Intended brand associations: Do they really drive consumer response?

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Brand managers exhibit considerable effort to define intended brand associations to anchor in consumers' minds. They follow a credo deeply rooted in branding literature: intended brand associations drive consumer response and brand equity. This article investigates the benefits of a strong overlap of actual consumer brand associations and management-intended brand associations (brand association match). The article presents results from two large-scale studies (3353 and 1201 respondents) involving one consumer goods and one service brand with multiple operationalizations of consumer response (attitudinal and behavioral). The results show that consumers with high brand association match show more positive brand response. However, after accounting for the valence of associations match does not add explanatory power. This outcome challenges a key foundation of brand management. The discussion identifies reasons why match may not be necessary to achieve response and provides arguments why the results do not imply free play for brand managers.

1. Introduction

What consumers know about a brand influences their response, that is, how they feel and act with respect to a brand (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Keller, 1993; Krishnan, 1996). Brand knowledge management is therefore a crucial strategic task for brand managers (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2004; Keller, 2003). Towards that end, many organizations define intended associations, for instance, attributes, user imageries or benefits, and build programs to make consumers aware and fond of these elements (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; Malaer, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, & Hoyer, 2011). Take the example of BMW. The desired brand image consists of three core elements (dynamic, challenging, and cultivated) with three attributes that describe each element's meaning respectively (Esch, 2010, p. 98). Now imagine two potential BMW buyers, Alex and Bill. When thinking of BMW, both elicit six associations. In the case of Alex, five are part of the BMW-intended set, whereas only two of Bill's associations belong to this set. Does this matter?

Managerial and scientific branding literature argues that brand association match, the overlap of *actual* with *intended* brand associations, leads to positive consumer response (cf. Aaker, 2005; Kapferer, 2004; Kotler, 2003). This article examines this deeply rooted assumption by adding to the limited extant research on brand match (Malaer et al., 2011) in two essential ways. First, it compares consumers' free brand associations (Keller, 1993) with management-intended brand associations. Such an approach allows respondents to freely express themselves without forcing them to think in predefined dimensions. Second, it follows Krishnan's (1996) advice to conduct intra-brand studies focusing on multiple consumers of specific brands and the variation of equity among them. This study thereby avoids factors that might contaminate the study of brand association match across multiple brands like desired positioning (broad versus focused), history, or (the quality of) specific marketing activities.[2]

To enhance generalizability, this article reports results from two large-scale intra-brand studies focusing on (a) a consumer goods brand (sample: 3353) and (b) a service brand (sample: 1201), using multiple operationalizations of response (attitudinal and behavioral). The large sample size per brand provides for a robust analysis of the match-response link through a sufficiently large number of respondents with varying degrees of match.

Results show that consumers with higher match exhibit more positive brand response. However, the number and valence of brand associations fully capture the effect of brand association match. Various tests show the robustness of this finding. The article discusses a number of reasons why match may not be necessary to achieve response, but also provides arguments why defining intended brand associations may not be a waste of time.

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[2] The intention is not to compare the effectiveness of brand positioning approaches; for example, many versus few or abstract versus concrete associations.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Brand associations and brand response

Keller's (1993) framework of customer-based brand equity provides a useful theoretical foundation for studying the link between brand associations and response. Keller (1993) conceptualizes brand knowledge as associations in consumers' minds that vary by favorability (positive evaluation), strength (closeness to the brand node), and uniqueness (exclusive to one brand in the product category). Equity is high when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory (Kamakura & Russell, 1991). Along the hierarchy of effects, these associations lead to an evaluative or behavioral response, for example, commitment, trust, purchase intention, or recommendation (e.g., Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2000; Lane, 2000). Many studies examine aspects of the association–response link and confirm that knowledge about a brand affects, for example, choice or willingness-to-pay (e.g., Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995).

