

BRAND ASSOCIATIONS IN THE MIND OF THE CONSUMER

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Abstract. *Branding is the science as well as the art of managing the associations of the consumer's mind with a brand and the public's memories of that brand. The brand is positioned at the intersection of the following key terms: differentiation, innovation, context, creativity, uniqueness and interest/attraction. We know that the success of the long-term relationship of the consumer with the brand is conditioned by the combination of brand associations in the mind of the consumer. We have approached the issue of identifying the specific brand associations to the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. This method of building brand conceptual maps is an important tool in brand management decisions. It provides the opportunity to know how information is stored in the mind of the consumer as well as the system of relationships within the consumer's mind. The main purpose of this paper was to construct two conceptual maps of associations for the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand for consumers and non-consumers of the brand by synthesizing the maps of individual associations made by each respondent as well as highlighting the main differences between the two conceptual associations maps made. The aim of the paper was to identify two sets of associations created by the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand in the minds of the consumers and non-consumers and to identify the intensity of the general feeling expressed towards the brand by the two categories.*

Keywords: *brand associations; brand conceptual map; brand equity; brand image; brand knowledge.*

Introduction

The issue of defining the concept of brand is becoming more and more current and increasingly studied (Datculescu, 2006, pp.58-76). Despite its importance (Myers, 2003), few methods of identifying and compiling brand maps have been developed so far (Punj & Moon, 2002), research methods developed focusing only on identifying brand associations in the mind of the consumer but not aggregating them into a network (Henderson, Iacobucci & Calder, 2002). It would be useful to remember here two methods of interest in developing brand maps such as ZMET (Zaltman's Metaphor Elicitation Technique), a method that uses qualitative techniques to identify the main

brand associations in the mind of the consumer, then through in-depth interviews discoveries of the links between these associations (Christensen & Olson, 2002). The second method - the construction of analytical maps, implies first to discover the brand associations in the mind of the consumers, and secondly, analytical methods and algorithms reveal the links between these associations (Henderson, Iacobucci & Calder, 1998). In this context, the identification and determination of the network of associations that intervene in the mind of the consumer (Campbell, 2002, pp.208-218) as a result of the branding strategy is the main pillar in consolidating and crystallizing the image, as well as in creating a business identity like a business card (Keller, 1998, pp.56-59).

The identification and measurement of these associations is the main concern of brand managers (Cărămidă, 2009, pp.39-41). Existing methods are more accessible to sociology and psychology practitioners rather than to marketers, as these associations are conditioned by cognitive processes in the minds of consumers (Brandt & Pahud de Mortanges, 2011). One of these methods, which has been simplified to make it accessible to marketing specialists, is building brand conceptual maps using the set of brand associations in the mind of the consumer (Joiner, 1998, pp.311-317). These maps are the visual representation of the associated consumer words with the brand, but also the way they are interconnected (Roedder et al., 2006).

We have approached the issue of identifying the specific brand associations to the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. This method of building brand conceptual maps is an important tool in brand management decisions. It provides the opportunity to know how information is stored in the mind of the consumer as well as the system of relationships within the consumer's mind (Schnittka, Sattler & Zanker, 2012). The method of building brand conceptual maps incorporates two other methods, simplifying them so that they can be applied on larger samples and without the need for specialized training of interviewers. Being relatively new, this method is not yet widely used on the Romanian market, from where comes the challenge of its approach in this paper.

Literature Review

Nowadays, the brand becomes the most important component of the company's assets, as the top assets become intangible, namely the company name, the logos, the customer base or the patents. A survey conducted in 2000 shows that for the top twenty companies in the world, only 20% of their resources were tangible, the rest being intangible, including brands (Danciu, 2004, pp.17-19).

Creating a brand involves communicating a brand image in such a way that the target group of the brand will form a set of associations related to that brand. Thus, the brand equity concept has become an increasingly updated and important topic in marketing management. Despite the increased interest in this topic, little research has been carried out to investigate both the nature of brand associations and their effect on consumer behavior.

Among the few studies carried out, a large part of them deal with this subject from a theoretical perspective, without carrying out either quantitative or qualitative research (Keller, 1993, 1998). Keller (1993) presents a conceptual model of brand equity from the perspective of the individual consumer. As for brand associations, he synthesizes

more research results, including the psychological field, conceptualizing various dimensions of associations. Associations are presented as a component part of the brand image that along with awareness of brand existence will constitute the brand awareness degree. Keller also offers a broad classification of types of associations, deals with their dimensions, but also provides implications for their measurement.

Joiner (1998), applying methods used in psychology and education to determine the cognitive structure, but also on the basis of previous research in the field of mind functioning, proposed a conceptualization model of brand associations called the Concept Map. Within this method, associations are seen as nodes that are linked by paths or relationships. Respondents who participated in the research were asked to write the associations they have in mind on a sheet (related to a particular subject/brand) and to relate them to each other by means of lines that represent the relations between them.

Low and Lamb (2000) deal in a different way conceptualizing brand associations, referring to three dimensions: brand image, brand attitude, and perceived quality.

Another study, which this time only deals with the brand image, was developed by the Spanish authors Belen del Rio, Vazquez and Iglesias (2001). Their research explores brand associations based on the functions or benefits that consumers associate with the brand. In particular, these functions are measured by four dimensions: warranty, social identification, status and personal identification. The article also studies the influence of these four dimensions on the consumers' desire to pay a premium price, to recommend the brand or to buy other related products from the same brand.

