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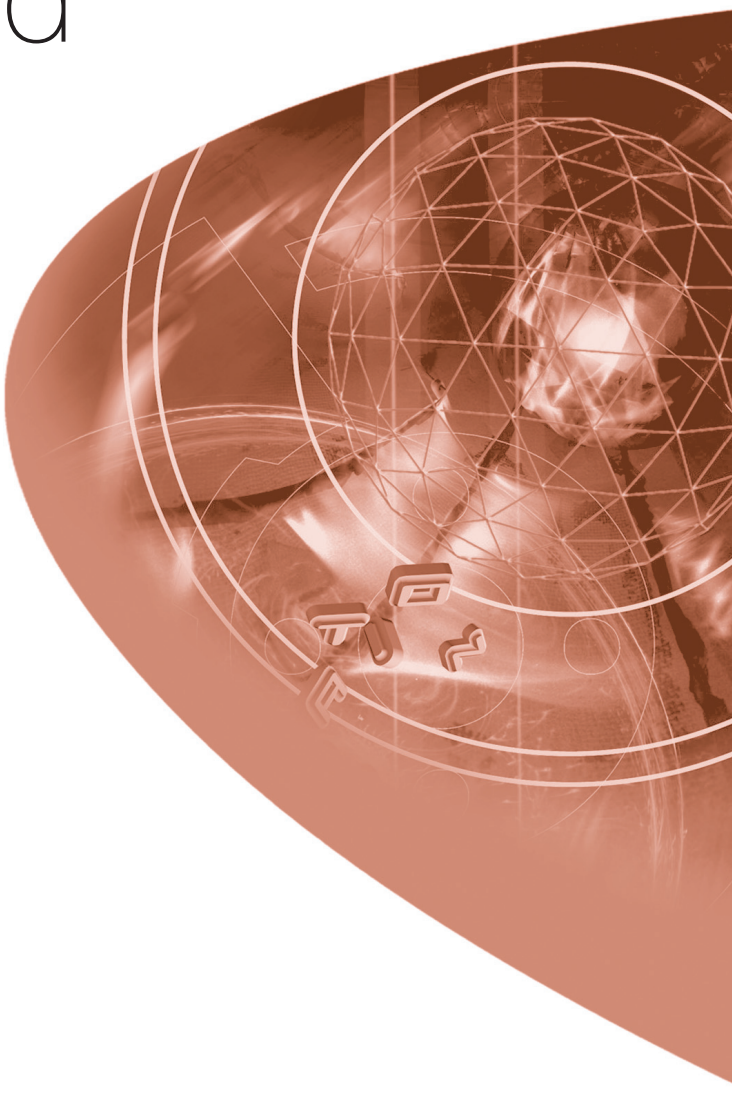

Special issue: 6th International Conference of the SIG on Brand, Identity, and Corporate Reputation of the Academy of Marketing

Guest Editors: Oriol Iglesias, Jatinder J. Singh and Mònica Casabayó

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Editorial

Over the years, I have found that academic sponsored conferences can address key issues facing the global marketplace by allowing contributors to address areas of interest that may not have been previously identified. The concept of key changes and challenges facing brands in an uncertain environment was the area of concern that were addressed at the 6th International Conference of the Special Interest Group on Brand, Identity, and Corporate Reputation of the Academy of Marketing that was held in ESADE in April 2010. I am pleased to present some of the research that was presented at this conference in this special issue of the *Journal of Product & Brand Management*.

Richard C. Leventhal

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Guest Editorial

Key changes and challenges for brands in an uncertain environment

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Abstract
Purpose – Brands are facing key changes and challenges that need to be addressed from both the academic as well as the managerial perspectives. This paper aims to discuss some of them and revises the research agenda of the field of brand management.
Design/methodology/approach – Conceptual implications are drawn from the analysis and discussion of the papers of this special issue, as well as from previous literature.
Findings – In this global world in which brands are present in many different countries and operate in really diverse business sectors the classical brand management theories and many of their assumptions may need to be revised.
Originality/value – The paper discusses the key challenges that brands are facing and encourages academics to use the rich diversity of methodologies that they have at their disposal and that can be extremely helpful to address the future research agenda of this field.

Keywords Brand management, Brand heritage, Luxury brands, Brand equity, Narratives

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The world in which we live is far more complex today than it was just a few years ago because of a feverish and fascinating process of perpetual change. New technologies bursting onto the scene, social networks undergoing extraordinary growth and expansion, huge amounts of information becoming available to consumers, the globalisation of the economy and the accelerated development of the so-called emerging countries are some of the main phenomena that are changing the face of the competitive environment in which brands operate (Aaker, 1996, 2010; Keller, 2003; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Veloutsu, 2009), which in turn is posing stiff challenges for managers.

One of the main consequences of this is the shift of focus, among both practitioners and academics, away from the product brand and towards the corporate brand. Whereas the primary goal of product brands is customer satisfaction, corporate brands have a broader, more all-embracing vision that takes into account the interests of multiple stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Anisimova and Mavondo, 2010) that includes not only customers but also other players such as employees, suppliers, the media, and investors. This new approach, in which the organisation becomes the brand (De Chernatony, 2002), is gaining importance in a more connected, transparent and global world. Furthermore, this new environment, where the weight of the services sector in the global economy is ever greater, has also encouraged the flourishing of service brands, which likewise highlight the importance of managing multi-stakeholder relationships (Brodie *et al.*, 2009). In some cases this has caused the terms service and corporate brands to be used interchangeably (De Chernatony *et al.*, 2006), although not all corporate brands are necessarily service brands.

Managers of corporate and service brands (and even product brands, although hitherto to a lesser extent) also place increasing emphasis on brand experience management, as opposed to the activities that had traditionally been considered most relevant in brand building processes, such as communication and advertising (Frow and Payne, 2007; Ind, 2003). Brand experience management focuses on delivering the brand promise (Brodie *et al.*, 2009) consistently for each point of contact with the various stakeholders (Payne *et al.*, 2009), with the aim of achieving greater loyalty and preference (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). In this respect the role of employees is crucial, as it is they who act as the main ambassadors of the brand and bring its values to life (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Foster *et al.*, 2010).

Lastly, we should also mention the revolution that is taking place in the sphere of brand communication, where media fragmentation is growing at a phenomenal rate (e.g. Rubinson, 2008) and the influence of social networks in the construction of brand image is becoming more and more important (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). All this leads to brand managers losing control to many other stakeholders (including consumers) in a process that some have come to call "brand hijack" (e.g. Cova and Pace, 2006).

Such a dynamic competitive environment is bringing about profound changes in the way branding is understood, and is confronting brand managers with a number of challenges.

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Many of them were discussed at the 6th International Conference of the Special Interest Group on Brand, Identity, and Corporate Reputation of the Academy of Marketing that was held in ESADE in April 2010 and out of which this special issue has arisen.

Brand heritage: a possible driver of authenticity and superior brand experiences

On top of all the elements mentioned above, as if the competitive environment was not complex enough already, the economic and social crisis we are living through has added more uncertainty to it. Thus, in this context, people need to make sense of what is going around and brands are a powerful device that they use to look for meaning (Batey, 2008). In this regard, brands offering an experience that is perceived as authentic (Gilmore and Pine, 2007), with a strong component of stability and a recognised heritage, seem to be a significant source of meaning for their customers (Loveland *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, brands with a strong heritage are better prepared to cope with the current uncertain environment, to address the future (Urde *et al.*, 2007) and to engage with their customers at symbolic and emotional levels (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006).

The concept of brand heritage is therefore attractive indeed, and can be of great interest for academics and practitioners alike. In this special issue, Rindell *et al.* present a novel approach that distinguishes between the past and current dimensions of brand images and their embeddedness in consumer practices. The two concepts on which their model rests (image heritage and image-in-use) capture the temporal and contextual aspects of brand image.

In their paper "Operationalising brand heritage and cultural heritage" Hakala *et al.* claim that the brand heritage is built around the history of the brand as well as the continuity and consistency of its core values, products and visual symbols. Working from this basis, Hakala *et al.* construct a pioneering operationalisation of both brand and cultural heritage that aims to help managers to develop better strategies for entering new geographic markets. This is a novel approach that opens up a host of new research opportunities, crucial in a world in which brands seek to have a global presence, but without losing their heritage.

All in all, it seems that in an uncertain and changing economic and social environment the role of brand heritage can be key in brand building related processes.

Luxury brand goods: lessons to be learnt from a growing economic activity in uncertain times

In a global environment of economic stagnation excellent results obtained by the luxury sector stand out. It is an area that merits special attention and from which interesting lessons could no doubt be learnt and applied to other contexts. In fact, the luxury market is made up of a wide variety of economic activities that will generate an estimated turnover of $2 trillion by the end of 2010 (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009).

Luxury brands are characterised largely by their capacity to build and maintain the identity of their owners, on the basis of the symbolic function performed by them, which find expression both at an inner, more personal level and, parallel to this, on a more outward social level (Fionda and Moore, 2009). Therefore, the concept of meaning transfer (Batey, 2008), from the brand to the individual and from the individual to his or her social network, appears at the core of brand management. The consumption of luxury brands is thus an essential resource, for some people, for the construction and maintenance of their identity (Arghavan and Zaichkowski, 2000). Another aspect to note is that, in order to be successful, luxury brands need to be perceived as authentic (as against counterfeits), and in many cases this perception is closely linked to the history of the brand, its consistency, and the level of recognition of its brand heritage (Brown *et al.*, 2003). In short, there is a clear connection between luxury brands and brand heritage that is well worth further investigation.

The paper by Hung *et al.* "Antecedents of luxury brand purchase intention" explores the factors influencing luxury brand consumption in the Chinese environment and studies the role played in this process by social context, individual perceptions and the concept of vanity. The results of this study cast doubt on the role of the symbolic value of luxury brands in China, in contrast with its central role in western societies. Therefore, in their paper the authors propose that the traditional models of luxury brand purchase intention that have been generated in Western environments should be adapted to provide a closer fit with the reality of other environments in which, as in the case in point of China, other factors such as vanity may have a fundamental role in this process.

One of the greatest threats for the thriving luxury brand business comes from counterfeit branded products. For this reason, Turunen and Laaksonen's paper seeks to gain further insight into the mechanisms associated with the consumption of luxury products, by comparing the meanings that consumers attach to luxury goods and counterfeit branded products. In this regard, the results of the study emphasise the importance of perceived authenticity as a clearly differentiating feature. Furthermore, counterfeits possess meanings that are basically social, whereas authentic luxury brands also have considerable impact on the construction of personal meanings.

Thus, not only brand heritage and cultural heritage but also authenticity seems to hold a key influence on the brand equity of luxury products.

Brand preference and brand equity: building strong brands that can succeed in uncertain environments

There are conflicting views in the literature regarding the relationship between brand preference and brand equity. In his seminal paper, Keller (2003) suggests that brand preference is an antecedent of brand equity. However, subsequently Chang and Ming (2009) studied the impact of brand equity on brand preference. Furthermore, some other authors even use the two terms interchangeably (e.g. Rundle-Thiele and Mackay, 2001).

In order to clarify the brand preference construct, Alamro and Rowley in their paper "Antecedents of brand preference for mobile telecommunications services" analyse 11 possible antecedents of brand preference, concluding that they can be clustered into three different types: awareness, image, and customer attribute antecedents.

On a different note, Baumgarth and Binckebanck expand the brand equity literature by means of a paper in which they

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study the influence of employees in generating emotional bonds with consumers of a B-to-B brand. Their conclusions highlight the crucial role of the sales network in building and maintaining a strong B-to-B brand. Therefore, their study sheds light on one of the basic questions posed by Keller and Lehmann (2006) about how customer contact points influence brand equity.

Some final reflections

In this global world in which one single brand is present in many different countries with different cultural heritages, traditions and consumer mindsets, the classical brand management theories and many of their assumptions may need to be revised and sometimes rethought. Consequently, this special issue includes papers that examine some highly diverse socio-geographical environments (for example China or Jordan versus Sweden or Germany), and presents some conclusions that allow us to challenge the suitability of some of the traditional brand management viewpoints on different cultures and emerging markets.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the focus on brand management has widened from the product brand to the service brand and the corporate brand. Thus, marketing practices may differ not only in different geographic and cultural settings, but also in different business sectors. This is why this special issue incorporates papers that deal with FMCG, CG, service brands and B-to-B.

Moreover, all the above-mentioned complexity requires that the field of brand management incorporates a wide spectrum of methodologies to cope with these challenges. In this regard, the papers published in this special issue are a reflection of the range of methodological possibilities available to researchers. Three of the papers are eminently quantitative, their objective being to test models that might enable us to advance towards establishing causal relationships, which form one of the pillars of scientific progress. On the other hand, the other three approach their research goals from a qualitative and interpretivist perspective, in an attempt to explore new spheres of knowledge and deepen the understanding of emerging fields of study. Interpretivist approaches to brand management research, as narratives or ethnography, are extraordinarily rich in uncertain environments such as we are now experiencing, as they allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of processes, emotions and feelings that are extremely difficult to extract using the traditional tools derived from quantitative methodologies (Flory and Iglesias, 2010).

All in all, this special issue touches on some of the many key challenges that academics and practitioners in the field of brand management are facing and relies also on a wide range of methodological approaches to deal with them. However, the exciting environment that we will encounter in the next years due to the economic, social and technological global changes that we are living will demand a continuous process of exploration of new theoretical perspectives as well as the testing of already existing models in new environments. In this context, we will need to revise the research agenda in the field of brand management and give more emphasis to some emerging topics, key for both practitioners and academics, such as the management of the brand relationships and experiences, the processes of value co-creation involving multiple stakeholders, the transference of power from the traditional brand owners to many emerging stakeholders, media planning in such a fragmented communication environment, and better understanding about how to build strong corporate brands, or develop new brand metrics.

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The role of brand images in consumer practices: uncovering embedded brand strength

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Abstract
Purpose – The present paper seeks to analyse the role of brand images in consumer practices for uncovering brand strength.
Design/methodology/approach – By employing a qualitative approach, data are analysed based on three elements that constitute the practices: objects (what tools or resources are required in the practice), images involved, and competences (what competences does the practice require).
Findings – The authors suggest practices as an additional unit of analysis for understanding brand strength based on image. Towards this end, the paper identifies and systematically categorises consumer practices and proposes that consumers develop novel and personal practices related to brands. The findings reveal embedded brand strength in mundane, routinised practices.
Originality/value – The paper presents a novel approach for understanding the past (image heritage) and current (image-in-use) dimensions of brand images and their embeddedness in consumer practices.

Keywords Image heritage, Image-in-use, Practice, Brand strength, Brand image, Consumers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Brand image strength has previously been studied mainly in terms of a brand's equity, which is proposed to moderate the impact of marketing activities on brand image (Raggio and Leone, 2007), or a brand's financial value to a company (Salinas and Amber, 2009). Strong brands have been defined by Keller (2008, p. 27) as the best known and most highly regarded brands. In this paper we propose that brand strength may be uncovered with the help of practices, and the role images play in them. A practice relates to the unconscious dimension of consumer decision-making: Antonides and van Raaij (1998, p. 220) argue that much of consumer behaviour occurs without extensive consideration and reflection. Consumer practices refer to the "more or less routinised actions, which are orchestrated by tools, know-how, images, physical space, and a subject who is carrying out the practice" (Korkman, 2006, p. 27). It is asserted that brand images play an important role in everyday consumption practices, since they form a part of the interpretational frame that customers rely on when they are exposed to brands.

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A practice approach is in line with the recent advances in marketing thinking, where value creation is proposed to be located in consumer activities (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Arnould *et al.*, 2006; Schau *et al.*, 2009). The spirit of the service dominant logic has impacted branding literature by highlighting the need to explore the temporal dimension of consumers' brand images (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007; Payne *et al.*, 2009; Arnould *et al.*, 2006; Strandvik and Rindell, 2010; Pitt *et al.*, 2006) and understand what consumers do with brands, not only what they think (see e.g. Arnould *et al.*, 2006; Fournier, 1998). So far, studies on practices have explored the process of collective (Schau *et al.*, 2009) and private brand value creation (Holt, 1995), but the role of consumers' brand images in practices is so far an uncharted territory.

The present paper studies consumers' brand images based on two novel concepts, image heritage and image-in-use (Rindell, 2007), which we propose are embedded in practices. These two concepts capture the temporal and contextual aspects of brand images. Image heritage embodies the consumer's past brand related experiences about a brand (Rindell, 2007). Image-in-use stands for the consumer's current image construction process influenced by image heritage (see also Rindell *et al.*, 2010). Image-in-use varies in different consumer activity contexts when, where, and with whom the image is constructed "in consumption" (Rindell, 2007).

The aim of the present paper is to suggest practice as an additional unit of analysis for understanding brand strength

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based on image and identify and systematically categorise consumer practices. Our approach demonstrates:

- how brand images are embedded in practices;
- how companies can analyse their brand strength by using a practice approach; and
- how companies can strengthen their brand by emphasising dimensions of consumer practices that are underrepresented in the company's branding strategy.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we will discuss image heritage and image-in-use, since they are novel concepts for capturing the temporal and contextual dimension in consumers' image construction processes. Second, an overview of practice theory is provided for clarifying the linkage between consumer images and practices. Then, the empirical setting, analysis and findings are presented. Finally, managerial implications and suggestions for further research are presented.

Image heritage and image-in-use

Rindell (2007) introduced two empirically grounded concepts, image heritage and image-in-use, which can be used to understand how brand images evolve over time. Inline with Zaltman (2003) and Braun-La Tour *et al.* (2007), her study illustrates how the consumer's past experiences with the brand, the image heritage, influence the interpretation of new events (cf. Walvis, 2008). Thereby, image heritage advances Kotler's and Keller's (2005) definition of brand images as "the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers, as reflected in the associations held in consumer memory". To date, studies on how consumers' earlier experiences about a brand influence the present image construction process are few, although numerous studies explore the influence of consumer experiences and knowledge on decision making processes and brand commitment (Coulter *et al.*, 2003; Bettman and Park, 1980; Mitchell and Dacin, 1996). However, these studies are neither positioned in accordance with the present study within consumer images nor do they apply practice theory.

Image-in-use (Rindell, 2007) has its roots in service literature. Grönroos (2007) and Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) have pointed out that value for consumers emerges in consumer activities, a view that has been labelled as value-in-use. Therefore, value is not considered to evolve based on the organisation's design and planning processes, but in various consumer consumption contexts. Likewise, images evolve in various consumer activities like consumption or social settings. Consequently, Image-in-use represents all these consumer activity contexts of when, where, and with whom the image is constructed "in consumption" (Rindell, 2007). Therefore, image-in-use captures the contextual dimension of consumers' image construction processes in a practice. In conclusion, image heritage and image-in-use are concepts that help to understand how brand images evolve over time in consumers' everyday practices.

The importance of image heritage lies within its embeddedness in the minds of consumers, and its influence on image-in-use. Solms and Turnbull (2002, p. 155) propose that individuals automatically reconstruct the reality they perceive from models stored in their memories. It is known that consumers do not always reflect on their consumption choices or activities (Zaltman, 2003) and consequently, relying on past brand related experiences may become unconscious, resembling unreflective mental processes (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). Both practices and images are subject to change as they develop over time, and they are also proposed to mould each other: first, brand image heritage influences the practices as it functions as the interpretational frame in consumer practices. Second, we propose that practices may also influence brand image if consumers develop novel brand-related practices. The relation between brand images and practices can be further portrayed as follows: consider the analogy between riding a bike and "the role of brand images in practices": once you have learned to cycle, you can focus on going to places rather than focusing on the act. The "act"of image construction can become unconscious once the object (product, company, place, nation, etc.) becomes familiar, after which the brand may become an unconscious choice, an undivided part of "ways of doing things". Consider that Google has almost become synonymous for searching on the web. In both examples routinised action plays an important role (cf. Walvis, 2008).

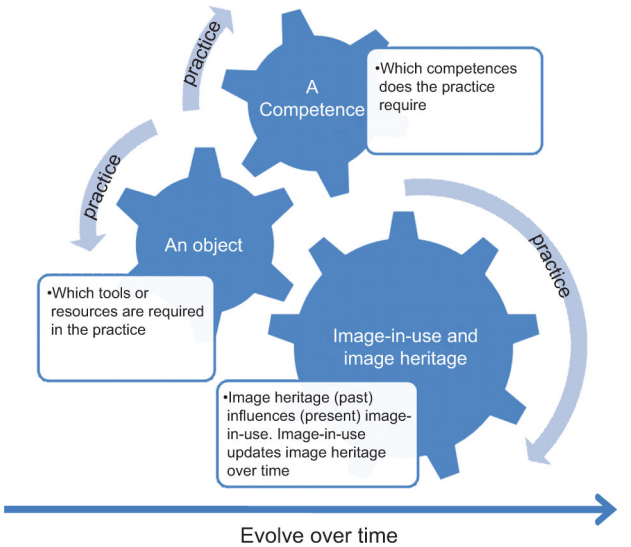
Practice theory

Practice theory has its background in the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, social theorists like Bourdieu and Giddens, cultural theorists like Foucault, and theorists of science and technology, such as Latour and Pickering (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001). Practices consist of interconnected elements: "forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, background knowledge in the forms of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250). A practice [...] forms [...] the "block" whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any of these elements. Practice theory takes the practice, i.e. the performance *per se*, as the unit of analysis. The practice becomes the entity from which consciousness emerges, as a form of integration of different resource elements. Therefore, a practice-based approach is not focused on who is doing what, what these subjects think about, or what they are like. Rather, the focus is on the process – what is done, how doing is constituted, how resources are used and how the doing has developed over time. Shove and Pantzar (2005) propose that a practice is skills, objects and images "in use". For example, the brand "Google" has become a consumer practice through the verb to google, which has become almost analogous to searching on the web. Thus, practices and brand images are often intertwined, and it is important to understand the contextual role of brand images within these practices.

To conclude, Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between image and practice as they are influenced by each other. The process is dynamic as it may change over time.

The Figure 1 summarizes how practices involve tools, resources and images that interact and influence each other over time. Next, we will discuss the method used in the study.

Figure 1 Image and practice relationship dynamics



Method

To explore brand strength, we examine the role of brand images (in terms of image heritage and image-in-use) in practices based on qualitative data. A qualitative approach allows informants to freely express their ideas and experiences about a brand (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). The analysed data consist of previously collected data used to analyse image heritage dimensions (Rindell, 2007; Rindell *et al.*, 2010). This secondary analysis approach has also been used by other practice researchers earlier (Schau *et al.*, 2009), validating the choices made in the present paper. We suggest that image heritage data are suited for investigating consumer practices, since both images and practice evolve over time. Data comprise of the international retailing brand "IKEA", and a Finnish national retailing brand "Anttila". Both companies are retailers with partly similar kinds of offerings, i.e. home decoration. Therefore, in the Finnish market the companies can be characterised as competitors.

All data have been collected by posing one specific question to the informants "What comes to mind from the brand X [IKEA/Anttila]?" Figure 2 presents an overview of the data.

The data include 42 in-depth interviews with adult consumers, 11 written accounts, one group interview, and seven learning diaries from business students. The approach draws from the strengths of a multiple-method approach as it combines data from various contexts of brands.

The data set was analysed based on three elements that constitute the practices:

1 an object (what tools or resources are required in the practice);
2 an image (what images are involved); and
3 a competence (what competences does the practice require).

A presentation of findings is presented next.

Figure 2 Overview of the dataset

International retailing context "IKEA" Data: 30 interviews (10+10+10 interviews in Finland, Sweden and Germany) Question: "What comes to mind from IKEA?" Country: Finland, Sweden and Germany
Finnish retailing context "Anttila" Data: 12 in-dept open interviews, 11 written accounts, 1 group interview, 7 learning diaries Total: 35 accounts (21-75 year-old informants) Question: "What comes to mind from Anttila?" Country: Finland

Findings

Our goal is to compile the brand specific practices to demonstrate how brand images are embedded in consumer practices, and how companies can analyse their brand strength by using a practice approach. The data analysis identified a number of brand specific practices. As proposed by Shove and Pantzar (2005), three elements constituted the practices:

1 an object (what tools or resources are required in the practice);
2 an image (what images are involved); and
3 a competence (what competences does the practice require).

The data is rich in activity based material as people tend to reflect on what they have done or are doing "with the brand". Next, a number of dominant practices will be presented. It is expected that the more multi-faceted the practices related to the brand are, the stronger the brand is.

Brand IKEA

We studied three different IKEA markets and induced practices across the 30 interviews. We assert that informants' image heritage is embedded in these practices. To support this assertion we present authentic scripts from the interviews detailing the practices. The data reveals multi-faceted consumer practices (see Table I) that are in line with the company's business and brand strategy (IKEA, internet, 28.5.2010). However, the images in these consumer practices were often contradictory. The only practice that emerged clearly positive was the one of entertaining the family.

Practice of entertaining the family

Families go to IKEA to enjoy their free time together. IKEA as a shopping centre functions as a setting for spending time together and for enjoying various activities, like eating together, letting children play and watching movies with other children, looking at interiors, imagining and dreaming of a new interior for the home. The image-in-use of IKEA is that it is fun and inspiring for the whole family. IKEA is easy to consume – it does not require any specific competence or expertise:

> I have children so I go there just to entertain myself, and they have these playgrounds for children. Nice to eat there, you can eat hotdogs and let the kids play. It's nice that they have these rooms decorated so that you can get good ideas (Interview, Female, 42 years old, Finland).

> I think it's also very good that you can buy sausage and stuff when you shop for your big family and the kids. We've always eaten there. It's super (Female, 40 years old, Sweden).

Table I Illustration of IKEA practices

Practices	Objects/tools/resources	Image-in-use	Competence
Entertaining the family	The shopping centre as a setting/set-up interiors	Fun and inspiring for us	No specific competence required
Assembling furniture	IKEA key, tools	Complexity, annoyance, frustration, satisfaction	Do-it-yourself competences
Practicing responsibility	Time, tools and materials	Irritation of failure, masculinity	Do-it-yourself competence Patience
Decorating the home	IKEA products, moderate price	Inspiring new ideas and ways of decorating the home, modern, young	To have an eye for beauty
Building social networks	Time, tools and material/IKEA products	Being the "hero"	Knowing how to assemble furniture/ have an eye for beauty

Practice of assembling furniture

IKEA requires customers to assemble the furniture themselves. The assembly service is offered at extra cost, which is considered annoying, but none of the informants regarded it as a valid option. The IKEA key and other tools function as objects in this practice. The image-in-use related to the practice is about complexity, annoyance and frustration, but also a sense of completion. The images further revealed the nervousness associated with being on display during instalment. The customer also sees that his role in this practice is dictated a priori:

> I have assembled quite a lot of IKEA furniture. I think I have learnt by now not to think myself when I assemble them. You just have to follow the instructions like a slave. Because it is very dangerous to start to think yourself when assembling an IKEA piece of furniture because then everything goes wrong (Interview, Male, 36 years old, Sweden).

> I wouldn't say I'm a do-it-yourself-man. I try to avoid it whenever possible (Male, 25 years old, Germany).

Practicing responsibility

For men, IKEA products give the opportunity to "build" and show competence related to taking care of and supporting the family, and doing something for the wife. IKEA is identified as a family provider's choice:

> I have assembled two kitchens for my family. I didn't buy much from IKEA when I was single. But now it's completely different when I have a family. Now I don't look for something exclusive but for quantity and then IKEA is OK. Being responsible for the family has changed this (Male, 47 years old, Finland).

> I think about going there on Saturdays and Sundays in order to buy a lot of things. We, my wife and I, think that it's cheap and easy to go there and buy everything you need. If I discuss furniture it's with her and whether we should go there and buy something (Male, 31 years old, Finland).

Practice of decorating the home

IKEA inspires to "develop" the interior at home and to use decorations and colours. Products and the interior settings are considered modern, fresh and youngish. If you have the competence, you can get a fresh home, if not, the risk exists that your home becomes "ikea":

> Well, almost all my furniture is from IKEA, except the kitchen (Female, 25 years old, Germany).

> Cheap, but also good. Cheap, good and cool. I love IKEA. Get a lot of inspiration from there. Decorating. You can change your mind, you can afford changing style. You can throw away, give to your children. My children have furnished their homes with IKEA furniture (Female, 42 years old, Sweden).

> My flat is completely furnished with IKEA products. It's somehow frightening, but I almost don't take other furniture warehouses into consideration anymore (Female, 29 years old, Germany).

Practice of strengthening social networks

Assembling furniture and decorating the home is not a skill all people have. Therefore, this skill can be used to support one's position within social networks through being known as the one who can help:

> I like to assemble furniture. It's very common that people don't. "Ooh, how awful to assemble them", they say. But then I say "I can do it for you". I think it's nice, you feel you're a good guy and doing well and so on (Male, 25 years, Sweden).

