Brand Synthesis: The Multidimensionality of Brand Knowledge

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The increased priority placed on branding by marketers in recent years offers an opportunity for consumer researchers to provide valuable insights and guidance. In particular, in highly competitive marketplaces, marketers often must link their brands to other entities, for example, people, places, things, or other brands, as a means to improve their brand equity. Understanding this leveraging process requires understanding consumer brand knowledge and how it changes from such associations. In this essay, I identify some promising and productive current research on this topic, and I suggest some important issues for future research. I conclude that adopting broader, more holistic perspectives that synthesize the multidimensionality of brand knowledge is critical to advance branding theory and practice, both in general and with brand leveraging in particular.

Consumer research insights have long played an important role in managerial decision making in many areas of marketing, for example, in the development of advertising, pricing, and channel strategies. Branding involves the process of endowing products and services with the advantages that accrue to building a strong brand (e.g., enhanced loyalty, price premiums, etc.). Branding's emergence as a management priority has led to a similar need to inform practicing managers of concepts, theories, and guidelines from consumer research to facilitate their brand stewardship.

Marketers are desperate for consumer behavior learnings that will improve their understanding of branding and their design and implementation of brand-building marketing programs. The importance of consumer research to marketing practice has perhaps never been higher as managers struggle to adapt to a fast-changing marketing environment characterized by savvier consumers and increased competition, as well as the decreased effectiveness of traditional marketing tactics and the emergence of new marketing tools.

In this complex marketing world, marketers find themselves having to grapple with difficult issues about branding and their brands. What are the most effective and efficient means of building a strong brand? What are the proper roles for popularized marketing approaches such as "buzz" marketing, permission marketing, one-to-one marketing, experiential marketing, and so on? How do you measure the strength and value of a brand? How do you decide when and where to expand a brand, for example, into new product categories or new market segments? How do you keep a brand relevant and contemporary while preserving its heritage and sources of equity? In many cases, a deeper understanding of how consumers feel, think, and act could provide valuable guidance to address these brand-management challenges.

Although increasing in activity in recent years, academic research in branding has a long tradition.[1] Much, however, remains to be learned. One area of increasing importance is the brand-leveraging process, that is, the effects on consumers of linking a brand to another person, place, thing, or brand. Marketers often attempt to increase their brand equity by, in effect, borrowing equity from others. Analyzing this leveraging process requires understanding (1) what in fact consumers know about a brand and (2) how this knowledge might be affected by linking the brand to other entities.

In this essay, I discuss developments in both of these areas, highlighting some promising and productive current research as well as suggesting some needs and directions for future research. To foreshadow the discussion, the main theme to the essay is that there are multiple dimensions of brand knowledge as well as multiple potential sources or means to create that brand knowledge. It is essential that this multidimensionality be fully addressed in developing consumer behavior theory to explain branding phenomena. A potential danger with consumer research into branding is

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[1]Some noteworthy and early seminal research includes Allison and Uhl 1964; Dichter 1964; Gardner and Levy 1955; Haire 1950; and Levy 1959. See Levy (1999) for some perspective and discussion.

to adopt too narrow a perspective. By ignoring the multiple effects affecting and resulting from marketing activity, consumer research could lack the richness necessary to provide more integrative and powerful theoretical insights and marketing solutions.

UNDERSTANDING BRAND KNOWLEDGE

Consumer brand knowledge relates to the cognitive representation of the brand (Peter and Olson 2001). Consumer brand knowledge can be defined in terms of the personal meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory, that is, all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information. Researchers have studied consumer brand knowledge for decades, with different areas receiving greater emphasis depending on the dominant research paradigm and thrust of the time.[2] For example, reflecting in part a strong methodological interest in information-display boards, researchers studying the organization of consumer memory at one point debated whether brand-knowledge structures were organized by attributes or by brands, as well as the effects of different information-processing factors such as consumer goals, brand familiarity, and so on (Bettman 1979; Johnson and Russo 1984; Mitchell 1982; Olson 1978).

Much of this earlier research concentrated on more tangible, product-related information for brands. One important thrust in recent branding research is an attempt to understand more of the abstract, intangible aspects of brand knowledge not related to the actual physical product or service specifications per se. For example, relying on 114 possible personality traits and 37 well-known brands in various product categories, Aaker (1997) uncovered five basic dimensions that appear to capture the perceptual space of brands. The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) has used a series of research methods to tap into consumers' visual and other sensory images for brands (Zaltman and Higie Coulter 1995). Finally, Fournier (1998) has extended the metaphor of interpersonal relationships into the brand domain to conceptualize the relationships that consumers form with brands.

