Journal of Business Research xxx (2015) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

Drivers of brand strength: Configural paths to strong cognitive brand equity☆

Hans Mühlbacher [a,1], Karine Raies [b,2], Reinhard Grohs [c,3], Oliver Koll [d,*]

[a] International University of Monaco, INSEEC Research Center, 2 Avenue Albert II, MC-98000 Monte Carlo, Monaco
[b] INSEEC Business Schools, INSEEC Research Center, 27 Avenue Claude Vellefaux, F-75010 Paris, France
[c] Private University Seeburg Castle, Seeburgstraße 8, A-5201 Seekirchen am Wallersee, Austria
[d] School of Management, University of Innsbruck, Universitätsstraße 15, A-6020 Innsbruck, Austria

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 29 September 2015
Accepted 17 November 2015
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Brand strength
Brand associations
Configural analysis
Favorability
Uniqueness
Consensus

ABSTRACT

Cognitive brand research conceives brand strength as the result of brand association characteristics, like favorability, number, uniqueness, and consensus. Most research uses regression type methods to study the impact of individual association characteristics across various brands. This study examines which patterns of brand association characteristics lead to high vs. low brand strength on an individual consumer level. Configural analysis of 2822 association tasks concerning six sport shoe brands by 729 participants shows that various combinations of brand association favorability, number, uniqueness and consensus are better suited for explaining high brand strength than each of these predictors individually. The combinations change with the level of product category involvement and consumers' familiarity with the brand. These findings extend theoretical understanding of cognitive brand equity and provide guidance for brand management practice.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Inc.

1. Introduction

In globalized economies where product offers abound and choices for consumers seem endless brands have become important management devices for differentiation and cognitive anchors for consumer decision-making. Strong brands have become strategic assets. Brand strength is an evaluative or behavioral response such as commitment, trust, reputation, or recommendation (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2000) that affects brand choice (Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995; Low & Lamb, 2000). Literature on cognitive brand equity tells us that brand strength results from what stakeholders know about a brand and how they evaluate that knowledge. In his seminal work on cognitive brand equity, Keller (1993) conceptualizes brand knowledge as associations in consumers' minds that vary by content, favorability, strength, and uniqueness. Following Kamakura and Russell (1991) brands are strong if many consumers are familiar with the brand and hold strong favorable associations that are exclusive to the brand in the product category. Prior research investigates whether or not the number of brand associations (Bennett, Haertel, & McColl-Kennedy, 2005), the relative presence of positive versus negative associations (Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006), the uniqueness of brand associations (Krishnan, 1996), and agreement with desired brand associations (Malär, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, & Hoyer, 2012) influence consumer brand response. These studies do not investigate how different brand association characteristics work together in their influence on consumer brand response. Such an examination is timely, as combinations of brand association characteristics may explain brand strength better than individual association characteristics. Different paths to strong cognitive brand equity may exist.

The majority of existing studies search to identify which characteristics of brand associations discriminate strong from weak brands at an aggregate level, that is, across a sample of consumers and brands. Krishnan (1996) advised to conduct intra-brand studies focusing on multiple consumers of a brand and the variation of brand strength among these consumers. Such an approach has become more popular lately (Romaniuk & Gaillard, 2007; Koll & von Wallpach, 2014) as it avoids potentially confounding factors like desired positioning, history, or the quality of marketing activities. The objective of the present research is to analyze the causal impact of different configurations of number, favorability, uniqueness and consensus of brand associations on brand strength for individual consumers.

The analysis builds on a survey of 729 participants in an online panel that is representative for Germany. Respondents completed 2822

☆ The authors gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments by Arch Woodside and thank anonymous reviewers of the GIKA conference 2015 in Valencia for their suggestions to improve the paper. We also thank the Brand Laboratory of the Innsbruck School of Management for funding the data collection.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +43 650 56 55 654.
E-mail addresses: hmuhlbacher@inseec.com (H. Mühlbacher), kraies@inseec.com (K. Raies), reinhard.grohs@uni-seeburg.at (R. Grohs), oliver.koll@uibk.ac.at (O. Koll).
[1] Tel.: +43 699 10 64 31 13.
[2] Tel.: +33 6 78 84 12 13.
[3] Tel.: +43 6212 26 26 43.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.11.013
0148-2963/© 2015 Published by Elsevier Inc.

Please cite this article as: Mühlbacher, H., et al., Drivers of brand strength: Configural paths to strong cognitive brand equity, *Journal of Business Research* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.11.013

association tasks concerning six sports shoe brands. Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA; Ragin, 2008a; Ragin, 2008b) provides the tool to investigate different patterns of brand association characteristics as causes of high and low brand strength. Results show that except factual consensus, the other characteristics of brand associations are sufficient but not necessary predictors. Causal combinations of association characteristics are more effective in predicting high brand strength than single brand association characteristics. The predictive configurations depend on consumers' levels of product category involvement and brand familiarity.