> I go and pick up all the food for the kids birthday parties from IKEA. It's exotic for some kids as we live in the city and all families do not have cars so they don't go to IKEA (Interview, Female, 42 years old, Finland).

Brand ANTTILA

We studied consumer practices of customers of the Finnish retail store Anttila, which is one of the biggest non-food retailers in Finland. Data analysis induced a limited number of practices across the 35 accounts. Common to all practices was the image-in-use of cheap shopping. We assert that informants' image heritage is strongly embedded in these practices as the company's original business idea was that of a budget store. To support this assertion we present authentic scripts from the interviews detailing the practices.

The findings revealed (see Table II) that all of the consumer practices that emerged were intertwined with the shopping of goods that are not necessarily of premium quality but reasonably or low priced. The images-in-use embedded in these practices were mainly based on the image heritage of the company's earlier strategies; maybe 10-20 years back in time or even longer (cf. Anttila, internet, 28.5.2010).

Practice of cheap shopping

Consumers consider Anttila as an inexpensive shop, or almost a bargain store, which does not offer high quality products, although Anttila has aimed at changing the corporate brand identity to be a store where you can find well-known brands at reasonable prices (Anttila, internet, 28.5.2010). Informants were well aware of the company's history, as it is over 50 years old. The strong influence of the informants' image heritage is

Table II Illustration of Anttila practices

Practices	Objects/tools/resources	Image-in-use	Competence
Cheap shopping	Money	Cheap prices, average quality	No specific competence required
Value-for-money shopping	Good selection	Middle-class, not so good quality	To be economical
Shopping for others	Suitability as a gift	Good enough as gift	No specific competence required
Shopping for the cottage	Good selection of everyday products	Suits well the cottage where you don't need the best	No specific competence required

evident in the accounts, pointing at an identity-image gap in the present data:

> I don't have any other image than that of the old bargain store in [the first Anttila shop in Helsinki] (Interview, Male, 48 years old).

> A shopping place for the whole family, cheap and with quite good selection (Female, 25 years old, Finland).

Practice of value-for-money shopping

The original shop has developed during its 50 years to a chain of department stores with a broad selection of everyday products. The company's strategy is to sell well-known brands at a reasonable price:

> Mid-class image, basic-line shop, also high-quality products. If you want something cheap – for sure good price-quality level (Interview, Female, 21 years old).

> Last summer I was so satisfied with Anttila. I wanted to buy a hammock, a genuine hammock. I went to Kodin Anttila and I was so satisfied because it was so reasonably priced (Female, 47 years old, Finland).

Practice of shopping to others

The company offers a broad selection of everyday products but they are not necessarily considered to be of the highest quality. A majority of the informants did not feel that the company was their first choice but if they were to buy something for someone else they could just as well buy it from Anttila:

> After all, I have been there. I bought mattresses for the country house. I called a few places, it was to my husband's family place, and that's why I chose Anttila. I don't think I would buy anything to our house from there (Interview, Female, 48 years old).

> You can't buy clothes from there, mail cloths. Well, for my son I found cheap shoes from there [...] if my daughter wants a CD I buy it from there (Interview, Male 49 years old).

Practice of shopping to the cottage

Due to the selection of everyday products a number of informants considered Anttila to be a good choice when shopping for products that do not require a high standard:

> I think if we were to buy beds for our home, we wouldn't go there but for the country house it suits well (Interview, Male 31 years old).

> If I buy bathroom towels home I wouldn't buy them from Anttila, but for the cottage it's OK (Interview, Female, 48 years old).

Conclusions and discussion

This study is the first to empirically investigate image heritage embedded in consumer practices in order to explore the contextual aspects of image-in-use. In particular, it identifies and systematically categorises consumer practices that reveal the contextual nature of brand image. This approach is theoretically important because it offers a new way of examining brand strength: practice is proposed as a novel unit of analysis for understanding brand image strength through the types of practices related to a brand. It also demonstrates how image-in-use is embedded in consumer practices, and shows how companies may analyse their brand strength by using a practice approach and strengthen their brand by emphasising dimensions of consumer practices that are underrepresented in the company's branding strategy.

Based on the data, the practice and image-in-use interlinks can be found at two different levels of significance. In the case of Anttila, there is a link between the brand's images and the practices of buying, in this case buying economically. In the case of IKEA, the inter-link extends from the practice of buying and home decoration to a socio-cultural level, since some of the practices relate to a sense of being responsible and constructing a family. The myriad of interlinks between IKEA images and practices clearly suggests that IKEA may have a strong position revealed by a practice point of view through the new practices constructed by consumers, for instance the practice of strengthening one's position within social networks through assembling furniture. Based on the data it can be argued that IKEA has been a "force" of re-defining the practice of home decoration to become almost an on-going activity to improve the home. However, critical voices towards this practice can also be found in the data, related to the ways IKEA contributes to increased consumption and a mentality of buying and throwing away. Thus, the respondents referred to an unfulfilled desire for more ethical consumption.

The two explored brands differ in terms of images and their linkages to different practices. Anttila's practices interlink images and "consumption" in terms of buying merchandise, whereas the relationship between IKEA and everyday practices is very different: the data suggest that many different simultaneous images are embedded in various forms of practices. It could be argued that the complex myriad of interlinks between images and practices point at a lack of a clear brand position. In contrast to such interpretation, we propose that IKEA has reached a status of significant socio-cultural impact. However, looking at image heritage, i.e. how brand images have evolved over time, it can be noticed clearly that Anttila has had equivalent socio-cultural influence in Finland on economical buying from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Differences in the degree of embeddedness of the brand in terms of objects in specific practices emerged from the data. As a tool or resource, IKEA's showrooms may to some informants be used as a tool in "decorating ones home".

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In conclusion, we propose two different factors determining brand strength when exploring images as embedded in practices. First, the significance of the practice in which the images are embedded is of relevance. For example, images' embeddedness in practices that relate to socio-cultural meaning may be considered to contribute to the strength of the brand, more than the sole practices related to "buying". Second, in contrast to mainstream branding literature, which assumes coherence in branding activities (e.g. Keller, 2008), we propose that brand strength may also be contributed to by the complexity of the myriads of interlinks between images and the practice. In particular, practices reveal consumers' ways of "doing things" with brands, which can be interpreted as reflections of brand strength.

For managers the study offers a new way of estimating brand strength. Zaltman argues that "consumers have far less access to their own mental activities than marketers give them credit for" (Zaltman, 2003, p. 9). Therefore we propose that a practice approach may contribute to understanding the contextual embeddedness of brands. Since images evolve over time, qualitative data that reveal image heritage may be used to understand how the practice is linked to a consumer's past experiences with the brand. The present study is limited to retailer brands in one specific market context, and therefore, we invite future studies to extend the approach to other levels of brands, and to other markets. We believe that future studies could aim at creating a classification of brand strength based on consumer practices, in line with the present study. Finally, it is of utmost importance to further investigate whether firms should aim at coherence within branding activities, as suggested by mainstream branding literature (e.g. Keller, 2008), and if so, to what degree. We believe the practice approach presented in this paper may offer insights into this discourse and therefore, future studies are invited that focus on this research question.

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Operationalising brand heritage and cultural heritage

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Abstract

Purpose – Brand heritage is acknowledged as one of the future priorities in branding research. Adopting it in an international context is challenging. In order to maximise its use it is necessary to know how strong it and the target country's cultural heritage are. Accordingly, the aim of the study is to construct a pioneering operationalisation of both brand and cultural heritage.

Design/methodology/approach – The study begins with a discussion on the focal concepts. Definitions are proposed and suggestions for operationalisation put forward. Thereafter, the concepts are applied in an analysis of brand heritage in different countries.

Findings – It is suggested that brand heritage is a mixture of the history as well as the consistency and continuity of core values, product brands, and visual symbols. A country's cultural heritage could be conceived of as homogeneity and endurance.

Research limitations/implications – The preliminary operationalisation of the concept needs to be further tested. Nevertheless, the clarification and suggestions offered here should open up opportunities for further research.

Practical implications – The exploitation of brand heritage in international markets is likely to be further accentuated. The operationalisations generated are easy for practitioners to apply, enabling companies to better evaluate what brand heritage means for them and to effectively plan its use in an international setting.

Originality/value – To the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to suggest operationalisations of brand heritage and cultural heritage.

Keywords Brand heritage, Cultural heritage, International branding, Brands, Heritage

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As businesses currently face the challenge of keeping up with rapid change in areas such as technology, the brand has become one of the few resources to provide long-term competitive advantage (Lindemann, 2003). One way of dealing with the environmental turbulence is to accentuate historical elements and thereby convey stability and confidence. It has become trendy for consumers to seek consolation in the past, and brands with an image including elements such as authenticity, heritage and stability are gaining in popularity (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Loveland *et al.*, 2010). It has also been argued that symbolic and emotional attachment between a brand and a consumer is more probable with brands that connect heritage and authenticity to their image (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006).

Coincident with its current attraction to marketers, heritage is acknowledged as a key organisational resource imparting long-lasting strategic value: companies are unique in terms of their heritage, and the heritage can provide the basis for superior performance (Balmer, 2009; Balmer and Gray, 2003). Unlocking the potential hidden value of a brand's heritage may be one way of harnessing the past and the present in order to safeguard the future (Urde *et al.*, 2007). Managers today face the challenge of marketing a brand's heritage in a way that brings out its historical reliability but does not make it appear out-dated. Indeed, it is argued that this will be the key to building successful brands in the future: due to the abundance of choice, today's marketing environment demands strong brand identities and decries imitation (Aaker, 1996; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006).

Coincident with the extensive research interest in brands in general is a growing fascination with nostalgia and retro brands (cf. Boutlis, 2000; Brown, 2001; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Kessous and Roux, 2008; Loveland *et al.*, 2010). However, research from the conceptual perspective of brand heritage is still scarce (e.g. Liebrenz-Himes *et al.*, 2007). The studies conducted by Urde *et al.* (2007) and Greyser *et al.* (2006) are among the few thus far focusing specifically on this, whereas others only mention it in passing, and the concept still lacks operationalisation.

Despite, or perhaps because of globalisation, there is an increasing need for research on cultural differences between nations in the business context (Leung *et al.*, 2005). There have been many attempts to measure national cultures. Most cultural mappings (e.g. Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 1994) emphasise differences in value priorities between individuals in a given national group in comparison with individuals in

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other national groups. They do not take into account how deeply rooted – or strongly inherited – these values are within a nation, however. Studies on national cultural heritage are scarce. The few that exist tend to consider heritage a cultural resource (i.e. cultural capital) and thus evaluate its benefits to a country/region (e.g. Bostedt and Lundgren, 2010), or they analyse it as a determinant of organisational behaviour (e.g. Fargher *et al.*, 2008).

However, national cultural heritage is rarely discussed in the academic literature on marketing, except for brief references to the cultural heritage in the country of origin (e.g. Tellström *et al.*, 2006), and is largely neglected as far as the target country is concerned. This is surprising given the large amount of literature on adaptation vs. standardisation of the different elements of marketing in target markets (Ryans *et al.*, 2003): one would assume that knowledge about cultural heritage would be a prerequisite. Like brand heritage, cultural heritage lacks operationalisation. Discussion of the two concepts that is restricted to definitions is pointless, however, without an understanding of their practical application. Moreover, combining these concepts in one study will enhance knowledge of brand management across cultures.

As a pioneer in this respect, Banerjee (2008) considered the cultural heritage of the target country in relation to branding. His conceptual framework for matching brand heritage and cultural heritage, although seemingly a valuable tool for enhancing understanding of brand heritage in international markets, has not, to our knowledge, been applied empirically. Its application is complicated, however, because of the lack of measurements for the two concepts. This constitutes the research gap for this study, the aim of which is to construct a preliminary operationalisation of brand heritage and cultural heritage.

Thus, the constructed operationalisations will constitute the main contribution of the study, and will be a major step forward in terms of theory development. Moreover, it will be of use to researchers focusing on international branding, allowing more systematic comparison of the strength of brand heritage in different brands and of the strength of the national cultural heritage in different countries.

The article proceeds as follows. First we define and discuss the concepts of brand heritage and cultural heritage, and suggest how they might best be operationalised. We then briefly evaluate the usability of the suggested measures in line with Banerjee's (2008) framework. Empirical cases are used to illustrate the theoretical discussion and to support the operationalisation. Finally, we suggest theoretical implications in the form of propositions, which lead us to the practical implications.

Brand heritage

Defining a brand and brand associations

A brand is often defined as a set of functional attributes and symbolic values, branding being the process of associating the attributes with the product in order to add value to it (e.g. Simões and Dibb, 2001; Knox and Bickerton, 2003). According to Kapferer (2004), a brand's success is based on its saliency, differentiability and intensity, and on the trust attached to the associations. In addition to these, Davis (2010) emphasises the role and accumulation of experiences in brand recognition. Brand preference ultimately depends on what the brand means to the customer and on the strength of its emotional effect, in other words on its place in the heart (e.g. Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006). Brands are intangible assets (Kapferer, 2004), and have traditionally been associated with physical goods, but the notion of branding has been extended to companies as well. A company brand is defined primarily in terms of organisational associations.

Brand intangibles cover a wide range of associations and represent a significant element and future priority in branding research. Brand heritage is one of the associations that marketers can use to differentiate their brands from those of their competitors, ultimately helping them to create a unique image for the offering (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). In turbulent times consumers become less confident in the future, wishing to protect themselves from the harsh, unpredictable realities of the outside world and seeking reassurance from the products they buy. This increases interest in brands with a heritage: skilfully exploited they can evoke past events (Brown *et al.*, 2003). Going back to one's roots and seeking comfort in the past in order to be ready for the future appears to be a growing trend. Brands representing stability, familiarity and trust can speak to people in periods of uncertainty, helping to create an image of authenticity and integrity that is likely to appeal to today's consumers. According to Ballantyne *et al.* (2006), in difficult times brand heritage offers a basis for stabilisation and growth. Indeed, Aaker (2004) recommends "going back to the roots" particularly for companies that are struggling. When external circumstances call for corporate change, however, overly strict adherence to the brand heritage can turn into inertia (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009).

A related concept that seems to be gaining popularity in these economically challenging times is "retro". Whereas brand heritage is deeply rooted in the company's or product's history, and cannot be copied, "retro" is a marketing and advertising tactic that any company can apply: reviving old products or brand slogans, incorporating images of days gone by, rehashing and re-contextualising old ads and old cultural representations, and evoking any kind of nostalgia associated with the past. It is even used when a company wants to position a new brand based on consumers' pre-existing emotional touch points (Sullivan, 2009; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Boutlis, 2000).

Dimensions of brand heritage

What is meant by brand heritage and heritage brands? Defining them is not straightforward. It should also be said that a company or product with a heritage is not necessarily a heritage brand. Having a heritage does not in itself create value but it may constitute the foundation of brand building (Urde *et al.*, 2007). The word heritage is generally associated with inheritance: something transferred from one generation to another. As a concept, therefore, it works as a carrier of historical values from the past (Nuryanti, 1996).

Accordingly, Banerjee (2008, p. 314) describes its history, image, expectancy and equity as the four pillars of a brand's heritage. History represents its rich eventful past, and the image "an after effect of the brand communication and positioning based on the benefits to be enjoyed by the consumers". Brand expectancy refers to the physical and emotional benefits that consumers receive from the brand. Finally, equity comprises two subsets: a homogeneous and a heterogeneous set of competences that, respectively, facilitate

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progression and give the edge over the competition. With the exception of its history, the elements of brand heritage in Banerjee's (2008) description are difficult to measure.

Meanwhile, according to Urde *et al.* (2007), a heritage brand is recognisable from the following characteristics: a track record, longevity, core values, history, and the use of symbols. A track record means demonstrated proof that the company has lived up to its values and promises over time, whereas longevity reflects consistent performance among other heritage elements. Core values are an integral part of a brand's identity, and over time may constitute its heritage. History is another significant element of identity, and for the heritage brands at issue embraces three timeframes: the past, the present and the future. As Urde *et al.* (2007, p. 7) put it:

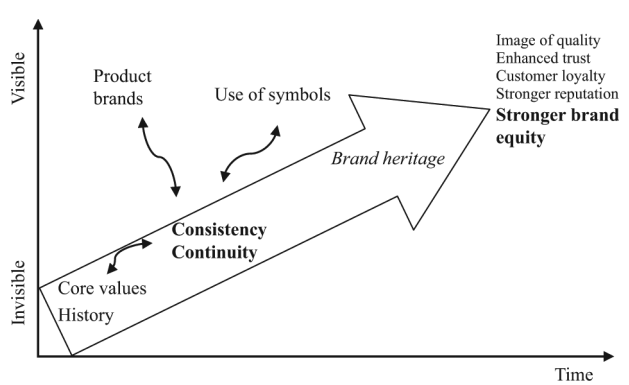
> Heritage brands are about history and history in the making.

History can make a brand relevant to the present and, prospectively, the future.

One way of creating a brand history is to link the brand to a sense of cultural continuity and communal tradition by means of its ubiquitous presence, of which Coca Cola is a good example: the Coke name and logo are discernible virtually everywhere, and the vast majority of people alive today can recognise it (Beasley and Danesi, 2002). However, according to some authors (e.g. Winkler, 1999), a long history is not a prerequisite in that some brands develop a strong heritage over a short period of time. This applies to many products of the e-era, such as eBay and Google, as the digital age has shortened time spans. Finally, symbols and other visual elements are used to identify the brand and express its meaning and values (Urde *et al.*, 2007). In our opinion, of Urde *et al.*'s (2007) brand-heritage elements, track record overlaps with history and core values, and consequently their definition is not applicable as such. In addition, we prefer the terms consistency and continuity to longevity because they better capture the idea of the same overall look and feel in the positioning strategy and underlying theme over time (see Percy and Elliott, 2009).

As shown above, definitions vary and, in many respects, overlap, but none of them explain how to measure brand heritage per se. As mentioned, the research in this paper is on the operationalisation of both brand and cultural heritage. Consequently, brand heritage is seen here as a composite of the history as well as the consistency and continuity of a company's core values, product brands and use of symbols (see Figure 1, which shows the "visible" and "invisible" from a consumer's perspective), and a potential measurement mechanism is proposed. The elements, in turn, produce an image of quality, enhanced trust, customer loyalty and a strong reputation – eventually leading to stronger brand equity. These components are discussed in the following.

Figure 1 Elements of brand heritage



Regardless of the contradictory notions (e.g. Davis, 2010), we consider history to be a prerequisite of brand heritage. For one thing, all companies have one. History – and here we mean a time span of some decades or more – can represent a depth of experience and a sense of permanence, and as such may be an important element in image creation (Fill, 2009) as well as in maintaining brand loyalty (Dahlen *et al.*, 2010). It also matters in terms of identity: employees know who and what they are as well as where they come from and where they are heading (Davis, 2010; Urde *et al.*, 2007). Respecting and highlighting the history of a company or a product should not be associated with being old-fashioned: it is possible to develop a modern brand without throwing away the history that made it what it is, in other words something that customers can trust (Dinnie, 2009; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006).

Its history can include the "story" of the company or brand, and stories make the past relevant to contemporary life (cf. Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009). A good story can engage audiences, build long-term relationships and support organisational claims. At best, the essence of the brand resonates with the memories and emotional connections of the audience (Dahlen *et al.*, 2010; Flory and Iglesias, 2010), thereby making the story of the company a success story that retains its attractiveness over the years.

Secondly, consistency and continuity in a company's operations and in its marketing communications enhance its brand heritage. For one thing, they concern the company's core values, and in this context help in defining the corporate strategy, and thus become part of the brand heritage (Urde *et al.*, 2007). Brown *et al.* (2003), referring to core values, mention the brand essence or the "aura": the core values are the consistent and essential guiding principles for which the brand stands. Moreover, they do not change with current trends, or even with changing conditions in the market, and they are not to be confused with financial or short-term aims (Collins and Porras, 1996). As Urde (2003) states, they should be part of a realistic future identity. The support of the whole organisation is needed in linking core values and the brand tightly together in a way that is hard to copy.

In the context of marketing communications, consistency implies a "one voice" approach, integrating the company's strategy and creative actions over the long term. Adding to this certain timelessness is an element of responsibility, which means respecting what has been done before, yet allowing change and improvement. Every new generation brings something new to the brand, but without the previous knowledge and tradition the branding would have to start all over again (Urde *et al.*, 2007; also Percy and Elliott, 2009).

Given the visibility of a company's brand heritage in its products, it is important to take the individual product brands into account. Besides, brands with a heritage are often the oldest ones in their respective product categories (cf. Aaker, 1996). Questions such as "how has the product line changed?" and "what were the focal product brands of the company at the time of its foundation, and what are they now?" need to be asked in order to assess the consistency and continuity of the product range.

Brands with a heritage can speak to consumers through various ways: symbols, graphics, nostalgia, packaging and

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advertising (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006). Symbols act as a means of expressing the core values, indicating what the brand stands for (Urde *et al.*, 2007). Visual symbols have more potential than words because a symbol is more ambiguous, imbued with meanings and rich in information, and at best can create an emotional bond with consumers. (Vestergaard and Schrøder, 1985; Borja de Mozota, 2003) The little Hariboy and the Gold Bear of Haribo Candy, not to mention the contoured Coca Cola bottle, are symbols that reflect and express the organisation's meaning and heritage (Urde *et al.*, 2007; Kessous and Roux, 2008). A consistent symbol can bring coherence and structure to the identity of a brand by associating it with the past, which makes it easy for consumers to recall and recognise it and to differentiate it from competing brands (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000).

Symbols that reflect heritage can be anything that represents the brand, including logos, shapes, colours and patterns (Urde *et al.*, 2007). They also appear in the form of taglines, such as "Snap, Crackle, Pop, Rice Krispies!" (Kellogg's, 2010), or as metaphors, gestures, musical notes, packages and even events or programmes (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). Constructing a logo is not only finding a name that creates familiarity for the brand. Successful brands develop a visual identity and a marketing-communication process that persist and are distinctive (Borja de Mozota, 2003). A colour, for example, can become so consistently linked with a specific brand and its heritage that it acquires a secondary meaning; accordingly, companies are increasingly registering colours as trademarks (Hoek and Gendall, 2010).

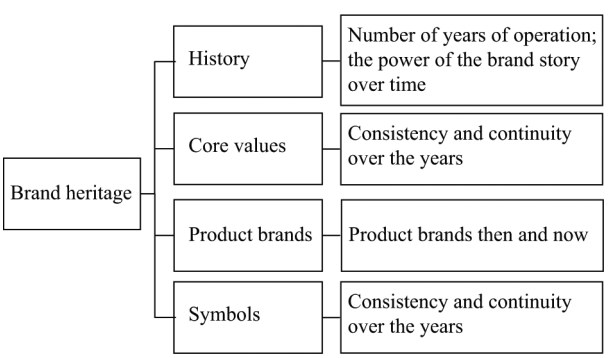
Operationalising brand heritage

Operationalisation is complicated because product and company brand heritage tend to be intertwined. This is even more accentuated in companies/products with a long history. In practice a company contemplating internationalisation needs to consider its brand architecture (Kapferer, 2004). With regard to fast-moving consumer goods the main emphasis is on the product. Figure 2 depicts the proposed operationalisation. As indicated, in referring to the intangible and tangible past of a company and its products, brand heritage is not only in the past but is also a representation of it.

The cultural heritage of the target country

Even though the brand heritage is considered valuable, its significance may vary according to where the brand is marketed: it may have a heritage in a global as well as a local sense, but the two may differ considerably (Van Gelder, 2003). Internationalising companies should therefore consider the extent to which they are able to – or should – utilise the local heritage. As Banerjee (2008) advises, the brand's heritage should be set in the context of the cultural heritage of the target country, and potential gaps in strength between them weighed up before the target country is approached.

Figure 2 The proposed operationalisation of brand heritage



The cultural heritage of the target country is relevant in that – in spite or perhaps because of globalisation – it has an enduring impact on the values of the individuals living in it (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). However, it is a complex phenomenon and assessing its strength is not straightforward. Culture could be defined as a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another (Hofstede, 2001). Societies develop their own distinctive cultures over time. The country is often used as the unit of analysis, and there have been various attempts to classify national cultures based on value differences (e.g. Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars, 1993). However, to our knowledge, there are no country classifications based on differences in cultural heritage.

In line with the definition of brand heritage suggested above we thus define the cultural heritage of a country as a composite of the history and the coherence and continuity of the nation's distinguishable characteristics. Given that it is a social construction, the understanding of cultural heritage depends on the evaluator's own historical and spatial context (cf. Arantes, 2007), and in order to be able to compare countries we would need clear, more objective measurement criteria. Moreover, if they are to be of use to companies they should allow fast comparison based on the secondary information available from each country.

According to Banerjee (2008), measurement of the cultural heritage of a country should be based on homogeneity (in fact, he refers to the degree of diversity), endurance, tolerance and impediment, but he does not explain how to do it. In particular, impediment and tolerance would be hard or even impossible to measure in practice. We therefore suggest that two dimensions – homogeneity and endurance – would be sufficient for evaluating and comparing the cultural heritage in different countries.

Measures of homogeneity could be based on the dominance of a single language, ethnic background and religion within a country. For instance, the higher the proportion of speakers of the dominant language, the more homogeneous the country would seem to be (Diener and Diener, 2009; Tonta, 2009). After testing the criteria on various countries, however, we decided to leave ethnic background aside because it correlated so strongly with language and religion that excluding it made no difference in the final assessment. Furthermore, it is rather easy to find information on the dominant language and religion, whereas ethnic diversity is not always documented.

Endurance is more difficult. Should we measure the period of independence or the years the country has been populated? Both are problematic: the former focuses more on political history and the latter is vague and does not differentiate countries from each other. We therefore propose that representations of cultural heritage and its conservation could be utilised in measuring the endurance of particular cultures. The UNESCO World Heritage Lists provide comparable data on cultural heritage sites (e.g. monuments

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and groups of buildings), as well as on intangible aspects of heritage (e.g. traditions inherited from ancestors, rituals and festive events) covering 186 of the 192 Member States of the United Nations. UNESCO describes heritage as the legacy from the past, what people live with today, and what they pass on to future generations (UNESCO, 2010).

Even though the UNESCO World Heritage List affords fast access to comparable data, and is provided by an international neutral player, it has certain shortcomings. For example, it has been accused of promoting a European viewpoint on cultural heritage, ignoring minority groups, and applying strict nomination criteria with which less developed countries may find it impossible to comply (Labadi, 2007; Rao, 2010). However, the fact that the list seems to be the only available comparable data source on the cultural heritage of different countries justified its utilisation as a proxy for endurance. Thus the number of nominations of any particular country on the list could be considered an indicator of endurance. In sum, Figure 3 depicts the suggested operationalisation of the cultural heritage of a country.

Utilising brand heritage in different cultures

Utilising brand heritage is more complicated when a firm operates in different cultures. Banerjee (2008) proposes four different strategies from which a firm considering its use in an international setting can choose. Together they comprise a matrix, illustrated in Figure 4. The selection of strategies depends on whether the heritage of the brand is weak or strong, and on whether the cultural heritage of the target market is weak or strong.

Of the brand strategies suggested, matching seems to be the most challenging in that it may need to be tailor-made for each country. Assimilation requires country-based adaptation as well, but it tends to be easier because the brand's particular heritage is not so deep-rooted. Both convincing and initiating emphasise communication with consumers, and thus do not seem to differ from the strategies adopted in the home market (cf. Banerjee, 2008).

Figure 3 The operationalisation of cultural heritage

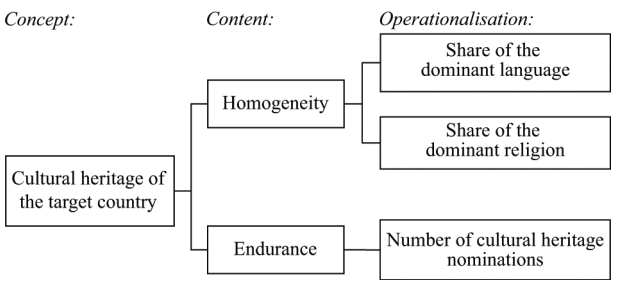
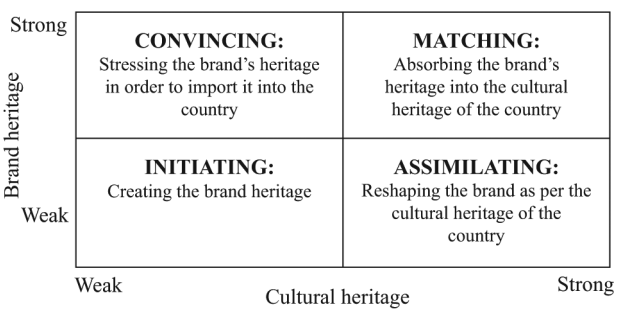


Figure 4 Brand strategies for different cultural heritages



Source: Modified from Banerjee (2008)

Methodology

In order to pilot the operationalisations created in the previous sections we decided to concentrate on fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs). It has been suggested that consumer-goods companies benefit from their heritage more than business-to-business organisations (Holt, 2004), and that more research is needed given that FMCGs rarely include brands that are associated with heritage (Alexander, 2009). Of the various industries represented in FMCGs we selected the food industry. Food is essential to the traditions of a culture, and a company can convey cultural elements of its country of origin along with its food brands (Tellström *et al.*, 2006).