One key aspect of brand associations impacting brand response is the *number* of brand associations resulting from brand experiences consumers had over time (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). The more familiar a consumer is with a brand the more likely she exhibits response to the marketing of the brand. Several studies empirically confirm the impact of the number of brand associations on consumer response (e.g., Bennett, Haertel, & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Krishnan, 1996). Another brand knowledge facet influencing consumer brand response is *valence* which captures the relative presence of positive versus negative associations (Krishnan, 1996). Positive associations are a strategic asset (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988) and source of sustainable comparative advantage (Barich & Kotler, 1991), leading to more positive brand response (e.g., Krishnan, 1996; Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006). Also the *uniqueness* of brand associations may drive brand response. Even though a brand may benefit from some shared associations that identify the brand as a member of a category, unique brand associations should differentiate the brand from other category members (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). Krishnan (1996) investigates this link and finds evidence for the relevance of the uniqueness of brand associations.

In summary, extant research focuses on explaining differences *between* brands and largely agrees that more, positive, and unique associations differentiate strong from weak brands.

2.2. The link between brand association match and brand response

Most popular marketing and branding scholars agree that brand managers need to (a) specify a set of associations to link with the brand, and (b) to align activities for consumers to learn these associations. Brand association match is therefore a cornerstone of effective brand building (cf. Aaker, 2005; Kapferer, 2004; Kotler, 2003). For example, consultancy McKinsey emphasizes the importance of delivering on *brand triggers*, key aspects of the brand promise (Court, Mitten, Narasimhan, & Berry, 2001). Kotler (2003) describes effective branding as "…*associating* (the brand's name) with a desirable benefit…" which "…works best when the target market believes that the company is best at delivering the benefit" (p. 420). Hence, the challenge for a brand manager does consist not only in choosing (a set of) desirable benefits for the target market, but also in making sure that the target market is aware of them. Aaker (2012, p. 48) proposes defining "must haves", that is, "desirable benefits or associations that a meaningful segment will insist on having", while Keller (2003, p. 15) argues for "…the association of the brand in customers' minds with a specific product class or customer need … to *firmly establish* the brand meaning in the minds of customers (i.e., by *strategically linking* a host of tangible and intangible brand associations)". Also,

organizational brand management processes of (a) positioning (i.e., defining intended associations); (b) fostering (i.e., establishing associations); and (c) monitoring (i.e., controlling the effectiveness of activities) highlight the importance of brand association match. The implicit assumption underlying branding theory and practice is that match leads to beneficial outcomes for the brand in terms of attitudes, intentions or behavior.

Whether consumers with different levels of match indeed respond differently to brands has received scant empirical attention. Malaer et al. (2011) relate the fit between intended and realized brand personality to loyalty and brand share. The authors find a positive relationship between these constructs and conclude that organizations should make sure that the intended brand personality matches consumers' perceptions. The present study takes an intra-, not an inter-brand perspective, as suggested by Krishnan (1996). Instead of comparing multiple brands (Malaer et al., 2011), which is subject to confounding factors (e.g., the brand's desired positioning or the brand's history), this study compares consumers of a specific brand to understand whether different levels of association match lead to different levels of response.

A number of consumer theories provide reasons why brand association match might further brand equity. For example, the disconfirmation paradigm asserts that satisfaction is a function of the match between expectations and actual experience (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Experiences in line with expectations cause confirmation; experiences not up to expectations result in disconfirmation. Transferring this paradigm to the area of branding and conceptualizing brands as promises (Aaker, 2005; Keller, 2003) allows speculation that a kept promise (an experience in line with a consumer's expectation) results in more satisfaction than a broken promise. Consumers whose brand association match is high should experience more kept promises than those whose perceptions differ (assuming that management is successful in creating touchpoints in line with intended brand associations). Dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) also illustrates a likely impact of association match on brand response. Dissonance results from conflicting cognitions and leads to uncomfortable tension. To avoid dissonance, consumers accommodate (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) or ignore conflicting information (Dearborn & Simon, 1958) and show selective attention (Dearborn & Simon, 1958). Such filtering of information may lead to even stronger assimilation for high and even more mismatch for low match consumer groups (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). In summary, for a given brand, consumers with higher degrees of brand association match should respond more positively to that brand.

