Qualitative Analysis of Consumer Brand Associations for Sports Brands: Cross-Cultural Comparison

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Introduction

Consumers tend to associate a brand with something in memory (Aaker & Keller, 1990). Schultz and de Chernatony (2002) stated that corporate brands are considered as a dynamic interface between an organization’s actions and customers’ perceptions. Because consumers evaluate brands very differently and their judgment will greatly influence purchase intentions, it is imperative to identify associations that are unique to a brand and how they successfully transfer from one (e.g., parent) brand to other (e.g., extended brand/products). Since brand associations can vary among consumers, across usage situations, and in different competitive environments (Pitta & Katsanis, 1995), there is need for additional research to investigate brand associations that may vary cross-culturally. Bottomley and Honden (2001) indicated that replication of brand evaluation studies across cultures often fail due to cross-cultural variation.

Researchers have found cross-cultural variations in consumer brand evaluations due to differing styles of thinking. Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001) argued that Eastern cultures promote holistic thinking while Western societies are more likely to promote analytic thinking. This view suggests that due to different styles of thinking, consumers evaluate branding activities from different perspectives. Regardless of its importance as a research topic when global businesses have become a prevalent trend, cross-cultural research on consumer brand associations is still lacking.

In the context of sports, Ross, James, and Vargas (2006) argued that identification of types of brand associations and development of a scale to measure various aspects of brand associations are still in developmental stage. Because associations help create (or transform) brand image (Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001), knowing which brand associations are used by sports consumers will provide useful information for practitioners as well as researchers. The need to conduct brand association research at the cross-cultural level cannot be emphasized enough because numerous business attempts are being made at the global level. This trend is likely to continue for a certainty as more countries get into free trade agreement, which will create a more favorable business environment for a company with strong brand power. Relatedly, study objectives are to: (a) identify various types of information (brand associations) individuals are reminded of related to a popular athletic brand, (b) develop a perceptual map to depict relative relationships among brand association types, and (c) examine cross-cultural similarities and differences between Americans and Koreans.

Methodology

Using a snow bowling technique, a total of 100 (50 Americans and 50 Koreans) individuals were interviewed. Ten interviewees were conveniently chosen in the ages of younger than 20, 21-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60 or older who frequently purchase athletic merchandise. This grouping method was chosen to increase generalizability of the findings in which different generations often display varying individual preferences. For each interview, a semi-structured questionnaire that consisted of five questions and demographic questions was used. The five questions included the following: (a) past/current purchase of athletic merchandise; (b) type of purchased items; (c) types of sports items represented; (d) specific school or team items represented; and (e) aspects each respondent associated the testing brand with when thinking of the brand or bought products under the brand. Each interview lasted for about 15 to 20 minutes. Interviews took place in various locations including office, library, private home, classroom via face-to-face or phone.

To conduct cross-cultural examination, a Korean data was collected for two reasons (data availability and market size). Initially, the instrument was translated into Korean and then translated back into English to check consistency.
(the result indicated good consistency with minimal errors). The faculty in Korea recruited four graduate students and then data was collected using the same snow bowling technique. The cross-cultural data was initially collected in Korean and then translated back into English. Initially, four manufacture brands were chosen: two well recognized brands (i.e., New Balance and Under Armour) and two less recognized brands (i.e., Fila and K-Swiss). Our primary rationalization was to choose multiple brands: (a) with adequate brand recognition; (b) that are less recognized and compare the results with that of well recognized brands; (c) that are adequately recognized in both cultures with varying levels. However, unexpectedly, respondents in both cultures only sufficiently recognized one brand (i.e., New Balance) while lack of brand recognition in one culture hindered from identifying sufficient brand association types. As a result, data was content analyzed only related to New Balance.

Summary of Key Findings and Discussion

Various types of associations that consumers connected their purchased brands with were identified. Those ten dimensions of brand associations that were applicable to both cultures included the following: (a) People factor; (b) Price factor; (c) Governing body factor; (d) Appearance factor; (e) Sport factor; (f) Institution/organization factor; (g) Fitness factor; (h) Location factor; (i) Brand factor; and (j) Marketing factor. On the perceptual map, the ten dimensions are further classified into four higher-order dimensions that included the following: (a) tangible/brand-related (upper left side listed with none), tangible/brand-irrelevant (lower left side listed with People factor and Location factor), intangible/brand-related (upper right side listed with Brand factor, Governing body factor, Institution/organization factor, and appearance factor), and intangible/brand-irrelevant (lower right side listed with Price factor, Sport factor, Fitness factor, and Marketing factor). The relative locations and proximity among the ten dimensions provided information on discriminant validity.

Generally, the overall findings were consistent with the existing literature with some new insights offering varying views to the literature. The overall findings of the current research were comparable to Freling and Forbes' (2005) research that fans often infer various associations that remind them of a brand in which various brand personality traits become a representative image of products under that brand. The ten dimensions of brand associations suggest that varying aspects of brand associations affect consumer thought process that often trigger actual purchase of athletic merchandise. The overall findings provide evidence to the literature that Keller (1993) and Shocker, Srivastava, and Ruekert (1994) indicated that forms of brand associations often include product or non-product attributes that are tangible, functional, intangible, experiential, or symbolic.

Based on Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan's (2001) view that individuals in eastern culture tend to be holistic thinkers, we expected that Koreans would be affected more by brand-related information than Americans. But that was not necessarily the case in the current study. Our supposition is that the weak brand recognition among Koreans somehow affected this type of result. Future research will need to empirically examine our argument to confirm. Braunstein and Ross' (2010) research is also comparable to the current research. They extended the idea of brand associations into the concept of brand personality in team sports. Derived from Aaker’s (1997) research on brand personality, they identified personality traits that individuals were frequently reminded of related to their favorite sports teams as a brand. Six brand personality in sport (BPS) dimensions were identified that included success, sophistication, sincerity, rugged, community-driven, and classic. Although additional empirical test of the ten proposed brand association dimensions is needed, the current research offer some insights that may guide scholars and practitioners into the direction of future research investigating brand associations especially at the global level.