

LOW STABILITY OF BRAND ASSOCIATIONS: ARE METHOD AND CONTEXT TO BLAME?

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ABSTRACT

We discuss reasons for low brand association stability:
(1) Feature lists cannot uncover brand-specific attributes.
(2) What a brand evokes is subject to circumstance. We experimentally test whether brand-attribute associations are more stable when retrieved by free association (not feature lists) and when consumers think about a brand within context.

INTRODUCTION

Lately scholars have reported low stability of brand-attribute associations in free choice affirmative binary rating tasks (“yes”-option, ticked or not, regarding a specific attribute). A multi-brand meta-analysis by Rungie, Laurent, Dall’Olmo Riley, Morrison, and Roy (2005) reports stability levels of 49 percent over a period of three months; another by Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008) an average of 53 percent for 20 brands with a one-week interval between two measurements. The conclusion that brand-attribute associations “show remarkably low stability” (Dolnicar and Rossiter 2008, p. 104) may stem from the call for high stability in much of the branding literature. For example, Keller and Lehmann (2006) recommend to investigate the stability of attribute-brand associations. Authors even define brand equity as an enduring construct built with a long-term mindset (e.g., Aaker 1991; Farquar 1991), and the associations strong brands evoke are assumed to be stable (Balmer and Gray 2003). Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008) provide a set of methodological recommendations to attain higher levels of stability. For example, they call for shorter questionnaires, samples that only contain category users and brand aware respondents, and a brand-prompted (“does the brand have attribute A, attribute B, etc.?”) instead of an attribute-prompted (“is this an attribute you associate with Brand A, with Brand B, etc.?”) procedure. Following these recommendations, stability levels in their experiment reach 66 percent (vs. 53% without).

We focus on two more potential sources of low stability of brand-attribute association. First, we propose that brand-attribute association measurement via feature lists may be responsible for low stability levels. The inherent logic of these lists is to expose the informant to a set of category-typical attributes and to link each one with a brand or not. Such a procedure neglects the core idea of

branding which calls for the creation of unique brand-specific associations in order to achieve differentiation. Omitting such unique associations from the feature list leaves the respondent with a set of options of which none may be top-of-mind regarding the brand. Hence the answers may be the result of temporary constructions only.

Second, besides this methodological source of instability, we propose that what a brand evokes may be context-dependent. Think, for example, of encountering Red Bull sponsoring a Formula 1 race versus purchasing a can of Red Bull at 11:00 p.m. to stay awake for another 100 miles on the road. It is unlikely that the associations evoked by the brand in each context are stable (Boatwright, Cagan, Kapur, and Saltiel 2009). Studying brand-attribute associations ignoring contexts assumes, too optimistic in our opinion, that informants retrieve the brand in the same contextual mind frame for each task. Therefore, low stability reported in many studies may be due to context instability rather than brand-attribute association instability.

In the empirical part, we conduct an experiment where we test for the effect of these two potential sources of brand-attribute association instability. We contrast stability levels of feature lists presented without context (the common procedure) with (a) the stability of free associations evoked by the brand and (b) the stability of feature lists within a stable context.

The next chapter discusses the two key issues highlighted – method and context – in more detail. Chapter 3 introduces our empirical study, followed by the results and concludes in chapter 5 with conclusions for branding science and practice.

BACKGROUND

Feature Lists versus Free Associations

Research reporting stability levels of brand-attribute associations relies on (1) feature lists as the preferred method and (2) on the existence of established brand associations (Kapferer 2004; Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986) to be retrieved from memory. These two assumptions are at odds. Feature lists typically contain a limited number of attributes derived from pre-studies in which respondents, stimulated by the category in question, elicit

brands and attributes (Dolnicar and Rossiter 2008). The attributes then included in the feature list of the actual study are the ones that are most frequently elicited (note that Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008) also include low frequency attributes in their study which show similar stability levels). Therefore, the chances of an attribute to be on the feature list increases if it is a category-prototypical attribute elicited by many respondents.