3. Empirical design

Relating brand association match to brand response calls for a research approach that differs from existing inter-brand association-response studies. These studies select a set of brands and then relate the average association structure of consumers to the performance of these brands. The unit of interest in this study, however, is not the brand, but the individual consumer. The study focuses on the impact of variation in brand association match between consumers of one brand on their individual brand response.

3.1. Sampling considerations

The empirical part of this paper explores the link between brand association match and established measures of brand response. In order to enhance generalizability of results this study examines this relationship for two brands operating in distinct industries (consumer goods and services). Sampling of brands and informants poses certain requirements. First, the brands under investigation should be successful and not target niche markets. For brands failing in the marketplace, desired brand associations may either not appeal to a large part of the market, or the company has failed in transmitting them successfully.

While success is one of the most contested constructs in organizational research (Ambler & Kokkinaki, 1997; Katz & Kahn, 1966), the two brands studied are among the most prominent in their respective industries, have been on the market for more than a decade, and their sales growth has been above industry average over the past ten years (more details on each brand in the results section). Second, the informants need to be typical for the market. One may reason that Apple evangelists (Schau & Muniz, 2006) or enthusiastic Hummer owners (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010) will have brand associations that are more in line with the intended brand associations of the respective management than adversaries of either brand. The consumer sample therefore consists of (potential) users of the brand.

3.2. Brand association retrieval

The determination of brand association match depends on assumptions regarding brand knowledge representation. This article assumes that consumers linguistically rationalize brand-related stimuli and store brand knowledge in associative networks (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Keller, 1993). Respondents' brand associations were collected applying the Unique Corporate Association Valence approach (Spears et al., 2006). When exposed to a brand name respondents are instructed to note down words or short phrases that come to their minds. After submitting answers, elicited associations are displayed again and respondents rate each on a five point scale from very positive to very negative. By applying free association tasks this study avoids the disregard of actual consumer-specific associations, a limitation of forced response when using aided memory measures (Spears et al., 2006).

3.3. Operationalization of brand association match and brand response

One of the authors developed a codebook for each study based on associations from a randomly drawn sub-sample of 150 respondents respectively. Based on this initial version, two trained coders independently coded all associations and refined the codebook when necessary. Inter-coder agreement was above 90% for both studies; disagreements were solved and codebook refinements agreed with one of the authors of this paper.

To assess brand association match each association was evaluated with regard to its fit with management intentions. Based on a careful examination of the company's brand handbooks each code was assigned to one of two groups; "matching" the desired brand associations, or "not matching" the desired brand associations (more details on the degree of brand association match in the results section). This allocation was discussed and refined during in-depth interviews with the respective brand management team. Brand association match for each respondent was operationalized as the ratio between (a) the number of matching brand associations and (b) the total number of associations elicited (both ranging from 0 to 8), resulting in match ranging from 0% to 100%. Additionally, the study includes the two association facets driving response in extant research—number of associations elicited by a respondent (ranging from 1 to 8); and association valence, operationalized as the average of the ratings given by the respondent to each of his elicited associations (Spears et al., 2006), ranging from 1 "very negative" to 5 "very positive".

The studies operationalize response by means of attitudinal as well as behavioral measures. The focal mindset metrics rely on two out of the three main stages of the hierarchy of effects only. The first stage, awareness, is a precondition to elicit brand associations; thus the focus is on the second and third stage, affect and conation (Srinivasan, Vanhuele, & Pauwels, 2010). For details on specific measures see the empirical findings section.

3.4. Testing for boundary conditions

The expected positive relationship between match and response may hold under certain conditions only and depend on other association facets. This study therefore explores non-linearity or thresholds in the match–response relationship. One could argue, for example, that positive response requires a minimum level of match. A low degree of match might suffice to establish necessary rapport with the brand or other brand users and reduce perceived risk (Howard & Sheth, 1969); but match beyond that level is irrelevant. Another argument to explore could be that brand association match only relates to response for high levels of match since brand enthusiasts strive to reduce any potential source of cognitive dissonance in their beliefs about the brand (Cohen & Houston, 1972). The empirical study also includes controls for number and valence of brand associations. On the one hand, extant research shows that these two association facets impact brand response; on the other hand, they may interact with brand association match in fostering response. For example, match may be less relevant for a consumer who associates the brand with a large number of very favorable associations than one with a small number of less favorable associations.

