Multi-Method Research on Consumer–Brand Associations: Comparing Free Associations, Storytelling, and Collages

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ABSTRACT

What consumers know and think consciously and unconsciously about a brand influences their attitudes and behaviors toward the brand and ultimately brand success. Therefore, keeping track of what consumers know is advisable. This article considers the value of using three approaches to assess brand knowledge: free association technique, storytelling, and collage-creation. Each method is suitable for tapping and reproducing different aspects of brand knowledge. The empirical study combines the three methods in an explorative setting to retrieve consumer brand knowledge regarding a major sports brand. The study compares knowledge that each method elicits and provides brand management with recommendations how to decide when to use each method and whether to employ one or more of these methods. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Managing a brand without knowing how stakeholders perceive the brand is like flying an airplane without information about position, speed, or weather. Since stakeholder brand knowledge impacts stakeholder attitudes and behaviors vis-à-vis the brand (Van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001), current stakeholder brand knowledge will influence the success of any activity focusing on attitudinal

or behavioral changes. To reach a specific airport a pilot needs to know the current position of the plane and the position of the airport. To reach a desired perception of stakeholders, a brand manager should take into account existing brand knowledge. In addition, to assess the effectiveness of brand-related measures, monitoring changes in brand knowledge is useful.

Methods to assess brand knowledge, however, are less advanced than radar- or GPS-based techniques to establish a plane's position. This article examines the value of three approaches to assess brand knowledge: the free association technique, storytelling, and collage-creation. All three methods have been used in brand research (e.g., Green, Wind, & Jain, 1973; Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006; Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008; Zaltman, 1997), rely on the brand as a stimulus to retrieve knowledge (as opposed to techniques rating or ranking the brand on a set of predefined items), and hence allow respondents to elicit knowledge at their own discretion. Each method, however, reproduces different aspects of knowledge, namely, verbal versus nonverbal knowledge and conscious versus unconscious knowledge (Woodside, 2006). This article makes several contributions: The study (1) discusses which aspects of brand knowledge each method taps, (2) compares the brand knowledge each method retrieves in an explorative empirical setting, and (3) provides brand management with recommendations which method(s) to employ.

Criteria for choice among these methods are numerous, ranging from purely economic considerations (how much time and money does management need to invest to access the knowledge of 100 respondents?) to more benefit-oriented considerations (e.g., which technique is most suitable in helping management understand why consumers grow attached to the brand?). The discussion takes into account various criteria to evaluate each method:

1. Breadth of knowledge: How much and what type of knowledge does the method produce?

2. Knowledge origin: Does the technique help brand management to understand which touch points are responsible for stakeholder knowledge?

3. Diagnostic potential: Do results inform about the relationship between the brand and the consumer?

4. Therapeutic potential: How actionable are the results? Do they provide management with clear guidelines as to which brand-related activities to undertake or to continue?

5. Resource intensity: How demanding is data collection, evaluation, and interpretation for each technique (in terms of costs, time, and expertise)?

6. Comparability: How easy and meaningful is comparison of results over time and across markets?

7. Competitive information: How suitable is the technique to assess brand differentiation?

In addition, the article discusses brand characteristics (e.g., corporate vs. product and/or service-intensity of the brand), category characteristics (e.g., frequency of usage, involvement, social importance), and stakeholder characteristics (e.g., B2C vs. B2B customers, users vs. nonusers, employees vs. consumers) that might moderate the usefulness of each method.

Subsequent to this introduction, the first section discusses different aspects of consumer brand knowledge representation, that is, how consumers may store brand-related knowledge. The following part introduces in more detail the three techniques outlined and which type of knowledge each seeks to uncover. Methods and results of the empirical study follow, with a discussion and managerial implications concluding the article.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Consumer Brand Knowledge Representation

Accessing consumer brand knowledge requires clarifying how consumers process and store different brand-related stimuli. Do consumers linguistically rationalize all brand-related information, that is, translate and store the information verbally? Or do consumers store information in the original format, for instance, as pictures or smells? Theory on mental representation distinguishes between verbal, language-like mental representations (e.g., natural human languages and formal numerical systems consisting of arbitrarily assigned abstract or amodal symbols) and nonverbal, object representations (i.e., concrete or modal symbols such as images, maps, smells, feelings, etc.), resulting from interaction with(in) the physical environment (Barsalou, 1999; Paivio, 1986). Both verbal and nonverbal symbolic systems can function at both a conscious and an unconscious level (Paivio, 1986; Wilson, 2002; Woodside, 2004).

