

Jerry Seinfeld: Exploring Human Brand Associations

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Abstract

This study uses a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the associations that consumers tie to a specific human brand (Jerry Seinfeld) prior to his anticipated co-branding partnership with a regional Australian financial institution. Results of the study identified strong and unique attribute and attitude associations in consumers' knowledge networks linked to the Jerry Seinfeld brand. These findings have implications for the co-branding partner in terms of the development of strategic positioning focusing on the partners positive salient human brand associations. Interestingly, benefit associations were not identified in this study, suggesting that other methods may be more appropriate in eliciting consumer brand associations for human brands.

Keywords: Brand associations, human brands, positioning, co-branding, brand equity.

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Introduction

To state that consumers develop associations about *product* brands is well accepted in marketing. Surprisingly, research has failed to explore the unique associations consumers link to *human* brands, such as celebrities. Studies in the celebrity endorsement literature have highlighted that the effectiveness of an endorsement is reliant on the match-up between the celebrity's image and the endorsed brand's image (Kamins 1990; Misra and Beatty 1990; Kamins and Gupta 1994). However, research has not been directed towards identifying the sources of human brand equity in terms of the unique associations that create a celebrity's brand's image. Understanding the sources of human brand equity, subsequently influences an endorsed partner's brand equity, through the meaning transfer process (McCracken 1989). The knowledge that consumers' hold about a particular brand is central to consumers' brand evaluations and choices. This study examines the associations tied to a celebrity within the pre-launch stage of an actual co-branding partnership. Jerry Seinfeld, a successful human brand known to endorse only a few product brands, has recently been signed to promote a regional Australian financial institution, an organisation new to celebrity co-branding. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is used to explore the human brand associations that have the ability to transfer onto the organisational partner brand from the anticipated co-branding relationship. Within focus group discussions Joiner's (1998) elicitation method is used to identify individual brand associations and Roedder John, Loken, Kim and Monga's (2006) Brand Concept Mapping (BCM) technique is used to aggregate the individual participant brand associations. Following Henderson, Iacobucci and Calder's (1998, 2002) recommendation, social network analysis (SNA) is applied to analyse the structural properties of the brand associations. The main aim of the study is to identify and use, in the forthcoming promotional campaign, the key brand features associated with the human brand (Jerry Seinfeld) that have the potential to increase the equity of both co-branding partners.

Brand Equity and Brand Associations

According to the customer-based brand equity model, brand knowledge, consisting of brand awareness and brand image, is the key to creating brand equity (Keller 2008). Leveraging human brand awareness and human brand image, in order to enhance partner brand equity, is the basis of using human brands for co-branding purposes (Seno and Lukas, 2007). Brand image is defined as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller 2008: 51). The associations that consumers tie to a human brand have the ability to transfer onto a brand partner through the co-branding process (McCracken 1989). The sources of brand equity tied to human brand partners can aid in enhancing partner brand awareness and are also able to facilitate the transfer of strong, unique and favourable associations onto the partner brand. Brand awareness for human brands is particularly strong, since by definition they are highly skilled in their chosen field, and because of these accomplishments, they have acquired great public recognition (Pringle and Binet 2005; Cronin 2003). It is the identification of the human brand image component of brand knowledge, i.e. the associations that become linked to a human brand in memory, that are highly important to brand managers in their strategic positioning and they should focus on leveraging the positive and unique secondary associations from the human brand partner (Keller 2008).

Consumers' knowledge of brands is organised in associative networks in memory (Aaker 1991, 1996; Keller 1993). According to the Associative Network Theory (Martindale 1991; Anderson 1983; Collins and Loftus 1975), memory is structured as an associative network containing nodes (brand information) connected via related links. Although Aaker (1991) provides a comprehensive classification of brand information within consumers' knowledge networks, Keller's (2008) categorisation is more appropriate for human brands due to the inclusion of non-product related associations which include attributes (product and non-product related), benefits (functional, experiential and symbolic) and attitudes that consumers hold of the brand in memory. Consumer knowledge for human brands may be more limited than product brands since, for example, functional benefits are unlikely in a human brand context. Associations tied to human brands could consist of celebrity attributes, the advertisements they feature in, brands they endorse, attitudes towards endorsements as well as consumers' perceptions of experiences they have had with the celebrity themselves (e.g., autograph signing, fan clubs, media articles and blogs such as Twitter). The associations that consumers tie to human brands are developed through experiences with the brand and influence consumers' perceptions, preferences, and choices in relation to human brands and the brands they endorse (Aaker 1991). Human brand associations are powerful as they can be transferred onto an endorsed brand (McCracken 1989) and may become part of the endorsed brand's association set. This is due to the spreading activation process, whereby several nodes in memory act as triggers resulting in the simultaneous activation of two connected nodes in the memory network (Anderson 1983). Identifying brand associations provides useful information for brand managers to better differentiate and position their brand from competitors, create positive feelings and attitudes towards their brand and aid in the retrieval of brand information (Aaker 1991; Low and Lamb 2000). Prior to selecting an endorser or co-branding partner, brand managers should be aware of the unique positive and negative associations tied to the human brand, since these associations can be transferred onto the co-brand (McCracken 1989), becoming a part of its association set and ultimately influencing its equity.