Brand managers, in contrast, aim to link brands with unique characteristics (and potentially target a limited segment of the market only). For example, Keller, Sterntal, and Tibout (2002) suggest that “points of parity” (to link the brand to a category) as well as “points of difference” (to differentiate them from other offers in the category) are key to building strong brands. Such uniqueness is the cornerstone of the positioning idea (Clancy and Trout 2002; Ries and Trout 1999) by allowing the brand to capture a distinct place in consumers’ minds (Albert and Whetten 1993; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Keller 1993). If a brand is successful in establishing unique brand associations in the marketplace, it is unlikely that all (or even most of) these unique attributes will be on the feature list. Brand-specific attributes by definition are not quickly elicited when thinking of the category – which is the typical task rendering the set of attributes included on the feature list.

Our conclusion from the Dolnicar et al. (2008) and Rungie et al. (2005) findings is not that brand-attribute associations are necessarily unstable. The associations provided may simply not be important enough for the brands under investigation to be strongly linked in consumers’ minds. Imagine a study of car brands that links Volvo and Porsche with category-typical attributes like luxurious, comfortable, high quality, or fuel efficient. None of these attributes may rank among the top five attributes elicited by most consumers when thinking of these two brands. Such (for each brand) irrelevant attributes may be linked to the category under specific circumstances (see next section), but are unlikely to exhibit high stability. We therefore propose to test the stability of attributes applying techniques that retrieve the most eminent attributes.

The Impact of Context

“It depends upon the situation” is a common reply respondents provide when being asked for certain issues, behaviors or decisions. People think, act and behave differently across situations since their cognitive activities and behaviors depend on contextual factors. In line with Belk (1974a) Barsalou (1988, 2003) identifies the following six dimensions characterizing a situation or context: (1) place or location (at home, outdoor); (2) temporary aspects (daily, in the morning); (3) activities a

person pursues to achieve a certain goal (doing sports to reduce weight); (4) antecedents states like the current mood (happy) or physical conditions (exhausted); (5) other persons (members of sport teams, friends) and (6) objects present in the situation (running shoes, mp3-player). Consequently, situation or context is an aggregated construct including the above dimensions that influence individuals’ cognitive and behavioral activities (Barsalou 1999, 2003; Damasio 1994; Schwarz 2006). A large body of findings in psychology indicates that human cognitive processes like knowledge acquisition and retrieval are responsive to the immediate context (e.g., Barsalou 1999; Gollwitzer 1999; Hassin, Uleman, and Bargh 2005; Higgins 1996; Schwarz 2006). Situation-sensitive cognition allows people to flexibly and dynamically acquire, assess and reproduce information that is relevant in a certain situation (Barsalou 1999, 2003; Schwarz 2006). Thus, people focus only on information that is highly relevant in a given situation. Damasio (1994) attributes this cognitive characteristic to “somatic markers” – shortcuts of human brains - that guide cognition in specific situations and inform humans on things to pursue or to avoid.

Prior research in the field of consumer behavior and branding shows that contexts or situations are explaining factors for unexpected outcomes with respect to product decisions (Belk 1974b; Desai and Hoyer 2000); evaluations and judgments (Adaval and Monroe 2002; Graeff 1997), brand extensions (Dawar 1991; Schmitt and Dubè 1992; Wänke, Bless, and Schwarz 1998), brand image beliefs (Batra and Homer 2004) and product and brand meaning (Kleine and Kernan 1991; Kreuzer 2010). For example, in a choice scenario including different situations Belk (1974b) shows that consumer decisions for snack food and meat depend on consumption or purchase decision. Ratneshwar and Shocker (1991) also support the context-dependency of consumer judgment with respect to snack-food and show that the “prototypical snack food” differs from “snacks that people eat at Friday evening party while drinking beer.”