Much research on consumer memory relies on the assumption that consumers linguistically rationalize brand-related information. One of the first theoretical developments in line with this assumption is associative network theory, introducing the notion of associative memory (Anderson & Bower, 1973). This theory assumes that consumers create associative pathways in their minds, resulting in networks of connections, that is, multiple links of brand nodes in consumer memory. While these associative structures can contain both verbal and nonverbal elements, most research focuses on the study of verbal elements. For example, Keller (1993) conceptualizes brand knowledge as a two-dimensional construct, consisting of brand awareness (the likelihood and ease with which consumers recognize and recall a brand when confronted with the product category) and brand image. Brand image includes "perceptions about a brand reflected by the associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 3), characterized by type (attributes, benefits, and attitudes), favorability, strength, and uniqueness (Keller, 1993). Much research dealing with brand knowledge, brand image, or brand reputation adopts this perspective (e.g., Aaker, 1991, 1996; Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995; Del Rio, Vázquez, & Iglesias, 2001; Esch et al., 2006; Hutton, 1997; Krishnan, 1996; Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000).

Another approach to consumer memory proposes a tripartite division of the mind into a semantic/episodic (Tulving, 1972, 2002), a declarative/procedural (Cohen & Squire, 1980), and an explicit/implicit (Graf & Schacter, 1985) system. The semantic memory system, in line with associative memory (Paivio, 1986), contains mostly verbal, categorical, and conceptual knowledge consisting of abstract, context-free information and general facts about a brand (Deese, 1965; Tulving, 1972, 2002). Semantic memory develops via rational thinking,

implying that consumers encode reality in abstract or amodal symbols, words, and numbers (Epstein, 1994; Barsalou, 1999). The episodic memory system contains more detailed, context-related, event-specific, and personal experiences with the brand (Tulving, 1972, 2002; Clayton & Dickinson, 1998; Nyberg et al., 1996). Episodic knowledge explains bonds between brands and consumers (Tulving, 2002), providing insights into consumer self-identities, their motivations and goals (Escalas & Bettman, 2000; Somers, 1994) in a temporally structured and context-sensitive manner (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). The thinking process underlying this memory system is experiential thinking, in which consumers encode reality in specific, modal images, metaphors, and narratives (Epstein, 1994; Barsalou, 1999). Experiential thinking occurs when consumers experience brands with multiple senses, namely vision, audition, haptics, olfaction, and gestation (Barsalou, 1999; Lindstrom, 2005). Sensory experiences influence how consumers understand reality (Lindstrom, 2005) and result in embodied knowledge (Gallagher, 2005), that is, the basic knowledge elements our senses generate (Rosa & Malter, 2003). Consumers typically store embodied knowledge in the original nonverbal form because they lack the necessary linguistic resources to verbalize multisensory information (Barsalou, 1999). The main source of embodied knowledge is vision, since more than 60% of the incoming information reaching the brain passes through the visual system (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008). Smell and taste, too, might play an important role, most obviously for cosmetic or food brands. According to Barsalou (1999), the human brain consists of several separate storage areas for all these different types of sensory information.

The declarative/procedural and the explicit/implicit memory systems account for the fact that consumers process and retrieve both verbal and nonverbal brand knowledge on a conscious as well as on an unconscious level (Paivio, 1986; Woodside, 2004, 2006). The declarative/procedural dichotomy distinguishes between conscious and unconscious knowledge processing and retrieval, while the explicit/implicit dichotomy implies different levels of consciousness during consumer behavior (Mantonakis, Whittlesea, & Yoon, 2008). Declarative memory contains intentionally or consciously acquired, stored, and retrieved knowledge. Similarly, consumers draw on explicit memory to consciously exhibit certain behaviors. Procedural knowledge, on the other hand, consists of skills or abilities consumers acquire non-reflectively (typically via prior experience) and apply without conscious effort (Cohen & Squire, 1980). This is similar to implicit knowledge, which results from prior experiences with a brand and allows consumers to unconsciously perform certain behaviors (Mantonakis, Whittlesea, & Yoon, 2008).