2. Theoretical background

Kapferer (2004, p. 13) defines a brand as "a shared desirable and exclusive idea embodied in products, services, places and/or experiences" and states that "the more this idea is shared by a larger number of people, the more power the brand has." He proposes that consensus about a brand's characteristics is an important driver of brand strength. In addition, existing literature indicates that the number, valence and uniqueness of brand associations influence consumer brand response (Bennett et al., 2005; Krishnan, 1996; Spears et al., 2006). This literature does not address how number, favorability, uniqueness and consensus of brand associations interact in their effects on consumers' brand response. Romaniuk and Gaillard (2007) question the direct impact of association uniqueness on consumer brand response. The level of uniqueness may influence the effects of favorability and number of associations. Favorability and number of association may have a stronger positive effect if consumers perceive a brand as unique. Gershoff, Ashesh, and Anirban (2008) suggest that the effect of favorability of associations on brand strength is greater for individuals who perceive strong consensus with relevant others.

2.1. Number and favorability of brand associations

Through exposure to a brand, consumers build brand knowledge, consisting of a set of associations regarding the brand. Romaniuk and Nenycz-Thiel (2013) emphasize that the total amount of associations a consumer links to a brand depends on the knowledge and experience a consumer has with a certain brand. Krishnan (1996) states that with an increasing number of brand associations the memory structure that represents a brand becomes richer, which "makes it easier to access the particular brand node from memory (…) since these associations offer multiple pathways to the same brand node" (Krishnan, 1996, p. 392). Krishnan (1996) identifies the number of associations to the brand as an indicator for brand strength.

The favorability of a brand association indicates how negatively/positively a consumer evaluates an association (Keller, 1993). Brand managers recognize that creating favorable brand associations is an important driver of brand equity (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010). Dacin and Smith (1994, p. 230) state, "The favorability of consumers' predispositions toward a brand is perhaps the most basic of all brand associations and is at the core of many conceptualizations of brand strength/equity." Previous empirical research has confirmed a positive link between the favorability of brand associations and brand strength (Koll & von Wallpach, 2014; Krishnan, 1996).

2.2. Uniqueness of brand associations

Several researchers emphasize the importance of unique brand associations. Krishnan (1996) suggests using the set of associations that are unique to a brand relative to other brands in the product category as an indicator of brand equity. Zaichkowsky (2010) concludes that a unique brand image allows brands to demand a price premium over competing brands that offer similar product quality. Consumer choice theory shows that features owned by all brands in a consideration set are ignored in consumer decision-making strategies (Dhar & Sherman, 1996). Following Broniarczyk and Gershoff (2003), unique associations, even when trivial, are beneficial for customer-based brand equity.

Research on brand positioning, however, suggests that a single-minded focus on uniqueness may produce undesired outcomes (Reidenbach & Grimes, 1984). A strategy seeking to communicate merely unique qualities for a brand could lead to negligence of essential category attributes (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). Consumers should be able to categorize a brand before adding unique associations (Barwise & Meehan, 2004; Keller et al., 2002). Punj and Moon (2002) suggest that particularly brands with limited resources need to anchor firmly in their product category. Successful positioning embodies a mix between linkages to a product category and differentiating features (Punj & Moon, 2002).

Given the important role scholars attribute to the uniqueness of brand associations for brand strength (Netemeyer et al., 2004) surprisingly little empirical research investigates this relationship. Krishnan (1996) compares high equity brands with low equity brands in six product categories. Results provide weak support for a positive effect of unique associations. Romaniuk and Gaillard (2007) collected consumers' associations for a large number of brands in eight product categories and find that the relationship of uniqueness with preference is weak at best.

2.3. Factual and perceived consensus of brand associations

Consumers use branded products as symbols for the purpose of social interaction (Ahuvia, 2005) and as extended selves (Belk, 1988). If a branded product should express certain aspects of the user's personality, this will only work if other people have similar brand associations (Elliott, 1994). Consensus concerning a brand is the degree to which different people share the same associations regarding a brand. Taking into account that someone could falsely believe that others share their brand knowledge two types of consensus exist: factual consensus accessible through observation or consensus as perceived by the individual. Whether consensus is a fact or perceived, when consumers think they share their associations regarding a brand with others they feel more comfortable. They experience less need for justification, less disagreement (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), and lower cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

2.4. Product category involvement and brand familiarity

Research on product category involvement has shown that increasing involvement with a product category increases the level of interest for category-related stimuli as well as the intensity and depth of information treatment (Mittal, 1995; Zaichkowsky, 1994). Different knowledge levels lead to different information processing, evaluation strategies as well as decision-making (Rao & Monroe, 1988; Selnes & Howell, 1999). Product category involvement, therefore, should have an impact on patterns of association characteristics that lead to high or low brand strength.

Hoeffler and Keller (2003) argue that since consumers may be more attentive to familiar brands, nurturing a viable brand knowledge structure is the first priority for brand managers. Consumers will use that structure to evaluate and interpret brand-related knowledge. Familiarity can result in a more thorough interpretation and evaluation of brand information, but consumers also rely on the affect related to a familiar brand. Thus, brand familiarity should have an impact on patterns of association characteristics that influence brand strength.

2.5. Research propositions

The review of extant literature leads to the following research propositions. P1: Number, favorability, uniqueness and consensus of associations are sufficient conditions for predicting high brand strength. P2: Combinations of these predictors explain the existence of high brand

Please cite this article as: Mühlbacher, H., et al., Drivers of brand strength: Configural paths to strong cognitive brand equity, *Journal of Business Research* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.11.013

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10492588

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/10492588

Daneshyari.com