Several studies focus on context effects in the area of branding. For example, research on brand extension demonstrates that the perceived fit of the brand with the target product or category depends on contextual factors (e.g., Dawar 1996; Wänke, Bless, and Schwarz 1998). Dawar (1991) shows how contextual cues influence product associations retrieved and thus the evaluation of the fit between brand and the extended product. With respect to context effects on brand evaluations Graeff (1997) confronted respondents with different social usage situations (boss situation vs. friend situation) and then measured brand attitudes and purchase intentions for two beer brands (Budweiser and Heineken). The results show that respondents had more positive attitudes and a higher

purchase intention for Budweiser in the *friend situation* and Heineken in the *boss situation*. Batra and Homer (2004) test the influence of brand image beliefs on several outcome variables (e.g., brand attitudes, purchase intention) in different situations. The authors evoked two social contexts with either low or high social consequences (going to a party vs. hosting a party) during an ad-experiment including different celebrity endorsers. The results show that brand image beliefs triggered through ads impact brand purchase intention more in the context leading to high social consequences. Kline and Kernan (1991) highlight contextual influences (kind and amount of context) on meanings people ascribe to consumption objects. The authors found variability along two dimensions including performance (what the product “is for”) and meaning (what the object “is”). With respect to brand meaning, Kreuzer (2010) shows how different brand usage situations influence brand interpretation on an individual level.

The above results provide evidence that situations influence brand-related outcomes such as attitudes or purchase intentions as well as the retrieved brand knowledge and the related meaning. Thus, it is important that brand research considers possible context effects in research designs to fully understand the meaning of a brand. Furthermore, in controlling for context effects possible instabilities of brand knowledge associations might be explained.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

Our study follows the design by Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008) and incorporates their suggestions to increase brand-attribute association stability: the sample consists of category users, the survey is short, only answers of informants who know the brand are considered, respondents are natives, for the feature list we omit instruction to guess if informants don’t know about an association, and associations are brand-prompted, not attribute-prompted.

Questionnaire

We select the product category sport shoes because of its high penetration and the existence of multiple prominent brands. A pre-study with 40 students helps to identify important brands (5) and attributes (6) – following the Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008) parameters for a short questionnaire. Each of these five brands has an unaided recall of 60 percent or more in the pre-study (the sixth-ranked brand dropped to 15%). Informants then fill in one of three randomly assigned questionnaires in two waves, separated by a period of one week.

Q1 (Feature List, No Context) is our base case and mirrors the Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008) questionnaire. Informants check on a feature list whether each of the five

brands (randomly ordered) associates with each given attribute (randomly ordered). Q2 (Free Association, No Context) uses the free-association method. Respondents get exposed to one of five brands randomly (and in text form only) and write down up to eight associations they elicit with these brands in predefined text fields. Q3 (Feature List, Context) again employs the feature list methodology, but provides a context primed through displaying a picture of a specific usage situation (in this case a person running, the brand of the shoe is not visible).

In week two informants receive the same questionnaire. Q1 and Q3 again display a randomized set of brands and attributes, Q2 displays the brand the informant responded to in week one.

Sample

Our sample consists of Austrians in the age group of 20–50 who are users of sport shoes. The informants are members of a commercial online survey panel. Even though the number of informants was identical in week one ($n = 140$), response rates in week two differed (non-response likely due to the start of school holidays). The final sample sizes for each questionnaire were 95, 74, and 81 respectively. Informants receive a small cash amount for participation.

Measures

Stability of associations for Q1 and Q3 follows the logic of Dolnicar and Rossiter (2008) who calculate the percentage as $11/(01+10+11)*100$ percent. Therefore the numerator consists of associations that are ticked in either week (11). The denominator also contains those associations that are ticked in one week only (10 – ticked in week one, not in week two; 01 – ticked in week two, not in week one).