In another intriguing line of research, Muniz and O'Guinn (2000) have explored brand communities, defined as a specialized, nongeographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand. Somewhat relatedly, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) have defined a subculture of consumption as a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on a basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity (see also McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002).

These studies and others similar in spirit are noteworthy for their ability to use novel research methods to uncover overlooked or relatively neglected facets of consumer brand knowledge that have significant theoretical and managerial implications. Increasingly, much of branding is about more

[2]See Alba and Hutchinson (1987) for some perspectives on earlier research.

abstract and intangible considerations, and these streams of research help to illuminate those aspects of brand knowledge. But other aspects of brand knowledge may also be important at the same time, suggesting a need for brand synthesis, as follows.

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF BRAND KNOWLEDGE

The reality that emerges from the varied research activity in branding through the years is that all different kinds of information may become linked to a brand, including the following:

1. Awareness—category identification and needs satisfied by the brand.
2. Attributes—descriptive features that characterize the brand name product either intrinsically (e.g., related to product performance) or extrinsically (e.g., related to brand personality or heritage).
3. Benefits—personal value and meaning that consumers attach to the brand's product attributes (e.g., functional, symbolic, or experiential consequences from the brand's purchase or consumption).
4. Images—visual information, either concrete or abstract in nature.
5. Thoughts—personal cognitive responses to any brand-related information.
6. Feelings—personal affective responses to any brand-related information.
7. Attitudes—summary judgments and overall evaluations to any brand-related information.
8. Experiences—purchase and consumption behaviors and any other brand-related episodes.

Broadly, these different kinds of information can be seen as some of the key dimensions of brand knowledge. These dimensions of brand knowledge vary on all sorts of considerations beyond their content per se, for example, abstractness, valence, strength, uniqueness, and so on. Importantly, all of these different kinds of information may become a part of consumer memory and affect consumer response to marketing activities. By creating differential consumer responses and affecting the success of brand-building marketing programs, brand knowledge is the source of brand equity.

These different dimensions of brand knowledge have seen concerted research efforts through the years, albeit in varying degrees, for understanding their marketing effects, but these efforts have often been in comparative isolation. An important future research challenge, however, is to develop holistic perspectives toward brand knowledge that would encompass the full range of all the different kinds of information involved, for example, approaches to create and apply detailed mental maps for brands. An ideal mental map representation would be a blueprint of brand knowledge, as comprehensive while also as parsimonious as possible, that

would provide the necessary depth and breadth of understanding of consumer behavior and marketing activity.

Developing broader perspectives toward brand knowledge is important given the reality (1) that marketing activity creates or affects multiple dimensions of brand knowledge and (2) that multiple dimensions of brand knowledge, in turn, influence consumer response to marketing activity. Integrating the different dimensions of brand knowledge could improve the ability of researchers to model consumer response and of marketers to focus their marketing programs better. For example, it may be useful to decompose consumer response to a well-known and well-liked brand in terms of to what extent the response is being driven by brand familiarity versus brand likability. By assembling the different dimensions of brand knowledge, their comparative effects could be traced and valued to address causal questions such as the relative importance of brand personality or other imagery and brand feelings, which different dimensions of brand knowledge have to be created to gain the benefits from branding, and so on.

Moreover, different dimensions of brand knowledge are likely to have interactive effects. For example, strong brand awareness and familiarity may be a prerequisite for certain types of thoughts, feelings, or attitudes to occur. How do the different dimensions of brand knowledge function as antecedents to or consequences with respect to other dimensions? How malleable or changeable are these different dimensions over time? Holistic approaches are thus needed that attempt to capture more dimensions of brand knowledge, both methodologically in terms of tools and models for creating mental maps as well as conceptually and managerially in terms of recognizing the range of effects in brand knowledge arising from and influencing marketing activity.

For example, in terms of the former, Janiszewski and van Osselaer (2000) provide a demonstration of a connectionist model where consumers are assumed to be adaptive learners who are "learning to value." This model is an example of an approach with potential to contribute to mental mapping (see also van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2001). In terms of the latter, unlike the static nature of mental maps, models that capture the interplay between brand knowledge and consumer response to marketing activity necessarily will need to be dynamic, with appropriate updating mechanisms of consumer memory. One challenge here is the wide range of marketing activity involved and the potential wide range of dimensions of brand knowledge that may come into play. The next section considers one particularly important form of marketing activity, brand leveraging, and its potentially broad impact on knowledge for the brand.