4. Empirical findings

4.1. Study 1: a consumer goods brand

4.1.1. Sample

The focus in study 1 is on an internationally operating consumer goods brand which uses the corporate brand as the umbrella brand for its complete product range. Data were collected via an online survey in seven European countries. The samples (n = 500 in each country) were comparable since they were drawn to be representative of the brand's target buyers (in terms of region, age, education, and gender). Respondents were invited via online research panels of one of the largest market research agencies in the world. Recent academic work used comparable datasets from the same research agency, indicating that online panels are becoming more common in large-scale consumer research (cf. Steenkamp, De Jong, & Baumgartner, 2010; Steenkamp, van Heerde, & Geyskens, 2010). To qualify for participation, respondents had to be aware of the focal brand to participate (brand awareness levels by country ranged from 50% to 90%). Females account for some two thirds of respondents, which mirrors their role in shopping for this brand (the brand's product focus is on fashion, home decor, and jewelry). The survey was administered in the respective respondents' native language. The questionnaire (developed in English) was translated into each local language using the back-translation method. Respondents' associations were translated into English before coding. Again, a subset of answers was back-translated to ensure translation quality.

The company employs the same marketing approach (standardized advertising, price positioning, selective distribution with a mix of own and partner stores, harmonized new product introductions) in all seven markets and faces a comparable competitive setting (similar market shares for the focal brand and largely the same competitors). The study includes testing for response style effects between countries (Baumgartner & Steenkamp, 2001; De Jong, Steenkamp, Fox, & Baumgartner, 2008) for the scale-based response measures. Since no substantial differences in response styles (and no differences in the number of associations elicited) existed, the study pools respondents across countries. After removing cases with missing values, the sample size is 3353 respondents.

4.1.2. Measures

The free association task resulted in an average (standard deviation) of 2.6 (1.7) associations elicited. Their average valence was 4.1 (.9) and the average level of match 43% (38%). This finding implies that on average each respondent mentioned 1.1 matching and 1.5

non-matching associations. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed that the largest absolute correlation between the predictors is below 0.2. Hence, multicollinearity is no major concern. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the free association task.

To cover the range of likely response on various points along the perception-preference-choice models (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; McGuire, 1972), we adopted established items to capture brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), desirability (Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995), and recommendation (Mittal & Frennea, 2010). The response format for these items was a five-point Likert scale. Given the high inter-item correlations (all .7 and above), items were aggregated to a single brand strength index (Cronbach alpha = 0.89). Average brand strength was 2.99 (standard deviation of .99) on a five-point scale (5 corresponding to high brand strength).

4.1.3. Results

Table 2 shows how the three association facets relate with brand response. For each model, all independent variables entered the linear regression simultaneously. Model 1 includes all three facets (number, valence, and match). These variables explain 37% of the variation in brand strength. Both the number of associations elicited and the valence of these associations positively impact brand strength, but there is no relationship between association match and response. When testing for the effect of brand association match alone (Model 2), a positive relationship is present, but with negligible explanatory power. In fact, when removing brand association match from the full model, the explanatory power of number and valence alone (Model 3) does not differ from the explanatory power the full model provides. An unreported analysis estimated these relationships for three sub-samples; frequent, infrequent and non-buyers. One might argue that these groups have adopted (non-)matching associations for different reasons (e.g., direct product experience versus word-of-mouth or advertising) and that purchasing the brand moderates the impact of brand association match on strength. However, the relationship between all association facets and strength remains unchanged.