While the memory systems outlined above can contain all aspects of brand knowledge, some tend toward more conscious, verbal brand knowledge (e.g., the semantic/associative memory) while others (such as the episodic memory) show a bias towards unconscious, nonverbal brand knowledge (Tulving, 1972). Figure 1 shows the example of a consumer's brand knowledge representation regarding the destination-brand Paris. Semantic memory, containing abstract information (capital of France, number of inhabitants, etc.), leans toward the conscious/verbal end of the continuum: Based in the declarative and explicit memory system, it allows the consumer to consciously retrieve this type of information. Episodic memory holds information that is the result of personal experiences with the brand (e.g., a visit in Paris) and may consist of verbal but especially nonverbal
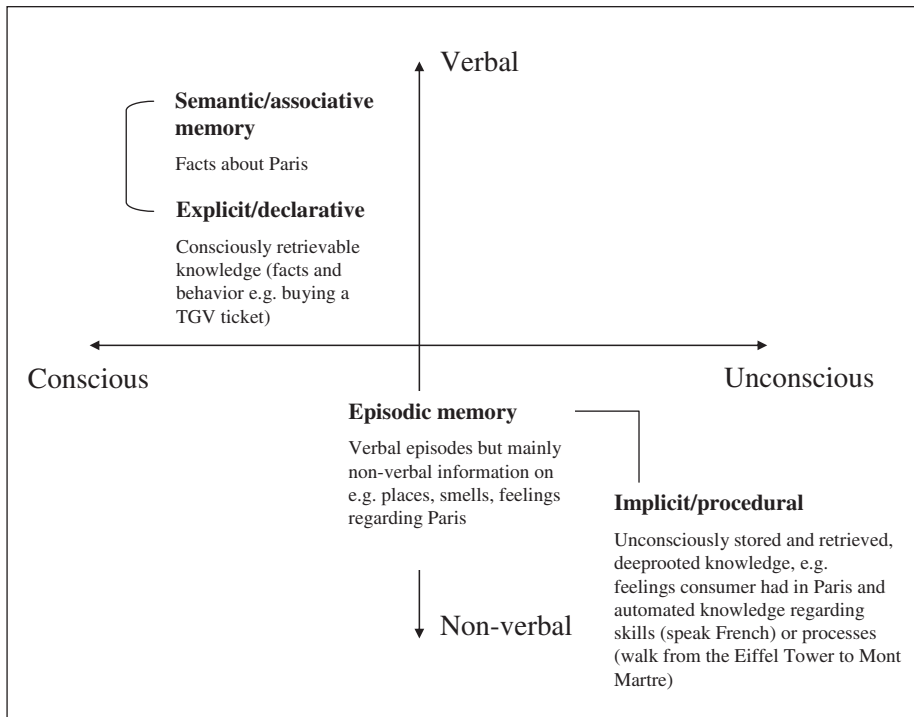
Figure 1. Consumer brand knowledge representation regarding the brand Paris.

information like images or places. Such knowledge often is part of procedural and implicit memory, containing deep-rooted, unconscious brand knowledge.

Methods for Retrieving Consumer Brand Knowledge

Each memory system acquires knowledge through specific principles and requires different methods for activation and retrieval (Mantonakis, Whittlesea, & Yoon, 2008). To comprehensively grasp the meaning a brand has for consumers, it is necessary to apply multiple methods that allow accessing various aspects of consumers' brand knowledge (Woodside, 2004, 2006). A common distinction is between methods retrieving verbal/explicit knowledge (e.g., free associations, written stories) and methods eliciting nonverbal/implicit knowledge (e.g., oral stories, collages).

Free association technique is the most popular method for investigating brand knowledge (Elliott, 1994; Keller, 1993; Krishnan, 1996; Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006). Consumers receive a stimulus—for instance, a brand name or a brand-related picture—and have to spontaneously name or write down a certain number of words that come to mind. Even though the stimulus can tap nonverbal reactions, including images, the focus is typically on retrieving easily accessible and recordable verbal associations from associative/semantic memory (Deese, 1965). Free association tasks focus on retrieving conscious brand knowledge (via declarative and explicit memory) while not giving insights into deeper, implicit brand knowledge (Batey, 2008).

Advancing to less easily accessible levels of brand knowledge (i.e., unconscious, nonverbal knowledge) requires additional research methods. One way to retrieve these knowledge aspects is via stories that provide deep understanding of consumer psychology (Escalas & Stern, 2003; Holt, 2004). Research shows that people think narratively (Bruner, 1991; Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008); therefore, consumers may store much brand-related information episodically in the form of stories. The most natural way to access this type of knowledge is by asking people to reproduce these stories. Knowledge retrieval predominantly taps verbal knowledge—especially if consumers reproduce their stories in writing. Oral storytelling, however, allows investigating both verbal and nonverbal brand knowledge representations, as consumers might underline their verbal accounts with nonverbal expressions (such as sounds or gestures). Storytelling gives researchers access to a broad array of unconscious consumer brand knowledge from episodic and implicit/procedural memory.

