



Brand Attitudes and Search Engine Queries

Jeffrey P. Dotson^{a,*},¹ & Ruixue Rachel Fan^c & Elea McDonnell Feit^b &
Jeffrey D. Oldham^c & Yi-Hsin Yeh^c

^a Brigham Young University, United States

^b Drexel University, United States

^c Google, United States

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Abstract

Search engines record the queries that users submit, including a large number of queries that include brand names. This data holds promise for assessing brand health. However, before adopting brand search volume as a brand metric, marketers should understand how brand search relates to traditional survey-based measures of brand attitudes, which have been shown to be predictive of sales. We investigate the relationship between brand attitudes and search engine queries using a unique micro-level data set collected from a panel of Google users who agreed to allow us to track their individual brand search behavior over eight weeks and link this search history to their responses to a brand attitude survey. Focusing on the smartphone and automotive markets, we find that users who are actively shopping in a category are more likely to search for any brand. Further, as users move from being aware of a brand to intending to purchase a brand, they are increasingly more likely to search for that brand, with the greatest gains as customers go from recognition to familiarity and from familiarity to consideration. Additionally, users that own and use a particular automotive or smartphone brand are much more likely to search for that brand, even when they are not in market suggesting that a substantial volume of brand search in these categories is not related to shopping or product search. We discuss the implications of these findings for assessing brand health from search data.

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Introduction

Survey-based measures of consumers' brand attitudes have been widely adopted by marketers to monitor brand health relative to competitors, assess the performance of advertising and other marketing tactics, and provide an early indicator of future sales (Aaker 1996; Keller 1993). Many large marketing research firms invest heavily in conducting brand tracking studies — periodic consumer surveys designed to gauge customers' attitudes towards a brand and its competitors (e.g., Millward Brown BrandExpress, Y&R BrandAsset™ Valuator,

YouGov BrandIndex). Brand attitude surveys typically ask respondents to answer a variety of attitude questions about brands including brand awareness (both recall and recognition), familiarity, purchase consideration and purchase intent. Marketers often summarize these attitudes across consumers to produce brand metrics which can be used to assess how the brand is performing in the minds of consumers relative to competitors. (For example, in the brand attitude survey we report, iPhone was recognized by 93.7% of consumers versus 75.0% for HTC; see Table 2.) Past research has shown that these consumer mindset metrics predict company stock returns (Aaker and Jacobson 2001), as well as future sales (Hanssens et al. 2014; Srinivasan, Vanhuele, and Pauwels 2010). Further, since these metrics assess intermediate stages in the purchase funnel, it has been suggested that they provide a more nuanced measure of consumer response to advertising (Hanssens et al. 2014; Percy and Rossiter 1992; Srinivasan, Vanhuele, and Pauwels 2010) than sales. Thus, brand tracking surveys that

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jeff.dotson@byu.edu (J.P. Dotson), rachelrfan@google.com (R.R. Fan), efeit@drexel.edu (E.M. Feit), oldham@google.com (J.D. Oldham), yeh@google.com (Y.-H. Yeh).

¹ The authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order. We thank GfK for their assistance with collecting the data described in this paper.

assess consumers' brand attitudes have become a standard and widely-used approach to tracking brand health.

Major brands invest a great deal of resources to field these brand tracking studies, an effort that has become increasingly more difficult as fewer consumers are willing to spend the time to answer surveys (Pew Research Center 2012). At the same time, digital platforms have begun to track consumer behavior in real time, presenting a tantalizing opportunity to measure brand health based on consumer behaviors at a much lower cost. For example, major search engines receive a large volume of search queries that include brand names in the query text. Google Trends (<http://www.google.com/trends>), a free tool that reports an index of the volume of queries submitted to Google, reports that in 2014 ten times more searches that included the word "android" were submitted by U.S. users than searches that included the generic term "smartphone" (Google 2015). Brand search volume could potentially be used as an ongoing, "dashboard" measure of brand health, the way survey-based metrics like the "percent of consumers who recognize the brand" have been used in the past to monitor brand health.