Empirically we investigated the phenomenon through case research. Case studies are appropriate when there is a need to understand complex phenomena that are not easily separable from their contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1989). The comprehensiveness that this approach allows is highly relevant to this research because of the novelty of the topic and because of the temporal dimensions of heritage. The study incorporates four cases (four food-product brands), thereby allowing both rich description and systematic comparison (see Miles and Huberman, 1994). The cases were selected on the basis of the companies' international scope, long history (offering maximum insight into their heritage), access (Finnish cases) and cooperativeness (i.e. information provided and trust gained during previous research projects). The brands chosen for this study were Fazer Puikula bread and Fazer Blue milk chocolate produced the by Fazer Group, and Elovena oat flakes and Sunnuntai baking products produced by the Raisio Group. Various forms of data were gathered in order to capture the versatility of the phenomenon (Table I). The data collection took place in 2007-2010.

The first task in the within-case analysis was to organise the data according to the agreed brand-heritage criteria: history, consistency and continuity of the core values, the product brands and the visual symbols. We also analysed the international scope (international markets and brand strategies utilised). Engaging in careful conceptual contemplation, having three researchers analysing the data, and asking the informants to review the draft cases ensured the construct validity of this qualitative analysis (cf. Daymon and Holloway, 2002; Yin, 1989).

Evaluation of cultural heritage relied on homogeneity and endurance, and was based on the conceptual studies by Banerjee (2008) and Arizpe (2004). The assessment of national homogeneity relied on quantitative data obtained from public sources (see Table II in the next section). The investigation concentrated on the main target countries of the case brands, which limited the number of countries in the analysis. The operationalisation of homogeneity compared with that in previous studies (e.g. Diener and Diener, 2009), and the shares of the dominant language and religion correlated ($r = 0.701$) in the countries concerned, indicating internal consistency. Endurance was more difficult to operationalise. The number of nominations on the

Table I Empirical data

Type	Quantity			
	Case Elovena	Case Fazer Blue	Case Fazer Puikula	Case Sunnuntai
Face-to-face interviews	1	3	3	1
Telephone discussions	4	1	1	1
E-mails	2	6	6	2
Company's own material (annual reports, internet pages)	41	21	49	34
Books	2	1	1	2
Press articles	6	12	9	4
TV documents	1	1	1	0
Observation (Company visits)	1	2	2	1

Table II Cultural heritage in the target countries of the studied cases

Main target countries for Fazer, Elovena and Sunnuntai	Homogeneity		Endurance
	Share of the dominant language[a]	Share of the dominant religion[a]	Number of cultural heritage sites and intangibles[b,c]
Estonia	Estonian 68%	Unaffiliated 34%	
	0.68	0.34	5
0.30	0.51		0.08
Latvia	Latvian 58%	Unspecified 64%	
	0.58	0.64	4
0.34	0.61		0.06
Lithuania	Lithuanian 82%	Roman Catholic 79%	
	0.82	0.79	6
0.46	0.81		0.1
Poland	Polish 98%	Roman Catholic 90%	
	0.98	0.90	12
0.57	0.94		0.20
	Russian 95%	Orthodox 70%	
	0.95	0.7	17
0.56	0.83		0.28
Sweden	Swedish 95%	Lutheran 87%	
	0.95	0.87	13
0.56	0.91		0.21

Note: The mean of homogeneity and endurance are in italic
Sources: [a]*The World Fact Book* (2010); [b]UNESCO, 2010; [c]China: highest score 61 (= 1)

UNESCO World Heritage List was used as a proxy, as explained previously. The measurements of homogeneity and endurance correlated ($r = 0.737$) in the countries in question. The internal consistency in the measurements and scatter plots shown in Figure 5 indicate good construct validity, but given the lack of previous studies and the small number of countries in the analysis, the results should be interpreted with caution.

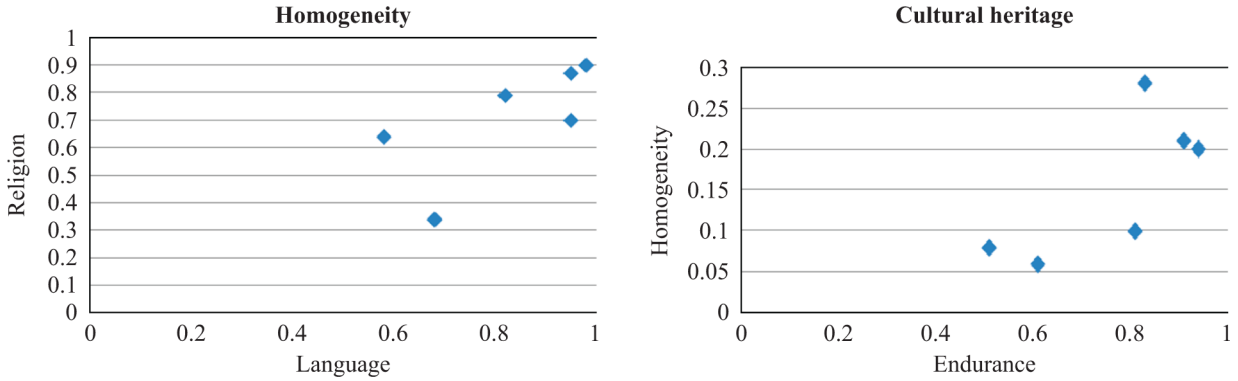
Data obtained from different sources were compared, and in the case of contradictory information clarified by means of additional phone calls or e-mails. Banerjee's (2008) framework was used for the cross-case analysis. The following section presents the results of the empirical study.

Applying the operationalisations in practice

The first case concerns the Fazer Group, the first industrial manufacturer of confectionery products in Finland, founded by Karl Fazer in 1891. Many of the brands that were launched at the time of the company's foundation are still on the market. Fazer Blue milk chocolate was launched in 1922, and has been voted among the most valuable brands in Finland for many years in sequence. Fazer's core values have remained the same since its establishment. In terms of symbols, the official logo has undergone small updates over the years but the registered colour remains the same. Fazer Blue was launched just a few years after Finland became independent, and the blue colour is thus – besides of nature – also a symbol of patriotism (cf. the Finnish flag). Continuity is expressed in the company's USP, which has been in use for decades: "It's good – it's Fazer's" (Donner, 1991, p. 19). The other Fazer example, Puikula bread, was launched in 1997 in Finland. Puikula builds its heritage on its oval shape, which is a traditional form of Finnish homemade bread, and on a fibre-rich composition.

Elovena is an 85-year-old oatmeal brand of the Finnish Raisio Group. Oatmeal was previously a bulk product, and it was Elovena that was first packaged and given a label. It

Figure 5 Scatter plots of the measurements related to homogeneity and cultural heritage



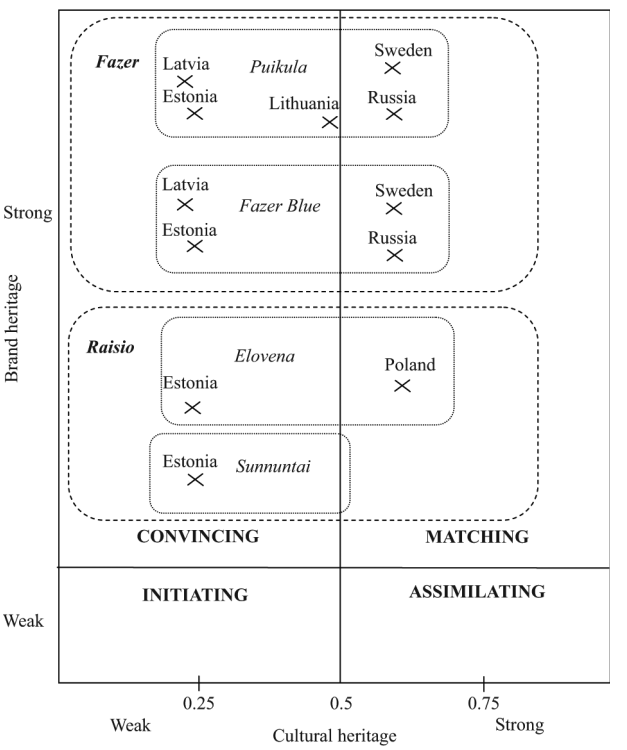
depicts a blonde girl in national dress with a sickle in her hand, standing by a cornfield, and has become a national icon. Another example from the Raisio Group is the Sunnuntai brand, which was launched as packaged flour in 1967 but soon developed into a family of products related to baking (margarine and yeast, for example). The warm, yellow background of the package, the round roll of sweet bread and the red rose were considered naïve at first but the concept worked, and it still does (cf. Heino, 1989). In sum, both the companies and the products analysed seem to have a rather strong heritage based on their long history, the consistency and continuity of their procedures, their core values and their visual symbols.

Table II gives a practical example of the evaluation of cultural heritage, listing the main target countries of Fazer Blue, Fazer Puikula, Elovena and Sunnuntai. The figure in bold under the name of the country is the mean of the homogeneity and endurance measurements. The homogeneity score was derived from the mean of the share of the dominant language (e.g. the mother tongue of 95 per cent of the population of Sweden is Swedish) and the share of the dominant religion (e.g. 87 per cent of people living in Sweden are Lutherans). Thus, in the case of Sweden the homogeneity score was 0.91. In deriving the endurance score we scaled the number of cultural heritage sites and intangibles in a particular country to the number of cultural heritage sites and intangibles in China (the country with highest numbers). Sweden, for example, has 13 cultural heritage sites and intangibles, which is 21 per cent of the Chinese figure (61), thus the score for Sweden was 0.21.

The higher the mean of homogeneity and endurance (the figures in italic), the stronger is the cultural heritage of the country concerned. It thus seems that Poland, Sweden and Russia are rather strong in cultural heritage, whereas Estonia and Latvia are weaker. Lithuania is in the middle, leaning slightly towards the weaker side. It is worth noting that even though we use the terms "weak" and "strong", which have been used in earlier research (cf. Banerjee, 2008), we do not mean to imply that "strong" is somehow better than weak. It may be that even though a country with a strong cultural heritage is more stabilised, it is also more traditional and inflexible, whereas one with a weak cultural heritage may be modern and dynamic.

Figure 6 illustrates the proposed brand strategies for the selected cases in their main target markets. Given that all these products appear to have a strong brand heritage,

Figure 6 Suggested brand strategies for the selected cases



convincing and matching strategies are proposed, depending on the target country's own cultural heritage.

Fazer Bakeries is active in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden and Russia. According to the framework (Figure 6), given the rather strong cultural heritage in Sweden and Russia is rather strong Fazer could adopt a matching strategy in those countries and a convincing strategy in the Baltic countries. Closer examination of the Puikula bread brand suggests that this assumption partly holds: a convincing strategy is used in Finland and the Baltics, whereas an assimilation strategy seems to have been adopted in Sweden and Russia. In the latter cases the decision stemmed from a market-entry strategy based on acquiring well-known local bakeries.

Fazer Blue milk chocolate is exported to Estonia, Latvia, Sweden and Russia. Again, one would expect to see a convincing strategy in Estonia and Latvia, and a matching

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strategy in Sweden and Russia. In practice, however, Fazer adopts a convincing strategy in all of the countries: the brand is exactly the same. The name of the company founder, Karl Fazer, is emphasised even more in the international markets than in Finland. The convincing strategy may be justified because of Fazer Blue's extremely strong image in Finland and the brand's position as the flagship product of the whole Fazer group.

The Raisio Group's Elovena oat flakes are sold in Poland and Estonia. According to the framework, a matching strategy should be adopted in Poland and a convincing strategy in Estonia. In fact, the firm uses matching in both countries: the brand differs slightly. The reason why the same strategy was adopted could be that international operations started in Poland and the Estonian market is rather small. It therefore made sense to use the concept developed for Poland in both markets.

The only market outside Finland for Sunnuntai baking products is Estonia. The brand is very strong in the Finnish market and the company did not want to change the product or its name. Consequently, a convincing strategy is utilised. This is in line with the framework.

In sum, the case studies show that, first, the proposed operationalisation of brand heritage and cultural heritage are rather easily applied in practice. Secondly, Banerjee's (2008) framework for evaluating brand strategies in international markets seems to fit well in some cases but – as the cases presented here show – branding decisions for international markets are influenced by many other things, such as internationalisation strategies, entry modes and the timing of market entry. Cultural heritage could thus be seen as one variable among many others that, through complex interaction, influence branding. This does not diminish its significance, however, but rather evokes the need to understand its interaction with other variables.

Discussion and conclusions

A company's brand heritage can be a noteworthy competitive tool as it enters international markets. However, brand managers should establish how the markets differ culturally, and construct a marketing strategy accordingly. In other words, the brand's heritage and the cultural heritage of the target country should be interlinked, thereby enabling companies to assess their relative strength in each target country. Assessment requires the objective operationalisation of both concepts, however, which was the purpose of this study. There have been studies focusing on conceptual definitions, but to our knowledge this is the first one to target operationalisation. Combining the definitions of brand heritage developed by Banerjee (2008) and Urde *et al.* (2007), and taking into account the measurability and the need to avoid overlapping concepts, we therefore propose that:

P1. Brand heritage is a composite concept incorporating the history of the brand in numbers of years of operation and the power of the brand story over time, as well as the consistency and continuity of the core values, the product brands and the visual symbols.

As Banerjee (2008) suggests, the brand's heritage should be considered in the context of the cultural heritage of the target country, and potential gaps in strength between them weighed up, before the country is approached. Previous literature (e.g. Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars, 1993) has classified countries based on cultural differences, but there is a dearth of tools for measuring differences in cultural heritage. This, again, calls for operationalisation. Having taken Banerjee's (2008) conceptualisation of national cultural heritage as a starting point and converted it into measurable form that proved to be usable in practice, we propose that:

P2. The cultural heritage of a country comprises homogeneity and endurance.

One way of assessing homogeneity is to analyse the coverage of the dominant language and religion, whereas endurance can be ranked in accordance with the number of cultural heritage nominations received.

The empirical application of the above operationalisations to Banerjee's (2008) framework, which to our knowledge is the first, leads us to our third proposition. It seems that both convincing and matching are often suitable strategies for internationalising companies with a strong brand heritage. We also found that both strategies could sometimes be adopted for one product brand simultaneously in different market areas. The timing of the market entry and the marching order of the markets also seem to matter. Hence:

P3. The utilisation of brand heritage in international markets is influenced by the strength of the brand's own heritage and the strength of the cultural heritage of the target country, and also by other variables such as the firm's internationalisation strategy and the timing of the market entry.

Thus, although it is extremely hard to estimate the impact of a country's cultural heritage on branding decisions – as there are other influencing variables – it should be borne in mind that "there are very few instances where culture does not matter at all" (Leung *et al.*, 2005, p. 368).

The above propositions are drawn from our theoretical discussion and case examples, and further research is needed to support their validity. We suggest that future studies should focus on specifying the circumstances in which cultural heritage matters more and when it matters less. Applicability of the brand-heritage concept should be considered in different product categories, and account taken of the strength of the heritage in the country of origin as well as the familiarity and traditions of the product category in the target market. Overall, more empirical research is needed to test the validity of the suggested operationalisations.

Managers are under increasing pressure to utilise brand heritage more efficiently in international markets. Given that the strategies seem to differ depending on the target countries' own cultural heritages, we recommend that firms basing their competitive advantage largely on a strong brand heritage in particular carefully consider how to enter countries with a strong cultural heritage. The operationalisations created in this study are easy for practitioners and managers to apply.

Our conclusions should be considered in the light of the limitations of the study. This research is primarily conceptual and the propositions are based on relatively scarce empirical evidence. In particular, the measurement of a country's cultural heritage is problematic and deserves further consideration. We assumed that both homogeneity and endurance would play an equal role in its determination: this assumption needs to be further deliberated. Furthermore,

the utilisation of the UNESCO World Heritage List as a proxy for endurance could be carefully considered in future studies. The overlap between the corporate and product brand heritage may also complicate the operationalisation of the concepts. All that said, we hope that this paper will provide the basis for future discussion, and will act as a trigger for further empirical studies.

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Antecedents of luxury brand purchase intention

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Abstract

Purpose – There has been considerable research into the global phenomenon of luxury brand consumption, but relatively few studies have empirically explored key relationships influencing purchase intention. This research aims to consider the respective roles of social context, individual perception, and vanity, and to set these relationships within a broader theoretical context of the literature on possession and consumer identity.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical study consisted of a large-scale survey conducted among Chinese luxury brand consumers in Taiwan. The data were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression.

Findings – The findings support the influence of the social context on purchase intention for luxury brands. There was weaker support for the role of perception. The experiential and functional aspects of luxury brand purchase were positively correlated with purchase intention, but symbolic value was not. Physical and achievement vanity had a positive impact on purchase intention while only achievement vanity had a moderating effect on perception.

Practical implications – This study offers new empirical support for the proposition that vanity has a role in luxury brand purchase intention and thereby shades both theoretical and managerial understanding of luxury brand consumption. It also suggests that symbolic value, which is highly influential in western conceptualizations of luxury brand meaning, needs to be re-evaluated in the context of Chinese consumers.

Originality/value – This study offers new empirical findings which contribute to a re-conceptualization of the antecedents of purchase intention in the area of luxury brand consumption. In particular, the study provides evidence of the roles of social context, perception and vanity in a Chinese consumption context to inform the primarily western models of luxury brand purchase intention.

Keywords Luxury brands, Purchase intention, Asia-Pacific, Vanity, Brands, Taiwan

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Studies in luxury brand consumption have burgeoned in recent years, with branding practitioners and academics keen to explore this US$ 180 billion industry (Datamonitor, 2007; Okonkwo, 2009; Park *et al.*, 2008; Tungate, 2005). In particular, the robustness of the luxury fashion business in the face of the recent and ongoing global recession has fuelled interest in this area (Sullivan, 2009; Wood, 2009).

The appeal of international luxury goods can be a result of their perceived premium quality, recognizable style, reputation, and/or limited accessibility. In the perceptions of the owners and others, these characteristics signify emotional, experiential, and/or symbolic values (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Chadha and Husband, 2007; Gardyn, 2002a; Jolson *et al.*, 1981; Nueno and Quelch, 1998). Because of these attributes, luxury brands as possessions help to shape the owner's identity by bridging the inner self and external world (Belk, 1988; Jenkins, 2004). For instance, a luxury handbag can be desirable to wealthy consumers who wish to mark their social status and economic power symbolically, to less wealthy but aspiring consumers who want to signify their aspirations, and to younger consumers who seek identity affirmation and a sense of belonging in owning such goods (Gardyn, 2002b; Park *et al.*, 2008; Piacentini and Mailer, 2004; Taylor and Cosenza, 2002; Thompson and Holt, 1997). Lastly, studies have shown that the appeal of luxury brands can penetrate both domestic and international markets, further increasing their attractiveness to consumers and suppliers (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009; Danziger, 2005; Johnson and Nunes, 2002; Karpova *et al.*, 2007; Silverstein and Fiske,

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2003). By considering the attributes stated above and the definitions by Berthon *et al.* (2009), Han *et al.* (2010), and Nueno and Quelch (1998), a luxury brand in this study is defined as a branded product that is carefully crafted, unique, and conspicuous. For this study we have focused on those luxury brands that are also well known internationally.

In spite of the considerable volume of research in this area, much remains to be understood about the relationships among the motivating factors behind the purchase intention for luxury brands (Okonkwo, 2009). According to Berthon *et al.* (2009, p. 45), "they [luxury brands] are poorly understood and under-investigated". This gap in consumer research is not unique to this specialist area. As Arnould and Thompson (2005) and Lye *et al.* (2005) noted, academics still have limited knowledge with regard to generalizing consumption processes and outcomes. For this reason, the aim of this study is to provide new insights into theorizing the consumption of luxury brands by integrating existing frameworks with empirical testing. The findings from 1,380 participants' luxury brand purchase intentions will go some way to meeting Tsai's (2005) recommendation that further empirical models on luxury brand consumption should be established with the inclusion of both personal and social orientations.

2. Literature review

To theorize luxury brand purchase intention with regard to the implications for consumer research, this study draws on consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Within CCT, Ahuvia (2005), Belk (1988), Jenkins's (2004) studies on possessions are particularly relevant. The central position is that is that consumers use possessions to formulate and alter their identities, in order to fit their own projections of who they are and aspire to be. At the same time, this process must also be validated by the judgment of the external world (Jenkins, 2004). In this study, the emphasis is on how self and the external world contribute to luxury brand consumption. Secondly, we examine the intention to obtain luxury brands, rather than actually possessing them. Lastly, we analyze vanity's direct and moderating effect on this process. With this research's central rationale laid out, the following review will outline the general literature with an overview on purchase intention, followed by a more focused review of two influential models of luxury brand purchase motivation. Finally, we will discuss the role of vanity in luxury brand purchase intention. From this review, we generate five hypotheses for testing.

This study focuses on purchase intention rather than behavior, because intention has wider implications and will often have a positive impact on an individual's actions (Ajzen and Driver, 1992; Pierre *et al.*, 2005; Schlosser *et al.*, 2006). This has been supported by many scholars who have studied the significance of purchase intention in the context of brand consumption (e.g. Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Yoo and Lee, 2009; Zeithaml, 1988). Antecedents of luxury brand purchase intention have been explored by Berthon *et al.* (2009), Tsai (2005), and Vigneron and Johnson (2004). In their research, although the specific terms that each of them used were differently, Berthon *et al.* (2009), Tsai (2005), and Vigneron and Johnson (2004) all referred to the influence of the self and external world on luxury brand consumption.

In a study on the value associated with luxury brands, Berthon *et al.* (2009) suggested that it is characterized by three worlds of consumer experience. World one focuses on functional value, which manifests the actual goods and service quality as perceived by the consumer. For the consumers operating under this category, quality can be important because it signals what an object does and how well this object can perform (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). In the empirical studies by Christodoulides *et al.* (2009) and Vigneron and Johnson (2004), quality was an important indicator to some consumer segments. In world two, the experiential value consists of individual thoughts and feelings toward the luxury brand because it is often perceived subjectively as something that is rare, precious, and unique. These can be divided into hedonic and uniqueness-seeking motivations. World three emphasizes a luxury brand's symbolic value, which indicates conspicuousness, expensiveness, and wealth. Within the symbolic dimension, possession of luxury brands could provide a signal to others as well as the user (Belk, 1988; O'Cass, 2004). In other words, the value lies in extending one's self and one's conspicuousness (Berthon *et al.*, 2009, pp. 47-49). By cross-referencing with Keller's (2003) work, it can be expected that these dimensions' impact the motivations of individuals to consume luxury brands, although this has not yet been empirically tested.

The other framework that is useful for this research is the brand luxury index (BLI), and it includes the five values (quality, hedonic, extended self, conspicuousness, uniqueness) mentioned above as indicators of luxury brand perception (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999, 2004). These have been tested empirically on a sample of Australian students, and all the dimensions correlated with the individuals' perceptions of the luxury brand (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). When this framework was tested again with non-student consumers from Asia by Christodoulides *et al.* (2009), the value of quality, uniqueness, and extended self were confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis while the categories of hedonism and conspicuous value passed the threshold of exploratory factor analysis.

Despite the limitations of these frameworks, they do highlight two of the three antecedents of luxury fashion goods purchase intention used in this study: perception and social influence. According to Berthon *et al.* (2009), consumers' perceptions towards luxury fashion brands have symbolic, experiential, and functional dimensions. Consequently, the first hypothesis tests the impact of different dimensions of consumer perceptions on purchase intention. In the first world of luxury brands, quality is the key to satisfying the consumers' need to fulfill functional value (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). The second world of luxury brands is related to experience. For Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), experiential consumption involves fantasies, feelings, and fun. In addition, Holbrook (1999) highlighted how this value could affect an individual's identification and behavior. Lastly, in the third world of luxury brands, there is a dimension of symbolic meaning (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Keller, 2003). According to Truong *et al.* (2008, p. 191), some individuals consume a luxury brand for the symbolic meaning it communicates to the world about the owner's wealth and value. From the above literature on each world, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Luxury brand perception is positively correlated with purchase intention.
H1a. Functional value perception is positively correlated with purchase intention.
H1b. Experiential value perception is positively correlated with purchase intention.
H1c. Symbolic value perception is positively correlated with purchase intention.

In addition to the user's perceptions, which are internal, external factors also contribute to a possession's perceived value (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Coulter *et al.*, 2003; Jenkins, 2004; Truong *et al.*, 2010). This is because a brand's value can hardly operate outside of its community (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Kapferer, 1992, 1997; Lalwani, 2002; Vickers and Renand, 2003; Wilcox *et al.*, 2009), and this is particularly apparent when the purpose of a luxury brand purchase is to signify wealth, trade up in social status, and/or seek approval (Danziger, 2005; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Silverstein and Fiske, 2003). This research labels this external factor that stimulates individuals' intention to purchase a luxury brand as social influence. In Tsai (2005), Vigneron and Johnson (1999, 2004), and Wiedmann *et al.*'s (2009) research, the impact of social influence on consumers' luxury brand purchase intention was discussed and empirically supported. According to Tsai (2005), socially oriented consumers are motivated to possess luxury brands in order to display their status and success to their targeted social groups. This would be especially important in luxury brands which are known internationally, hence the focus of this study on international luxury brands. By implication, we derive the following hypothesis:

H2. Social influence is positively correlated with purchase intention.

Perception and social influence have been tested before with different samples, but the third main aspect of this framework, the role of vanity, has received much less attention even though marketers have try to link vanity with numerous products within consumer culture (Wang and Waller, 2006). Although Berthon *et al.*'s (2009), Tsai (2005), and Vigneron and Johnson (1999) studies have all discussed the consumption implications of vanity, our research suggests that its role is even more prominent than previously indicated. This is because it connects between an individual's self and his/her desired external world through symbolic and sensory fulfillment (Wang and Waller, 2006; Watchravesringkan, 2008). Vanity can be seen to have elements that are relatively hidden, such as the use of personal care products because of physical vanity, and the ostentatious display of status objects, signifying a vanity with regard to social status and power. For the purpose of this research, vanity is defined as "having an excessive concern, and/or a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of, one's physical appearance/personal achievements" (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1995, p. 612). The traits and behaviors disclosed by Netemeyer *et al.* (1995) include more concern for self advancement, physical appearance and status. Belk (1985) and Netemeyer *et al.* (1995) suggest these can be observed, for example, from an individual's use and choice of cosmetic products, clothing products, and conspicuous consumption in general. In Durvasula *et al.*'s (2001) studies, they further claimed vanity is importantly linked with the consumption of luxury fashion brands. This correlation has not, as yet, received wide empirical support (Park *et al.*, 2008). Of the few who have examined this relationship, Sedikides *et al.*'s (2007) research is influential. By studying the relationship between individuals who are prone to vanity and their spending on high-prestige products, they concluded these consumers will keep wanting and consuming new products, including fashion goods, to satisfy their voracious appetite and self-esteem. Based on the works reviewed above we derive the following hypotheses:

H3. Vanity is positively correlated with purchase intention.
H3a. Physical vanity is positively correlated with purchase intention.
H3b. Achievement vanity is positively correlated with purchase intention.

In addition, this study also suggests that vanity could moderate the relationship between perceptions and the influence of social context on purchase intention. Feiereisen *et al.* (2009) and Mandel *et al.* (2006) studied how vanity could influence individuals with different majors and gender. In their studies, the results demonstrate vanity not only could directly affect behavior, but also can be a moderator. Consequently, this investigation examines the moderating impact of vanity while fixing on one type of luxury brands with the following hypotheses:

H4. Vanity has a moderating effect on consumer perception and purchase intention.
H4a-1. Physical vanity has a moderating effect on consumer functional perception and purchase intention.
H4a-2. Physical vanity has a moderating effect on consumer experiential perception and purchase intention.
H4a-3. Physical vanity has a moderating effect on consumer symbolic perception and purchase intention.
H4b-1. Achievement vanity has a moderating effect on consumer functional perception and purchase intention.
H4b-2. Achievement vanity has a moderating effect on consumer experiential perception and purchase intention.
H4b-3. Achievement vanity has a moderating effect on consumer symbolic perception and purchase intention.
H5. Vanity has a moderating effect on social influence and purchase intention.
H5a. Physical vanity has a moderating effect on social influence and purchase intention.
H5b. Achievement vanity has a moderating effect on social influence and purchase intention.