While offering some undeniable advantages compared to free association techniques, storytelling does not uncover the whole breadth of brand knowledge representations. Consumers have thoughts, desires, feelings, emotions, experiences, and fancies with regard to brands they cannot articulate in stories because they are either "too vague, too complex, or too intense for ordinary speech" (Siegelman, 1990, p. 7) or even unconscious (Plutchik, 1993). This requires research methods that "engage people in ways that enable them to bring unconscious states to a level of awareness" (Zaltman, 1997, p. 427). One way to uncover such deep thoughts, emotions, metaphors, and unconscious thinking is via projective techniques (e.g., Barner, 2008; Costa et al., 2003; Donoghue, 2000; Hofstede et al., 2007; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995; Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008). Articulating emotions such as joy, sadness, or anxiety can be difficult for individuals. Projective techniques detect this information indirectly without making consumers uncomfortable. For instance, asking consumers to describe which animal best represents the brand and why is a powerful metaphor to uncover unconscious thinking about brands, for example, to tag brand personality (Woodside, 2004). Another way to access this type of information is via pictures or images (Blümelhuber, 2004; Zaltman, 1997). A major part of consumer brand knowledge and thoughts are image- rather than word-based (Damasio, 1994; Kosslyn, 1994; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). As in storytelling, consumers should have an opportunity to represent brand-related information in a format similar to their mental representations. Collage technique is one way to align the research process with the mental state in which brand representation occurs. Collages are an expressive projective technique asking consumers to elaborate their ideas about brands, consumption motives, or product usage (Kirchmair, 2007) by combining different materials, forms, or pictures to create a new whole flexible composition. Collages support spontaneity, fantasy, and creative and metaphorical thinking and trigger new and hidden thoughts, emotions, and associations through transformation, reordering, and reassembling of the component images (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999). As consumers rethink and rearrange their initial idea to assemble the collage, cognitive processes activate implicit or unconscious knowledge as well as unexpected new associations with the brand (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999). Collages support the expression of a variation of internal brand knowledge representations by allowing consumers to retrieve nonverbal and verbal thoughts (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Additionally, in contrast to other image-based techniques (such as asking consumers to draw a brand-related picture), collage-creation does not require artistic skills.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

The previous section introduced different types of brand knowledge and methods to access them. The empirical part of this study compares brand knowledge that each of these methods retrieves in an exploratory setting. The focal brand is a major player in the sports industry. Informants (an interdisciplinary student sample aged 20–26) had to participate in three sessions with five- to seven-day breaks between each session. In each session the stimulus consisted of a picture of a product of the focal brand in a typical usage situation (a shot of a runner's leg wearing running shoes from the focal brand). After seeing the stimulus, respondents had to (1) elicit up to ten verbal associations, (2) write down a story that came to mind when thinking about the brand, and (3) create a collage representing the brand.

This is the exact description of the task provided with the stimulus picture in each of the three sessions: (1) Please write down your thoughts (one per space provided) when you think of the Brand XYZ. (2) Please think of the Brand XYZ. Write down a short story (based on your own experience or imagination) that comes to mind. (3) Please create a collage that expresses what you think about the Brand XYZ by using the provided material.

Informants had to perform the first two tasks online (in a controlled classroom setting); for the final collage task they had one hour and some 100 magazines on display in the experiment room to create an A2-sized collage (420 × 594 mm; 16.5″ × 23.4″). The sample size was 61 respondents for the first two tasks and a random subset of 31 students for the final task. The other 30 informants had to create a collage using a different stimulus. Completion of two collages is arduous and probably affects either result. Still, much experimental and exploratory work relies on sample sizes of this order (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Informants received cash compensation (€30.00) for their participation. Respondents seemed at ease with completing the tasks; however, 3 out of the 61 stories were descriptions of the brand rather than personal experiences with the brand.

In order to make the results of the various methods comparable, the study included creating a codebook relying on a subsample of responses in each experimental setting. Two research assistants independently coded all brand knowledge aspects. For the free association technique they used one code for each association consumers elicited, for the story one code for each fragment of the story, and for the collage one or several codes for each (adjoining group of) picture(s). While these codes cover all brand knowledge aspects of each task, the study also considered the stories' main setting, key protagonists, and tone. For the collage, respondents had to provide a short explanation of each chosen picture to help understanding of their meaning. Inter-coder agreement was 92% for the free association task, 86% for the contents of the story, and 91% for the elements of the collage. The two research assistants and one of the authors resolved disagreements through discussion. Figure 2 shows brand knowledge from one informant elicited by each technique and the respective coding of knowledge elements.

The study reports and compares brand knowledge by evaluating: (1) breadth and concentration of brand knowledge (operationalized via the number of codes necessary to cover all knowledge elements and their cumulative frequency distribution); (2) overlap of specific knowledge elements between methods; and (3) actual brand knowledge. The analysis compares aggregate (across-informant) brand knowledge and does not focus on (within-informant) consistency of knowledge.

Figure 2. Consumer–brand association of informant "Joe" elicited by each technique.

Breadth and Concentration

The average number of knowledge elements retrieved from informants by each method varied substantially (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, given the nature and allotted time period, the average collage contained three times as many brand knowledge elements as the average number of verbal expressions elicited in the free association task. The stories contain slightly more elements than the free association task. The collage task (or the brand in question) motivated all respondents to elicit a large number of knowledge elements: No respondent retrieved fewer than 11 elements in the piece of art. In terms of the breadth of knowledge each method reproduces, both the collages and the stories elicited a higher variety of knowledge elements than the free association technique.