4.2. Study 2: a service brand

4.2.1. Sample

Study 2 investigates an Austrian hotel brand with a single location. A random sample of all Austrian and German hotel guests who stayed at the hotel during two years before the survey was invited by email to participate in an online survey. These two nationalities make up

Table 1
Descriptive results: brand association task.

	Study 1 (n = 3353)	Study 2 (n = 1201)
Average number of associations elicited	2.6	3.8
% of respondents eliciting		
1 association	35%	8.8%
2 associations	20.3%	8.5%
3 associations	19.0%	15.8%
4 associations	12.9%	13.9%
5 or more associations	12.8%	53%
Average valence of all associations elicited	4.1	4.5
% of respondents with valence of		
3 or less	20.5%	6.4%
3.01–4	35.2%	11.9%
4.01–4.5	7.8%	12.5%
4.51–5	36.7%	69.2%
Average match	42%	30%
% of respondents with match of		
0	31.1%	31.3%
33% or less	19.8%	25.0%
33%–66%	23.1%	21.4%
66% or more	26.0%	12.3%

Table 2
The impact of brand association facets on brand strength; study 1.

Dependent variable: brand strength index (desirability, trust, recommendation)				
	Independent variable	Beta coefficient	Sign. at $\alpha = 0.05$	Adjusted R^2
(1) Full model	Constant	0.32	Yes	31%
	Familiarity	0.09	Yes	
	Valence	0.59	Yes	
	Match	- 0.08	no	
(2) Match only model	Constant	2.92	Yes	0.1%
	Match	0.10	Yes	
(3) All but match model	Constant	0.30	Yes	30.9%
	Familiarity	0.10	Yes	
	Valence	0.59	Yes	

over 90% of the hotel's customer base. The questionnaire was administered in German, the native language of all respondents. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to a random selection of 4500 hotel guests that had stayed at the hotel at least once during the previous 24 months. The response rate was 27% resulting in a sample of 1201 respondents. Non-respondents did not differ from respondents in terms of gender, age, recency of their stay, and origin.

4.2.2. Measures

The mean (standard deviation) for the number of associations elicited was 3.94 (1.35), their average valence 4.55 (.8) and the average level of match 32% (29%). Respondents in this study elicited one association more than in study 1, which may be due to relying on actual users only, more positive emotions (valence of 4.55 compared to 4.02), and a more intense experience a hotel stay provides (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). The largest absolute correlation between the predictors is 0.31, so multicollinearity is no concern. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the free association task. Two indicators helped capture brand response. (1) A Likert-scale-based brand strength composite of items capturing trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), recommendation (Mittal & Frennea, 2010) and overall quality (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000) which was aggregated because all inter-item correlations exceeded .73. (2) To add to these rating-based evaluations, a conjoint task provided part-worth utilities for the focal brand. The task contained three attributes, brand (with three levels: focal brand, key competitor, and a no-name provider), price and a location variable. Sample size for the conjoint task is 1095 because the conjoint answers of 106 respondents did not have sufficient internal consistency. Scale-based answers from this group did not differ from the rest of the sample. The average scale-based brand strength is 4.58 (out of 5) with a standard deviation of .68 and the average part-worth is .80 (standard deviation of .57), compared to − .12 (.61) for the key competitor and − .34 (.52) for the no-name brand.

4.2.3. Results

Table 3 shows that, in line with study 1, the relationship between brand association match and brand strength is positive and explains a somewhat higher, although still small portion of the variation in brand strength (5.5% for the scale-based measure of brand strength, 1.3% of the variation in part-worths). Again, the explanatory power of three brand association facets is substantially higher: 31.8% for the rating-based measure and 11.9% for the part-worth measure. Finally, when excluding association match from the analysis the R2 level in comparison to the full model hardly drops, again pointing to little added explanatory power of brand association match. Brand association match, nonetheless, has a statistically significant impact on brand strength in the full model. In unreported analyses, we obtained similar substantive results when working with three sub-samples; one-time, two-time and more frequent visitors.

Table 3
The impact of brand association facets on brand strength; study 2.