With the hypotheses listed above, potential antecedents that might lead to luxury brand purchase intention can be tested. In the following section, we explain the design of the questionnaire and the sampling method used.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Sampling, distribution, and participant background

The Greater Chinese market is one of the main areas responsible for the boom in luxury brand consumption (Datamonitor, 2007; Lu, 2008; Okonkwo, 2009; Wu and

Delong, 2006), and Taiwan is one of the fastest growing luxury markets in Asia (Chadha and Husband, 2007; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). For this reason, Taiwan is chosen as the context of this empirical study, as some commentators believe that it may act as a portal to the Greater Chinese market (Roy, 2003; Wang and Heitmeyer, 2005).

A total of 1,750 surveys were distributed and 1,380 valid responses were returned, giving a response rate of 78.8 percent. The high response rate was likely due to three reasons: the gift for completing the survey, trained interviewers who would perform a quick check on the spot to avoid potential errors, and incentives to the interviewers based on the effective return rate. Among the respondents, 69 percent were under the age of 31, 67.5 percent were females, and 60 percent were married. Additionally, in terms of socioeconomic status, 28.8 percent were students and 25.1 percent were working in the service sector with the mode income of £500-£800[1] per month (as shown in Table I). The surveys were mainly gathered near universities or within major shopping districts of the Taipei and Kaohsiung metropolitan areas, which are the two most populous cities in Taiwan. The common reasons given for not participating were: late for a(n) appointment/meeting, a general lack of interest, or lack of knowledge about luxury brands.

Apart from the general definition on luxury brands as disclosed above, we focused on luxury brands that are more internationally recognized. This is because this study acknowledges that luxury goods and luxury brands are not necessarily synonymous. For instance, based on Alleres's (1990) classification, the former may be luxurious while not necessarily having a global reputation or distribution, and vice versa. This research focuses on internationally recognized luxury brands because we wanted to ensure that the participants would have some familiarity with the brands before analyzing their purchasing intention. Nevertheless, the study also has implications for less well-known luxury goods, given that some luxury brand consumers take pride in showing their discernment by consuming and displaying items which are not yet well known in the mass market (Lu, 2008).

Table I Demographic characteristics of the sample

	n	%
Age groups in years		
<19	68	4.9
20-30	588	42.6
31-40	520	37.6
41-50	387	28
>51	37	2.7
Gender		
Males	449	32.5
Females	931	67.5
Marital statues		
Married	830	60.1
Single	550	39.9
Occupation		
Public sector employees	149	10.8
Private sector employees	594	43
Students	397	28.8
Homemaker	43	3.1
Other	197	14.3
Education level		
Secondary level	77	5.6
Graduate	1043	75.6
Post-graduate	260	18.8

Notes: $n = 1{,}380$

A list of 30 luxury fashion brands was drafted after reviewing Okonkwo's (2007) luxury fashion brands index. This list was compared with the definition of luxury brands used in this research, Taiwanese media coverage of luxury brands, and Asian consumers' luxury brand preferences (Chadha and Husband, 2007). This step was necessary because Okonkwo's (2007) index was based on brands' years of establishment and we wanted our participants to have a certain familiarity about the brands so we needed to include current and not just long-established brands. In addition, we decided to focus on fashion brands as they make up a significant proportion of luxury goods consumption (Datamonitor, 2007; Durvasula *et al.*, 2001; O'Cass, 2004).

This list was narrowed down to six brands after a ranking process was performed by purposefully selected sample of 40 consumers who self-reported that they have high interest and knowledge about luxury brands in general. Participants could write their own choice of brands if they could not find suitable ones on the list. This step was taken to ensure that the selected brands were widely recognized. The six brands chosen by the consumers were Burberry (British), Celine (French), Coach (American), Dolce and Gabbana (Italian), Gucci (Italian), and Louis Vuitton (French). This list can be said to be comprehensive, since it includes brands from the four host countries of the most renowned fashion shows (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2006; Okonkwo, 2007), and they are among the brands that are highly recognizable to certain groups of Asian consumers (Chadha and Husband, 2007). While the questions were identical, six versions of the survey were prepared, with one of the listed brands printed on each of them. After the purpose of this research explained, participants could select the brand of their choice (out of the six brands listed above) to answer questions on. The specific item chosen as the focus of this survey was a handbag as it was used in Han *et al.*'s (2010) study on luxury brand consumption. According to Thomas (2007, p. 168) cited in Han *et al.* (2010, p. 18), "handbags are the engine that drives luxury brands today". When compared with other products, this item and its translation are not necessarily gender-specific in Chinese culture and can be used in different social settings. In addition, a handbag can carry a mixture of functional, experiential, and symbolic values, and so it is particularly appropriate for this research. The use of handbag as an example to explore participants' luxury brand purchase intention was explained to them before the survey was filled in. We felt the respondents understood the implications of this research and its questions.

3.2 Questionnaire design

Participants completed a survey with a five-point Likert scale for evaluating their perception of luxury brands, social influence, the trait of vanity, and purchase intention.

Informants rated all items with anchor points from "strongly disagree" (= 1) to "strongly agree" (= 5). The target question examined in this study was "what contributes to consumers' luxury product purchase intention?". All the variables in the model (Figure 1) were measured with multiple items to adequately capture the domain of the constructs (Churchill, 1979). The survey measurement items for each variable are presented in Table II and were specifically generated for this study based on descriptions and measures of related constructs in the literature: three luxury brand perceptions which included functional, experiential and symbolic value generated from Berthon *et al.*'s (2009) and Vigneron and Johnson (2004), social influence from Wiedmann *et al.* (2009), the trait of vanity from Netemeyer *et al.* (1995), Tsai (2005), Wang and Waller (2006), and Watchravesringkan (2008) and lastly, Pierre *et al.*'s (2005) and Schlosser *et al.* (2006) work on purchase intention. The wordings of the measures were slightly modified to be appropriate for this study (as shown in Table II).

4. Data analysis

A principal component analysis was performed with the items to test the factorial validity of the scale. A series of exploratory factor analyses were applied to further purify the measurement indicators; the factor structure of the study model is supported for reliability by the Cronbach's α and so on. Exploratory factor analysis was chosen to define the theoretical framework for this study. Varimax rotation was employed to the principle components in order to extract factors on the same scale that failed to exhibit significant loading on the construct. This research conducted a strict a priori decision criterion to discard factor loadings of 0.6 (Hair *et al.*, 2009) and the components with Eigenvalue greater than 1.0 were retained. The analysis revealed 68.8 percent of the variance is contributed by seven factors, and these are defined as follows: functional value (four items), experiential value (five items), symbolic value (three items), physical vanity (five items), achievement vanity (four items), social influences (seven items) and purchase intention (three items). The values of alpha ranged from 0.79 to 0.91 and factor (as shown in Table III). The means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables used in this current study are demonstrated in Table II. Hypothesis tests were conducted by using multiple regression to reveal their level of significance (Cohen *et al.*, 2003). Hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Cohen *et al.*, 2003) was used to evaluate the relationships among the variables. The variance inflation factors were examined and all were found to be within the range of 1.36-3.10; hence, multicollinearity does not contaminate the results (Hair *et al.*, 2009). Table IV presents the results of each hypothesis, while the following paragraphs provide an explanation of the procedures undertaken.

This research used regression for analysis because "multiple regression was a very general system for analyzing data in the behavioral sciences" (Cohen *et al.*, 2003, p. XXV). We followed Cohen *et al.* (2003) and Song *et al.*'s (2006) procedure to average items for each independent variable and then entered into the regression followed by the steps below. According to Song *et al.* (2006), averaging the items for each independent variable is suitable when examining hypotheses. Control variables (e.g. gender and income) were entered at step one, then luxury perception was entered at step two (*H1*), social influence was included at step three (*H2*), and two traits of vanity were added at step four (*H3*). At steps five and six, the interactions of two vanity aspects × three luxury perceptions (e.g. physical vanity × functional value perception) (*H4*) and two vanity aspects × social influence (*H5*) were added to test the moderating effects. During analysis, it was found that consumers with higher functional and experiential value perceptions towards luxury brands will

Figure 1 A proposed conceptual framework

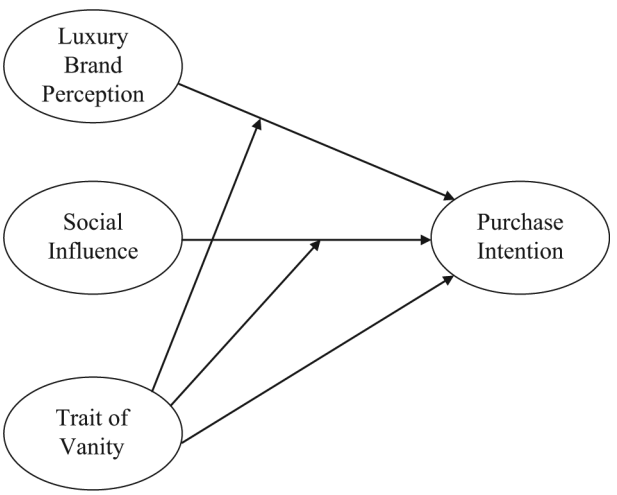

Table II Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations, and correlations

	Lux1	Lux2	Lux3	V1	V2	SI	PI
Lux1							
Lux2	0.581*						
Lux3	0.527*	0.476*					
V1	0.220*	0.039	0.150*				
V2	0.239*	0.122*	0.239*	0.434*			
SI	0.315*	0.377*	0.245*	0.348*	0.304*		
PI	0.425*	0.329*	0.135*	0.224*	0.193*	0.397*	
M	3.380	2.737	3.458	3.629	3.648	2.931	3.005
SD	0.728	0.862	0.848	0.685	0.751	0.771	0.835

Note: *$p < 0.01$; Lux1: Functional value perception; Lux2: Experiential value perception; Lux3: Symbolic value perception; SI: Social influence; V1: Physical vanity; V2: Achievement vanity; PI: Purchase intention

Table III Results of the exploratory factor analysis

Variable	Measurement items	Factor loading *	α
Purchase intention	Strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree(5)		0.909
	I have strong possibility to purchase Luxury Brand X's product	0.884	
	I'm likely to purchase Luxury Brand X's product	0.859	
	I have high intention to purchase Luxury Brand X's product	0.809	
Function value dimension	I strongly disagree (1)/I strongly agree(5)		0.867
	Luxury brand X's product is handmade (crafted)	0.776	
	Luxury brand X's product has the best quality	0.773	
	Luxury brand X's product is sophisticated	0.721	
	Luxury brand X's product is superior	0.694	
Experiential value dimension	I strongly disagree (1)/I strongly agree(5)		0.875
	Luxury Brand X's product is precious	0.816	
	Luxury Brand X's product is rare	0.788	
	Luxury Brand X's product is unique	0.713	
	Luxury Brand X's product is attracting	0.766	
	Luxury Brand X's product is stunning	0.716	
Symbolic value dimension	I strongly disagree (1)/I strongly agree(5)		0.787
	Luxury Brand X's product is conspicuous	0.785	
	Luxury Brand X's product is expensive	0.686	
	Luxury Brand X's product is for the wealthy	0.676	
Social influence	Strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree(5)		0.88
	Before purchasing a luxury branded products, it is important to know what brands will make good impression on others	0.807	
	My friends and I tend to buy the same luxury brands	0.766	
	Before purchasing a luxury branded products, it is important to know what kinds of people buy certain brands	0.765	
	Before purchasing a luxury branded products, it is important to know what others think of people who use certain brands	0.719	
	I tend to pay attention to what other luxury brands others are buying	0.712	
	I like to know what luxury branded products make good impressions on others	0.711	
	I actively avoid using luxury branded products that are not in style	0.644	
Vanity-physical	Strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree(5)		0.863
	I place high emphasis on my appearance	0.875	
	My appearance is very important to me	0.849	
	It is important that I look good	0.756	
	I would feel embarrassed if I was around people and did not look my best	0.710	
	I will make effort to look good	0.711	
Vanity-achievement	Strongly disagree (1)/strongly agree(5)		0.868
	My achievement is highly regarded by others	0.842	
	I want others to look up to me because of my accomplishments	0.814	
	Professional achievements are an obsession with me	0.790	
	Achieving greater success than my peer is important to me	0.784	

Note: *All factor loadings are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$

have higher purchase intention, meaning *H1a* and *H1b* are supported ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$). However, contrary to some previous studies (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), the results of this work show that symbolic value is negatively related to purchase intention. Thus, *H1c* is not supported, with $\beta = -0.18$, $p < 0.001$. We comment further on this finding below. In summary, experiential and functional values are positively related to purchase intention, while symbolic value has a negative correlation. In terms of social influence's relationship with purchase intention (*H2*), this analysis found a strong effect, as suggested in the literature (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Lalwani, 2002), with $\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$, and thus *H2* is supported.

In *H3*, the hypothesis was that the trait of vanity will have a positive relation with purchase intention. The participants' responses supported with the effects of both physical ($\beta = 0.06$; $p < 0.05$ for *H3a*) and achievement vanity's on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.03$; $p < 0.1$ for *H3b*). Lastly, the moderating effect of vanity between luxury perception and social influence on purchase intention was tested in *H4* and *H5*, respectively. In order to test the moderating effect of vanity on the relationship between them, hierarchical regression procedures were performed, as recommended by

Table IV Hierarchical multiple regression results

		Purchase intention					
			H1	H2	H3	H4	H5
	Dependent variable	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Controls	Gender	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03
	Marital status	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03
	Educational level	−0.06	−0.05	−0.04	−0.03	−0.03	−0.03
	Age	−0.11****	−0.11****	−0.09****	−0.09****	−0.09****	−0.09****
	Avg. monthly income	0.13****	0.13****	0.11****	0.11****	0.11****	0.11****
Luxury perception	Lux.1 – Functional		0.43****	0.39****	0.38****	0.37****	0.38****
	Lux. 2 – Experiential		0.17****	0.09****	0.10****	0.10****	0.10****
	Lux. 3 – Symbolic		−0.18****	−0.19****	−0.20****	−0.02****	−0.20****
Social influence (SI)				0.29****	0.26****	0.26****	0.25****
Vanity	V1 – Physical vanity				0.06**	0.06**	0.07**
	V2 – Achievement vanity				0.03*	0.04*	0.03
V1 × SI							0.04
V2 × SI							−0.01
V1 × Lux.1						−0.02	
V2 × Lux.1						0.09****	
V1 × Lux.2						−0.04	
V2 × Lux.2						0.09****	
V1 × Lux.3						0.01	
V2 × Lux.3						0.06**	
R^2		0.01	0.23	0.29	0.30	0.30	0.30
χR^2		0.01***	0.21***	0.06***	0.01*	0.00**	0.00
F		0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.35

Note: *$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$; ****$p < 0.001$

Baron and Kenny (1986). In the hierarchical regression model for *H4*, the order of entry was as follows: the predictor (purchase intention), control, luxury perception dimensions, social influence, and moderator (trait of vanity) variables were entered sequentially into regression equations. Then, the interactions of the multiplication of luxury dimensions and vanity were added. R^2 for the interaction term indicates a significant moderating effect.

The results demonstrate that achievement vanity (that is, vanity related to ownership and display of status signifying objects) has an impact on three luxury perceptions, but not on physical vanity. The multiplication of physical vanity and three dimensions of luxury perception are all insignificant, with $\beta = -0.02$, $p > 0.1$; $\beta = -0.04$, $p > 0.1$; $\beta = 0.01$, $p > 0.1$, and thus the results do not support *H4a-1*, *H4a-2*, and *H4a-3*. In other words, only achievement has a moderating influence between the relationship of luxury perception and purchase intention, since the interactions between the functional, experiential, symbolic dimensions and achievement vanity are all significant ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$ for *H4b-1*, *H4b-2* and *H4b-3*); thus, *H4* is partially supported. A similar procedure was used for *H5*. During step six of examining *H5*, social influence was multiplied by vanity, and the results show that there was no significant interaction between social influence and vanity ($\beta = 0.04$, $p > 0.1$ for *H5a*; $\beta = -0.01$, $p > 0.1$ for *H5b*), which indicate *H5* is not supported. These findings show that both physical and achievement vanity have no moderating effect on the relationship between social influence and purchase intention.

5. Interpretation and discussion

With the examination of factors suggested by the previous literature, the primary task for this section is to make sense of the hypotheses that were confirmed and give potential interpretations for those that were not supported. First, given that social influence is positively related to luxury brand purchase intention, the way that luxury brands can bridge the individual and the external world resonates with previous studies on possession. According to Homburg *et al.* (2010) and Jenkins (2004) an individual's projected image often has to be validated by their external environment. Consequently, it could be inferred that the consumption of luxury brands will be likely to rise when the environment promotes such consumption and/or favors certain images. This is an intuitively plausible result, but the statistical confirmation is telling, especially in the context of a rapidly growing consumer nation, such as Taiwan. The increased exposure of international luxury brands in media and the concomitant increase in international awareness and travel would support this possibility. The luxury brand phenomenon is likely to continue to grow.

Second, the impact of self on purchase intention was examined under the category of perception, which is formed by functional, experiential, and symbolic values. Luxury brands place a heavy emphasis on the latter two kinds of value, but the significance of premium quality was again highlighted as core values. So far, the findings of this study have largely reconfirmed what was already known. Nonetheless, what is perhaps puzzling is the finding that symbolic value had a weak negative relationship with purchase

intention. Because Christodoulides *et al.* (2009) did not propose a concrete explanation on the causes of why some of Vigneron and Johnson's (2004) findings were not supported in a Taiwanese context, cultural variables were not included in our questionnaire. Nevertheless, when our finding aligned with Christodoulides *et al.*'s (2009), we propose that the current luxury brand literature on symbolic consumption may not be culturally transferable without qualification (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Truong *et al.*, 2008; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). A fundamental question to be asked is thus whether current definitions of symbolic value reflect Asian consumers' negotiation between identity, Confucian values, and behavior.

There are several potential explanations to symbolic value's negative association with purchasing intention. First, although the Greater Chinese market is one of the main areas responsible for the boom in luxury brand consumption (Chadha and Husband, 2007; Datamonitor, 2007; Okonkwo, 2009) and Asian consumers seek individuality through ownership of (often Western) fashion brands (Delong *et al.*, 2004; Phau and Leng, 2008; Wang and Heitmeyer, 2005; Wu and Delong, 2006; Zhou and Wong, 2008), collectivism, maintaining harmony, and knowing one's place in the socioeconomic hierarchy are still culturally rooted (Hofstede, 2001; Yau, 1988). Under this conflict of values, some may pursue luxury brands that they perceived as subtle as Lu (2008) and Wang *et al.* (2000) have indicated. Second, it could be possible that the participants thought it was important for them to be perceived as economically prudent rather than extravagant when interviewed. Their responses could therefore be seen as *post hoc* rationalizations offered because, while ownership of luxury brands is acceptable, the espoused reason for owning them has to be functionality, however spurious this reason may seem given the huge price differential between bags of equal functionality. Lastly, because luxury fashion brands can be further divided into sub-categories (Alleres, 1990; Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Okonkwo, 2007), it could be possible that some of the participants did not feel that the brands this research elected were symbolic enough to fulfill their need for sensation. Similarly, participants could value these brands based on the utility rather than the symbol they brought, because handbags actually have functional value unlike some other luxury goods categories. Under these circumstances, the perceived symbolic value's association with purchase intention can be explained. However, these potential explanations will require further examination because similar luxury brands can be divided into subcategories, Chinese luxury brand consumers, like those in other countries, fall into many groups with differing, and sometimes conflicting, motivations (Truong *et al.*, 2010). So, for example, some Asian brand consumers are ostentatious in the way they display their wealth, while others are far more discreet. The question of whether luxury brand consumption is consistent with traditional Chinese values or inconsistent with them cannot be answered simply since the reality is complex and nuanced.

There were mixed results with regards vanity. Although it has a direct impact on purchase intention, only achievement vanity was seen to moderate between perception and purchase intention, and neither form of vanity can moderate between social influence and purchase intention. These results with regard to vanity's association with purchase intention offered new insights into Sedikides *et al.*'s (2007) work while they differed from Park *et al.*'s (2008) findings. We suspect this difference is likely to be because the participants in the current research were both older on average and more financially independent. Specifically, the following two potential explanations are offered on the difference between these two samples. Other things being equal, older individuals would have more exposure to luxury brands. Older consumers would therefore be likely to have a higher purchase intention. By the same token, by being financially independent, these consumers can have a higher purchase intention than those who are not. Individuals who do not have sufficient funds can still have the desire for a luxury brand, although this desire cannot be equated to purchase intention unless they have the financial means to actually buy the product.

To continue the discussion on vanity, it is widely recognized that individuals use possessions to reaffirm who they are and/or shape an image of who they want to be (Ahuvia, 2005; Sedikides *et al.*, 2007). By considering vanity alongside the more frequently discussed motivations and reasons for involvement, as this research has done, the decisions and behavior of individuals with regard to the consumption of non-necessities could be further broken down. In the case of this research, only achievement vanity was able to enhance the relationship between luxury perception and purchase intention with regard to luxury handbags. In other words, a luxury brand's emphasis on value has an effect on those who seek status approval, but not on those who seek physical attractiveness. One possible explanation for this lies in whether a luxury brand's value has more symbolic meaning for those individuals who pursue status via achievement than for those who emphasize physical appearance. This might be the reason why few research studies have directly suggested that luxury brands can make the user feel physically more attractive.

Finally, one plausible interpretation for vanity's inability to moderate between social influence and purchase intention is that social influence is more culturally rooted, whereas vanity varies individually. For a society that values collectivism, social influence perhaps carries a more dominant role than vanity; and thus the latter cannot moderate the former. However, this explanation will require additional research to confirm it. With the findings discussed and contributions put forth, the limitations of this study and future research directions serve as a concluding note for this inquiry.

6. Limitations, future studies, and concluding notes

This work is not free from limitations, and these provide some suggestions for future research directions. Most crucially, although the sample of participants might be an accurate reflection of Taiwanese shoppers in metropolitan areas and shopping districts, it is not representative of the general population. What is more, Lu (2008) has indicated that Chinese consumers fall into many categories, and thus our findings may not be generalizable across all Chinese consumers. Similarly, the use of handbag as the focal product had support in the literature (Han *et al.*, 2010), but there are different products within the broad luxury fashion and accessory product category which it may also be useful to investigate. Secondly, due to our data collection method and choice of location, limited information can be provided to describe those individuals who preferred not to be interviewed or failed to complete the survey apart from the three common

reasons given: lack of interest, lack of time, or lack of relevant knowledge. Thirdly, the explanation offered with regard to the inability to establish a correlation between symbolic value and purchase intention requires further examination. Lastly, how vanity affects an individual's intention could be qualitatively studied in order to advance current knowledge of this influential factor. Why vanity does not appear to moderate social influence and purchase intention will be a particularly interesting topic to investigate.

However, despite these limitations, this enquiry into Taiwanese consumers' purchase intentions toward American- and European-based luxury brands has generated new empirical insights focusing on five main areas:

1 It examined luxury brand purchase intention in an Asian context by integrating existing models, as Berthon *et al.* (2009), Tsai (2005), and Vigneron and Johnson (2004) recommended.
2 It reconfirmed the significance of social influence with regard to purchase intention.
3 It partially supported perception as an antecedent towards purchase intention.
4 It proposed a revision of symbolic consumption in an Asian context.
5 It empirically established the role of vanity as a motivation in luxury brand consumption.

Note

1 At the time of this research the exchange rate between Great Britain Pound to New Taiwan Dollar to US Dollar was 1:64:2.

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Diffusing the boundaries between luxury and counterfeits

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Abstract
Purpose – The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of luxury consumption by comparing the meanings and the attributes of counterfeit branded products and luxury goods.
Design/methodology/approach – This study is an interpretative qualitative research in which the meanings and essence of luxury and counterfeit goods are uncovered by written stories. The photo-ethnographical method was used to generate the stories.
Findings – Consumers regard both luxury goods and counterfeits as being at different levels and of different quality ranging from poor to excellent. Counterfeits possess mainly social meanings, whereas authentic luxury goods may also operate on a personal level. However, consumers do not perceive luxury and counterfeit branded products as counterparts; counterfeits can be regarded as the embodiment of luxury, whereas non-brand products are rather the opposite. Moreover, the existence of authenticity is perceived to be a vital connective and distinctive factor among luxury and counterfeit branded products.
Originality/value – The research aspires to shed light on the essence of counterfeit and luxury goods by comparing them in an effort to gain better understanding of the luxury phenomenon as a whole.

Keywords Research paper, Luxury, Counterfeiting, Meaning, Authenticity, Research

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The luxury market comprises a large share of economic activity, and it is estimated to reach $2 trillion by 2010 (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). However, the luxury industry loses billions because of counterfeiting. The global market for counterfeits today is estimated to exceed $600 billion, which is 7 percent of world trade (Counterfeiting Intelligence Bureau, 2008), and therefore it can be regarded as a significant economic problem propagated by consumer demand. Although counterfeiting is regarded universally as a criminal act – and has been linked to narcotics, weapons, human trafficking and terrorism (Thomas, 2007) – the social acceptance of fakes has risen dramatically (Counterfeiting Intelligence Bureau, 2008).

The importance of brand today is an embodiment of the immaterial world; consumers are seen as meaning-creators, who live in a dynamic interaction with social and cultural environment (Solomon, 1986), where they choose brands that possess the images that they wish to attach to themselves. That set of values, attitudes, and lifestyle is manifested through consumption (Solomon, 1986). Symbolic meanings of goods are argued to operate in two directions; outward in constructing the social world, and inward to construct the identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). But do the symbolic meanings attached to luxury products differentiate from meanings attached to counterfeits?

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To be able to understand counterfeited luxury goods requires an understanding of authentic luxury items. Luxury branded goods can be conceptualized from the viewpoint of product attributes (i.e. Nueno and Quelch, 1998) or a consumption perspective (i.e. Vigneron and Johnson, 2009; Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000). The latter suggests that luxury is regarded as possessing a symbolic function that operates on both a personal and a social level (Fionda and Moore, 2009). The product perspective, instead, the phenomenon of luxury and counterfeit products, has been examined mainly by counterposing these terms (e.g. Penz and Stöttinger, 2008). Counterfeits are considered to be imitated products of low quality and low price and that those are a common sight on the street, while luxury products are considered to be the opposite.

The aim of this study is to compare the meanings connected to luxury products and counterfeits. Two principal objectives were identified for this study; first, the study specifies the meaning construction of luxury and counterfeit products. The conceptualization is based on previous literature of luxury and counterfeit consumption, as well as on studies related to symbolic interactionism. Second, the empirical part of this study aims to identify how luxury branded products and counterfeits become significant and meaning-based in the informants' stories and what kind of meanings they are perceived to contain. The empirical objective is to interpret what kind of product attributes differentiates luxury products from counterfeits, and what are the social and personal meaning differences luxury and counterfeit products.

The paper begins by conceptualizing the luxury and counterfeit products especially based on both social and personal meanings of brands as well as studies relating to symbolic interactionism. To gather an empirical data, the photo-ethnographical methods were used as an elicitation technique to generate stories. By analyzing the stories, the

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product descriptions and attributes attached to luxury and counterfeit products are examined. In addition, the social and personal meanings of counterfeit and luxury products are studied. The article ends with conclusions and a discussion of consumer's authenticity perception of luxury and counterfeit products.

2. Literature review

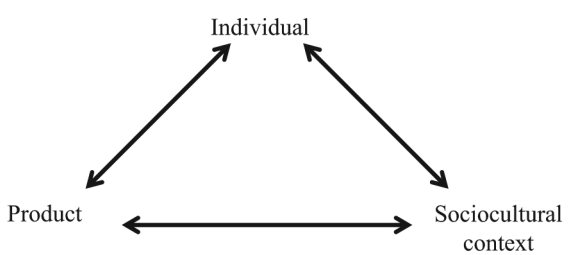
2.1 Defining luxury construct and meanings

The idea of luxury contributes to the luxury brand, and the attributes are further reflected in and adopted to the counterfeit. Therefore it is important to understand the nature of luxury before discussing counterfeits.

When defining the essence of luxury, previous research (Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Tynan *et al.*, 2010; Phau and Prendergast, 2000) – has focused on the external attributes of luxury branded products such as excellent quality, high price, rarity, distinctiveness, exclusivity and craftsmanship. However, by listing the product attributes, luxury cannot be conceptualized extensively; although high price and excellent quality are seen as attributes of luxury products, not all expensive products are considered to be luxurious. High price of a product has a positive role in determining the perception of its quality, and it can be a way to make a product rare and thereby exclusive, but it is not a determinant of luxury on its own (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993). Moreover, luxury brands must appear perfectly modern but at the same time be laden with history, heritage and tradition. Perception of authenticity is often linked to heritage and historical background of the product (Beverland, 2006), and Brown *et al.* (2003) notes that authenticity comes into existence via an individual's own interpretation of the object, influenced both by the environment and the individual's experiences. All in all, luxury status of a product is constructed by an individual, and instead of focusing only on objective product attributes of luxury items, more attention should be paid to the meaning construction of luxury, which arises in specific social context through an individual's perception (Rajaniemi, 1990).