Typically, brand managers rely on the most important aspects of brand knowledge and often use frequency to assess importance (Creswell, 1998). The percentage of all elements the five most frequently mentioned codes uncover ranged between 29% (collage) and 35% (free associations), while the top 30 elements cover some 80 to 90%, respectively. Ten associations make up around 50 percent of knowledge elements, respectively.

Overlap of Content

Collages and storytelling reveal both a larger number of knowledge elements per respondent and a larger variety of knowledge. If (1) collages and storytelling cover all aspects not retrieved by the free association task and (2) the additional elements the two techniques tap are similar, economic considerations might justify the use of one of these two approaches only. Figure 3a shows to what extent different methods tap specific knowledge elements. The 57, 73, and 70 knowledge elements

Table 1. Breadth and Concentration of Brand Knowledge.

	Free Association Task	Storytelling	Collage
Sample size	61	61	31
Different knowledge elements uncovered	57	73	70
Total knowledge elements uncovered	373	517	611
Elements per informant			
Average	6.1	8.5	19.7
High	10	19	38
Low	5	3	11
% of knowledge elements uncovered by			
Top 5 Elements	35	34	29
Top 10 Elements	54	49	48
Top 30 Elements	90	83	87
Elements needed to cover			
50% of total brand knowledge	9	10	11
75% of total brand knowledge	18	25	22
90% of total brand knowledge	30	43	37

each method uncovers result in a total of 92 different elements. Of these, 39 (42%) turn up for each method, while 30 (32%) are unique to one of the three methods—with stories showing the highest number of unique elements: 18% of all knowledge elements storytelling retrieved are not present for the other methods, compared to 12% for free association and 14% for collages.
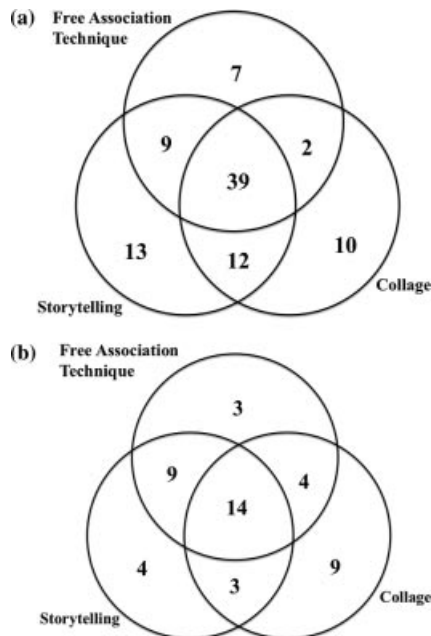

Figure 3. (a) Overlap of all knowledge elements retrieved by each method. (b) Overlap of the 30 most frequent knowledge elements retrieved by each method.

Management typically pays more attention to brand knowledge that is frequent than brand knowledge that is rare (Dacin & Brown, 2006; Keller, 1993). Therefore, Figure 3b only considers the 30 most frequent elements each method elicits. A higher overlap in Figure 3b relative to Figure 3a implies that frequent knowledge elements are more consistent across methods than less frequent ones. The results partly support this notion: 14 of the top 30 (47%) elements each method taps are identical—slightly more than the 42% when taking into account all associations—and only 10 percent (13%) of the elements are unique for the free association (storytelling) approach. The stronger overlap between free association and storytelling than between the other techniques potentially results from the verbal (as opposed to visual) nature of tapping knowledge. In contrast, 30% of the elements the collage uncovers are not among the top 30 of the other two techniques. Indeed, the most frequent element in the collages is not among the top 30 elements in storytelling. This element relates to less common sport activities that informants are unlikely to perform themselves. However, these sport activities are frequent targets of sponsoring activities due to their attractiveness for passive consumption. Collages hence uncover knowledge elements that may remain undetected through the other two methods.

Nature of Brand Knowledge

Finally, this section compares which aspects of brand knowledge each method taps. Amending Keller's (1993) classification of brand knowledge, this study distinguishes between the following groups (in parentheses, the amendments): price, packaging (and distribution), user imagery (both positive and negative), usage imagery, functional benefits, experiential benefits, symbolic benefits, attitudes (facts about the brand, advertising-related knowledge, sponsoring-related knowledge, competitive aspects, and product names/attributes). Examples of brand knowledge amendments respectively are: Sports Experts (a prominent sports retailer, for distribution), cool people (positive user imagery), vain people (negative user imagery), the city where the headquarters are located (facts), the company slogan (communication via advertising), an athlete the company sponsors (communication via sponsoring), same as XYZ (competitive aspects), and running shoes (product). Table 2 shows the distribution of brand knowledge (elements) each method retrieves with respect to this classification.

