equity. The level of brand equity was clearly higher when there were both unique and positive associations. Brand interest depends on associations in a similar way to brand equity: once again, maximum levels are attributable to favorable and unique associations. Subjective knowledge is the only one of the three constructs studied here where the favorability and uniqueness of associations had no impact. A more comprehensive background study is necessary. Its relations with the other knowledge measurements, i.e. brand familiarity and expertise, also require further study.

Our research contributes to achieving a better understanding of the influence of brand associations on consumer behavior. Experiments using a fictitious brand made it possible for us to control the interviewees associations stored in memory and measure the consequences of these manipulations on three constructs. Our research, however, has certain limitations. The first is temporal: the process of building brand associations only lasted a few minutes. Also, the use of an unknown brand may restrict the external validity of the study
Now that the impact of brand associations on the three constructs studied in our research is better known, we feel it is important to continue in this vein. In particular, it would be interesting to try an integrated approach by positioning and testing each of these constructs in a more general experiment, taking background and consequences into account. The results presented here confirm what marketing experts have felt for some time, i.e. that brands can no

longer be content with simply presenting their advantages but must, at the same time, emphasize their differences.

References available on request