While there is little theoretical or empirical literature on why a search engine user would submit a query for a brand, a literature has emerged that implicitly assumes that branded search queries represent an intermediate stage in the path-to-purchase. For example, Joo et al. (2014) and Lewis and Reiley (2013) use branded search query volume as an aggregate measure of advertising response and both find that search queries for the advertised brand increase substantially in the minutes after a television ad is aired. Brand search has also been incorporated in time series models relating advertising to sales and has been shown to improve sales prediction over models that do not include brand search metrics (Chandukala et al. 2014; Hu, Du, and Damangir 2014). Thus, brand search shows promise as a potential brand metric that, similar to survey-based brand attitude metrics, measures some intermediate stage in the purchase process.

Yet, while both brand attitudes and brand search have been proposed as measures of some intermediate stage in the purchase process, it is not clear whether they measure the same thing. Before marketers adopt brand search as a standard metric of brand health, they should understand how search relates to the traditional brand attitude metrics, which have been well-tested as measures of consumer interest in a brand (Hanssens et al. 2014; Lehmann, Keller, and Farley 2008; Srinivasan, Vanhuele, and Pauwels 2010; Stahl et al. 2012). In this paper, we answer the question:

Are customers who hold positive attitudes toward a brand more likely to search for the brand? If so, which brand attitudes are most closely associated with brand search?

Unlike past research, which has focused on correlating aggregate time-series on the volume of brand search with aggregate time-series of sales, we conceptualize and measure brand search as a behavior that *individual* consumers engage in. To investigate the relationship between attitudes and search at the consumer level, we assembled a panel of Google users who

answered a typical brand attitude survey for two categories: smartphones and vehicles. In addition to answering the survey, these users also consented to allow us to observe their Google Search query counts for brands in those two categories. This unique data set allows us to relate the number of times an individual user searches for a particular brand during the study period to the attitudes s/he holds towards that brand.

Our analysis of this data shows that users who hold positive attitudes towards a brand are much more likely to search for that brand. We find that the likelihood of searching for a brand grows higher as the brand attitudes go deeper from recognition to purchase intent, with the largest increases for customers who hold positive "mid-funnel" attitudes: familiarity and purchase consideration. We also confirm that users who are actively shopping for a product category are more likely to search for brands in that category. Thus, an increase in search for a brand may be due to an increase in the number of consumers who are shopping for the brand and hold positive attitudes towards the brand.

We also find that consumers who already own a particular brand are also much more likely to search for a brand than non-owners and that customers who are engaged with a category, i.e., have high enduring product involvement (Bloch and Richins 1983), are more likely to search, regardless of whether they are actively shopping for a new smartphone or vehicle. This suggests that a substantial proportion of the total search volume is not related to shopping and that categories and brands with a higher user base and more "enthusiasts" will have more search volume, all else equal.

We should point out that our analysis is correlational; we show that users with positive brand attitudes are more likely to search for a brand. Following theory, our analysis assumes that brand attitudes lead to product search (cf. Keller 1993) and specifically brand search queries in a search engine. Because we only measured brand attitudes at one point in time, we did not investigate the possibility that there may be dual causality, i.e. searching for a brand in a search engine changes brand attitudes. We also do not investigate the relationship between branded and generic search as customers move through the purchase process (Rutz and Bucklin 2011).

The data we report suggests that there are many reasons a user might submit a brand search query. Users who are shopping in a category are more likely to search for any brand in the category; users are more likely to search for brands for which they hold positive attitudes; users who own a brand are more likely to search for the brand; and users who are category enthusiasts are more likely to search for all brands in the category. While we do not expect that these results will generalize to all categories, they shed light on how managers in high-involvement categories should interpret brand search volume from tools like Google Trends. Our data strongly suggests that overall search volumes reported by tools like Google Trends are a composite of different types of searches – shopping, product troubleshooting, keeping up with news and trends in the category – each associated with different consumer objectives and attitudes. In the conclusion, we will discuss some potential strategies for decomposing aggregate

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