Usage imagery–related knowledge elements are prominent outcomes in all methods. These mostly relate to sports consumers mentioned, although the frequency of specific sports differs. Running (the sport the stimulus shows) is more prominent in stories that tap episodic and procedural knowledge, while other sports (which the organization sponsors heavily, but respondents are unlikely to perform) more frequently surface with the two other methods. Experiential benefits (e.g., the contribution of the brand to one's performance and outcomes like fitness or health) and product features are frequent knowledge elements all three methods elicit.

No method uncovered much knowledge relating to price, packaging (distribution), negative user imagery, symbolic benefits, attitudes, and competitors. This finding may be due to the methods themselves or the brand in question. For brands that feature price or competition as prominent parts of their desired positioning, these elements may appear more strongly. Brands with a partisan followership (e.g., the Hummer or a political party) may also elicit more competitive aspects and

Table 2. Distribution of Brand Knowledge Retrieved by Method.

Knowledge Aspect	Free Association Task	Storytelling	Collage
Price	3%	4%	1%
Packaging and distribution	1%	1%	0%
User imagery positive	1%	4%	14%
User imagery negative	1%	1%	0%
Usage imagery	18%	20%	22%
Functional benefits	10%	11%	5%
Experiential benefits	17%	18%	18%
Symbolic benefits	1%	3%	3%
Attitudes	0%	0%	1%
Facts	12%	9%	5%
Advertising-related	10%	2%	4%
Sponsoring-related	6%	4%	12%
Competitors	2%	3%	1%
Product	17%	20%	13%

negative user stereotypes. With respect to symbolic benefits and attitudes, both the data collection for the stories (i.e., in writing) and the coding of the collage (i.e., using only the visual elements of the collage) explains the lack of these aspects. A face-to-face interview or "member check" (Woodside, 2006, p. 259), that is, an explanation of the collage content by the creator, might reveal brand attitudes and subjective meanings of the collage and allow advancing to deeper, unconscious levels of consumer memory (Batey, 2008; Bruner, 1991; Woodside, 2006).

The methods lead to significant deviations with respect to these classes of brand knowledge: functional benefits, facts, positive user imagery, and both communication aspects. Free association reveals more associative/semantic knowledge related to facts (e.g., the company's history, size) and advertising-related knowledge (e.g., verbal descriptions of the logo). Easy retrieval and simple verbal reproduction of these elements help their prominence in free association tasks (Deese, 1965). Functional benefits (e.g., the quality of the products, specific technical attributes) are more frequent in free association and storytelling than in collages. Respondents may have an easier time reproducing functional elements verbally than finding pictures in magazines they deem suitable to represent these aspects. Stories allow the retrieval of episodic and procedural memory, such as personal experiences with the brand relating to functional benefits (e.g. durability, comfort or style). Storytelling less likely taps sponsoring-related knowledge because sponsoring does not relate to personal experience, whereas free associations contain sponsored athletes if prominent enough. Also, collages focus on sponsoring activities because the task exposes consumers to magazines potentially containing pictures with athletes using the brand.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study provides ample evidence that method impacts consumer brand knowledge retrieval. Not only the amount of knowledge, but also the nature of knowledge differs, leading to the conclusion that a multi-method approach can

provide more thorough understanding of consumer brand knowledge than a single-method approach. However, typical constraints in marketing research (e.g., time, money) and divergent objectives of brand understanding (e.g., monitoring, competitive tracking) impact the feasibility of a multi-method approach. Based on the issues raised in the introduction, the next part weighs the merits of a multiple- versus single-method approach.

1. Breadth of Knowledge: How Much and What Type of Knowledge Is Reproduced?

Collage-creation is the method that generates the largest number of elements per respondent. The richness of collages varies with the time respondents have to complete the task, the material they have at their disposition, and the location where the respondents create the collage. Informants may enjoy browsing magazines and typically will only participate if they are not under time pressure. In contrast, the free association task does not address the creative potential of respondents and, as part of a questionnaire, provides little incentive to spend a long time finishing the task. In this study, the storytelling part was computer-administered, without probing specific aspects of the story. In a face-to-face setting, this method may easily reach or surpass the richness of knowledge collages tap. Interviewing informants after completing the collage results in more in-depth information about the various parts of the collage, often adding personal experiences of the creator. A combination of collages with the interviewer probing for each collage element may therefore be the method to choose when breadth of knowledge is desirable.

