Capturing Association Sets to Evaluate Consumer Differences in Perceptions of Sports

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Advances in cognitive psychology demonstrate that people think about phenomena through concept and category systems that are developed through communication and experience (Lamberts & Shanks, 1997). Those concepts and categories become related to each other in memory through structures, which are also known as schemas (Fisher, 2017). This structural basis for memory and reasoning guides tastes and preferences, and has been incorporated into brand theory in the form of models that understand brand equity as the strength of association sets that are triggered by the brand (Halkias, 2015).

The challenge for market researchers is to identify the concept and category schemes that consumers use when thinking about products and services. Schemas must be inferred through the concepts and categories that consumers use when thinking about a brand and/or a particular class of products or services (Meyers-Levy, 1989). The challenge is amplified by the recognition that schemas change as a result of experience. They may enlarge or they might reorganize – processes classically known as assimilation and accommodation (Schaffer, 2006). Thus, it becomes important to understand how people who are familiar with a brand or a product class differ from those who are not familiar with it.

This approach differs significantly from classic methods of measurement, such as psychometric scaling, because the concepts and categories must be derived inductively from consumers, and the researcher cannot assume a common latent structure, as is normally required using psychometric techniques (Leiber, 1978). In other words, the concept and category schemes that consumers use must be derived directly from their memory and/or reasoning behavior. Further, differences between those who have experience with the brand or product class may be due to different structure of relations among concepts and categories, rather than merely with the level of score on a particular latent trait (aka: factor or dimension).

The approach also differs from thematic analysis of interview data. Themes derived from several interviews or focus group data provide a useful analysis of the cultural narratives associated with a particular phenomenon (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). When applied at a psychoanalytic level, they can provide a useful understanding of the existential narratives people build around their lives (Deutsch & Murphy, 1955). Although these are important and useful levels of analysis, they do not capture the underlying schemas — that is, the concepts, categories, and relationships among concepts and categories that consumers use when recalling or reasoning. It is necessary to map the underlying brand (or product category) associations in order to ascertain the ways that brand or (or product category) is represented in memory, and the consequently most useful associations to amplify or add in marketing communications (Halkias, 2015; Meyers-Levy, 1989).

Word association methods have been advocated as a means to identify and map the concept and category scheme of consumers (Friedmann, 1986). Although rarely used, they have been applied to sport, and have yielded useful insight (Stewart & LaCassagne, 2005). Indeed, the fact that such methods are not culture-bound has been a particular advantage.

In order to explore further the application and insights that may be obtained from word associations, we asked sport participants and non-participants to mention five words that came to mind for three sports: (1) diving, (2) track and field, and (3) their own favorite participant sport. People (N=192) were randomly intercepted in public spaces using street surveys, and asked to mention 5 words they associated with each of the three sport. Except for their “own preferred sport”, it can be assumed respondents were non-participants in diving and track and field. Diving (N=126)
and track and field (N=84) participants were approached, via their clubs, through an online survey. These participants were also asked to provide 5 words that came to mind when they think of their sport.

The street survey yielded a total of 897 words for diving, 920 words for track and field, and 918 words for “own sport”. The diving online responses yielded 625 words; the track and field online responses yielded 415 words. Total words for diving (street and on-line) yielded 1522 responses and 294 unique words; the total words for track and field (street and on-line) yielded 1335 responses and 287 unique words.

The researchers spent several rounds of coding before reaching consensus about the categories and subcategories’ structure. The 12 categories reflect groupings pertinent to the sport and marketing communication context, and include: (1) experience, (2) skills, (3) outcomes, (4) structure; (5) physical environment, (6) affect and evaluation, (7) aesthetics, (8) events, (9) novelty, (10) ethics, (11) participant characteristics, and (12) body. For several categories, subcategories were created. For example, the category of experiences included: escape, physical, affective, and learning; the category of affects and evaluation included: negative affect, positive affect, negative evaluation, positive evaluation, variable evaluation and variable affect. Once the category structure was agreed upon, two researchers independently coded all words. Discrepancies in coding were further discussed with the other members of the research team until consensus was reached.

Comparisons of participants and non-participants in diving and track and field demonstrated significant differences in the salience, ubiquity, and penetration of particular concepts and categories. In particular, participants’ concept and category schemes demonstrated greater focus on details of the sport and its associated experiences. Participants in different sports also demonstrated somewhat different concept and category patterns, reflecting differences in the performance demands and subculture of their sport. These findings suggest that marketing communications intended to recruit new sport participants and communications intended to attract viewers who have not experienced the sport should build from different representations of the sport and what it entails. Implications for marketing and for future research are discussed.