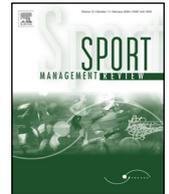




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Measurement and segmentation of sport fans using brand association networks: Application to Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League (UCL)



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ABSTRACT

This article presents a new research methodology for cognitive segmentation based on brand association networks. This application illustrates how brand association networks and cognitive segmentation can identify and describe the UEFA Champions League fans' segments as a function of their cognitive content and structure. Four segments were identified (show-business lovers, passionate fans, admirers of celebrities and fair play, and event followers). A discussion of the results, directions for future research and managerial contributions are provided.

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1. Introduction

The sports industry represents one of the ten biggest business sectors and its primary source of revenue is derived from sports fans (DeSarbo & Madrigal, 2011). Bouchet, Hillairet, and Bodet (2013, p. 3) highlighted the fact that “today, sports brands have become powerful, some even mythical, and get great benefits from their successful products, their images and the value they hold (. . .). Moreover, their success is based on their ability to enhance the perception and the recognition of symbols associated with them.” Branding is recognized as a strategic leverage for sport organizations, both nationally and internationally (Chanavat & Bodet, 2009; Richelieu, Lopez, & Desbordes, 2008) and is one of its major assets (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005). Its strength is one of the main drivers of fans' commitment and purchasing merchandize which allows them to self-identify with their club (Richelieu & Pons, 2006).

Brand image represents an important concept in consumer behaviour and marketing research for scholars and practitioners. There are two streams of research in sport image. The first is based on cognitive psychology with the schema

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theory (Chalip & Costa, 2005). The second has its foundations in social psychology with the concept of social representation (Bodet & Lacassagne, 2012; Bodet, Meurgey, & Lacassagne, 2009; Bouchet & Lebrun, 2010; Ferrand & Pagès, 1996; Lebrun, Souchet, & Bouchet, 2013). From the 1980s, mainstream research in marketing has discussed and measured image with brand associations (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). This research stream is based on cognitive psychology and considers brand image as associations organized as a network in consumer memory (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Collins & Quillian, 1969; Tversky, 1977). The graphical representation of such a brand memory is called a brand concept map. John, Loken, Kim, and Monga (2006) and Brandt, Pahud de Mortanges, Van Riel, and Bluemelhuber (2011) call for a future research aimed at understanding and uncovering consumers' brands associations' networks in consumer memory. The heterogeneity of individuals' brand cognition reinforces this challenge (Carrillat, Riggle, Locander, Gebhardt, & Lee, 2009).

To date there are three methods based on cognitive network theory that use mapping techniques in order to analyze associations' networks in consumer memory: concept mapping (Joiner, 1998), Zaltman's Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Christiansen & Olson, 2002; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995), and Brand Concept Maps (John et al., 2006). It is assumed that the structure of the elicited map reveals the inherent relationships between the associations and the brand as represented in a person's memory (Joiner, 1998). All three methods adopt the following three stages: elicitation of consumers' maps, aggregation of individuals' maps and construction of a final collective brand map. These methods are aimed at identifying consumers' common cognitive structure related to brands. These methods do not emphasize which associations are core associations and which are non-core associations (John et al., 2006). Furthermore the spreading activation theory (Anderson, 1983) considers that recall of information is made through the activation of one node and this activation spreads from that node to other nodes connected to it in memory. The strength of the activation depends on the distance between the link (Anderson, 1983). Concept mapping and Brand Concept Maps method allow for consideration of the strength of the links, but neither of these methods are able to analyze the directions of the links between the associations.

Moreover, these methods do not allow integration of the heterogeneous cognitive profiles (Carrillat et al., 2009; Grunert & Grunert, 1995; Woodside, 2004). In any event, they rest on the risky assumption that customer cognitive contents and structures are homogeneous enough to warrant aggregation. This heterogeneity should be analyzed by carrying out segmentation. In order to fulfil this objective, we conceived a method introducing innovative developments since it explicitly takes into account the causal relationships between variables and the strengths of these relationships, as well as explicitly deriving specific collective maps for diverse hidden segments. Hence it enables research to model the inherent heterogeneity present within the collected data, especially when dealing with small to medium sample data sets.

Our paper follows this important research stream, and has potential managerial implications. For brand image management it highlights the causal relationships that should be reinforced by communication campaigns. For segmentation, the technique uses brand perceptions as its main criteria. The cluster descriptions provide managers with information about the different subgroups of fans, which have different brand perceptions. Sport marketers could prioritize the clusters and adapt their competitive strategy in light of these differences in perception. For brand positioning, managers can assess the relevance of the brand identity by comparing fans' perceptions with the brand's positioning statement. Finally, it concerns brand extensions, co-branding, celebrity endorsement and sponsorship strategy in analysing the associations between two or more brands.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we clarify the theoretical framework. In Section 3, we present and illustrate this innovative methodology based on causal mapping. In Section 4, we analyze the brand associations' network of a major sporting event to illustrate how the method can be applied in order to perform a segmentation based on fans' cognitive structure. In Section 6, we contrast the new methodology with the existing ones and focus on the potential for further development of the methodology. A discussion and managerial implications concludes the article.

2. Theoretical framework

A review of the literature related to cognitive psychology reveals that researchers in marketing and in sport marketing use various concepts to express the information linked to a brand in the consumers' minds: brand knowledge, brand image or brand associations. Based on this literature review we suggest a new method, which opens the option of measuring customer segments.

2.1. Brand knowledge, brand image and brand associations

In line with the work of Peter and Olson (2001), Keller (2003) stressed the fact that brand knowledge relates to the cognitive representation of the brand: "Consumer brand knowledge can be defined in terms of the personal meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory, that is, all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information" (Keller, 2003, p. 596). Researchers studying the organization of consumer memory at one point debated whether brand-knowledge structures were organized by attributes or by brands, as well as the effects of different information-processing factors such as consumer goals, brand familiarity, and so on (Bettman, 1979; Olson, 1978).

There are various streams of research that help to illuminate the personal meaning of brand knowledge. However other aspects of brand knowledge may also be important at the same time, suggesting a need for brand synthesis, as follows: awareness, attributes, benefits, images, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and experiences (Keller, 2003). Broadly, these different kinds of information can be seen as some of the key dimensions of brand knowledge.

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