The nature of the brand and the respondent's product class and brand involvement bears on the willingness to participate in each method and the richness of the information the procedure provides. Experiential brands (i.e., those brands respondents interact with more frequently and longer) may add relevance to the storytelling and collage creation tasks. For example, most people may be able to tell a story or create a collage about the car or holiday destination brand they desire/own/remember, but may consider these tasks overwhelming if the brand is a household cleaning product or the average grocery product. High involvement with the category or the brand in question will render the task more relevant and interesting and lead to more insightful results. However, if informants have difficulties in reproducing brand knowledge irrespective of method, brand managers may also be able to draw certain conclusions.

2. Knowledge Origin: Does the Technique Help Brand Management Understand Why Stakeholders Know What They Know?

Most respondent accounts resulting from the storytelling task are personal experiences. Informants often even include an explanation of why they elicit certain aspects of the brand. This added value is also within reach when probing for the contents of the collage. Therefore, if the focus of the investigation is why consumers know what they know (and many consumers may only unconsciously be aware of that), then free association may be least suitable, as the researchers have to guess why informants elicit certain aspects of brand knowledge. For some

aspects, such as product features or advertising slogans, such reasoning may be obvious, but not for others, such as user imagery related aspects. The representation of a brand in the mind results from an accumulation of experiences across touch points over time (Lindstrom, 2005; von Wallpach & Koll, 2007a), a process the respondent cannot sensibly reconstruct. Still, as part of a story relying on personal experience (Flanagan, 1954) or when explaining the meaning projected onto a collage, marketers can infer which consumer–brand touch points carry importance in building knowledge.

Such information is likely more relevant for companies that spend significant resources in maintaining a large number of touch points (e.g., sales channels, information channels) with consumers as opposed to a company using a single sales channel with limited advertising or information activities. Also, brands that motivate consumers to engage strongly in co-creation of brand meaning (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) should know what part and which aspects of brand knowledge company-controlled versus consumer-initiated activities create.

3. Diagnostic Potential: Do Results Inform About the Relationship Between the Brand and the Consumer?

Along the same line of reasoning, story- and collage-creation lend themselves more to understanding unconscious information regarding the bond between consumers and brands. Storytelling has been widely used to better understand consumer/customer–brand relationships (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Woodside & Wilson, 2000), although administration via PC is less likely to uncover much in terms of unconscious emotional bonds than a face-to-face setting. This study fails to elicit highly unconscious, emotional consumer accounts in the storytelling phase, whereas probing and personal interaction will ease such elicitation. To understand how a person relates with the brand, collage-creation is not sufficient. Only after probing why informants choose and combine certain visual images researchers (and maybe even informants themselves) can understand the collage's meaning. Free association performs weakly on this criterion: Time and space restrictions respondents face render in-depth recreation of brand–person relationships unlikely. In addition, associations are indexical; that is, the meaning respondents ascribe to a term depends on the situation they envision and is difficult to infer (Creswell, 1998). Large-scale surveys often employ scales measuring trust, importance, or sympathy of the brand to tap such aspects.

This criterion applies more strongly to players in industries/categories where strong ties between consumers and brands are more frequent. For example, many consumers develop close, almost fanatic relationships with their car, PC, or fashion choice, whereas such relationships are less common in household care categories. Depending on the intimacy of brand–consumer relationships in the focal industry, some brands may perceive free association as sufficient when evaluating this criterion. Brand knowledge also shapes the relationship with other stakeholders. Internal branding emphasizes the importance of the corporate brand as a source of employee commitment (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Organizations should therefore strive to understand which aspects of brand knowledge (resulting from which employee-relevant touch points) lead to high/low levels of employee commitment.

4. Therapeutic Potential: How Actionable Are the Results? Do They Provide Management with a Clear Guideline of Which Brand-Related Activities to Initiate or to Continue?

Each of these methods has potential to guide managerial action. The specific guidance each provides varies. Associations resulting from free association tasks are classifiable according to their valence (Krishnan, 1996), type of association (Keller, 1993), fit with an organization's desired image (Dacin & Brown, 2006; von Wallpach & Koll, 2007b), or their potential to harm the organization. If a brand aiming for a certain lifestyle positioning elicits unwanted (i.e., not compatible with brand identity), unfavorable, or mostly functional associations, management may conclude that past actions were not successful and need reevaluation. Mostly favorable, desirable associations (e.g., mainly consisting of certain user imagery) may indicate effective brand management. The knowledge that stories and collages retrieve may be more insightful and potentially more specific in uncovering weak spots. However, management often disregards discomforting news and only pays attention if the evidence is overwhelming (March & Simon, 1958). Therefore, evidence coming from large sample surveys using free association tasks may be less specific, but more impactful. The impact that stories and collages have on changes in brand management efforts depends on management's belief in these methods and the personal repercussions that changes will bring.

5. Resource Intensity: How Demanding Is Data Collection, Evaluation, and Interpretation for Each Technique in Terms of Costs, Time, and Expertise?

