

TOWARDS CONCEPTUALIZING THE CONSUMER COGNITIVE PROCESS UNDERLYING BRAND ASSOCIATION TRANSFER

Jean Boisvert, American University of Sharjah, UAE

ABSTRACT

The last two decades have witnessed substantial research in terms of brand associations although the process underlying transfer of associations from parent brands and line extensions is still unclear. Previous research has seldom explained the principle of cognitive algebra underlying transfer leading to an inconsistent body of knowledge in this area despite important theoretical and managerial implications. The objective of this paper is to alleviate this lack of consistency by proposing a conceptualization of the process underlying transfer of brand associations.

As per the affect transfer literature (Fiske and Pavelchak 1986; Brooks, 1978; Fiske 1982), most studies investigating transfer have investigated the relationship between brand image and the global evaluation of brand extensions (e.g. Aaker and Keller 1990; Sundie and Brodie 1993) but direct evidence for any particular process underlying transfer is thus sparse in the literature. Transfer of affect is claimed to occur if a similarity exists between the parent brand and the extension (Fiske & Pavelchak 1986). The more the parent brand associations are shared by the extension in consumers' minds, the more likely they are to transfer (Boush et al. 1987; Boush & Loken 1991). However, Boush et al. (1987, 1991) did not suggest a method to measure transfer nor they modelled transfer of brand associations. Furthermore, it was argued that when transfer is viewed from the brand-specific associations' perspective, the constraints inherent to the concepts of affect and similarity are overridden (Broniarczyk & Alba 1994). When a new line extension is introduced a transfer is said to have occurred when evaluations are congruent between the measure of associations in the parent brand and the measure of the same associations in the extension (Keller 1993). Very few marketing studies have attempted to conceptualize transfer of brand associations, and/or addressed transfer directly methodologically speaking (Gwinner and Eaton 1999).

A field study was conducted based on the principles suggested by Aaker and Keller (1990) and Keller (1993) and later applied by other authors (Krishnan, 1996; Nelson et al., 1993; Martinez and de Chernatony, 2004; James, 2005). The procedures were based on the use of an open-ended question method in which respondents were asked what comes to mind first when they think about a specific brand and then what comes to mind second, and third. The process was repeated three times in order to generate an exhaustive list of associations. In the survey, the name of the bank was repeated every time a respondent was asked: "what comes to your mind first when I mention Established Bank to you?" "what comes to your mind second when I mention Established Bank to you?" and "what comes to your mind third when I mention Established Bank to you?". This method reconciles the best of indirect methods by using open-ended probing questions and direct quantitative methods in order to generate a series of consumer-based associations (Krishnan, 1996).

The paper suggests that associations transfer between parent brands and line extensions lies on a paradox. More specifically, when the statistical index in repeated measures of brand associations in the parent brand and then in the extension is non-significant, complete transfer is observed. On the other hand, statistically significant measurements of specific brand associations, assessed before and after, reveal a non transfer of those associations. The arithmetical principle underlying magnitude of transfer of brand associations is non linear being inversely proportional to its statistical significance.

This paper contributes to a better understanding of how brand association transfer from a parent brand to its extension. The existing literature on transfer has either described transfer of affect or the impact of fit without bringing any insights into how specific brand association transfer to the extension which has concrete theoretical and managerial implications. This article closes this knowledge gap. As proposed in the conceptualization, transfer of brand associations follows an optimization pattern. The magnitude of transfer can be either high or low with statistically significant thresholds. It is low when the association strongly linked to the parent brand, from the consumer's point of view, is either weakly linked to the extension or already strongly linked to the latter (and significantly more than the parent brand). Furthermore, the magnitude of transfer will be high when the association is equally linked to the extension as compared to the parent brand meaning that the statistical inference is not significant which is counter intuitive and represents a paradox. One would expect a high transfer being statistically significant between the parent brand and the extension but the empirical reality confirms otherwise.

References available upon request