	Independent variable	Beta coefficient	Sign. at $\alpha = 0.05$	Adjusted R^2
Dependent variable: brand strength index (trust, recommendation, overall quality)				
(1) Full model	Constant	−0.39	Yes	11.9%
	Familiarity	0.05	Yes	
	Valence	0.23	Yes	
	Match	0.04	No	
(2) Match only model	Constant	0.78	Yes	1.3%
	Match	0.24	Yes	
(3) All but match model	Constant	−0.40	Yes	11.9%
	Familiarity	0.05	Yes	
	Valence	0.23	Yes	
Dependent variable: part-worth utilities from conjoint task				
(1) Full model	Constant	2.40	Yes	31.8%
	Familiarity	0.06	Yes	
	Valence	0.42	Yes	
	Match	0.20	Yes	
(2) Match only model	Constant	4.45	Yes	5.5%
	Match	0.54	Yes	
(3) All but match model	Constant	2.36	Yes	31.2%
	Familiarity	0.06	Yes	
	Valence	0.44	Yes	

4.3. Robustness check

Before discarding the importance of match the study examined two boundary conditions.

(a) Are matching associations more likely to be favorable and therefore an indirect driver of positive brand response? (b) Do extreme levels of match (0% or 100%) lead to substantially different response patterns the linear regression model does not pick up?

Table 4 shows that matching associations on average are more favorable than non-matching associations (average favorability scores of 4.38 versus 3.9 in study 1 and 4.88 versus 4.43 in study 2). Matching associations may be more favorable because (a) organizations choose "per se" attractive attributes for their desired brand associations and/or (b) organizations successfully charge certain brand attributes in a favorable way via branding activities (e.g., the favorability of the attribute "crocodile" likely differs between Lacoste loyalists and non-buyers).

To investigate this issue further, the study compares the number and favorability of matching and non-matching associations between respondents who show a relatively positive versus a relatively negative brand response (median-split procedure). The findings show that these groups hardly differ with respect to the number of matching versus non-matching associations they elicit. In both studies, the group exhibiting high brand response elicits more associations, but the

percentage of matching associations is similar to the low brand response group. However, the favorability pattern highlights a noteworthy difference. Matching associations on average receive a higher favorability score than the non-matching ones, but the difference is much larger among the low brand response group. People fond of the brand rate both matching and non-matching associations as favorable (difference of .24 in study 1 and .2 in study 2). People not fond of the brand evaluate matching associations much more favorable than non-matching ones (difference of .64 in study 1 and .76 in study 2).

This pattern indicates that people with positive brand response attach positive emotions to all top-of-mind associations, whether management-intended or not. Brands might benefit from the fact that people less enthusiastic about the brand show higher favorability for intended associations. If these consumers had a consistently low favorability across all associations they might impact the brand discourse more negatively since all they associate with the brand is unfavorable. However, the fact that they rate management-intended associations more favorably could act as an "insurance policy" for the brand. These consumers may not be fond of the brand, but they link the brand to certain associations that they hold in high regard, providing room for consensus with consumers who respond positively to the brand.

Second, this study compares brand response of consumers with extreme match levels; splitting the samples into three groups: no match, perfect match, and some match. Table 5 shows sample sizes and average brand strength levels. In study 1, small differences between these groups' response levels arise, featuring an inverse U-curve between match and response. The two extreme match groups are slightly less responsive. In study 2, zero match results in substantially lower response than some match or 100% match. While these findings are difficult to explain, they provide only limited evidence that high match is relevant. In fact, only in the case of the hotel brand zero match seems to result in lower attitudinal and behavioral brand response. This group not only rates the brand less positively, but also visits the hotel less often.

5. Discussion and managerial implications

This article focuses on a specific facet of brand associations, brand association match (i.e., the degree of overlap between managerially intended and actual consumer brand associations) and its effect on brand response. Marketing research and brand management practice emphasize the importance of brand association match, but this paper's empirical results cast doubt on this claim. While high brand association match positively relates to brand response, the number and valence of brand associations fully capture the effect of association match. This study adds to existing research by linking

Table 4
The distribution of matching versus non-matching associations among high brand strength versus low brand strength segments.