Keeping sample size and geographic coverage constant, free association is the least resource-intensive method of the three. Both the time respondents need to complete the task and the resources analysis and interpretation require are significantly lower than for the other two methods. Rarely will a study administer collages and storytelling tasks to large samples with the idea of drawing conclusions representative for a specific population. More likely, management applies these methods to gain a thick description (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of the brand and purposefully uses a biased sample consisting of, for example, heavy, lost, or highly involved consumers. For free association, data collection options include face-to-face, paper-and-pencil, phone, or online options, whereas the benefits of storytelling are limited in non-personal settings. Personal interviews including a storytelling exercise or discussion about a collage require knowledgeable interviewers. Finally, need and scope for interpretation are lower for free association, hence demanding less time and less qualified researchers relative to the other two methods.

6. Comparability: How Easy and Meaningful Is Comparison of Results over Time and Across Markets?

In order to present free association task results, studies typically summarize frequencies of specific associations, their valence (Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006), and the average position at which an association occurs in the retrieval process

(Vergès, 1992; Vergès & Bastounis, 2001). Tracking these numbers over time and assessing whether specific associations have become more or less frequent, favorable, or prominent is relatively straightforward. Such comparisons do not lend themselves as clearly to storytelling and collage: The collage's look depends on the set of pictures available to the collage creator, and the composition of the picture does not tell the same about the importance of knowledge aspects as the order in the free association approach. Storytelling comparisons may, in addition to the specific content of the story, focus on changes in tone (positive vs. negative), changes in setting (e.g., childhood memory, imagination, geographic location, competitor presence), or changes in the protagonists of the story. If the objective is brand tracking over time, possibly involving multiple geographic markets, the free association task is the most advisable method, eventually in combination with one of the other methods for gaining more in-depth understanding of the results.

7. Competitive Information: How Suitable Is Each Technique to Assess Brand Differentiation?

When evaluating the results of this empirical study, direct references to competitors are rare in the free association and collage methods, and more frequent in storytelling. The collage task may even counter the objective of uncovering competitive information, as respondents may specifically search for pictures that contain the focal brand (if it is as prominent as the one in this study). In the stories, a few experiences relate directly to changes in brand usage, or describe brand choice dilemmas, thereby pointing out the competitive setting of the focal brand, and partly providing key differentiation aspects. In addition to the focal brand, a study could survey both the focal and key competitor brands. In line with the arguments above, such an undertaking is certainly cheaper, simpler, quicker, and more easily interpretable (while lacking in depth and breadth) for the free association method than the other two methods.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The analysis focuses on comparing knowledge elements each method helps to retrieve. Coding associations, elements of stories, and elements of pictures allows comparing methods with regard to the existence and frequency of codes. Clearly, this approach reduces the information stories and collages contain by neglecting, for example, the context and tone of the story, the spatial and dramatic composition of the collage, and the artist's explanation of relationships between collage elements. While reducing comparability between methods, alternative roads to interpretation such as a hermeneutic analysis focusing, for instance, on metaphors in stories (Arnold & Fischer, 1994) or a semiotic analysis of collages (Mick, 1986) would leverage the benefit of either method by providing access to more deeply rooted, embodied, and eventually unconscious knowledge.

The identification of the brand's core elements is an objective of most research on brands, that is, perceptions that remain stable across time or context and that stakeholders share (Dacin & Brown, 2006; Keller, 1993; Vergés, 1992). When applying the free association technique, frequency and position of each brand knowledge element are indicators of core elements (Vergès, 1992). So far, limited

research deals with brand knowledge in different contexts, with the exception of brands sold in different product categories or brand extension research (e.g., Batra & Homer, 2004; Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Low & Lamb, 2000; Schmitt & Dubé, 1992). For example, the brand Red Bull may elicit different associations when the stimulus is a mixed drink using the product as one ingredient as opposed to a stimulus showing one of the Red Bull sports events. To better understand the role of brand in different contexts and to infer context-independent brand elements, future research needs to employ different stimuli to elicit brand knowledge and compare the respective results. In contrast to free associations, the determination of core brand elements in stories and collages is less straightforward. If the artist interprets his collage, the perceived fit of each picture with brand is a criterion; otherwise, the position or size of the pictures may be indicators to use. A hermeneutic analysis of stories may prove useful in understanding the gist of the story and hence the brand—for instance, by identifying those elements of the story the storyteller pronounces and by detecting at which point in the story these elements appear.

This study pools data from respondents to draw conclusions about cross-method homogeneity of results and thereby applies a quantitative perspective to making sense of qualitative data. The objective is to compare whether aggregate knowledge about a brand differs when resulting from tasks addressing different memory systems. Studying knowledge characteristics within-informant, but across-method is another potentially fruitful research avenue.

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