Mapping Brand Associations

Knowledge of brand associations is essential for marketers, yet the identification and measurement of brand associations has tended to be more artful than precise. One of the first approaches developed to draw out consumer brand associations is ZMET, Zaltman's Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman and Coulter 1995). ZMET uses qualitative research techniques to identify key brand associations followed by in-depth interviews to uncover links between the brand associations. More recently, Roedder John et al. (2006) have introduced Brand Concept Mapping (BCM) to not only identify important consumer brand associations, but also graphically represent how these associations are connected to the brand and to one another. BCM is a simple, yet effective technique that is structured in three stages: elicitation, mapping and aggregation (Roedder John et al. 2006). In the elicitation stage consumers are asked to recall important brand associations for a specified target brand (Joiner 1998). Consumers then show how the associations are connected to the target brand and to one another by structuring the information in a diagram. In the third stage, researchers aggregate the individual brand maps to produce a consensus brand map. BCM gives a more precise way to generate visual representations of brand associations, but the technique provides no means for conducting a structural analysis of the associations.

Social network analysis (SNA) is a quantitative, relational approach that goes beyond basic mapping of consumer perceptions to analysing structural aspects of network connections

(Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982). Henderson et al. (1998) demonstrate the value of SNA for analysing brand associations. They discuss five different network properties in relation to 10 different branding effects. Of particular relevance to this study are the different network analytic measures of centrality that can be used to detect critical and complementary combinations of brand features, which may assist in brand positioning. Although a social network analytic approach to aggregating brand associations has been conducted for product brands such as cars (Henderson et al. 1998, 2002) no research to date has used this technique for human brands.

Method

An Australian based research company recruited participants from their panel data consisting of participants who have actively signed up to participate in research studies with the company. Participants took part in one of two separate focus group sessions. Eighteen adults, 9 females and 9 males, between the ages of 18 and 60 completed brand concept maps for the human brand, Jerry Seinfeld. Each of the focus groups lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Joiner's (1998) nondirective, free association elicitation approach was used to generate individual brand associations. This unstructured method allows participants to include any salient association directly or indirectly linked to the brand, be it a tangible characteristic of the brand or an intangible quality (Steenkamp, Van Tripp and Ten Berge 1994). To elicit brand associations, participants were told to think about "*anything* that comes to mind when you think about the human brand: *Jerry Seinfeld*". Once the brand associations were identified, participants were asked to generate their individual concept maps by drawing different types of lines (single, double or triple) between associations to signify the strength of the connections (Roedder John et al. 2006). The information from the individual maps were then aggregated and entered into a relational matrix for SNA. Ucinet (Borgatti, Everett & Freeman, 2002) and Netdraw software (Borgatti 2002) were used to analyse the brand associations and create the network maps showing the interconnections among the brand associations.

Results

Figure 1 presents the graphical representation of the brand associations for Jerry Seinfeld. The nodes in the graph specify the characteristics and items reported to be associated with the human brand and the lines show the interconnections among the nodes, with the thicker lines indicating core associations. Not surprising, the *Jerry Seinfeld* node dominates the graph, with 19 direct associations. Specific human brand attributes and participants' attitudes towards Seinfeld are identified in the map. The thicker lines to *Comedian* and *Actor* emphasise his core attributes, in terms of his career, and both are linked to other key traits, *Comedian* with *Stand-up* and *Actor* with the *Characters* featured in his TV Show. Participants' in-depth discussions provided strong support for focussing on his comedic style in a co-branding campaign. Of potential importance, Seinfeld's comedy was not necessarily always seen in a positive light. While some participants thought his comedy was "a bit quirky", others held more negative attitudes describing it as "contrived" and "manufactured" and "he is always nitpicking at people."

Seinfeld's stand-up comedy act, showing him as a successful individual, using his contrived humour and even emphasising his American nationality would be drawing on his brand image that highlight his key brand features at the core of consumers' associations.

Table 1: Network Centrality Measures for Jerry Seinfeld Brand Associations

Brand Node	Degree	2-Step Reach	Betweenness
Jerry Seinfeld	0.679	0.964	0.758
Comedian	0.250	0.893	0.070
Actor	0.179	0.857	0.050
Stand-up	0.143	0.786	0.204
Successful	0.143	0.714	0.031
Wealthy	0.143	0.786	0.009
Contrived	0.107	0.750	0.000
Funny	0.071	0.679	0.000
American	0.214	0.786	0.110
TV Show	0.214	0.750	0.107

Discussion

A combination of Brand Concept Mapping and Social Network Analysis proves to be a useful technique to elicit, map and aggregate consumer knowledge structures for human brands, providing a holistic view of consumers' perceptions of a celebrity's brand image. Findings from this study identified many factual, concrete attribute associations tied to the Jerry Seinfeld brand, such as his career, hobbies and the movies or TV shows in which he has starred. These attributes explain the sources of the celebrity's brand equity. By using the BCM technique, participants could move beyond the mere tangible, concrete or "factual" descriptors of the Seinfeld brand, to describe abstract attributes such as his success and attitudes towards his humour. Interestingly, participants were unable to link the attributes tied to Jerry Seinfeld to either functional, experiential or symbolic benefits, suggesting that the brand concept mapping method may not be appropriate for eliciting consumers' meaning tied to human brands, and other methods such as laddering (Reynolds and Gutman 1988), may be more suitable. Future research should be directed towards exploring and mapping other human brand associations in order to identify whether benefit associations could in fact be tied to human brands.

The results of the BCM and SNA analyses provide valuable information on the key human brand features or attributes that should be focused on to effectively position the brand in future promotional campaigns, providing consistent alignment with consumers' knowledge structures. Results of this study demonstrate that by using a combination of methods, brand managers are able to identify and develop a positioning strategy focusing on the identified strong and unique human brand associations. Future research should explore the co-branding partner's associations to identify compatibilities in brand image to further direct promotional strategies in order to ensure co-branding effectiveness through image congruency (Kamins 1990; Misra and Beatty 1990; Kamins and Gupta 1994). This will also provide consumers with cognitive consistency and assist them in easily encoding advertising messages, thus enhancing the equity of both brands.

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