Possessions are part of the social communication system, in which objects are socialized and may embody different symbols in different social contexts (Davis, 1986). Apart from social context, meanings are dependent upon the consumers' interpretation; for example a Louis Vuitton handbag can be regarded as prestigious by some, while other consumers might perceive it to be loud and vulgar. The meanings, as well as luxury status, are not inherent in an object and can arise from the interaction of an individual, goods and specific social context, which have a reciprocal function (Solomon, 1986; Rajaniemi, 1990). Figure 1 shows the process of dynamic meaning creation.

Figure 1 Reciprocal dynamics of meaning construction



The product attributes attached to luxury items are only one factor in meaning creation. It is in the dynamic interaction of individual and social context (i.e. symbolic interactionism), that social and personal meanings of luxury are created. The perceived product excellence earned through product attributes does not grant a branded product luxury status in itself; the luxury is shared in specific social groups, sub-cultures or cultures.

Brands act as social tools for self-expression, for instance to communicate status or actual or ideal self, or to manifest membership of a group for significant references (Sirgy, 1982). Besides of constructing the social context, in the theory of symbolic interactionism, the consumption goods are argued to have twofold function; the symbolic possession of a product could construct the identity as well (e.g. Belk, 1988; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Solomon, 1986). Perceived uniqueness and conspicuousness of a product are thought to be dimensions of luxury that are ladden with social functions; uniqueness is sought by consumers to enhance social image as well as self-image. Perceived uniqueness is based on the rarity and scarcity of the product, which creates desirability of luxury. Uniquely perceived items enable consumers to stand out from the crowd but at the same time connect themselves to a desired group. The aspect of conspicuousness is closely related to the consumer's effort to attain and maintain the social status created by luxury consumption (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). The consumed products attain social meanings by the contradictory desires of a consumer to be distinguished from the masses and identified with a group (Cova, 1997).

Besides consumption of luxury brands to communicate the self, luxury products become meaning-based when used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Vigneron and Johnson (2004) separate personal-oriented luxury dimensions, such as hedonism and extended self, from product-centered perceptions (quality, uniqueness and conspicuousness). Luxury items contain emotional value, and when consumers perceive a product to be exquisite, glamorous and stunning, it creates a hedonistic experience for the owner and gives the luxury product personal meanings. On the other hand, self-identity and self-image can be confirmed through a luxury product's symbolic meanings as Solomon (1986) suggests in the theory of symbolic self-contemplation. By integrating the branded product's symbolic characteristics to self-image, a consumer enables the actual self-image to become closer to their ideal (Belk, 1988). Individuals rely on branded products especially when they feel insecure about their role performance, and the branded product becomes an instrument by which to achieve a social goal.

Vigneron and Johnson (2004) argue that the psychological and social meanings that luxury brands carry are the crucial characters that separate luxury items from non-luxury products. However, the subjective nature of luxury enables consumers to perceive and evaluate luxury in more detail, rather than simply categorizing a product as luxury or non-luxury. It is debated that not all luxury brands are deemed equally prestigious, and therefore there are different levels of luxury (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). A luxury product exists at the far end of the continuum of ordinary goods, but the line between luxury and non-luxury products may be dependent on the context and the people concerned. Kapferer (2008)

has similar findings and suggests that the luxury market can be described as a pyramid that is divided into the griffe, the luxury brand, the upper-range brand and the brand. The highest luxury is described in architectural terms as the griffe, and is regarded as a pure and unique creation and a materialized perfection, as art. The griffe is "quiet luxury," which does not use visible brand logos and therefore is meaningful only for luxury experts who are able to recognize the essence of luxury without visible brands. The meanings of luxury griffe might be merely psychosocial and closely attached to self-identity, because the lack of social manifestation. The high psychological meaning of the griffe becomes concrete for example in tailor-made suits or custom-designed jewellery. Almost opposite is the second level, the luxury brand, which consists of a small series of handmade work that can be considered very fine craftsmanship. This level, however, is regarded as "loud luxury" (e.g. logos that are easily recognizable) and therefore can be regarded as having more social rather than psychological meanings (Kapferer, 2008: 96-100). The luxury brands with highly visible brand logos are popular in the counterfeit industry, mainly because the counterfeit manifests so clearly the desired status, and many consumers can interpret the messages.

2.2 Defining counterfeit product

Bian and Moutinho (2009) define counterfeits as products bearing a trademark that is identical to a trademark registered to another party. Counterfeits cannot exist without high brand value products, because the product attributes are copied from the original product, carrying only a few distinctive features (Eisend and Schuchert-Güler, 2006). From the consumer perspective, there exist two types of counterfeiting; deceptive and non-deceptive counterfeiting (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988). The former represents a situation in which a consumer is not aware of purchasing a fake product. The latter is a more commonplace phenomenon in the luxury brand market, occurring when consumers knowingly purchase a counterfeit (i.e. non-deceptive product) as it often becomes apparent through the price and the place of purchase.

Earlier counterfeits were recognizable because of lower quality in terms of performance, reliability and durability. The quality of counterfeit products has been steadily improving over the past several years, and almost every attribute defining luxury, including design, quality and durability can be transferred onto the counterfeit product (Phillips, 2005).

Past research of counterfeits has mainly examined the demand side (e.g. Bloch *et al.*, 1993; Eisend and Schuchert-Güler, 2006), attitudes (e.g. Penz and Stöttinger, 2008), demographical and psychographical factors (e.g. Eisend and Schuchert-Güler, 2006) or product characteristics (e.g. Bian and Moutinho, 2009; Gentry *et al.*, 2001) influencing the counterfeit purchase. However, the social and psychological meanings behind counterfeits are not studied. Can counterfeits, copied from luxury brands, evoke similar psychosocial or social meanings that are an inseparable part of luxury?

3. Methodology

The empirical part of this study aims to identify how luxury branded products and counterfeits become significant and meaning-based in the informants' stories and what kind of meanings they are perceived to contain. To carry out this research, photo-ethnographical methods were used as an elicitation technique to generate stories. When interpreting visible material, informants are believed to reflect their own social realities, which are shaped by social context, cultural conventions and group norms (Schwartz, 1989). The informants interpreted the photographs and wrote a story by drawing from and reflecting their cultural possessions. By this way the multiple realities that are constructed by individuals are revealed. The epistemological ground ascribes to the interpretive research according to which the knowledge is gained through understanding the subjective meanings and contextual realities, which are shaped by peoples' interaction with the world.

The pictures were used as an elicitation cues, since by using visual material it is possible to bring out and convey the hidden thoughts and feelings of consumers (Zaltman, 1997). The photographs were chosen based on the theoretical framework of dynamic meaning construction. The picture of the social situation aimed to elicit social meanings, whereas the self-portrait attempted to elicit self-reflection and personal-related meanings. The photographs used were identical for both groups except the first one, which pictured the place of purchase as either a prestige luxury store or a counterfeit street market. This revealed to the informant if the luxury product was authentic or not. The second photograph illustrated a social situation in which the product was used, whereas the third situation portrayed the consumer of the product admiring her/himself in a mirror with the product. The male informants received photographs of Rolex watch, whereas women wrote a story based on pictures of Louis Vuitton handbag; different highly copied brands of counterfeit market were chosen for different sex in order to enable the informant to identify her/himself with the photograph. Table I presents the titles of the stories.

A total of 20 written stories of the photographs were collected; seven informants were asked to write a story inspired by a luxury photograph and 13 to write about a counterfeit picture. When the subject of research is delicate, it is easier for individuals to produce a story about a third-person rather than to speak directly of themselves, as third-person narratives make it possible to hide behind the story. In addition, the stories were not considered to be direct reflections of objective truth and reality but merely as cultural stories (Koskinen *et al.*, 2005).

The stories were collected using convenience sampling by seeking out people with specialized knowledge of an area. The informants were blog writers, fashion-savvy people who discussed certain brands on the Internet or were consumers of counterfeit or genuine luxury products. They were deemed suitable for the group because of their passion for luxury and fashion. Unfortunately, the number of male blog writers, who wrote about luxury is small, which reflected to the amount of male informants (four out of 20). However, blog writers can be seen as sharing social context and thereby possessing similar kinds of meanings. The stories were collected via the internet, ensuring that the sample was gathered from all over Finland. Anonymity made it possible for the informants to express their opinions openly. The writers were young adults between the ages of 18 to 30. Consumption among young adults is not yet routinized, and they are thought to be more open to influences from their social environment (Aledin, 2009).

Table I The stories used as empirical data is titled by the writers

	Female informants (Louis Vuitton bag)	Male informants (Rolex watch)
Pictures of authentic product	Louis Vuitton Speedy (informant no. 2)	From Rolex to real richness (informant no. 1)
	One of my dreams (informant no. 3)	Masculine perspective of luxury (informant no. 6)
	The value of luxury bag (informant no. 4)	
	Luxury brand as extension (informant no. 5)	
	Prestigious dream of luxury (informant no. 7)	
Pictures of counterfeit	Luxury? (informant no. 8)	Social climbing (informant no. 10)
	Holiday-handbag (informant no. 9)	Genuinely recognizable (informant no. 16)
	The magic of a bag (informant no. 11)	
	Material (informant no. 12)	
	Do I fit in? (informant no. 13)	
	Faking it (informant no. 14)	
	Souvenir (informant no. 15)	
	A world of trademarked handbags (informant no. 17)	
	Fake (informant no. 18)	
	Self-searching (informant no. 19)	
	Liars – dreams of a better life (informant no. 20)	

4. Results and analysis

The stories created by the informants were unified wholes containing beliefs, evaluations, attitudes, emotions, behaviors etc. and those can be seen to reveal something significant about the consumers' relationship to luxury and counterfeit products. In present study, these stories are interpreted especially by reflecting on the product attributes applied when describing the products and on the social and personal meanings they contain.

The content analysis of the stories from photo-ethnographic data concentrated on the patterns of speaking about luxury and counterfeit goods and meanings that lie behind them. Stories cannot arise in a vacuum, and it can be believed that the writer narrates and interprets the photographs by associating them with his/her own life and experiences (Bauer and Jovchelovitch, 2000, p. 68). Therefore, the stories are considered to represent the consumers' beliefs, thoughts and interpretations of the luxury and counterfeit goods influenced by social and cultural context.

Approximately one-third of the stories directly reported on the photographs in the same order the pictures were shown. However, the remainder of the writers used the pictures as a basis for the interpretative story and constructed the narration more freely. The stories included background description, reasons for the action and feelings stirred up by the pictured situations. Some informants choose to give a fictive name to the person presented in the photographs, whereas a few stories were written in the first-person; a choice that may indicate a higher involvement and more relevant personal meanings about the product.

4.1 Perceived product attributes

Both luxury and counterfeit goods had product-centered meanings. In counterfeits, the functionality and aesthetic reasons were perceived as vital. The quality expectations were a common concern in the counterfeit stories, whereas quality was considered to be a self-evident characteristic of luxury. In particular, quality questions and price were the main factors in evaluating the superiority and level of luxuriousness. The high price of luxury products was perceived as an indicator of luxury and therefore was acceptable. Consumers were willing to save up for luxury products, because the expensive product would otherwise be impossible to buy from their monthly salary:

> [...] She planned to save up some money for her next trip to Europe during the summer time. Then she could buy the most expensive handbag she could find as a gift or souvernir to herself (Woman 5, pictures of luxury).

The stories on counterfeit products discussed the price issue as well. Counterfeits were perceived to be a profitable bargain that could fulfill the functional task the product was made for. Counterfeit consumers were not willing to pay for brands – they tried to convince themselves that they could gain the same benefits by buying a counterfeit. In addition, the low price and easy accessibility were major temptations:

> However, he could buy the "beach version" of Rolex from the charter holiday he is having. Paying for €20 for the similar kind of watch means great savings when comparing to costs of €5,000 for authentic version. With the "savings" of €4980, he could enjoy his life for a few months further (Man 6, pictures of counterfeit).

In accordance with Vigneron and Johnson (2004), these stories revealed that counterfeits were considered to be of different levels and possess different qualities in product attributes ranging from poor to excellent. In addition, the consideration of the luxury product was not simply black and white. The luxury products were also perceived to have different levels of quality: to be of different value, meaning that both high-end and lower-level luxury goods exist when evaluating product attributes. The level of luxury was interpreted in terms of the consumer's own economic situation and the context:

> [...] the handbag is not the cheapest copy, it really looks genuine – if you don't look at it too closely (Woman 17, pictures of counterfeit).

In addition to the price, the quality of the product was an attribute that was often evaluated among counterfeit products. On the contrary, quality was not discussed in the stories of luxury products. High quality was regarded as self-evident in luxury items. Luxury was perceived to exist at the far end of the continuum, but instead of counterfeit,

consumers valued non-brand products less and considered them to be more of a counterpart (see Figure 2).

Because of imitation, the counterfeits were thought to be better than non-brand products, because they proclaim the symbolic meanings of the authentic brand. By using a counterfeit, consumers may reveal their own ambitions and dreams.

4.2 Social and personal meanings of luxury and counterfeit goods

Luxury and counterfeits were perceived to have both social and personal functions. The social meanings of luxury products were linked to consumers' intentions to gain respect and approval from a desired group, but at the same time their desire be distinguished from the masses. The luxury products were described as being more than just a possession and seemed to invoke feelings that did not occur in counterfeit stories:

> Mikael is proud of his new Rolex and he shows off it to his friends. Mikael feels that everyone respect him more and just because of the watch (Man 1, pictures of luxury product).

> The summer blew over with the Speedy in hand, with admiring glances from acquaintances and strangers – especially other LV-owners (Woman 2, pictures of luxury product).

Counterfeit users also wanted to be associated with a significant group, but unlike luxury consumers, they did not want to stand out from the crowd due to the counterfeit product:

> She tried to catch glimpses of her own reflection in every reflecting surface that she found. She walked confidently down the street with her head held high. She felt like she was a part of the group that she once used to envy (Woman 18, pictures of counterfeit).

> [. . .] oh, and those watchful glances, how great it feels to for once be the object of envy rather than vice versa. The girls at the next table are clearly whispering something about my handbag; they are probably wondering about the price (Woman 20, pictures of counterfeit).

The aspect of being envied arose in the counterfeit stories, but did not exist when narrating about luxury. This might be due to luxury operating on a more personal level, whereas social meanings are considered simply a veneer in luxury consumption. However, the fear of being caught using a fake was also characteristic of counterfeit stories. Counterfeit consumers fancy themselves as having a genuine luxury product and made up a supporting story for this lie, which they maintained by purchasing "high-quality fakes":

> [. . .] she was looking at herself in the mirror; should I not have bought the bag? What if someone notices that the bag is not genuine? What will they say if they notice? (Woman 13, pictures of counterfeit).

The stories showed that the key factor that distinguishes a luxury branded product from a counterfeit is authenticity. Among counterfeits, authenticity was something unattainable and missing from the product, whereas in luxury stories, authenticity was a dimension that was proposed to be vital and inseparable from a luxury branded product:

Figure 2 Consumer's evaluation of the luxury – counterfeit continuum

> [. . .]with the brand-new bag I walk into a nearby café. I feel like everyone immediately notices my handbag and its authenticity – at least those who understand something about it (Woman 3, pictures of luxury).

Authenticity is dependent on the consumer's own perception, and because it is not inherent in an object (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), authenticity needs social context and individual interpretation to exist:

> It doesn't even matter if the others laugh. They all know that it isn't authentic. They all got the genuine product, or at least the more expensive fakes. And this is not a fake; this is actually loved more than any of those authentic ones (Woman 12, pictures of counterfeit).

The counterfeit consumer might not care about the "objective authenticity" value (e.g. a product created by a trademark-owned company) of the product, and he or she creates a different kind of private and emotional bond. If the emotional bond is psychologically significant for an individual, could the counterfeit product therefore attain a subjective value or influence an individual's self-identity?

Nonetheless, the psychological meanings centered on stories of luxury branded products, which were regarded as having a role in the individual's identity construction:

> Before leaving, I glance at myself in the mirror to see how good looking I am with my handbag. I am sure that this handbag increases my self-confidence a lot. It is like a missing part of me (Woman 3, pictures of luxury product).

In the stories, the consumer of authentic luxury goods attained a psychological benefit and value through consumption, as Vigneron and Johnson (2004) suggested. The stories of luxury branded products had personal functions in self-identity construction.

In brief, the stories revealed that the meanings of a counterfeit product related mostly to the social situation, while the meanings of luxury goods also emphasized personal importance. Especially "loud luxury" products, broadly used in social functions and therefore also counterfeits copied from these, relate to the social context. Counterfeits might fail, creating deeper psychological meanings, because the individual knows the product is inauthentic.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, the luxury and counterfeit phenomena were juxtaposed and examined by comparing the meanings. In previous research, luxury and counterfeits were studied mainly either separately (e.g. Eisend and Schuchert-Güler, 2006; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Tynan *et al.*, 2010) or by counterpoising the phenomena (e.g. Penz and Stöttinger, 2008). However, this study suggests that the concepts of luxury and counterfeit possess sliding levels of perceived superiority, which is congruent with the research findings of Vigneron and Johnson (2004) and Kapferer (2008). Besides, consumers perceive non-brand product (rather than counterfeit) as contrary to luxury branded product.

In addition, the differences in psychological and sociological meanings distinguishes the luxury branded products and counterfeits. Luxury products possess both social functions and personal meanings, including instrumental exploitation of self-identity construction and initiation of feelings, whereas the meanings of counterfeit apply mainly to social functions. The social meanings attached to luxury center on gaining admiration and appreciation, as those attached to counterfeits focus on social group acceptance.

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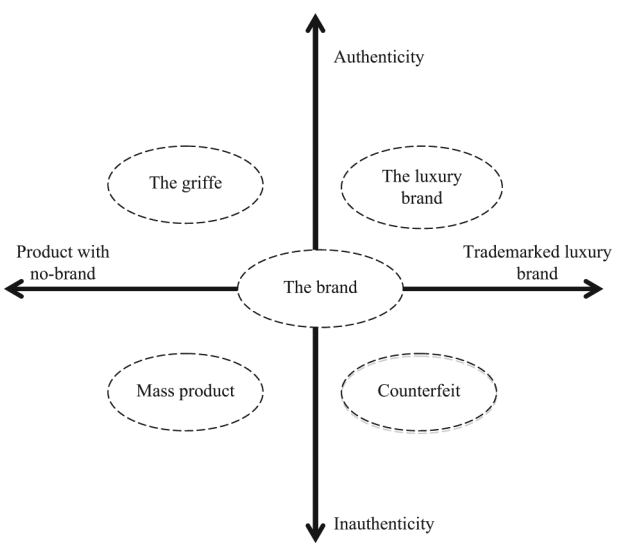
The most important finding that has received insufficient attention previously is the role of authenticity in the luxury evaluation. This attribute emerged both from luxury and counterfeit stories: It was perceived as a self-evident characteristic of luxury stories, whereas among counterfeits the lack of authenticity was highlighted. The authenticity was regarded as the most important factor distinguishing luxury from counterfeit. Figure 3 presents the luxury-counterfeit continuum, which is completed with the depth axis of authenticity. Kapferer's (2008) view of the levels of the luxury-pyramid is adapted and reconstructed by dividing and sprinkling it onto the luxury-authenticity axis to reflect the multidimensional concept of luxury.

The griffe is placed in Figure 3 at the highest level of luxury because of its perceived uniqueness and rareness. It is dependent on authenticity but it does not need a brand to be a luxury. Instead, the second level, the luxury brand, which was the main focus of this study, also needs authenticity to gain luxury value. In addition to authenticity, the luxury product needed a high-end brand to manifest prestige. The originality and value of this study is attained by examining luxury and comparing it with counterfeit. The counterfeits are regarded as the pursuit of luxury achieved by imitating its attributes. However, because of the authenticity attribute, the counterfeit cannot reach luxury status. But, is it possible to consider a luxury branded product to be authentic, if no counterfeit exists? Without a counterfeit there is no basis to compare or classify something as authentic. A counterfeit product is dependent on the authentic luxury product that it imitates, but is a consumer's perception of authentic luxury goods also dependent upon the existence of a counterfeit? In fact, the future research could be more focused on the consumer's perception of product authenticity. Taking authenticity discussion into consumer behavior and symbolic consumption studies could be a fruitful field for future research.

In general, the study indicates that the perceived authenticity of luxury product is the major character to differentiate luxury and counterfeit product. Therefore, the marketers and genuine luxury brand companies should concentrate on maintaining the factors of authenticity (e.g. historical background, overall image and quality expectations) in order to evoke personal meanings, which are advantages of their products. However, according to this study, the counterfeits can attain personal value (e.g. emotionally attached souvenir) as well; therefore, the marketers of luxury brands should devote an attention to strengthen symbolical meaning-construction attached to product, which is socially significant for luxury consumer.

This study has limitations based on the sample size, which was not large enough to draw strong conclusions. Moreover, the data was collected from Finland because of accessibility issues, which results in the study being culturally narrow. Nonetheless, the study has its bearing to the area of the meanings of luxury and counterfeit goods that has a great managerial importance, but which has received limited empirical exploration within research literature. Despite its limitations, the conceptual analysis with qualitative data manages to shed light on the perceived differences in meanings related to luxury products and their counterfeits. The incorporation of these initial results into a more extensive population remains a challenge for future studies.

Figure 3 Levels of luxury placed on luxury and authenticity continuum



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Antecedents of brand preference for mobile telecommunications services

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to report on a study into the antecedents of consumer brand preference, in the context of telecommunications service brands in Jordan.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire-based survey was used to gather attitudes towards brand preference and its antecedents in the context of mobile telecommunications service providers in Jordan. The questionnaire was distributed, in Arabic, to university students in Jordan, a group selected as being active users of mobile phone services; 648 completed questionnaires were received. Data were entered into SPSS. Principal component analysis (PCA) was applied to identify the antecedents of brand preference. Multiple regression was conducted in order to investigate the relative impact of the identified factors on brand preference.

Findings – Factor analysis identified 11 antecedents of brand preference; these can be theoretically clustered into three groups: awareness antecedents (controlled communication (advertising), and uncontrolled communication (publicity, word of mouth)); image antecedents (service value attributes (price, quality), provider attributes (brand personality, country of origin, service (employee + location)), and corporate status (corporate image, corporate reputation)); and, customer attribute antecedents (satisfaction, perceived risk, and reference group). Multiple regression showed the contribution of each of these antecedents to brand preference.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to theorise by proposing and testing one of the first holistic models to integrate consideration of many of the antecedents of brand preference.

Keywords Brand preference, Mobile telecommunications, Mobile communication systems, Jordan, Middle East, Services branding

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Brand preference features in all of the major texts on brands and brand strategy. For example, Aaker (1996), Keller (2003), Kapferer (2008), and de Chernatony (2006) all mention brand preference in their discussions that focus variously on brand equity, brand image, brand knowledge, brand awareness, brand association, and service branding. However, none of these authorities place brand preference at the heart of their discussions of brand strategy. Nilson (2000), on the other hand, suggests that brand preference should be the focus of brand management:

> Successful brand management focuses on making brand preference, ensuring that products and/or services sold under the brand's umbrella of values really are perceived as superior to those of competitors (Nilson, 2000, p. 26).

Similarly, Lin (2002) argues for the pivotal role of brand preference in product development:

> Businesses that want to develop new products or expand their product line can use brand preference as a key factor in allocating resources to develop effective product strategies (p. 259).

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Despite its potential importance, especially in dynamic markets in which brand loyalty may be elusive, and the best that brand managers can hope to achieve is to continually promote and re-vitalise brand preference, brand preference has received relatively limited attention, and such research that has been conducted is scattered across time, sector, and place. Whilst there is some research that considers the antecedents to brand preference, most studies consider only one or two antecedents (e.g. Ayanwale *et al.*, 2005; Chang and Ming, 2009; Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Jamal and Good, 2001). Only Mitchell and Amioku (1985) offer a more holistic model that simultaneously considers a range of determinants in brand preference. It is difficult to disagree with Singh *et al.*'s (2005) suggestion that insufficient is known about how brand preference is formed, and that therefore there is a need for further research into brand preference and its antecedents.

This article takes the position that brand preference is an essential pre-requisite to brand equity, and in dynamic and highly competitive marketplaces in sectors such as the telecommunications industry, and in emerging marketplaces, such as the Middle East, where loyalty may be elusive, brand preference takes on a special significance. The study reported in this article, then, investigates brand preference in the context of the mobile telecommunications service sector in Jordan. This is part of a wider study of brand strategy in the sector (Alamro and Rowley, 2011). This article makes a contribution to theory by developing a holistic model of the antecedents of brand preference, and also offers insights into

the relative impact of the different factors on brand preference.

This article starts with a brief literature review covering the key prior works in branding and brand preference that have informed this research. The following section outlines the research design for this study. This is followed by an outline of the methodology adopted. Next, data analysis and findings are summarised; this section has two parts, the first which focuses on the principal component analysis towards the development of a model of the antecedents of brand preference, and the second which focuses on the regression analysis, which identifies the relative importance of the various antecedents. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered.

2. Literature review and model development

2.1 Theoretical context

As indicated in the introduction, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of brand preference and limited previous empirical research on the antecedents to, or the factors that influence, brand preference. As such the research reported in this article has been informed by a range of different contributions on branding and brand strategy, in addition to prior work specifically on the factors that influence brand preference.

First, we establish the definition of brand preference adopted in this article. Different authorities conceptualise brand preference in different ways, and propose different relationships between brand preference and other branding variables. For example, Keller (2003) discusses brand preference as an antecedent of brand loyalty and brand equity, whereas Chang and Ming (2009) discuss brand preference as a consequence of brand loyalty and brand equity. Other authors (e.g. Rundle-Thiele and Mackay, 2001) use brand preference and brand loyalty interchangeably. In this study, brand preference is viewed as an antecedent to brand loyalty. Many authors (e.g. Keller, 2003; Jamal and Good, 2001) do not offer a definition of brand preference. However, Hellier *et al.* (2003) both offer a definition of brand preference and operationalise its measurement. This study adopts their definition of brand preference. Brand preference is:

> The extent to which the customer favours the designated service provided by his or her present company, in comparison to the designated service provided by other companies in his or her consideration set (p. 1765).

Two key contributions that operationalise the measurement of brand preference inform this study, Hellier *et al.* (2003) and Jamal and Good (2001). Jamal and Good (2001) is also one of the two previous studies that examine a range of factors that influence brand preference. They suggest that demographic factors and product (service) factors are likely to determine, and be suitable for use in, the measurement of brand preference. The other prior work that also explored the range of attributes that might affect brand preference is that of Mitchell and Amioku (1985); they conceptualise brand preference as a bundle of attributes that leads a customer to favour one brand over another. These attributes are classified into three sets, namely consumer attributes, product (service) attributes, and market attributes. These studies are complemented by a range of studies that examine the relationship between brand preference and one or two other branding variables, such as brand equity (Chang and Ming, 2009), reference group (Escalas and Bettman, 2003), advertising (Ayanwale *et al.*, 2005), self-image congruence (Jamal and Good, 2001), and re-purchase intention (Hellier *et al.*, 2003).

This study also draws on the models from the wider field of brand strategy, including those of Berry (2000), de Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) and Grace and O'Cass (2005b). Berry (2000), for example, explores the relationship between brand awareness and brand meaning, respectively, and brand equity. He also notes that companies presented brand, and external brand communication impact on brand awareness, and that both of these, as well as consumer experience with the brand, impact on brand meaning. de Chernatony and Segal Horn's (2003) more complex model represents the stage in the branding process, and their interaction with communication, holistic brand image, and relationships. Finally, Grace and O'Cass's (2005b) model of the antecedents of brand verdict, is particularly valuable is suggesting a range of possible variables for this research. They propose that brand verdict is a result of brand attitude, which in turn is influenced by satisfaction, brand evidence, and brand hearsay. Brand evidence comprises: brand name, price/value for money, servicescape, core service, employee, and self-image congruence. Brand hearsay comprises: controlled communication (advertising and promotion), and uncontrolled communication (word-of-mouth, and publicity).

2.2 The research model and hypotheses

Several authorities have found brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes to be major antecedents of consumer brand preference (Berry, 2000; Keller, 2003; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003; Grace and O'Cass, 2005a). When brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes are treated as post-preference constructs, the general succession is shown in Figure 1.