For Q2, a codebook based on the answers of all respondents provides the foundation for two coders to independently code each association, starting with all answers from week one followed by all answers from week two to avoid potential carry-over effects that may occur when subsequently coding the same informant’s associations given in week one and week two. Inter-coder agreement is more than 92 percent with the remainder of the answers coded through joint discussion. In general, the stability measure applies the logic of Q1 and Q3: Any associations elicited in both weeks are stable, whereas associations elicited in one week only are considered unstable. For example, the degree of stability of an informant with associations of A, C, D, and F in week one and B, C, D, E, in week two is 33 percent (2 stable associations C, D, divided by six associations elicited in total). More specifically, however, assessing stability of free associations is less straightforward for two reasons:

First, the level of detail applied in the codebook impacts stability. For example, if a respondent elicits “Michael Jordan” in week one and “LeBron James” in week two, the association is stable if the most fitting code is “celebrity endorser,” but unstable if each of these celebrities receives a separate code. Comparable to intercoder reliability (Srnrka and Koeszegi 2007), stability levels are likely to suffer from more detailed category schemes. We therefore assess stability by applying the codebook in its original form (60 codes) and in a more condensed format following the Keller (1993) categorization of brand associations into, for example, user imagery, products or behavior (13 codes).

Second, respondents may elicit multiple associations within a single code (“celebrity endorser”) in one week (Michael Jordan and LeBron James), but one association only in the other week (Michael Jordan). One may argue that stability exists (“celebrity endorser” is present each week), but also claim instability (the second association is not repeated). The same problem occurs if in one week a respondent provides two associations within a category, but none in the other: Are two associations unstable (both are not present) or just one (the category is not present)? Again, we provide results for both lines of thinking.

These stability measures therefore are association-based by showing the percentage of associations elicited/ticked in either week divided by all associations elicited/ticked. However, the nature of the measure also allows its calculation for each informant, each brand and, slightly refined, for each association (percentage of respondents

eliciting/ticking it in either week divided by all respondents eliciting/ticking it). In addition, respondents answer questions regarding category involvement and brand equity for each brand (recommendation, usage) to allow for better understanding of brand-specific differences.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the level of brand stability for each experimental condition. The table provides information on an aggregated level (all brands), by brand, for the favorite brand of respondents and split-half results for category involvement. The level of stability between the three conditions does not differ as expected: For the base case *Feature List, No Context* the brand-attribute associations show a stability of 47 percent, in line with other comparable studies (Dolnicar et al. 2008; Rungie et al. 2005). Interestingly, if a stable context is provided, the stability level drops slightly to 44 percent (difference n.s. at a 95% confidence level), not furthering higher stability levels as expected. With regard to free associations, the stability levels based on the detailed codebook reaches 31 percent, substantially below the level of the feature list. Given the average number of associations elicited by each respondent (4.98), this translates into 1.5 on average to be re-elicited one week later. Whether the remaining associations are in fact temporary constructions only, or drawn from a stable, but larger pool that is not retrievable via our method, remains to be answered. Reducing the coding scheme to 13 elements only increases the stability rate to 38 percent. If the focus is not on the number of associations but rather on whether each element is mentioned in

TABLE 1
Stability of Brand-Attribute Associations (%) (Associations Ticked/Elicited in Both Weeks Divided by All Associations Ticked/Elicited)

	Feature List No Context	Feature List Context	Free Assoc. Detailed Code Scheme (60 codes)	Free Assoc. Condensed Code Scheme (13 codes)	Free Assoc. Condensed Code Scheme (13 codes)*
Sample Size	95	81	74	74	74
Total	47%	43%	31%	38%	47%
Adidas	55%	45%	39%	46%	57%
Asics	31%	39%	29%	30%	38%
Nike	50%	48%	30%	32%	43%
Puma	49%	39%	27%	42%	49%
Reebok	44%	45%	29%	38%	49%
Involvement**: High / Low	47% / 47%	46% / 39%	33% / 29%	37% / 38%	47% / 47%
Favorite Brand**	55%	51%	31%	47%	51%

* ignores number of associations elicited by category in stability calculation

** association stability of sub-samples:

high-low median split for category involvement; stability for favorite brand only

one or both weeks, stability goes up to 47 percent. This means that a respondent eliciting associations from four different categories in week one, will elicit associations in only two of these categories a week later. We agree with other scholars that these levels are surprisingly low.