UNDERSTANDING BRAND LEVERAGING

Brand knowledge can be created in a variety of ways. Any potential encounter with a brand—marketing initiated or not—has the opportunity to change the mental representation of the brand and the kinds of information that can appear in consumer memory. Marketers attempt to design their product offerings and marketing programs to create

brand-knowledge structures that are the most advantageous, and much prior research has contributed to our understanding of these types of effects. In increasingly competitive marketplaces, however, marketers often must link or associate their brands with other people, places, things, or brands as a means of building or leveraging knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to achieve more directly through product marketing programs. Figure 1 displays some of these more common secondary sources of brand knowledge.

Linking the brand to some other person, place, thing, or brand affects brand knowledge by (1) creating new brand knowledge or (2) affecting existing brand knowledge. Much research has examined these transfer effects in terms of country-of-origin effects (Li and Wyer 1994), celebrity source effects (McCracken 1986), cobranding or ingredient brand effects (Park, Jun, and Shocker 1996), corporate branding effects (Brown and Dacin 1997), and so on. Little research has attempted to take a broader perspective, however, to consider simultaneously the multiple entities to which a brand can become linked.

One example of a more expansive approach is the work by management consultants Sam Hill and Chris Lederer. In their book *The Infinite Asset,* they redefine the concept of brand portfolio to take on a much larger meaning than its conventional usage (Hill and Lederer 2001; see also Lederer and Hill 2001). With their approach, brand portfolios refer to all the brands that factor into a consumer's decision to buy, whether the company owns them or not, for example, brand extensions, cobrands, ingredient brands, brand alliance partners, and so on. Hill and Lederer develop a three-dimensional model called the "brand portfolio molecule" to represent their approach, which captures each different type of a brand's role and influence as well as its positioning and corresponding degree of control.

MULTIPLE MEANS OF CREATING BRAND KNOWLEDGE

A number of theories and processes have been proposed to explain how brand leveraging effects might be manifested, for example, source credibility, affect transfer, cognitive consistency, categorization models, and so on. One potentially fruitful research direction is how the various concepts and mechanisms proposed in one area might be relevant and provide insight into other areas. For example, how might source credibility be applied to country-of-origin effects? How are countries deemed expert, trustworthy, or likable? Such applications could yield insight as to how broadly the various theories and processes can generalize.

A deeper understanding of how knowledge for a brand and other linked entities interact is thus of paramount importance. Ideally, to provide comparable insight and guidance, an abstract model would be developed that encompassed all the different means of leveraging brand knowledge. Along those lines, three factors would seem to be particularly important in predicting the extent of lever-

FIGURE 1

SECONDARY SOURCES OF BRAND KNOWLEDGE
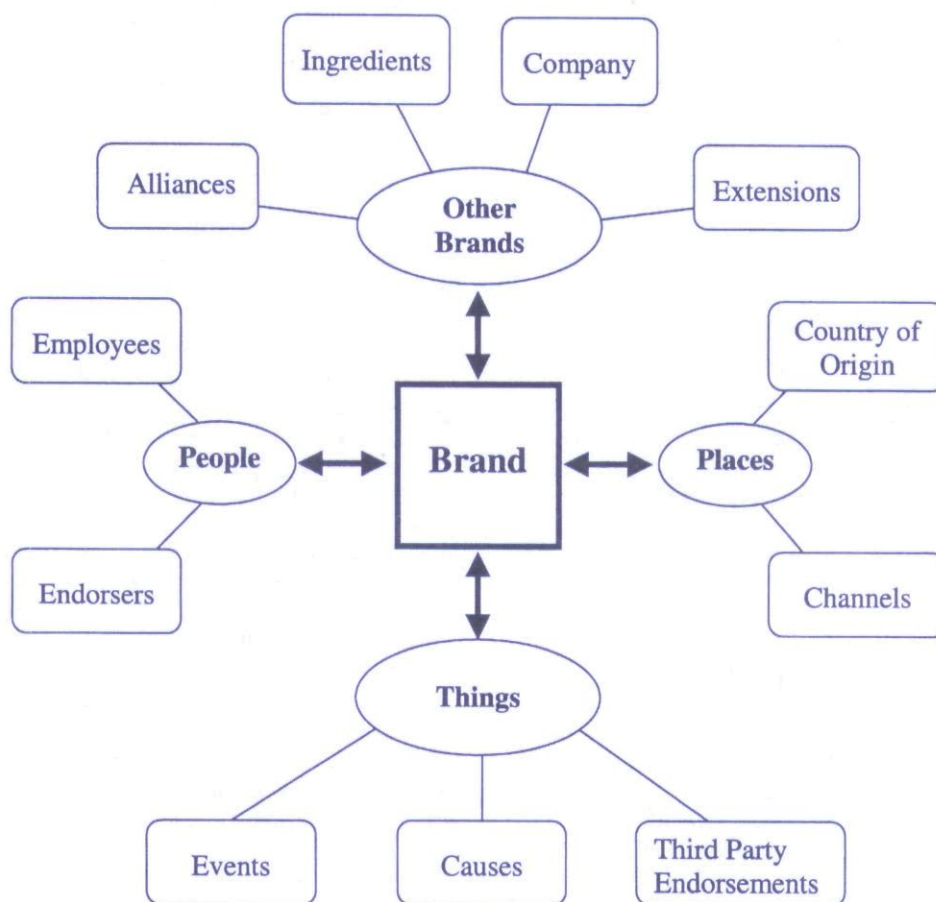
aging that might result from linking a brand to another entity in some manner:

1. Knowledge of the entity—the same dimensions identified for brand knowledge could be applied to these other entities; in this case, what knowledge exists about the entity and has the potential to transfer to the brand?
2. Meaningfulness of the knowledge of the entity—given that the other entity has some potentially relevant knowledge, to what extent might this knowledge be deemed meaningful for a brand?
3. Transferability of the knowledge of the entity— assuming that some potentially meaningful knowledge exists for the other entity and could possibly be transferred to a brand, to what extent will this knowledge actually become linked to the brand or affect existing knowledge?

In other words, the basic questions with leveraging secondary knowledge of any type of other entity would seem to be (1) What do consumers know about the other entity? (2) Does any of this knowledge affect what they think about

a brand when it becomes linked to or associated in some fashion with this other entity?

Theoretically, any aspect of knowledge may be inferred as a result of other entities being linked to the brand (see fig. 2), although some types of entities are inherently more likely to create or affect certain kinds of brand knowledge than would other types of entities. For example, events may be especially conducive to the creation of experiences, people may be especially effective for the elicitation of feelings, other brands may be especially well suited for establishing particular attributes and benefits, and so on. At the same time, any one entity may be associated with multiple dimensions of knowledge, each of which may affect brand knowledge directly or indirectly.

For example, consider the effects on knowledge of linking the brand to a cause. Identification of the brand with a cause (e.g., Avon's Breast Cancer Crusade) could have multiple effects on brand knowledge. A cause marketing program could build brand awareness via recall and recognition, enhance brand image in terms of attributes such as user imagery (e.g., kind and generous) and brand personality (e.g.,

FIGURE 2

UNDERSTANDING TRANSFER OF BRAND KNOWLEDGE
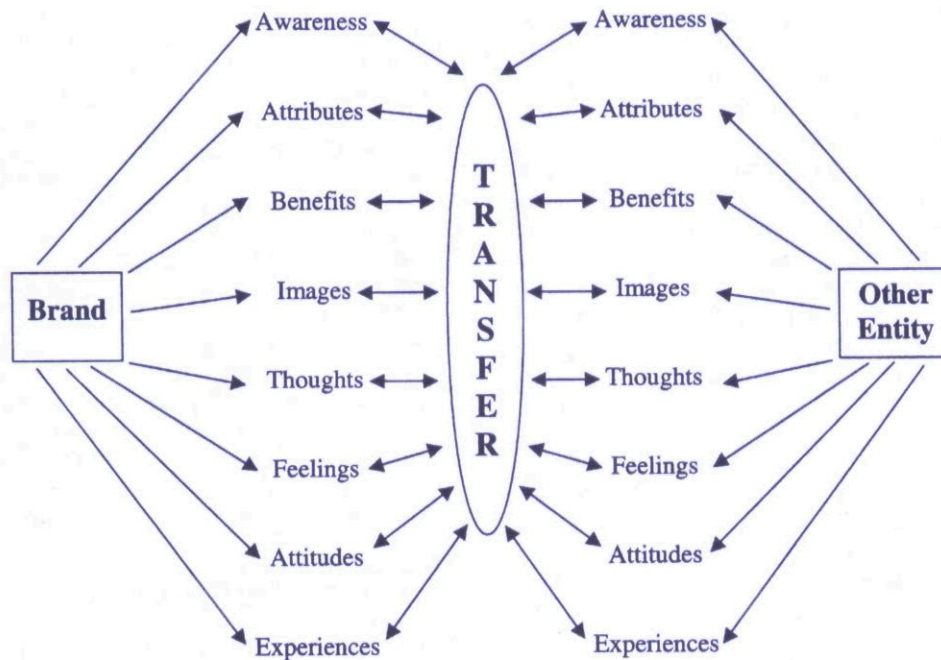
sincere), evoke brand feelings (e.g., social approval and self-respect), establish brand attitudes (e.g., credibility judgments such as trustworthy and likable), and create experiences (e.g., through a sense of community and participation in cause-related activities).