In this context, brand awareness is the ability of a potential consumer to recognise the brand as a member of a specific product or service category (Aaker, 1991). Brand image is "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 2003, p. 66). Consumer attributes is loosely defined as the characteristics of consumers (Zeithaml, 1991). However, the exact relationship between these three constructs and brand preference remains unclear.

In this paper, the proposed model and its associated hypotheses concerning the antecedents of brand preference was developed on the basis of previous research and theory that suggests relationships between independent variables and the dependent variable, brand preference. This section summarises the basis for the hypotheses. In order to lend some theoretical structure to the section, the potential antecedents are clustered into three groups, associated respectively with brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes. Brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes are not measured as distinct variables in

Figure 1 Elementary research model

this study; they are used as cluster labels. Figure 2 shows the research model and hypotheses.

The literature (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003; Kapferer, 2008) suggests that organisations must develop emotional and functional relationships with consumers if they are to succeed in competitive markets. Brand awareness and brand image (e.g. Keller, 2003), together with consumer attributes (Hellier *et al.*, 2003; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990), help maintain these relationships. Thus brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes form the bridge between organisations and consumers. The literature suggests the constituents of consumer attributes – satisfaction, perceived risk, and reference group – mediate brand image and brand awareness (Aaker, 1996; Hellier *et al.*, 2003; Kapferer, 2008).

Nonetheless, brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes cannot create sales by themselves (Aaker, 1991; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2003). The reason for fostering brand awareness is not to create sales directly, but to create brand preference.

The literature suggests brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes are fostered by a variety of means – advertising and other forms of publicity, WOM, quality, brand personality, and so forth – (e.g. Aaker, 1991, 1996; Atiyas and Dogan, 2007; Berry, 2000; Grace and O'Cass, 2005a; Kapferer, 2008).

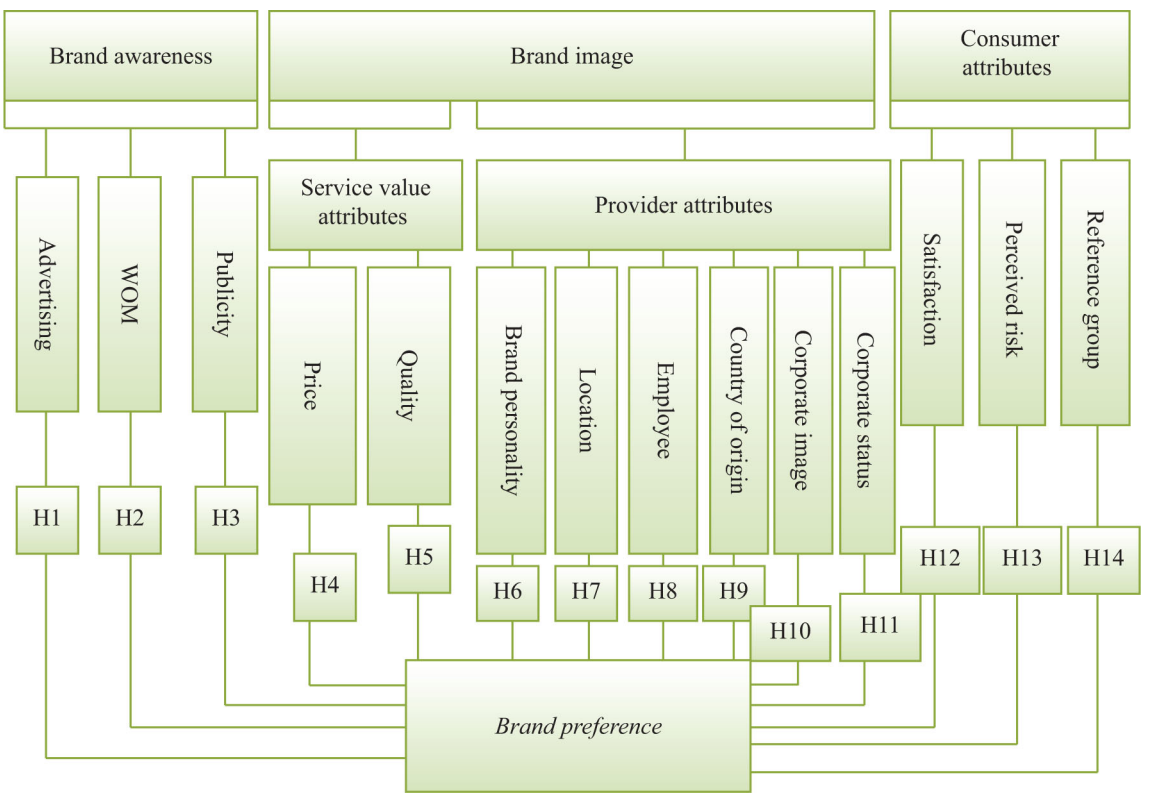
2.3 Brand awareness antecedents

As already mentioned, the literature suggests brand awareness is fostered by a variety of means, including advertising and other forms of publicity, and WOM (Aaker, 1991, 1994; Berry, 2000; Simon and Sullivan, 1993). In this, the role of uncontrolled communication has been appreciated since at least the early 1980s (George and Berry, 1981). Thus, companies need to both advertise, and also to take active measures to ensure that WOM and other forms of uncontrolled communication concerning their bands are positive. WOM, along with advertising and other forms of publicity, is a core variable in building brand preference (Berry, 2000; Grace and O'Cass, 2005a). It follows that companies should "control" their uncontrolled communication.

Both of Berry's (2000) and Grace and O'Cass's (2005) models propose that advertising is plausibly the most important promotional activity. Keller (2008) notes that this importance is reflected in the huge advertising budgets of large companies. In addition to fostering awareness (e.g. Berry, 2000; Florack and Scarabis, 2006), advertising helps to reduce consumption apprehension (Berry, 2000). Advertising affects consumer attitudes towards brands by, among other things, informing them of the existence of the brand (Fill, 2006). The degree of consumer response and its direction (positive or negative) are influenced by the content of the advertising. Consequently, if an advertisement is evaluated positively by a consumer, they will form a positive perception of the brand, and the higher the positive perception of the brand, the greater the likelihood of a brand being preferred (Ayanwale *et al.*, 2005).

In addition, advertising, even when it provides useful information, carries the disadvantage that the information does not come from a reliable source. WOM and other uncontrolled communication (the latter termed unpaid publicity), by contrast, has high credibility (Mangold *et al.*, 1999). For this reason, WOM and unpaid publicity leads to brand preference (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Swanson and

Figure 2 Research model and hypotheses



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Kelley, 2001) and plausibly has a greater net overall effect on sales than advertising (e.g. Ennew *et al.*, 2000).

Berry's (2000) model accords a special importance to word-of-mouth (WOM), including: people talking to one another about the service; news stories (unplanned) and similar reports in the media (publicity) concerning the service; and, happenstance, as when, for example, a character in a movie uses the service. The model emphasises that services are risky from the consumer's viewpoint. Therefore the model presents service branding as a perceived risk-reduction exercise. This risk reduction is achieved through emotional bonding with consumers. Plausibly WOM and publicity, together with advertising are responsible for this emotional bond.

WOM, in particular, supports and develops the perception of a brand in the customer's mind. Increasingly, word of mouth seems desirable to achieve positive perception and thus preference for a brand in the customer's mind (Sweeney *et al.*, 2008). This is because customers tend to consider word of mouth creditable and impartial (Swanson and Kelley, 2001; Stokes and Lomax, 2000; Sweeney *et al.*, 2008). Thus, many consumers of service branding are heavily dependent on WOM when forming their brand preferences (Grace and O'Cass, 2005a).

Publicity is also an important factor in influencing consumer brand preference (Grace and O'Cass, 2005a). This importance is due to its deep influence in triggering a positive or negative brand response in customers (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). Hauss (1993) suggests that good media coverage has a strong influence on consumer attitudes and thus preference.

The above discussion poses the first three research hypotheses:

H1. Advertising (controlled communication) conducted by a service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

H2. Positive word of mouth about the service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

H3. Positive publicity about the service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

2.4 Brand image antecedents

As indicated, brand image pertains to how consumers perceive a product or service, regardless of whether their perceptions are accurate (Keller, 2003) and regardless of whether the perceptions are what the marketing company wants them to be.

In general, the literature (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Atiyas and Dogan, 2007; Lassar *et al.*, 1995; Keller, 2003) suggests brand image is facilitated broadly by product or service attributes of a brand coupled with the provider's attributes. Each of these two major components can be subdivided into a number of specific attributes.

Service value attributes comprise service price and service quality. Several empirical studies (e.g. Nowlis and Simonson, 1997; Tse, 2001) provide evidence that price affects consumer choice of service. Generally, consumers are willing to pay higher prices for brands that they perceive to have high value and vice versa (Erdem *et al.*, 2004). Price is an easy way to compare alternative services (Aaker, 1996; Grace and O'Cass, 2005a; Keller, 2003). This is to say that, organizations should price their services based on their quality perception in the consumer's mind. Thus, high price if it is not coupled with a high quality this will have a negative influence on brand preference, and, on the other hand, low price, usually, does not promise good quality, but customers may expect value, a compromise between price and quality. This logic can be presented as a reasonable pricing strategy.

Several authorities (e.g. Atiyas and Dogan, 2007; Hellier *et al.*, 2003) have empirically shown that service quality affects consumer brand preference. In addition, a number of authorities (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003; Zeithaml, 1991) deal with service quality as a main antecedent of the purchase decision and brand preference. Service quality is reflected in two main dimensions: technical quality and functional quality (Gronroos, 1984). This research identifies these variables based on the nature of the industry (i.e. mobile phone services). Better quality, technical or functional, should enhance brand preference (Gronroos, 1984).

The above discussion poses the following hypotheses:

H4. Perceptions that the price for the service is reasonable has a positive impact on brand preference.

H5. Perceptions of high service quality has a positive impact on brand preference.

The providers' attributes are also plausibly important. These include: brand personality, corporate image and reputation, country of origin, the attitude of employee, and the location of the service.

The literature (e.g. Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Fournier, 1998; Rajagopal, 2006) supports the view that brand personality is an important antecedent of brand preference. Several authors (e.g. Batra *et al.*, 1993; Freling and Forbes, 2005) propose that brand personality is a metaphor for the emotional relationship between a brand and its consumers, and others similarly (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Siguaw *et al.*, 1999) argue that it leads to emotional ties between brands and consumers.

Recent empirical studies (e.g. Mulyanegara and Tsarenko, 2009) showed that brand personality has a strong correlation with brand preference. These studies suggest that preferred and successful brands usually generate perceived attributes that are consistent with target consumers' personalities. In the same vein, Siguaw *et al.* (1999) state that:

> A well established brand personality has been shown to result in increased *preference* [emphasis added] and patronage, higher emotional ties to the brand, and trust and loyalty (p. 49).

Similarly, the location of service may be critical for the consumer. The literature (e.g. Laroche and Manning, 1984; Yoon *et al.*, 2009) suggests that convenient location positively influences brand preference. O'Cass and Grace (2004) suggest that service providers should consider service location during the development of the service brand. O'Cass and Grace (2004) suggest that location is one of four critical criteria of service branding in addition to employee, process, and past experience. This suggestion is backed by much of marketing literature that presents location (place) as one component of the marketing mix. More precisely, Duncan (2002) suggests that convenience is what matters about location, and further presents it as a replacement in terms of marketing mix to place (location). This is to say that the convenience of location leads to brand preference.

Employee behaviour is especially important in service industries. Employees deal directly with customers, so their

attitudes and behaviour influence customers' perceptions towards the organisation (Bitner *et al.*, 1994; de Chernatony, 1999). Thus service suppliers spend considerable efforts in training and motivating their employees (de Chernatony, 1999; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003). de Chernatony and Segal-Horn's (2003) model focuses on the role of employees to deliver and maintain the desired image. They argue that, if staff are sufficiently aware of the values that organisations aspire to convey, they will deliver them correctly and consistently. Employees are therefore a part of the organisation's communication tool.

Evidence suggests country of origin can be important in shaping brand preference (Han, 1990; Lim and O'Cass, 2001; Yasin *et al.*, 2007). Customers tend to associate a provider's brand with the given country, and this affects their perceptions of the brand (Han, 1990), because customers tend to prefer some countries (often their own, or those of similar culture) and to dislike other countries (Keller, 2003; and see Nowlis and Simonson, 1997). In marketing literature, a number of studies (e.g. Aaker, 1991) have shown the importance of country of origin to brand preference.

Many authorities (e.g. Cravens and Oliver, 2006; Greyser, 1999; LeBlanc and Nguyen, 1996) suggest that corporate reputation and image affects brand preference. Such conclusions are unsurprising: corporate reputation and image reflect the point of interface between the company and the consumer. Also, branding is a corporate activity (e.g. Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001; Keller and Lehmann, 2006).

A corporate image that is perceived to be positive and to align with customers' values fosters brand preference (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001; Souiden *et al.*, 2006). Souiden *et al.* (2006) propose that companies can foster consumer brand preference through five dimensions associated with corporate image, via innovation, success, openness, responsiveness, and shrewdness. Corporate image influences consumer brand preference. Corporate brand does so through brand values (de Chernatony, 1999), which means that when consumers buy the company products or services, they are also buy a number of the values that are associated with the company (Ind, 1997). Balmer and Gray (2003) argue that these values that corporate brands represent promise product or service quality and reduce perceived risk.

Customers' perceptions of a brand are also influenced by the corporate reputation of the associated organisation (de Chernatony, 1999; Fitzpatrick, 2000; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001; Vendelo, 1998). A good corporate reputation is likely to foster brand preference. Souiden *et al.* (2006) suggest that corporate reputation influences the consumer through: emotional appeal, social responsibility, product or (service) quality, industry position, ethical issues, financial situation, and commitments towards customers. Aaker (2004) suggests that a company that has a reputation for high product or service quality provides a promise which is a protection against unlikeable consumer experiences. Mulyanegara and Tsarenko (2009) in a study that predicted brand preference in the Australian fashion market, discovered that brand prestige and reputation influence brand preference, thus marketers are advised to hone their branding strategies based on them.

The above discussion poses the following hypotheses:

H6. Perceived good personality of the service brand has a positive impact on brand preference.

H7. Perceived convenience of location of the service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

H8. Perceived appropriate employee behaviour of the service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

H9. Perceived positive reputation of the country of origin of the service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

H10. Perceived positive corporate image of the service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

H11. Perceived positive corporate reputation of the service provider has a positive impact on brand preference.

2.5 Consumer attributes antecedents

Consumer attributes affect directly brand preference. Arguably, the important consumer attributes are: customer satisfaction, customer perceived risk, and customer reference group.

The importance of satisfaction is intuitively obvious: if consumers are unhappy with products are services, they are unlikely to continue using them. This intuition is supported in the literature. Hellier *et al.* (2003), for example, found that consumer satisfaction is an antecedent to brand preference. Customer satisfaction is defined as general contentment stemming from experience of the brand (Hellier *et al.*, 2003). Many authors (e.g. Bearden and Teel, 1983; Hellier *et al.*, 2003; O'Cass and Grace, 2004) discuss the relationship between satisfaction and brand preference. Hellier *et al.* (2003) argue that satisfaction is an outcome of experience, and influences brand preference. Customers who feel satisfied when using a brand will tend to use it again.

Grace and O'Cass's (2005) model presents satisfaction as the response to performance of brand hearsay (brand communication) and brand evidence (brand associations). The performance of brand hearsay (brand communication) and brand evidence (brand associations) defines the response of consumer. This response (satisfaction) can be negative or positive, and results in forming the overall perception (brand attitude) of the consumer toward the brand. The consumer, thereby, decides (brand verdict) whether to patronise the brand or not. The literature suggests that customer satisfaction retains customers and increases their preference. For example, Cronin and Taylor (1992) argue that customer satisfaction leads to positive brand attitude (i.e. brand preference), and customer dissatisfaction leads to negative brand attitudes. A study conducted by Martensen (1997), with a view to examining tweens' (aged 8-12) satisfactions with, and loyalty to, their mobile phones showed the importance of satisfaction to brand preference.

Perceived risk is correlated with brand purchasing decisions (Mieres *et al.*, 2006). The literature suggests that the higher the riskiness of a brand, the lower (more negative) is the brand preference (Dunn *et al.*, 1986; Mieres *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, service industries are more likely to be perceived as "risky" (e.g. Mieres *et al.*, 2006; Zeithaml, 1991). Services, in particular, In have high credibility problems; they have a high perceived risk inherent in the purchase decision (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 1993; Gabbott and Hogg, 1998). Consumers may perceive services as especially risky, in part because they may be intangible and in part because the customers have to pay for them before they receive the benefits (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 1993; Zeithaml, 1991). Thus, for service industries, brands

play an important role of minimizing perceived risk from the consumer perspective (Berry, 2000). Perceived risk may be multi-dimensional – it may have financial, performance, physical, psychological, time, or social components, and often a combination of them (Bateson, 1991; Laroche *et al.*, 2003). Berry's (2000) model emphasises that services are risky from the consumer's viewpoint. Therefore the model presents service branding as a perceived risk-reduction exercise. This risk reduction is achieved through emotional bonding with consumers. The emotional bonding in turn creates brand preference and brand equity. The literature suggests that the higher the riskiness of a brand, the lower (more negative) is the brand preference (Dunn *et al.*, 1986; Mieres *et al.*, 2006).

The term reference group was coined by Hyman (1942) and refers to those groups or people who are "psychologically significant for one's attitudes and behavior" (Turner, 1991, p. 5). The literature (e.g. Moschis, 1976; Park and Lessig, 1981; Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Escalas and Bettman, 2003; White and Dahl, 2006) suggests that reference groups are a major influence of consumer preference. This is unsurprising. People tend to do what their friends do.

A number of studies (e.g. Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Park and Lessig, 1981) have addressed the relationship between reference group and brand preference, and provided evidence that reference group influences brand preference. Escalas and Bettman (2003) suggest that reference group gives the brand a specific meaning for consumers, such that the brand with a positive image in the eyes of the reference group is preferred by consumers, whereas the brand with a negative image in the eyes of the reference group is more likely to be rejected by consumers. To conclude, consumers tend to follow the decisions of their reference groups (e.g. Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Folkes and Kiesler, 1991; Moschis, 1976; White and Dahl, 2006).

The above discussion poses the following hypotheses:

H12. Customer satisfaction with the service has a positive impact on brand preference.

H13. Perception of a low risk associated with the service has a positive impact on brand preference.

H14. Reference group has a positive impact on brand preference.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research philosophy and approach

Quantitative methodology was used to satisfy the purpose of this study. There are three reasons for the choice of quantitative methodology for this study. First, quantitative approaches are most appropriate in cases in which there are clearly framed hypotheses (Creswell, 2009). The present study had clearly framed hypotheses (*H1-H14*). Second, meeting the objective demanded using a representative sample, and this, in the nature of things, would have to be large. Qualitative research with large samples is not practicable. Third, the quantitative methods of data collection and analysis used in this study are widely used and tried and tested. A survey was conducted using self-administered questionnaires to satisfy the use of positivist methodology.

3.2 Questionnaire design

Questionnaires are common in survey research. They are an efficient means of data collection when the researcher knows what data are required to answer their research questions, and how to measure the research variables (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Oppenheim, 1992; Sekaran, 2003). The main questions in the questionnaire measured attitudes towards brand preference and its antecedents. These used five-point Likert scale statements (1 = "strongly disagree"; 5 = "strongly agree"). Item statements for these variables were informed by previous research as illustrated below. In responding to these statements, respondents were invited to reflect on the brand of their current mobile telecommunication service provider. Categorical questions were used for demographic variables, such as gender, age, and education. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted to remove any inconsistencies and confirm the suitability of the content, structure and design of the questions and the questionnaire. The questionnaire was, then, translated into Arabic, and piloted again with both professional researchers and students, and finally distributed to the students.

3.3 Respondents

Respondents were university students in Jordan. Hair *et al.* (2003) list relevant criteria choosing respondents. These include:

- the respondents should possess the information the research project is designed to collect;
- the respondents are knowledgeable of the topic of interest;
- the respondents are accessible; and
- the respondents are available during a time frame.

Students met these criteria, thus:

- The student market is large and important for services (Almossawi, 2001).
- The student market is homogeneous and so reduces the impact of non-controllable confounding variables (Homburg and Koschate, 2004, cited in Matzler *et al.*, 2006).
- Students know about and are and familiar with branding issues. Many researchers on branding consider the use of student respondents as preferable to use of other groups (Yoo *et al.*, 2000).
- Students' consumption behaviours and perceptions resemble that of the typical users; this has been confirmed by different industry sources (e.g. Lim and Quester, 2003; Grimm, 2005; Hayes *et al.*, 2006; O'Cass and Grace, 2004).

It is for such reasons that many leading researchers in branding (e.g. Aaker and Keller, 1990; Martinez and de Chernatony, 2004) use student respondents.

A multi-stage sample was used; this type of sample is well known for its accuracy and precision (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). In total 648 usable completed questionnaires were obtained. A total of 55 per cent of respondents were male and 45 per cent were female. Ages ranged from 18 to 45 + years of age; most (84 per cent) were in the range 18-24. In terms of education, 2 per cent were Doctoral students, 6 per cent were Master's students, 8 per cent were Higher Diploma students, and 84 per cent were Bachelor's students.

4. Findings

4.1 Preliminary findings (descriptive and PCA)

All data were subjected to normality (skewness and kurtosis and the presence of outliers) prior to conducting principal component analysis (PCA). In general, the data did not appear to be problematic, with all statistics falling within acceptable ranges. Then the data were subjected to PCA. This was in order to:

- confirm that all putative influences on brand preference (price, quality, brand personality, etc.) were genuinely independent; and
- to eliminate irrelevant questionnaire items.

All results for brand preference were also subjected to a separate PCA. This was, similarly, to:

- confirm that it was a single factor; and
- eliminate irrelevant questionnaire items.

Table I shows all factors before and after PCA. Assessment of correlation matrix through KMO and Bartlett's test resulted in high KMO statistics (ranging from 0.79 to 0.86) and a significant probability level ($p < 0.0005$) for the Bartlett's test of all factors. Kaiser's criterion was conducted and only factors with eigenvalues of 1.0 or more were retained, then a scree plot test used to validate the retained factors, and finally parallel analysis was used. Cronbach's alpha for each factor was then computed for all factors; it ranged from 0.77 to 0.96. Table II shows the preliminary results After PCA.

Table I Results of the PCA on antecedents of brand preference

Defined factors before PCA	Factors emerging from PCA
1. Brand awareness antecedents	
Advertising	Controlled communication (advertising)
Publicity	Uncontrolled communication (publicity + word of mouth)
Word of mouth	
2. Brand image antecedents	
2.1 Service value attributes	2.1 Service value attributes
Price	Price
Quality	Quality
2.2 Provider's attributes	2.2 Provider's attributes
Brand personality	Brand personality
Country of origin	Country of origin
Employee	Service (employee + location)
Location	
Corporate image	Corporate status (corporate image + corporate reputation)
Corporate reputation	
3. Consumer attribute antecedents	
Satisfaction	Satisfaction
Perceived risk	Perceived risk
Reference group	Reference group

4.2 Regression analysis

The regression analysis used the following model:

$$\text{Brand preference}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_{1\ \text{controlled communication i}} + \beta_{2\ \text{uncontrolled communication i}} + \beta_{3\ \text{price i}} + \beta_{4\ \text{quality i}} + \beta_{5\ \text{brand personality i}} + \beta_{6\ \text{service (employee+location) i}} + \beta_{7\ \text{corporate status i}} + \beta_{8\ \text{country of origin i}} + \beta_{9\ \text{satisfaction}} + \beta_{10\ \text{perceived risk i}} + \beta_{11\ \text{reference group i}} + \varepsilon_i$$

The regression model proved significant, $F_{11,636} = 60.71$, $p < 0.0005$. The model explained about 50 per cent of the variance; $R^2 = 0.51$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.50$). The model was tested for linearity, normal distribution of residuals, homoskedasticity, independence of errors, co-linearity, and outliers, to establish that the model did not violate any regression assumptions, (see Hair *et al.*, 1998, for more discussion about these assumptions). Table III shows the main results of the regression.

As can be seen from the Table III, all predictor variables were significant other than service (employee and location). The partial correlations in the table provide the unique contribution of each predictor variable to the model. The square of the partial correlations thus provides the unique contribution to the variance within the model by each predictor.

Table III further shows that, of the predictor variables, none was dominant, though controlled communication, explaining over 10 per cent of the variance, contributed the most. The table also shows that brand personality and country of origin made trivial contribution to the model, each explaining around only 1 per cent of the variance.

The sum of the explained variance from the partial correlations is 0.4748. This is close to the explained variance from the model as a whole (around 50 per cent). This suggests the model is robust.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to branding theory by proposing and testing a model of the antecedents of brand preference. PCA identified 11 factors, which we group into three theoretical clusters, associated, respectively with brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes. The study demonstrates that variables in all three clusters influence brand preference, and in particular that there are a wide range of factors that together contribute to brand preference. This outcome supports the value of taking a holistic perspective on the relationship between independent variables, such as controlled communication, perceived quality, and reference group, and the dependent variable, brand preference. On the basis of this study, the research that considers the relationship between specific antecedents to brand preference, such as those, say, associated with the creation of brand awareness is only revealing a small part of the picture; unfortunately, much previous work on the antecedents of brand preference is of this nature.

As discussed earlier, in the absence of holistic models of the antecedents of brand preference, this study has been informed by the models of Berry (2000), de Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003), and Grace and O'Cass (2005b). Most important amongst these is Grace and O'Cass's (2005b) model of the antecedents of brand verdict. In common with their model this study identified the two factors, controlled

Table II Preliminary results of research variables after PCA

Factor name	Number of items after PCA	Source	EFA loading range	Alpha
Brand preference	6	Adapted from Jamal and Good (2001) and Hellier *et al.* (2003)	0.74-0.82	0.87
Brand personality	5	Adapted from Aaker (1997)	0.66-0.80	0.77
Price	3	Adapted from Lassar *et al.* (1995)	0.85-0.86	0.87
Quality	10	Adapted from Lim *et al.* (2006)	0.85-0.89	0.94
Country of origin	3	Adapted from O'Cass and Grace (2004)	0.96-0.97	0.96
Service (employee and location)	11	Cronin and Taylor (1992), Grace and O'Cass (2005a), and O'Cass and Grace (2004)	0.58-0.93	0.88
Corporate status	10	Adapted from Souiden *et al.* (2006)	0.65-0.89	0.94
Advertising (controlled communications)	4	Adapted from Holbrook and Batra (1987), and Grace and O'Cass (2005b)	0.82-0.91	0.89
WOM + Publicity (uncontrolled communications)	6	Adapted from Bansal and Voyer (2000), and Grace and O'Cass (2005b)	0.75-0.86	0.90
Satisfaction	5	Adapted from Hellier *et al.* (2003)	0.72-0.80	0.85
Perceived risk	5	Adapted from Mieres *et al.* (2006)	0.79-0.89	0.91
Reference group	12	Adapted from Park and Lessig (1981)	0.70-0.93	0.95

Table III Regression analysis results

Independent variables	Unstandardised coefficients B	Unstandardised coefficients Std Error	Standardised coefficients Beta	*t*-value	Sig.	Partial correlation	Effect size
(Constant)	−0.824	0.204		−4.039	0.000		
Uncontrolled communication	0.166	0.028	0.184	6.011	0.000	0.230818	0.053277
Controlled communication	0.214	0.024	0.279	8.774	0.000	0.32562	0.106028
Brand personality	0.106	0.030	0.101	3.539	0.004	0.139825	0.019551
Price	0.089	0.020	0.135	4.560	0.000	0.177037	0.031342
Quality	0.084	0.019	0.132	4.477	0.001	0.176589	0.031184
Corporate status	0.161	0.026	0.189	6.321	0.000	0.240015	0.057607
Service (employee + location)	−0.013	0.023	−0.017	−0.590	0.556	−0.02182	0.000476
Country of origin	0.048	0.018	0.078	2.726	0.007	0.106151	0.011268
Satisfaction	0.131	0.025	0.162	5.265	0.000	0.206294	0.042557
Perceived risk	0.147	0.021	0.214	6.962	0.000	0.262577	0.068947
Reference group	0.136	0.023	0.175	6.018	0.003	0.229171	0.052519

communication (advertising), and uncontrolled communication (word-of-mouth, and publicity). Their model also shares with the model proposed in this study, price and satisfaction. Further, their "self-image congruence" aligns with this study's "reference group". Both studies identify service factors as influencers, but whilst their study separates servicescape, core service and employee, this study found all service aspects to collapse onto one factor, service.