Table 1 also shows interesting differences between brands: First, some brands tend to have more stable brand-attribute associations than others (ranging from 31 percent to 55 percent in the feature list). Providing a stable context reduces the feature list stability for some brands, but increases the stability for others. The stability levels also differ for the free association tasks ranging from 30 percent to 46 percent. Interestingly, condensing the number of categories affects stability levels differently, indicating varying diversity of associations by brand. For example, some brands tend to elicit similar association (e.g., mostly user imagery for Puma) which drives up the stability levels when condensing the categorization scheme.

Category involvement is not related to brand-attribute association stability, as shown by the median-split comparisons in Table 1. Typically stability levels of high- and low-involvement informants do not differ except for the context feature list – possibly an indication that highly involved informants can relate more easily to the provided context. Finally, whether the brand is the informant's favorite brand or not matters: Stability levels for one's favorite brand are higher, with the exception of the detailed categorization scheme. It appears that respondents have more permanent mental constructions of brands they like most as opposed to other brands where associations appear to be more temporarily constructed.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study compares the stability levels for brand associations elicited via feature lists (no context and stable context) and via free associations (no context) respectively. We assumed that respondents provide more stable brand-attribute associations via feature lists when provided with the same context in both weeks. The stability levels for the feature list tasks without contexts and the feature list task with a stable context are similar (47% vs. 44%). This finding is coherent with Schmitt and Dubè (1992) who question whether feature lists can account for contextual variations since “feature list representations face problems explaining sensitivity to contexts” (Schmitt and Dubè 1992, p. 123).

Additionally, our results show that a stable context reduces stability levels for (in this sample) more familiar brands like Adidas and Puma and increases these levels for less familiar brands like Asics and Reebok. One explanation might be that the context exhibits a stronger impact on respondents' mindsets when being confronted with the less familiar brand. Hence context may have

more effect on respondents' answers for less familiar brands as the context helps to activate specific knowledge.

For the free association task we found substantial differences in the stability levels depending on the scope of the coding categories. When coding the data in detail (60 categories) we found a lower stability level (31%) compared to a coarser coding scheme including 13 categories (47%). Here the stability levels are comparable to eliciting brand associations via feature lists. Even though feature lists represent critical aspects of knowledge, other knowledge is omitted that might be (more) important for additional insights since it prohibits additional information not contained in its elements (Barsalou 1993; Schmitt and Dubè 1992).

Our study has several implications for brand measurement: First, we recommend studying the sensitivity of brand-attribute association stability to contexts. It is important to understand which types of associations are temporarily and permanently elicited in different contexts. While stability levels are similar for measurement with and without context we found preliminary evidence that stability comes from different associations. Which associations are more or less closely linked to brands in different contexts can be helpful in planning as well as in monitoring branding activities. Second, while stability levels of free associations are lower than those of feature lists, we advocate not relying on the latter alone. The breadth of associations elicited with free associations allows a better understanding of unique (and potentially enduring) brand associations that may again be more helpful in developing and monitoring branding strategies. We are aware of the additional resources that such techniques require in comparison to analyzing feature list surveys. However, the importance of thorough investigation of mindset metrics for understanding effective branding (Srinivasan, Vanhuele, and Pauwels 2010) warrants the additional effort. Finally, investigating differences in (the stability of) associations between consumer segments (not only regional or socio-economic differences, but also segments differing in brand patronage, brand attitude and brand attachments) may provide the foundation to better reach so far untapped consumer segments.

Future research should assess the impact of the context on stability levels in the free association tasks. In this respect Wu and Barsalou (2009) found situation-specific information in respondents' data of free associations tasks. The authors argue that people do not think of objects like product or brands in isolation but always frame them according to a certain situation (Wu and Barsalou 2009). Thus, future research on brand-attribute associations should investigate if a stable context increases the stability level in free associations tasks and if different contexts lead to varying answers and thus to a lower stability level.

Our study demonstrates stability on an aggregate respondent level. Future research should probe for individual differences like brand familiarity, usage and brand patronage impacting stability of free associations and feature lists. Furthermore, future research can identify

stability levels across associations to figure out which types of associations are more stable and which ones are more dynamic across contexts. Future research should also investigate stability levels of brand associations in different product categories.

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