A number of issues come into play in terms of understanding how the three factors above might operate according to the different types of secondary sources of information and the different dimensions of knowledge potentially involved. Understanding transferability, the third causal factor in the leveraging model, is especially critical. Congruity models or other attitude models may be useful, but regardless of which theoretical approach is adopted, a number of different moderating factors should be explored, such as the perceived similarity of the brand and other entity, the manner by which the other entity is linked to the brand (e.g., how explicit, temporal, etc.), the uniqueness of the linkage (e.g., are other entities themselves linked to a few or many other entities), and so on. These moderating factors have many theoretical and practical implications. For example, in terms of perceived similarity, leveraging is often designed to provide complementary brand knowledge in an attempt to shore up a negatively correlated attribute (e.g., the youthful Tiger Woods's endorsement of the aging Buick brand of automobiles). Social cognition models of how consumers resolve different types of incongruent information may be useful to provide the necessary conceptual insight and managerial guidance.

CONCLUSIONS

Two key areas of consumer research in branding revolve around the creation and representation of brand knowledge. The challenge and opportunity for consumer research in both of these areas is fully appreciating the broad scope and complexity involved. That is, the chief position of this essay is that the multidimensional nature of consumer brand knowledge (in terms of different types of information in consumer memory) and leveraging (in terms of multiple sources of secondary meaning from a linked entity) must be understood and accounted for to provide the right perspective and backdrop to consumer research into branding.

In an increasingly networked economy, understanding the consumer behavior effects of linking a brand to other entities such as another person, place, thing, or brand is crucial. Marketers must be able to understand how various entities should best be combined, from a consumer brand-knowledge perspective, to create the optimal positioning in the minds of consumers. More broadly, marketers need guidance as to how they can best integrate all of their various marketing activities to assemble the right brand-knowledge structures.

Consumer research can be invaluable in providing such assistance to the extent to which it can provide insights into the interactive effects of brand knowledge and marketing activities. Doing so would seem necessarily to require well thought-out and integrated theories of how brand knowledge should be represented and how brand knowledge changes. Dynamic models toward that goal must reflect the fact that

brand knowledge affects consumer response to current marketing activity, which, in turn, potentially changes aspects of that brand knowledge and, therefore, consumer response to any subsequent marketing activity in the future.

Consumer research in branding has the opportunity to contribute in many other ways as well. For example, a topic of obvious importance not addressed in this essay is branding effects and consumer choice. Perhaps one of the more intriguing issues here is when consumers use the brand, in effect, as an attribute in making a brand decision. In certain settings, for example, under low involvement when consumers lack motivation, ability, or opportunity, a brand name may be used as a heuristic cue. Understanding the decision rules when such a strategy might be invoked—and more generally how brand names are factored into constructive decision processes—is another fascinating research topic.

Finally, it should be recognized that this essay presented a representation of brand knowledge based largely on cognitive psychology. Important perspectives on branding and brand knowledge obviously can, and have been, gained from other disciplinary viewpoints, for example, anthropological or ethnographic approaches. Part of the challenge in developing mental maps for consumers that accurately reflect their brand knowledge is how best to incorporate multiple theoretical or methodological paradigms.

In conclusion, academic research in branding can blend practical value with intellectual rigor. Capturing and synthesizing the complexity of brand knowledge and how it changes from, as well as influences, marketing activity provides tremendous challenges and opportunities that can embellish consumer behavior theory and improve brand management practice.

[*David Glen Mick served as editor for this essay.*]

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