Adopting a holistic approach to the antecedents of brand preference has also provided the opportunity to explore the relative influence of different factors on brand preference. The least important influencing variable was service. This can probably be accounted for on the basis of the sector for this study; mobile phone services are typically delivered remotely, with little interaction between the customer and the service employee, and with very occasional engagement in physical surroundings associated with the brand. This is perhaps an important point that needs to be considered in further research on service branding, in contexts where the service is delivered digitally.

The other two factors that exerted relatively limited influence on the brand preference outcome were country of origin, and brand personality. Country of origin was included in this study because country of origin (i.e. Jordanian v international) was at the heart of the brand strategies of the competitors in the mobile telecommunications service providers in Jordan (Alamro and Rowley, 2011). It may be less appropriate in other contexts. However, even in this context and despite the exposure of the respondents to branding strategies that hinge on country of origin, country of origin had relatively limited influence on brand preference. Interestingly, brand personality, again an important strand in the branding strategies of the competitors in this marketplace, was also limited in impact on brand preference.

At the other end of the spectrum, controlled communication had the most significant impact on brand preference. This is not surprising since there is a substantial body of previous research that suggests that advertising has a large effect on brand awareness, which, in turn may affect brand preference (e.g. Fill, 2006; Gardner, 1985; Lutz *et al.*, 1982; Mitchell and Olson, 1981). However, it does argue for

the importance of a planned marketing communications strategy and further development of understanding of its role in influencing brand preference.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This study has proposed and developed a model of the antecedents of brand preference in the context of mobile telecommunications providers in Jordan. PCA identified eleven factors, which we group into three clusters, associated, respectively with brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes. Apart from service, which is a special case, all eleven factors make a contribution to brand preference. Brand preference, then, is influenced by a range of factors. The factor that makes the most contribution to brand preference is controlled communication, or advertising. The value of taking a holistic approach to the antecedents of brand preference has been demonstrated.

This research has important consequences for brand strategies. It, for example, confirms the role of controlled communications in developing brand preference, but emphasises that attention to controlled communication is not sufficient. Brand practitioners also need to seek to influence uncontrolled communication, in the form of publicity and word-of-mouth. In addition, the delivery of the brand promise plays a significant role in influencing brand preference. Factors such as price, perceived quality, and corporate status (corporate image and corporate reputation) also need to be actively managed.

There is considerable scope for further research into brand preference and its antecedents:

- This study was conducted in a specific sector in a specific country. The research could usefully be replicated in related sectors, such as broadband service providers, and other service sectors. Such research might explore the extent to which the antecedents of brand preference and their relative influence, varies between different contexts.
- Whilst this study has sought to embrace a wide range of potential antecedents to brand preference, there is scope for further studies that investigate other factors that might influence brand preference. These might include customer demographics, such as age, and income and psychographic factors such as consumer personality, lifestyle and so forth. In addition, there is scope for the application of additional statistical techniques, such as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) or structured equation modelling (SEM) to further validate the antecedents of brand preference, and explore the relationships between those antecedents.

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Sales force impact on B-to-B brand equity: conceptual framework and empirical test

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to develop and empirically test a conceptual framework explaining the influence of the sales force on brand equity relative to the product and promotion elements of the marketing mix, in the context of business-to-business marketing.
Design/methodology/approach – Six research hypotheses, relating to the effects of four key drivers of B-to-B brand equity identified in a review of the relevant literature, were empirically tested with a sample of 201 respondents in B-to-B firms in Germany, using partial least squares analysis.
Findings – The results confirm the high relevance of the sales force to the building and maintenance of a strong B-to-B brand. The most important driver of brand equity in this environment is the salesperson's behaviour, followed in sequence by his or her personality, product quality and non-personal marketing communications.
Research limitations/implications – The sample size permits only a general analysis and conclusions. The choice of PLS analysis and formative scales limits the rigorousness of scale and model evaluation. The decision to interview one manager per company may have introduced informant bias.
Practical implications – The study identifies controllable variables that are critical to the effective management of a B-to-B brand and offers an alternative approach to the measurement of brand equity in B-to-B marketing.
Originality/value – This is the first study to test the widely claimed influence of the sales force on B-to-B brand equity empirically, developing a simple but powerful framework to integrate sales management and brand management in this context.

Keywords Brand equity, B-to-B branding, Sales force behaviour and personality, Conceptual framework, Brands, Sales force

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The aphorism that "B-to-B brands have feet" encapsulates a widely-held belief that the human factor features strongly in business-to-business (B-to-B) marketing. According to many practitioners, it is the personal interaction between buying and selling centres that makes the difference that matters in markets characterised by increasingly commoditised products. It is thus reasonable to assume that the perception of B-to-B brands will be strongly influenced by the quality of personal communication with customers and the emotions that result from human interaction. From this perspective, it is people rather than products who that generate B-to-B brand equity. B-to-B brands, in turn, have been found to be of increasing value in industrial markets (Mudambi, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009).

However, marketing scholars have not always taken the importance of B-to-B branding as a given. For instance, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007, p. 357) have recently observed that, in industrial marketing, "things are different – branding is not meant to be relevant". As decision making is widely seen as a predominately rational process (Rosenbröijer, 2001), the emotional aspects of branding are perceived as being inappropriate. Lynch and de Chernatony (2004, p. 403) asserted that "the limited work on business branding has largely ignored the role of emotion and the extent to which organisational purchasers, like final consumers, may be influenced by emotional brand attributes". The sales function plays a highly important role in this respect: salespeople do not just explain product features and negotiating prices, they also shape brand perceptions as part of the interpersonal communication process. Clearly, B-to-B brand management must integrate this potential, if it is to fully exploit the positive benefits of branding. Yet the brand-driving capabilities of the sales force have not yet been examined empirically, and are often overlooked in practice.

Against this background, we examine the influence of the sales force on brand equity in a B-to-B context.

2. Literature review and research questions

While there is a long-standing academic interest in personal selling and a quickly growing body of literature on B-to-B brand strategy, no attention has been paid in the literature to the interdependence of these two management disciplines. More specifically, and if B-to-B brands do indeed have feet, it is important to understand how emotions conveyed through the sales function influence brand equity, and the resulting managerial implications.

2.1 B-to-B branding

In business-to-consumer marketing, there is little doubt that the brand is a strong, enduring and differentiating asset that influences consumer behaviour. However, there is a belief that

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brands have little significance when dealing with a corporate unit that makes buying decisions related to "serious" industrial products on a strictly rational basis (Rosenbröijer, 2001). Products in commodity businesses or speciality markets are chosen through an objective decision-making process based on hard facts, such as functionality, price, or quality, while such soft attributes as reputation or trust are of no interest. But Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007, p. 357) question this received wisdom:

> Is this true? Does anybody really believe that people can turn themselves into unemotional and utterly rational machines when at work? We don't think so.

Lynch and de Chernatony (2004) define brands as clusters of functional and emotional values that promise a unique and welcome experience in the buyer-seller transaction. This was found to be valid in B-to-B markets early in the development of a research stream on "industrial" branding (Gordon *et al.*, 1991; Lehmann and O'Shaughnessy, 1974; Mudambi *et al.*, 1997; Saunders and Watt, 1979).

Since those studies, it can generally be assumed that branding is a relevant aspect of B-to-B marketing even if its importance may vary (Mudambi, 2002). B-to-B brands have a facilitator function, which makes it easier to identify and differentiate businesses (Anderson and Narus, 2004). A strong brand can secure a place for the company name on the bid list, and help to sway the bidding decision in very close contests (Wise and Zednickova, 2009). Thus, B-to-B brand managers must relentlessly concentrate on developing and communicating points of difference as the basis for creating differentiation and providing superior value (Davies *et al.*, 2008). Given the importance of the sales function, however, it is surprising that salespeople and their emotional potential are seldom seen as a starting point for differentiation.

In a rare acknowledgment of the relevance of the organisational sales function to successful B-to-B branding, Lynch and de Chernatony (2004) have pointed out the high importance of effective interpersonal communication of the brand's values, both within the organization and in the marketplace. Emotions are not conveyed via advertising, but rather through personal interaction between selling and buying centres. The most recent of the studies available for review demonstrates a clear link between the internal and external brand equity in B-to-B markets (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010).

2.2 Personal brand communication

A company's salespeople are one channel for the communication of a brand's attributes, especially in service-oriented industries. Their interactive and persuasive capabilities translate into emotions, such as trust, and thus have a significant effect on brand equity. Studies of branding in services marketing have devoted considerable attention to the influence of the service provider's employees on customers' evaluation of the service (Berry, 2000; Farrell *et al.*, 2001).

Other research reported in the services marketing literature has addressed such aspects of interpersonal communication style, and its effects on customers' responses, as non-verbal communication (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006), customer orientation (Bettencourt and Gwinner, 1996; Sparks *et al.*, 1997), employee satisfaction (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Homburg and Stock, 2004), and perceived effort (Mohr and Bitner, 1995; Specht *et al.*, 2007). Beyond the services marketing literature, Wentzel (2009) has analysed the effects of different aspects of employees' communication on consumers' perceptions of brand image and their attitudes to the brand, in various product categories.

All studies in this research stream underpin the relevance of employee-customer interpersonal communication to successful branding, and hence to brand equity in general, but not in the B-to-B context. Given the underestimated role of emotions in industrial markets, there is no compelling argument to suggest that such causal relationships should not apply to B-to-B brands as well.

2.3 Personal selling

Relevant research studies have centred on the determinants of direct sales success, being apparently unconcerned with long-term and brand-related effects. The literature discusses three groups of determinants of success in salespeople (Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Taylor and Woodside, 1982; Weitz *et al.*, 1986): personality traits such as age, motivation, gender, demographic similarities between salesperson and customer; social competences and skills, such as verbal and non-verbal communication, flexibility, friendliness, teamwork; and such professional competences and skills as economic knowledge and product knowledge, plus adaptation of selling style to buyers' needs (Spiro and Weitz, 1990).

However, salespeople today are expected not only to meet sales targets but also to build long-term, profitable business relationships which in turn are based on positive emotions such as satisfaction. Thus, relationship selling behaviour is important from a branding point of view (Ahearne *et al.*, 2007). Its primary goal is securing, building and maintaining long-term relationships with profitable customers (Johnston and Marshall, 2005).

The literature suggests that, after the initial sale, the sales relationship should enhance customer satisfaction and trust (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Ganesan, 1994), as well as commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). There is no research, however, connecting these measures with branding in the B-to-B context. This is an important gap in the literature, since B-to-B brand management needs not only to incorporate sales as a corporate function, but also salespeople as human individuals and emotional links to the customer.

2.4 Research questions

The goal of our research study was to develop a conceptual framework capable of explaining the impact of the sales force on B-to-B brand equity, closing an important gap in the B-to-B branding literature.

The central research question thus addressed the relative impact of the sales force on brand equity in that context, compared with the other elements of the marketing mix. Three specific research questions were to be answered:

1. How can B-to-B brand equity be measured?
2. Does the sales force influence B-to-B brand equity?
3. How important is the sales force for B-to-B brand equity compared with the other elements of the marketing mix?

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3. Conceptual framework

3.1 The sales force and classical marketing as drivers of B-to-B brand equity

According to Michell *et al.* (2001), brand equity is a consequence of customers' perceptions of the brand. Vargo and Lusch (2004), discussing the "service-dominated logic" of B-to-B marketing, asserted that brand image is dynamically constructed by social interaction. Following their lead, Grönroos (2007, p. 290) has suggested that:

> A brand is created in continuously developing brand relationships where the customer forms a differentiating image of a physical good, a service or a solution including goods, services, information and other elements, based on all kinds of brand contacts that the customer is exposed to.

The literature takes two broad perspectives on the role of the sales force. First, practitioner-focused publications tend to concentrate on so-called sales techniques (Schiffman, 2008) that are supposed to conclude a deal, for example through questioning and closing techniques, thus accentuating the short-term and transactional aspects. The relationship marketing paradigm, however, emphasises the need for long-term management of customer relationships (Gordon, 1998; Gummesson, 1999; Peck *et al.*, 1999). In that perspective, a more sustainable driver of sales success is the salesperson characteristics, such as empathy, expertise or reliability. The general line of reasoning is that customers will respond differently to different salespeople, depending on their characteristics (Homburg and Stock, 2005). Hence, one dimension that needs to be included in the conceptual framework is the salesperson's personality, consisting of personality traits, such as empathy, social competence, such as flexibility, and professional skills, such as expertise (Homburg *et al.*, 2007).

The second broad perspective is to be found in the extensive literature dealing with the nature of customer relationships, in particular from the viewpoint of institutional economics (Williamson, 1985) and behavioural research (Seth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Customer-oriented behaviour is defined as the ability of salespeople to help their customers by engaging in behaviours that increase customer satisfaction (Saxe and Weitz, 1982), such as trying to help to achieve the customer's goals, discussing the customer's needs, and trying to influence the customer through information rather than through pressurising sales techniques (Homburg and Stock, 2005). According to the classic theory propounded by Macneil (1980), a "relational contract" is based upon a state of trust between two parties. Complementing the explicit terms of a contract, there are implicit terms and understandings that determine the behaviour of the parties, placing even simple transactions in a wider social and economic context. Hence, another important dimension that needs to be acknowledged in the framework is the salesperson's behaviour within the relationship with the customer.

Based on these considerations, the driver labelled "salesperson" can be divided into two constructs, personality and behaviour. Despite the strong focus on selling in many B-to-B markets, sustained customer relationships are still based on some necessary prerequisites. First, brand awareness, as promoted through such classic marketing communication initiatives as advertising, publicity and corporate image campaigns, is often the first step in the buying process. Second, regardless of sales excellence, there will be no re-purchasing if product quality is not at least competitive. Therefore, our study also considers two of the classic "4Ps" of the marketing mix: product and promotion.

We do not consider place as part of classical marketing because our focus is on the sales force, which is an integral part of distribution policy. An additional measurement under this heading would have overemphasised place in comparison with the other Ps. Rather, we are comparing sales as a representative of place with the other elements of the marketing mix. We also excluded price from our conceptual framework because, in the context of our study, we saw it as a threshold factor. If a price were to be set too high in comparison with competitive offers, the sales force would stand little chance of persuading potential customers to buy; if it were too low, they would be of marginal significance because the price, rather than their persuasive efforts, would be likely to close the deal. We are therefore assuming that the sales force can only apply its competence if price does not play a decisive role in the sales process.

3.2 B-to-B brand equity

Generally speaking, brand equity is the differential effect that brand knowledge has on customer response to the marketing of the brand (Keller, 1993). This additional effect can be measured by individual behavioural effects, such as brand loyalty, or by aggregated financial measures, such as "brand value".

The depth of the discussion about the proper conceptualisation of brand equity is legendary. Thorough overviews are provided by Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010) and Salinas and Ambler (2009). The conceptual models formulated by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) have provided the most influential frameworks in that debate, and have often been used as a theoretical base in the B-to-B literature (Gordon *et al.*, 1993; Kim *et al.*, 1998; Michell *et al.*, 2001). Yet both in fact concentrate on different, more or less independent, dimensions.

An alternative view of the brand equity concept is offered by the "brand funnel" or "buying funnel" approach (Kotler *et al.*, 2006; Riesenbeck and Perrey, 2009; Rozin and Magnusson, 2003), both of which suppose a sequence of separate stages of brand effect and brand equity. This fundamental hierarchical principle is often encountered elsewhere in marketing, for example in the numerous models of advertising effect summarized by Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) or the "chain of effects" linking brand trust to brand performance proposed by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), and is applied to branding in the B-to-B environment by Mudambi *et al.* (1997), Muñoz and Kumar (2004), Thompson *et al.* (1997), and Yoon and Kijewski (1995).

What remains unclear is the number and type of separate stages. Our proposed model incorporates three stages, similar to those in the "iceberg" model by the international market research company "icon" (Musiol *et al.*, 2004; Zimmermann *et al.*, 2001). The first of the three is short-term, more flexible and easier to influence by marketing. Typical constructs are brand imagery, the mental picture of a brand (Ruge, 1988) and first impressions. We call this stage brand perception.

The next stage is long-term oriented, more stable and only indirectly influenced by marketing. Relevant constructs are brand attitudes, brand trust or brand sympathy. We use the term brand strength to sum up these branding effects (Lassar *et al.*, 1995). At the final stage, stored brand equity influences

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behavioural intentions or real behaviour. Brand loyalty, measured by actual purchase, intention to repeat-purchase and commitment to the brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), is thus the pivotal outcome of our stepwise model of brand equity.

3.3 Research hypotheses

The first set of four research hypotheses concerns the influence of the sales force and the two key elements of the marketing mix on B-to-B brand equity.

Theoretical descriptions of personal selling and several empirical studies underpin the strong influence of the salesperson's personality and behaviour on a customer's evaluation, in general. The B-to-B branding furthermore supposes a positive influence on B-to-B brand equity (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004; Kim *et al.*, 1998; Mudambi, 2002; van Riel *et al.*, 2005). An integration of the two research streams in combination with the proposed model of B-to-B brand equity is the theoretical basis for the following hypotheses:

H1. The salesperson's personality has a positive influence on the brand perception, in a B-to-B setting.

H2. The salesperson's behaviour has a positive influence on the brand perception, in a B-to-B setting.

Moreover, the literature of customer satisfaction and its related body of empirical research support a positive link between subjective perceived product quality and several aspects of brand equity (Szymanski and Henard, 2001). This link has been confirmed by empirical studies in various B-to-B markets (Baumgarth, 2008; Bennett *et al.*, 2005; Cretu and Brodie, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 1998; van Riel *et al.*, 2005). Classic branding theory furthermore identifies non-personal communication as one of the central building blocks of a strong brand (Yoo and Donthu, 2001). This argument is also supported by some B-to-B branding papers (Hutton, 1997; Webster and Keller, 2004). Thus:

H3. Product quality has a positive influence on brand perception, in a B-to-B setting.

H4. Non-personal communication has a positive influence on the brand perception in a B-to-B setting.

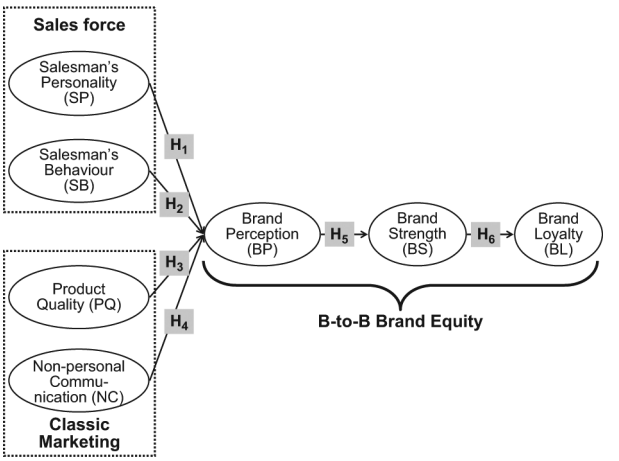
The final set of two hypotheses relates to the internal structure of B-to-B brand equity. First, we hypothesize that the short-term and more flexible brand perception has a positive impact on the long-term and stable brand strength. Second, brand equity, more knowledge-based and attitude-based, is the driver of future behaviour whereas brand loyalty is the pivotal behavioural outcome (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Thus:

H5. Brand perception has a positive effect on brand strength, in a B-to-B setting.

H6. Brand strength has a positive effect on brand loyalty, in a B-to-B setting.

Figure 1 presents the proposed model of the influence of the sales force on business-to-business brand equity, linking the six hypotheses in causal paths from the four marketing antecedents via brand perception and brand strength to final outcome of brand equity, brand loyalty.

Figure 1 A model of sales force impact on business-to-business brand equity



4. Methodology

Based on conceptual framework presented earlier, the empirical study reported next will help to close an important gap in the literature of branding in B-to-B marketing.

4.1 Research design

Input data were collected by computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) of 201 business-to-business firms in Germany, conducted by a professional market research company. The average duration of an interview was about 22 minutes. The sampling frame and sample profile are described in section 4.2. In order to reduce order-effect bias, the sequence of the single items of the constructs was rotated.

Given the need to test a structural equation model with unobservable constructs, the methodological choice is between a covariance-based approach, such as AMOS or LISREL, and partial-least-squares regression analysis. Comparisons of these alternatives are to be found in Chin and Newsted (1999) and Fornell and Bookstein (1982). Historically, the former has been the dominant method for solving causal models of this type, but marketing and management researchers have been turning to the latter (Fornell, 1992; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006; Hulland, 1999).

The number of questionnaires in our study was the key factor in the choice of partial-least-squares as the method for testing the model. This "soft modelling" approach (Chin and Newsted, 1999) was selected because the sample size was considered too small for the alternative "hard" procedures. Further considerations were that: the measurement scales and the model itself are new and untested; the majority of the variables do not fulfil the assumption of multivariate normal distribution; and the modelling of formative and reflective constructs in a single model is better suited to the distribution-free partial-least-squares method. The data were analysed by the SmartPLS software (Ringle *et al.*, 2006), and the causal model judged on the basis of explained variances (R^2) and the Stone-Geisser test (Q^2), following Chin (1998) and Hulland (1999). The covariance-based AMOS software was used in the particular case of evaluating the quality of the reflective measurement models.

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Missing values were replaced by estimated values in SPSS via the expectation maximization (EM) algorithm.

4.2 Sample

In order to cover a broad range of the B-to-B world, we chose the quota sampling selection procedure. The market research company was provided with a sampling frame setting the following selection criteria:

- Company size: 80 per cent SMEs, defined as fewer than 500 employees; 20 per cent large companies, employing more than 500 staff.
- Respondent's role in the buying centre: 50 per cent top management; 50 per cent purchasing management.
- Type of business-to-business-transaction, as defined by Backhaus and Voeth (2007): 25 per cent product business; 25 per cent system business; 25 per cent plant and engineering business; 25 per cent derived-demand supplying business.
- Quality of the supplier-buyer-relationship: 50 per cent judged "top supplier"; 50 per cent "bad supplier".

After a briefing and a pre-test, the market research company conducted the interviews over a period of a month. The demographic profile of the final sample in Table I shows that it does not meet the quota perfectly, but does cover a broad range of the B-to-B market.

4.3 Measurements

As far as possible, we relied on construct measures available in the literature that could be adapted to the context of the study, but supplemented them with others identified in interviews with branding and sales experts. Appendix 1 lists the 45 specific items generated. Respondents' answers were recorded on 11-point Likert scales and percentage scales. Because of the two scaling formats, a z-standardization of all manifest variables was conducted (Tenenhaus *et al.*, 2005).

The construct salesperson's personality was newly developed for this study. The 16 items were selected on the basis of our screening of the literature relating to the personality traits of salespeople (Badovick *et al.*, 1992; Churchill *et al.*, 1985; Homburg *et al.*, 2007), on social skills (McBane, 1995) and to professional skills (Homburg *et al.*, 2007; Spiro and Weitz, 1990; Weitz *et al.*, 1986). A formative measurement scale was custom-constructed.

The measurement of the second construct, salesperson's behaviour, is drawn from relational contract theory (Macneil, 1980), supplemented by inputs from Dwyer *et al.* (1987). The two scales, adapted for use in German, were derived from Beutin (2000) and Ivens (2002). The nine factors were measured by multi-item scales, for each of which an index was calculated. The nine indices were the basis for this formative scale.

The two marketing-mix variables product quality and non-personal communication were measured by reflective scales. The four items for capturing product quality were based on scales proposed by Vickery *et al.* (1994) and Garvin (1987), adapted to suit the German B-to-B environment in a series of workshops with marketing professionals. Non-personal communication was measured by four items, based on the work of Stadelmann *et al.* (2001).

The three scales for measurement of the B-to-B brand equity were also reflective. Brand perception measured short-term brand equity by four scale items, capturing the notions of mental imagery via personal assessments of the vividness and attractiveness of the brand (Marks, 1973; Ruge, 1988). Brand strength captured the longer-term and more stable brand equity dimension, and was measured by three items (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Musiol *et al.*, 2004). The final construct, brand loyalty, measured the outcome of a strong B-to-B brand via five items (Baumgarth, 2008; Homburg *et al.*, 2003).

Table I Demographic profile of the sample

	n	%
Sample size	201	100.0
Company size		
SMEs (<500 employees)	182	90.5
Large firms (500 or more employees)	19	9.5
Buying centre role		
Top management	78	38.8
Purchasing management	123	61.2
Type of business-to-business transaction		
Product business	58	28.9
System business	62	30.8
Plant and engineering business	43	21.4
Derived-demand supplying business	38	18.9
Quality of the supplier-buyer-relationship		
Top supplier	119	59.2
Bad supplier	82	40.8

5. Results

5.1 Measurement model analysis

Our study generated data relating to both formative and reflective constructs. Evaluation of the reflective measurement sub-models was carried out by such conventional methods as Cronbach's alpha and exploratory factor analysis, in accordance with the "guidelines" and "recommended thresholds" for confirmative factor analysis proposed by Churchill (1979), Bagozzi *et al.* (1991), and Gerbing and Anderson (1988).

Because rigid criteria for checking the validity of the formative constructs were not available, their validity was assessed by weights and t-values, using a bootstrapping routine ($n = 1{,}000$ cases), and also by the usual tests for multicollinearity. Table II summarizes the descriptive statistics, item loadings (reflective constructs) or weights (formative constructs), and the global fit criteria.

The results for the measurement model show satisfactory results for the reflective constructs non-personal communication, brand perception, brand strength and brand loyalty, all meeting the Cronbach's alpha threshold of 0.7. Confirmatory factor analysis yielded acceptable fit indices: only the reflective construct product quality fails to achieve the Cronbach threshold value, at 0.64. But the result of confirmatory factor analysis (CFI = 0.977; NIF = 0.962) supports the selected measurement, and the scale is therefore accepted.

Analysis of the weights of the two formative constructs salesperson's personality and salesperson's behaviour resulted

Table II Measurement model

	Mean	SD	Loading/weight	t-value
Salesperson = "SP" (formative, max VIF = 4.93)				
SP1	7.35	2.48	0.15	1.21
SP2	7.58	2.22	0.34	1.87
SP3	6.78	2.23	0.09	0.74
SP4	7.63	1.98	0.13	1.22
SP5	7.69	2.13	−0.06	0.54
SP6	7.60	2.20	−0.04	0.35
SP7	6.69	2.17	0.28	1.93
SP8	8.12	2.05	−0.35	2.20
SP9	7.51	2.26	−0.03	0.29
SP10	7.39	2.04	−0.12	1.02
SP11	7.15	2.07	0.09	0.80
SP12	8.21	1.97	0.16	1.12
SP13	7.61	2.12	0.40	2.15
SP14	7.68	1.98	0.04	0.34
SP15	6.84	1.98	−0.16	1.28
SP16	7.19	2.14	0.19	1.33
Salesperson behaviour = "SB" (formative, VIF = 3.73)				
SB1[a]	7.32	1.75	0.49	4.71
SB2[a]	8.21	1.72	0.00	0.05
SB3[a]	6.38	2.15	0.94	0.44
SB4[a]	7.22	1.89	0.12	1.09
SB5[a]	7.60	1.60	−0.03	0.53
SB6[a]	5.77	2.20	0.26	2.82
SB7[a]	8.09	1.73	0.21	1.44
SB8[a]	7.00	1.89	0.12	1.32
SB9[a r]	6.43	2.18	0.12	1.61
Product quality = "PQ" (reflective, $\alpha = 0.64$, χ^2/df = 2.33, NFI = 0.962, CFI = 0.977, SRMR = 0.037)				
PQ1	8.36	1.87	0.77	13.82
PQ2	7.56	2.27	0.80	21.22
PQ3	8.68	1.57	0.59	7.18
PQ4	7.11	2.67	0.53	4.77
Non-personal communication = "NC" (reflective, $\alpha = 0.75$, χ^2/df = 5.00, NFI = 0.949, CFI = 0.958, SRMR = 0.046)				
NC1	6.77	3.04	0.76	15.81
NC2	7.56	1.82	0.83	28.19
NC3	4.01	3.14	0.68	9.77
NC4	4.43	2.99	0.7	10.02
Brand perception = "BP" (reflective, $\alpha = 0.70$, χ^2/df = 3.68, NFI = 0.946, CFI = 0.959, SRMR = 0.038)				
BP1	73.78	21.86	0.76	18.27
BP2	65.50	21.91	0.66	11.30
BP3	7.30	2.41	0.69	12.65
BP4	7.15	2.16	0.78	23.06
Brand strength = "BS" (reflective, $\alpha = 0.80$; calculation of further fit indices is not possible for constructs with three items)				
BS1	7.08	2.28	0.86	24.74
BS2	7.30	2.28	0.77	15.74
BS3	7.65	2.78	0.90	57.25
Brand loyalty = "BL" (reflective, $\alpha = 0.90$, χ^2/df = 1.73, NFI = 0.987, CFI = 0.995, SRMR = 0.023)				
BL1	7.79	2.51	0.91	40.92
BL2	7.27	2.83	0.84	22.73
BL3	7.12	3.05	0.73	13.46
BL4	8.46	2.21	0.86	27.26
BL5	8.01	2.31	0.92	55.53

Notes: Reflective constructs: Cronbach's Alpha: $\alpha \geq 0.7$; Chi-Square/Degrees of Freedom (χ^2/df) ≤ 5; Normed Fit Index (NFI) ≥ 0.9; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) ≥ 0.9; Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR) < 0.1; Formative constructs: max. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) ≤ 10; max. [a]index of three reflective items; [r]reversed coding

in some items exhibiting a fairly low weight and others a negative sign. These variables contributed only very little to the explanation of the variance in the latent variables. In the literature, there is debate as to whether such variables should be eliminated (Jöreskog and Wold, 1982) or should not (Rossiter, 2002); we have accepted the arguments of the critics of elimination. This decision is justified by the additional calculation of the structural model after an elimination of these critical items. The results for the structural model by the use of modified scale are very similar to the results with the original scales. We therefore accepted all measurement models and used them in the empirical test of the structural model.