	Type of association	Total sample	Low response group	High response group
Study 1				
Average number of associations	Matching	1.0	0.9	1.1
	Not matching	1.7	1.6	1.8
Average favorability of associations	Matching	4.4	4.0	4.8
	Not matching	3.9	3.4	4.6
Study 2				
Average number of associations	Matching	1.3	1.0	1.5
	Not matching	2.6	2.6	2.6
Average favorability of associations	Matching	4.9	4.8	4.9
	Not matching	4.4	4.1	4.7

Table 5
Brand response for different levels of match.

	Level of match			
	0% Match (1)	1–99% Match (2)	100% Match (3)	ANOVA
Study 1				
Proportion of sample (n = 3353)	31%	45%	24%	
95% C.I. mean brand strength	2.82–2.95[2,*]	3.05–3.15	2.92–3.06[2,*]	F = 13.4[**]
Study 2				
Proportion of sample (n = 1455)	37%	58%	5%	
95% C.I. mean brand strength	4.2–4.39[2,3,*]	4.68–4.75[1,*]	4.63–4.86[1,*]	F = 54.3[**]
95% C.I. mean part-worths	0.61–0.74[2,3,*]	0.84–0.92[1,*]	0.81–1.03[1,*]	F = 17.3[**]

* Groups with means that differ ($p < 0.05$).
** Sig < 0.01.

individual-level match to individual-level response instead of studying aggregate match–response relationships across multiple brands. Higher match for brand A than brand B can indicate better marketing leading to *stronger* consumer response; but does not inform about whether match per se is important.

Our findings are in line with the idea of brand-hijacking (Wipperfuerth, 2005)—which states that consumers may take over a brand and drive its evolution—and thus challenges the traditional view of management being in charge and having the ability of creating desired and stable brand knowledge among consumers (Da Silveira, Lages, & Simoes, 2013). For example, the reach and interactivity of social media may influence brand knowledge in many ways unforeseen by an organization. Consumers are likely to exhibit behaviors impacting brand knowledge irrespective of their attitude towards the brand (Luedicke et al., 2010). Apple fans and antagonists, for example, may simultaneously associate the brand with both matching and non-matching associations, like reduced design, Steve Jobs or insular technology. Whether they will attach a different favorability to these associations and their response is a result of the individual appeal of these associations. Brand managers are unlikely to greet this conclusion with enthusiasm, because it adds a lot of chance to their jobs.

A first possible implication for managers is that brand association match is not necessary to establish positive brand response. What matters is that consumers think favorably about the brand. People fond of the brand establish positive associations, irrespective of whether management intends these associations or not. They likely engage in selective perception and ignore or reinterpret information which does not confirm existing positive beliefs about the brand (Dearborn & Simon, 1958). The fact that non-matching associations also enjoy high valence is in line with the argument that brand familiarity, typically higher among high response segments, leads to more positive brand attribute evaluations (Barnard & Ehrenberg, 1990). A further argument for why people fond of the brand will rate matching and non-matching brand associations positively arises from Heider's (1958) balance theory, which allows arguing that the negative evaluation of any brand association may result in psychological imbalance.

Still, brand managers may strive to consciously send appealing signals. Our findings show that even among low-response segments matching associations tend to enjoy high valence. Two possible explanations come to mind. Either the organization is successful in charging intended associations positively or low response segments strive for brand knowledge consensus with relevant peers by attaching low favorability to non-intended associations only. Positive associations by low-response groups can be relevant since they could reduce their desire to engage in negative word-of-mouth. In a nutshell, one could say that striving for match reduces the chance of negative response, even if it does not drive positive response.

Also, brand association match may be important for other stakeholders besides customers (Ravi & Kotler, 2012). For example, high employee brand association match avoids confusion regarding the brand's intended meaning and gives direction to brand-related activities (e.g., R&D, advertising, internal communication). While the effect on customer brand response may be low, one can only hypothesize about the disarray of signals an organization might emit if employees lacked direction regarding desired brand associations.