5.2 Structural model analysis

The data were analysed by the SmartPLS software, and the hypotheses tested by means of bootstrapping ($n = 1{,}000$ cases). For the dependent brand-related variables, the explained variances (R^2) and predictive power (Q^2) were calculated. Table III displays the results of those hypothesis tests.

Almost all coefficients were strongly significant ($p < 0.01$) and in the expected direction, which confirms the nomological validity of the constructs, and supports *H1*, *H2*, *H3*, *H5*, and *H6*. *H4* is only partially supported by the results of the empirical test, at $p < 0.1$. The variables in the model collectively explained 59 per cent of the variance in brand perception, 55 per cent with respect to brand strength and 61 per cent in the case of brand loyalty. The model was moreover found to have good predictive power, the "Stone-Geisser test" (Chin, 1998) yielding a Q^2-value of 0.30 for brand perception, 0.39 for brand strength and 0.44 for brand loyalty, all of which were above zero.

To sum up, all four hypothesised drivers had a significant and positive influence on brand perception, in the B-to-B context, and ultimately on brand strength and brand loyalty. The two sales force variables, salesperson's personality and salesperson's behaviour, explained about three quarters of B-to-B brand equity: personality = 27 per cent; behaviour = 47 per cent. On the other hand, the two elements of the marketing mix shared only about a quarter: product quality = 16 per cent; non-personal communication = 10 per cent.

Table III Estimated effects within the causal models

Hypothesis	Path	Coefficient	*t*-value	Acceptance
H1	SP → BP	0.244	3.42	✓✓✓
H2	SB → BP	0.423	5.78	✓✓✓
H3	PQ → BP	0.142	2.33	✓✓✓
H4	IC → BP	0.090	1.84	✓
H5	BP → BS	0.740	22.39	✓✓✓
H6	BE → BL	0.781	25.24	✓✓✓

Notes: ✓ = hypothesis confirmed ($p < 0.1$); ✓✓✓ = hypothesis confirmed ($p < 0.01$); SP = Salesperson's personality; SB = Salesperson's behaviour; PQ = Product quality; NC = Non-personal communication; BP = Brand perception; BS = Brand strength; BL = Brand loyalty

6. Discussion

6.1 Summary and research-related implications

Previous conceptual and empirical studies have emphasised the increasing importance of branding in business-to-business marketing. Many researchers and practitioners assume that, in contrast to the business-to-consumer context, the sales force is an important building block of a strong B-to-B brand. Our own empirical study confirms this assumption for the first time. Furthermore, our data clarify that salesperson's behaviour is more important than salesperson's personality. Though both sales force dimensions are more relevant than the two elements of the marketing mix, product quality and non-personal communication have a positive influence on B-to-B brand equity. Future models of B-to-B branding should therefore include the sales force as an independent variable. Our proposed conceptual framework is a first step, which can be used as the basis for the development of more sophisticated models.

Moreover, both the framework and the empirical findings demonstrate that successful management of a B-to-B brand should be based on a combination of sales force management and deployment of the classic marketing mix. That alignment is, in this context, a frequently controversial topic: see, for example, Kotler *et al.* (2006). Future research should take into account findings related to the sales-marketing interface, such as that by Homburg *et al.* (2008).

In addition to these main results and conclusions, our study has validated a scale for the measurement of B-to-B brand equity, incorporating three dimensions, arranged in sequence, and 12 items. In particular, integration of brand imagery into the measurement of brand perception could be a fruitful direction for further research.

6.2 Management-related implications

Our findings suggest that managers should acknowledge the special role of the sales force in B-to-B brand management. The salesperson should not be seen as simply an actor in the distribution process, but rather should be integrated into the processes of product (or service) positioning and marketing communications. Since sales management (= sales department) and brand management (= marketing department) are often separate organizational divisions, it is vital to take practical action against resistance to integration in both functions. The B-to-B brand can be used as a device to bring the two together for the common good: superior differentiation of the offering in a competitive environment.

The results of our study suggest the need for systematically interactive brand management, which can be defined, in the B-to-B context, as the management process of planning, implementing and controlling relationship-shaping interactive processes with current or potential customers through sales operations, with the objective of anchoring an identity-matching image in the minds of relevant buying-centre members (Binckebanck, 2006). Interactive brand management is thus fundamentally about using the sales function as the motive force for communicating differentiated company values, integrating sales into brand management, and implementing a strategy of "relationship leadership".

6.3 Limitations and further research

As with all empirical research, several methodological limitations of the study have to be considered. First, the sample size is sufficient for statistical analysis, but inadequate for a cross-sectional comparison of industrial markets. An increase in a future study would permit the analysis of this and other group effects. The geographic restriction to Germany is also limiting. It would be interesting to compare the influence of the sales force on the brand in different cultural contexts.

The study had an overtly exploratory objective. With hindsight, the scales may have been too long. In particular, the scale for the measurement of the sales behaviour need further purification for future applications. In addition, the formative character of both sales force constructs lowers the possibility to evaluate the quality of the scales. In future studies, the conduct of an expert validation (Anderson and Gerbing, 1991) or the combined use of a formative and a reflective scale (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001) can improve the quality of the measurement model.

Another problem to be acknowledged is informant bias. It is recommended that future studies should involve two or more respondents per firm, and that drivers and brand equity should be measured independently of each other.

Our conceptual framework is a relatively simple one which, for example, implies independence of the four considered drivers. Further research should allow for interdependence among the four drivers and also the effect of the level of integration on them. For example, the concept of integrated marketing communication (Schultz *et al.*, 1993) recommends a fit among the various communication instruments. Here, the integration of non-personal marketing communications and the personal communication of the sales force could be an important driver of B-to-B brand equity.

Finally, we feel that such associated management topics as the sales-marketing interface, or the moderating effect of corporate culture and corporate brand orientation on the causal relationships, are interesting issues for further consideration.

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Appendix

Table AI Scales and items

Salesperson's personality = "SP"
SP1 … enjoy direct customer contact.
SP2 … always tackle their tasks with healthy optimism
SP3 … have at the ready a great deal of empathy (can put themselves in the customer's place, can take the customer's perspective etc.)
SP4 … have a healthy sense of self-esteem (feel sure of their own competence and abilities etc.)
SP5 … are competent in oral communication (can express themselves in a straightforward and precise manner, can pose well-directed questions etc.)
SP6 … can listen to their customers actively
SP7 … have also mastered non-verbal communication (can use body language professionally, are able to detect signals in the body language of their customers etc.)
SP8 … are always friendly towards their customers
SP9 … are flexible (adapt themselves and their selling behaviour to different customer types and situations)
SP10 … are able to work in a team (can fit into team structures, enjoy team work etc.)
SP11 … can manage themselves well (time management, punctuality, priority setting etc.)
SP12 … have a great deal of product knowledge (both of their own and competitive products)
SP13 … know and understand their customers very well (their needs, value chains, usage of product/service etc.)
SP14 … have a great deal of market knowledge (the position of the supplier or trends in the market)
SP15 … have a great deal of knowledge on business aspects (can assess the consequences of their decisions on costs, can conduct economic feasibility studies etc.)
SP16 … are able to adapt to any customer on the basis of their experience

Salesperson's behaviour = "SB"
SB1 * a) The supplier is interested in improvements that advance the relationship as a whole rather than being just to its own advantage
b) The supplier would help us in problematic situations as much as his possibilities would allow for
c) The supplier has no problem with us owing them something
SB2 * a) It is important to this supplier to cultivate a long-term relationship with us
b) The supplier has long-term objectives in its relationship with us
c) The supplier assumes that its relationship with us will be profitable in the long run
SB3 * a) The supplier proactively provides all information (on new products/services, trends etc.) that might be helpful to us
b) The supplier normally updates us in good time on all relevant changes
c) The supplier also provides sensitive information, for example on its cost situation
SB4 * a) The supplier reacts flexibly to requests for change
b) Complaints are well managed and handled by this supplier
c) In the event of an unforeseen situation, the supplier would be prepared to deviate from pre-existing agreements in order to come to a new understanding
SB5 * a) The supplier in question precisely monitors the punctuality and accuracy of monetary transactions
b) The supplier always sees to it that we keep agreements (obtaining information, arranging contacts etc.)
c) If we failed to keep an agreement with this supplier, it would immediately bring that to our attention
SB6 * a) This particular supplier is obviously planning for the future of our business relationship
b) This particular supplier sets explicit objectives for the future of our business relationship
c) The supplier discusses questions with us that are important for the strategic development of our business relationship
SB7 * a) The supplier is interested in both parties gaining from the relationship in the long run
b) The supplier always behaves fairly in negotiations with us
c) The supplier always shows appropriate respect
SB8 * a) The supplier looks at each conflict separately, irrespective of who we are and the total volume of our business
b) The supplier reflects on the reasons behind conflicts
c) In conflicts, the supplier looks for specific solutions that help our business relationship along
SB9 * a) The supplier frequently mentions the sources of power at his disposal to get his own way
b) The supplier does not hesitate to place pressure on us in situations of conflict
c) The supplier uses instruments of power only if that does not threaten the future of our business relationship

Product Quality = "PQ"
PQ1 The product/service supplied is very important for our firm
PQ2 The supplier normally delivers the relevant product/ service in excellent quality
PQ3 The price of this supplier's product/service is very important to us
PQ4 This supplier's product/service is highly geared to our needs

Non-personal communication = "NC"
NC1 This supplier has positioned itself in the market as a brand
NC2 This supplier has a positive image in the market
NC3 This supplier receives frequent press coverage
NC4 This supplier's advertising is easy to remember

Brand perception = "BP"
BP1 Just as for people, houses and other objects, we also have inner images of brands, firms and shops. Please call to mind your inner image of this specific supplier. How clear and vivid is it in your mind?
BP2 Inner images can be attractive or unattractive, regardless of how clear and vivid they may be. How attractive or unattractive is this supplier's image in your mind?
BP3 I frequently hear of or see the supplier
BP4 This supplier makes an impression because of its clear positioning

Brand strength = "BS"
BS1 I like this supplier
BS2 I trust this supplier
BS3 If this supplier were to leave the market, I would strongly regret it

Brand loyalty = "BL"
BL1 We firmly intend to stay loyal to this supplier as long as possible
BL2 I gladly recommend this supplier in talks with colleagues
BL3 I would be willing to serve as a reference for this supplier
BL4 We will purchase from this supplier again
BL5 We expect to continue the business relationship for a long time

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Book reviews

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Marketing Accountability: How to Measure Marketing Effectiveness

Malcolm McDonald and Peter Mouncey
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This is a "how to" book that aims to "empower marketing executives to justify their actions to both CEOs and chief financial officers" (p. 3) by presenting a three-level methodology that links actions to outcomes.

The first level concerns the process for linking marketing activities to long-term shareholder value. The authors explain how marketing is essential to: target the right customers and develop a compelling value proposition, which will lead customers to choose the firm over its competitors, and deliver superior returns through greater market share and/or higher margins, thus translating into higher dividends and/or higher share price.

The second level focuses on the link between marketing expenditure and outcomes. It does so by exploring how particular actions contribute to improving the critical success factors that are part of the firm's strategy for each planning unit, and that will translate into revenues.

The third and final level relates to the micro measurement of promotional activities. It addresses issues such as the link between promotion and brand awareness, the buying cycle, or cross-channel behaviour.

The majority of the book seems to be concerned with the first level. I say "seems" because the separation between the levels is not clear-cut and there is certainly no direction in the table of contents as to which chapters relate to which level, which might be seen as a weakness in a "how-to" book.

More specifically, chapter 1 ("It's tough at the top – CEOS are finally demanding accountability for marketing expenditure") documents the rise of intangible assets as a percentage of corporate value and the difficulties this trend brings in terms of measuring the value and risk of these assets. The chapter also notes the difficulty of linking marketing investment with financial returns, and the pressures to produce forecasts and budgets, thus setting the context for the remaining of the book.

Chapter 2 ("Strategic marketing planning – a brief overview") takes a detour from the main topic of the book to introduce the marketing planning process. This chapter is aimed at readers unfamiliar with strategic marketing planning, and it would be better positioned in an appendix.

Chapter 3 ("A three-level marketing accountability framework") starts with a brief discussion of what exactly counts as expenditure and value, before presenting the three-level model that underpins this book. The first level is presented in section 3.3.1, and the reader is directed to chapters 4 and 5 for further detail. The second level is presented in section 3.4, and the third level in section 3.5, with references to chapter 11 for further detail.

Chapter 4 ("A process of marketing due diligence") explores a crucial step in marketing: understanding the market and deciding what parts to target and how. It presents a thorough discussion of the rationale for marketing due diligence, including topics such as risk, returns, and the capital markets.

Chapter 5 ("The marketing metrics model and process") provides more detail of the metrics model previously mentioned in chapter 3. Specifically, McDonald and Mouncey outline the five key components of the model: corporate performance, market segments, impact factors, marketing and other actions, and budget resources. The first component is briefly discussed in section 5.2.1. The second component is explored in chapter 6 ("Segmentation – the basic building block for markets"). Chapter 7 ("How to become the first choice for the customers you want") is concerned with the third factor. Chapter 8 ("Turning strategy into action, and measuring outcomes") addresses the fourth and fifth components.

Chapter 9 ("Delivering accountability – finalizing the metrics strategy") is about choosing the metrics that matter the most for the organisation. The authors present a useful checklist of points to consider when developing a metrics strategy.

Chapter 10 ("Why data quality can make or break accountability") takes a step back from explaining the methodology to discuss the importance of developing a company-wide data management strategy. This chapter also provides an introduction to the principles of data management strategy. For those marketers who might feel tempted to say that such technical aspects are not of concern to marketing, the authors say that quality data is "a vital foundation for marketing strategy" (p. 216) and to measure performance.

Chapter 11 ("Measuring the effectiveness of multichannel strategies") is authored by Hugh Wilson. This chapter links metrics with the buying cycle and across multiple channels, with references to a few simple statistical techniques. This chapter is very different in style and structure from the preceding ones – for instance, it does not start with a summary. It is, however, very well organised and it is easy to follow.

Chapter 12 ("Valuing brands"), too, is written by a guest author, this time David Haigh. Again, it follows a different style and structure from the rest of the book. This chapter starts by repeating some of the messages delivered in chapter 1, about the importance of intangibles and the challenges of measuring such assets. From there, it moves on to describe how brands – a particular kind of intangible assets – add value to the business. It also introduces briefly key concepts such as brand equity measurement, sensitivity analysis, or the link with the marketing mix. It is a good introduction to the issues around, and the process of, brand valuation. This chapter would benefit from the addition of a few references of further reading on the topic.

Marketing Accountability is largely the product of seven years of research into global best practice on marketing accountability methodologies, including work "with many of the best companies in the world to produce and test the methodologies set out in this book" (p. 3). It is a bit disappointing, however, that this close collaboration did not translate into rich case studies

and examples to illustrate the issues discussed throughout the book. Instead, the examples provided are very generalist and the kind one finds in most textbooks. It would be really useful for the reader to follow one or two case studies throughout the book to see how the various concepts translate into practice, and how the various steps built on each other.

In this book, McDonald, Mouncey and their guest authors cover a broad range of topics, models, and concepts that are essential for any marketing manager - from segmentation, to the development of action plans, the importance of quality data and the "how to" of brand equity measurement. It is a useful book, well-grounded in prior research, and linking the strategic and operational aspects of marketing. *Marketing Accountability* does not offer a simple solution, but it certainly provides valuable and useful arguments to fend off criticism of the lack of accountability of marketing, as promised in the introduction to the book. It is worth reading, and worth navigating the less than logical structure.

I would say that this book is a bit too complex for the absolute beginner, and not detailed enough for the expert. Rather, it is a useful summary of key concepts, and provides enough references for the interested reader, who wants or needs to know more about specific topics, to pursue.

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Brand About. A Seriously Playful Approach for Passionate Brand-Builders and Merchants

Andrea Syverson
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This is one of those books that makes you think as you read it. It gives snippets of information that you have probably never heard or thought of and looks further into key topics. Unlike many texts on branding, *Brand About* looks beyond branding by manufacturers and includes those people who merchandise brands. Syverson coins the term "Merchketeers" to reflect this wider viewpoint.

How does the concept of "brand about" work? The author has travelled the world and was impressed by the aborigines of Australia who "go walkabout". That means, put simply, that they gain experience of their world by visiting it, thinking about it. Syverson suggests that brand managers need to do more of that: to get out of their comfort zones and take a closer look at the world.

She started life in Colorado. This reviewer's only experience of Colorado is having looked out of plane windows from 30,000 feet at a dry, desolate place – dotted with areas of civilization here and there! The plane analogy seems a good model for a description of this book. People who only take high-level views miss out on so much! *Brand About* takes you down to look closer instead of flying over.

Ten chapters cover a number of broad issues, some more absorbing than others. The overall experience, returning to the analogy of a transcontinental flight, was like sitting next to and talking to a fellow passenger who is knowledgeable and easy to listen to. Occasionally something of a missionary feeling comes across, and occasionally you feel you are back in junior school when an interesting series of points culminates in questions starting "How can your…" or "How will you…", which can get annoying after a while! But this is a comfortable and worthwhile flight!

An early chapter urges readers to "Play" in their brand. Do not take things too seriously, try to think outside the normal bounds of brand management. Many people need to "think outside of the box" but are too busy to do so! Maybe we just need to do it, and Syverson cites successful marketers who have. The second chapter encourages us to ask questions, often of ourselves, and be "insatiably curious". The need to think outside of one's home state or country is emphasised: *Fortune* magazine is quoted as reporting "to help prepare promising leaders for the future, companies are forcing their employees to take on new global risks" (p. 39). Like the aborigines, we learn not just by looking but also by listening. Chapter 3 gives hints on how to listen properly, especially to customers. In this chapter, a beachball is suggested as a metaphor for an organisation. Beachballs are made up of a number of segments in different colours. Each segment is like the divisions of a company where people "naturally work all day, every day in their particular colored stripe (Accounting, marketing, customer service, operations or merchandising)" (p. 58). They need to see the entire beachball, talk with others, especially customers and intermediaries. "Listen, watch, share stories. Only when we feel our customers' culture viscerally can we bring them what they want" (p. 66).

Risk taking is encouraged. Chapter 5 talks about learning from past successes and failures as this is often where the seeds of future success may lie. Dare to think new things about brands and take risks even if being ordinary appears a safer way to go. Richard Branson is quoted: "I'm not the sort of person who fears failure" (p. 80) People who manage brands, both in large corporations and one-person businesses, often fear failure. But being too cautious may be as damaging as being reckless. A number of very successful businesspeople encourage risk taking. The founder of McDonalds, for example, said "If you're not a risk taker you should get the hell out of business" (p. 81). But, to keep the argument balanced, a reader should remember that history is written by the victors. Managers in Fannie Mae and Lehman Brothers took risks!

Brand managers are encouraged to morph in to "merchketeers". Do not be bound by the 4Ps. Think like a marketer but also act like a merchant. "It is the job of the merchketeer to be sure that every product is 'on brand,' focuses on the customers' needs and desires, and creates a solution to make their lives simpler, easier or better in some way. In addition, merchketeers add the surprise and magic that brands need to delight and wow their customers" (p. 95). Chapter 6 gives many examples of how this might be done with the merchketeer acting as a herald, someone who announces important news to the world, does. People often switch on the TV to catch up on latest the news, without actually knowing what the news might be. This is just natural inquisitiveness. Some brands become so interesting to their consumers or even observers from the sidelines, that people "can't wait to see

what they do next!" (p. 110). That only happens when marketers think outside of the 4Ps and take a few risks.

People should be encouraged to think of brand management as an art and what they do as a craft (chapter 7). Brand managers and brand champions should both be mentored and mentor others, much as artisans have worked with apprentices in traditional crafts. Co-creation, especially via the internet, may have buried the traditional connections between producer and consumer, but good merchketeers can see new opportunities to get closer to consumers rather than more remote! Chapter 8 suggests ways that modern communications have taken brand managers away from markets of millions to millions of markets. Like any good book, from time to time, a comment was made that makes the reader's mind wander. On page 151 the writer tells us how "nearly impossible it is to find a cup of high-quality decaf black tea." Her point is that mass marketing means that individual tastes could not be catered for well. But now they can! This reviewer started to wonder: What do decaf beverage manufacturers do with all that caffeine?

Chapters 8 and 9 emphasize the need to think of people as individuals, and chapter 9 discusses Amish communities as a model of something that seems to work and can be expanded on where marketers work more closely with customers. Above all marketers should have fun but not be silly or reckless, and aim to get back to the simple life of connecting in person, adding value to people's lives and reaping the rewards in return.

A lot of questions are asked by the author. Possibly the most important one is left to page 174. "When did we lose sight that first and foremost our customers are complicated human beings just like us?" People have been through "high tech" and now many are looking for "low tech." We need to be close to our customers to understand how future brands need to realize that modern marketing technology allows one-on-one better than any media since the old days of face-to-face marketing.

This may seem like a dream to marketers who are hitched to a grindstone of cutting costs, building sales, boosting profits, but in chapter 10, Syverson encourages readers to maybe dump things that no longer really add value to a brand and "dream" what might be possible. This may be the first step to a new reality for brand management.

This book is worth reading. It takes about as long to read as a flight from coast to coast in the USA. It will not give you answers but will encourage you to think about what might be possible. It might even encourage you not to rush from where you are to where you want to be but stop off in places, take time out to think about things that you may only otherwise see for a few fleeting seconds from far too high up.

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Content Rules: How to Create Killer Blogs, Podcasts, Videos, Ebooks, Webinars (and More) that Engage Customers and Ignite Your Business

Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman
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Content Rules by Ann Handley, Chief Content Officer, MarketingProfs, and C.C. Chapman, Founder, Digital Dads, is the ideal "go-to" text for any marketing or brand management professional wanting to either validate current online marketing initiatives or learn other ways through which to effectively extend his or her marketing efforts.

Content Rules comprises 29 easily-digestible chapters that lead the reader from why online content creation and management is so important to, at the end, descriptive case studies that demonstrate how online marketing tactics were successfully incorporated into a variety of organizations.

The book itself is divided into four sections: "The Content Rules," a lively discussion of the crucial importance of "killer content"; "The How-To Section," with chapters devoted to blogs, webinars, ebooks, and other online marketing tools; "Content That Converts: Success Stories (With Ideas You Can Steal)"; and "This Isn't Goodbye," a wrap-up discussion with a "gift" for the reader.

According to the authors, *Content Rules* "demystifies the [online] publishing process and shares the secrets of creating remarkable blogs, podcasts, webinars, ebooks, and other web content that will attract would-be customers to you" (p. xvi.)

Chapter 1, "The case for content," firmly establishes the reason for improved online marketing content: "the point of creating killer content [is] [. . .] to convert browsers into buyers and customers into regulars or (better yet) rabid fans, ambassadors, and advocates" (p. 7).

Attention must be paid not only to where your content is displayed, but how. Today's consumers are much more new-media savvy and are very aware when they are being sold to rather than being informed, which is their reason for going online: to learn more about your products or services. "Show; don't just tell. Good content doesn't preach or hard-sell. Instead, it shows how your product lives in the world" (p. 16).

In chapter 3, "Insight inspires originality," the authors make the case for applying tried-and-proven journalistic techniques to your online publishing. "Just like good journalism, good content strategy focuses on the story you have to tell and the audience you are trying to attract" (p. 18).

Then, after you have identified your story and your audience(s), Handley and Chapman turn in chapter 4, "Who are you?", to the seemingly-simple but often mismanaged challenge of finding your "voice [. . .] how you express your brand. It's about the tone you take in all of your communications and [. . .] figuring out what's unique about you and your perspective" (p. 29).

Once you have accomplished this task, say the authors, and have gotten a handle on presentation of your content, your next challenge is to figure out what you are going to produce. Will it be in the form of a blog? A webinar? A podcast?

With the variety of formats available to the online marketer, the quandary becomes one of identifying what form your communication will take, and with what projected results? "Whether you start small or large, your idea or theme is always the foundation, and each piece of content you produce should have a place in that larger picture" (p. 64).

One major difficulty for online marketers that is a continuing theme in *Content Rules* is that of

communicating versus selling. Chapter 6, "Share or solve; don't shill," addresses this particular conundrum. "Good content shares or solves; it doesn't shill. In other words, it doesn't hawk your wares or push sales-driven messages" (p. 70).

But once you attract potential customers to your website, how do you maximize the impact of your efforts [...] how do you build a "community" of fans or followers [...] visitors to your site who will then share your content with their own communities? Patience is crucial, caution the authors in chapter 7, "Stoke the campfire." "One key consideration (which needs to be communicated to executives at your company) is that community takes time to develop. A community cannot be forced, manipulated, or magically conjured" (p. 99).

One final thought on communities is pointed out in chapter 9, "The care and feeding of fans": listen to your followers' [...] your communities' [...] comments and opinions. "The last thing you want your community and customers to think is that you lack listening skills" (p. 114).

Social media is not just for consumer or service-specific organizations, however. It is applicable to and for the business-to-business arena as well, and chapter 10 of *Content Rules*, "Attention B2B companies," makes it clear that the B2B marketer is well-advised to embrace and master the concept of dynamic content. "For B2B companies, the job of each piece of content [...] should be tied to a short-term goal, such as 'encouraging the reader to sign up for the XYZ webinar.' Plus, it should be associated with your company's strategic objectives, such as 'increasing sales by 15 percent in North America' (p. 123).

Section II, "The how-to section" of *Content Rules*, focuses on specific online tactics to communicate with customers and potential customers, with eight chapters devoted to individual opportunities to reach your target markets.

"A blog as a hub of your online content" (chapter 11) establishes a baseline for these activities. "A blog is a logical and appropriate first step if you want to create and publish [...] posts you write, curated content you pull together, press mentions, and content created about your organization elsewhere that you want to share" (p. 141).

A blog allows you to establish your voice ... to take the first step in communicating with your customers and potential customers. And, from there, you can venture on into other areas that offer the opportunity for that all-important conversation about your products or services.

Webinars come second in the line-up of viable and valuable online venues through which marketers can reach out and educate. "A 2009 study by Business.com found that a whopping 67 percent of business leaders who rely on social media seek out relevant podcasts or webinars" (p. 153).

Webinars make it possible for you, as a marketer, to explain, clarify, or reinforce the value of your product or service. "Webinars allow you to marry voice, image, and sound and create something that teems with life. This is a boon to B2B companies or service firms, which are often selling an intangible thing that a buyer can't easily connect with" (p. 159).

Other tactics discussed include the revered white paper (repurposed online, possibly, as an e-book), customer success stories (case studies), FAQs, videos, podcasts, and photographs. The authors are not suggesting that you need to incorporate all of these into your online marketing; rather, they offer these examples for consideration. The question that the reader has to answer is "Which of these will work best in my situation?"

The final section of *Content Rules*, "Content that converts," provides excellent examples of companies that have incorporated one or more of the online tactics discussed into their marketing programs. With everything imaginable, from "Reynolds Golf Academy" (chapter 19) to "Kodak" (chapter 25) to "PinkStinks" (chapter 28), the reader is assured of learning valuable tips from an organization in his or her space.

As promised, the authors wrap up in chapter 29, "This isn't goodbye, and a gift for you," with "an invitation to connect further [...] [via the firm's] web site (www.contentrulesbook.com), on Twitter (@thecontentrules), and on Facebook (www.facebook.com/ContentRules)" (p. 269).

In closing, the promised gift, a "12-point checklist," enables the reader to assess his or her readiness to embrace the concept of an online marketing program and to determine whether or not his or her current content "rules."

Content Rules is an educational and entertaining "must-read" for any marketing manager or CEO who recognizes the importance of developing an effective online presence but is not certain how to proceed. It also serves as a comprehensive checklist for those who are online but are not certain they are covering all the requisite bases.

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