In summary, the results provide important theoretical and practical insights. The study confirms extant research that enhancing the number of associations consumers have in mind and the favorability of these associations is worthwhile. Many and, more importantly, positive associations are key assets in driving response. However, the study also shows that the managerial intention behind these associations may be irrelevant. Brands may enjoy positive response even among consumers who do not link the brand with any management-intended associations.

An organization should therefore understand which aspects of the brand provide the greatest potential to generate positive valence. For example, one should carefully choose a testimonial that credibly represents the brand's positioning and enhances the favorability of certain brand associations. Assume that a car brand wants to position its newest model as "tough". To support this claim, brand management wants to use an animal, either a rat, clearly one of the most enduring species on earth, or a polar bear known to survive in rather harsh conditions as well. Both animals sure are credible, but the latter may more successfully enhance the favorability of the concept toughness in Western societies, where the polar bear ranks among the most loved animals (4th rank) compared to the rat ranked at position 211 (www.favoriteanimal.com; accessed on January 2, 2013).

6. Limitations and future research directions

The limitations of this study lead to some future research directions. A first limitation of this study concerns the retrieval of associations via top-of-mind elicitation. A considerable body of literature argues that consumers store brand associations in a format that only projective retrieval methods can access (e.g., Koll, von Wallpach, & Kreuzer, 2010; von Wallpach & Kreuzer, 2013; Woodside, 2006; Zaltman, 1996). Applying alternative brand knowledge retrieval methods may add to the richness of brand associations retrieved, whether they are management-intended (but difficult to retrieve with common paper & pencil methods) or not. For example, brand concept maps (Roedder John, Loken, Kim, & Monga, 2006) usually generate a larger, albeit largely predefined, association set per respondent which could serve to determine brand association match.

The findings of this study rely on large samples, but are limited to two brands. We encourage further confirmation through additional research investigating the intra-brand match-response link. In addition, both studies sample consumers from Europe only. One could argue that consumers in this region may have a higher tolerance for ambiguity and therefore accept potential cognitive dissonance resulting from gaps between their brand meaning and the stimuli management sends. However, the European markets this study includes score relatively high on uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001), implying that similar results might arise in other, more risk-taking, national cultures. In addition, individual traits like status-seeking or mavenism may drive the effect of brand association match on response; an area future research should investigate. Extending this study to other stakeholders, notably employees, and testing the impact of brand association match on their response level, could provide justification for management to define and aim to anchor intended brand associations in stakeholders' minds.

The findings also illustrate that extreme levels of match exhibit a different impact on brand response for the two brands in this study. The experiential hotel brand seems to suffer from zero match, whereas the less experiential brand enjoys the highest response for non-extreme match levels. Some boundary conditions of the match–response link to investigate are category (e.g., impulse, share-of-wallet, frequency of purchase), brand (e.g., marketing spend, online activity, value positioning), and consumer (e.g., involvement, length of brand relationship, variety-seeking) characteristics.

The focus of this study is on the match of actual brand associations with intended brand associations. One could argue that a different match matters, namely the match of one's own brand associations with the associations of others (cf. Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009). Along this reasoning, Ligas and Cotte (1999) claim that how the marketer constructs a brand and presents the brand to a specific segment will be less effective if multiple perspectives on the brand's meaning exist. They add that a brand that succeeds in establishing shared awareness of its meaning can reach a larger audience. This claim may be even more relevant in times of more frequent and wider-reaching interaction between consumers via social media. New technologies facilitate brand hijacking efforts (Wipperfuerth, 2005) and could potentially result in

low match, but high brand knowledge consensus of large customer segments. One can speculate that high match matters less if consensus with other brand-interested individuals is sufficiently high. In their research agenda on corporate identity, Dacin and Brown (2002) suggest to study the effect of consumers' construed associations (what consumers think others think about the brand) on brand response. Future research should engage in developing operationalizations of brand association consensus and in investigating brand association consensus' impact on brand response.

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