As a follow-up to the model built by Joiner, the authors Roedder, Loken, Kyeongheui, and Monga present the model of building conceptual brand maps. According to them, the developed methodology is a way of identifying brand association networks. Unlike Joiner's method, this model involves selecting and building a conceptual brand map based on the associations made available, while also mentioning the intensity of links between associations.

Brand maps or graphic representations of associations are important from the perspective of understanding the links and relationships between brand associations. Brandt and Pahud de Mortanges (2011) use the same research methodology as the one presented above, but this time it's about a product, not a service like the original model. Brandt and Pahud de Mortanges which also target the model of building conceptual brand maps. The research once again validates the model, confirms improvements to the methodology, and extends the scope to city brands.

The main concern of brand managers is to understand and manage the set of associations generated by a particular brand. Thus, the authors Till, Baack and Waterman (2011) have attempted to develop a methodology for identifying these associations that is also accessible to brand managers in terms of ease of application. As a result of applying the proposed method, managers gain a clear and complex vision on the associations generated by the managed brand or the competitors' brand, being able to visualize them in a strategic brand association map.

Roedder, Loken, Kyeongheui and Monga (2006) introduced the model for building concept maps of brands, which is an important approach to measuring brand image from brand association perspective, also offering implications regarding the intensity and uniqueness of brand associations. This model does not offer, instead, techniques to measure the importance of brand associations. This was brought to the original model by authors Schnittka, Sattler and Zenker (2012). They are developing a new methodology called Brand Association Network Value (BANV), which quantifies the overall value of the association network.

Koll and von Wallpach (2013) present the results of two large-scale studies for a product, namely for a service that involves conceptualizing consumer responses. The findings show that a higher degree of association will generate more positive responses from consumers. It also identifies why overlapping associations are not a necessary condition for generating consumer responses. This finding is inconsistent with the managerial practices that attach great importance to the degree of overlapping of brand associations.

In conclusion, the analyzed literature offers a fairly broad spectrum of possibilities to approach brand associations. At the same time, the different dimensions explained do not provide a well-defined conceptual framework, leaving room for future research.

For the research which we will use onwards, we will use the model conceptualized by the authors Roedder, Loken, Kyeongheui and Monga (2006), namely the construction of Brand Concept Maps (BCM), as it provides a structured framework research, it exemplifies and specifies the tools and instructions to follow, and many of the subsequent research is based on this model.

Methodology

Research problem

This research seeks to identify brand associations specific to the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. Using the identified associations, a conceptual map of representative brand associations for Alexandru Ioan Cuza University will be built for both consumers and non-consumers starting from their individual brand association maps.

Purpose

Designing two conceptual maps of brand associations for consumer and non-brand consumers by synthesizing the maps of individual associations made by each respondent, as well as highlighting the main differences between the two conceptual maps of associations made.

Objectives

01. Identifying a set of associations created by the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand in the minds of the consumers (students of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University) and non-consumers (the students of the four other state universities in Iasi).

O2. Identifying the intensity of the general feeling expressed towards the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand, both by consumers and non-consumers.

The research was conducted in two stages:

I. Stage of deduction of associations (elicitation)

II. Stage identifying brand conceptual maps

Tools and methods of research

The first stage was designed to identify a set of major brand association for Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, and then to be used in the second stage of the research. The method used in this step is a qualitative one, having the interview guide as a tool. It was composed of a single open question, ("What associations do I remember when thinking about the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand?"), because through this open question the main consumers of the brand - the students, have the possibility to verbalize any associations come to their minds. This stage was intended to provide a wider range of associations, but not just those associations that appear first in the mind of the consumer (also called "top of mind").

The next set of associations of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand was identified at this stage:

Table 1. List of brand associations resulting from the first stage

No.	Associations	Frequency	Representative associations
1	Projects / presentations / teams / suit	24	Projects
2	Exams / grids / backlogs / grades	22	Exams
3	College / FEAA / Law / Geography	20	Colleges
4	Bachelor / Master / PhD	19	Levels of studies
5	Colleagues / friends	19	Colleagues
6	Professors	17	Professors
7	Seminars / courses	17	Courses
8	Students / Studentship	17	Students
9	Reputation / quality / reliability / responsibility / sobriety / popularity / performance	15	Reputation
10	AIESEC / LSE / Asdmark / ELSA / ATRAG / volunteering	14	Student organizations
11	Copou/Copou park	14	Copou
12	Partial / session / evaluation	13	Session
13	Scholarship / budget / fees	13	Scholarship
14	Erasmus / international cooperation / international	13	International
15	History / age / tradition	13	Tradition
16	Home / Emporium / "At the whale" / campus	13	Student campus
17	Library / books / course support	13	Library

No.	Associations	Frequency	Representative associations
18	University / top university / one of the best universities in Romania / the first university in Romania	13	The first university in Romania

As we recorded a wide variety of associations, and most importantly because of this, the occurrence of associations did not satisfy the criterion of 50% of appearances, we used the grouping of associations in lexical fields, as can be seen in the table above (table 1). From each field, we extracted only the most representative associations, as can be seen in the last column of the table.

This research aims to identify both positive and negative associations to make research more complex. The negative associations identified had frequent occurrences much lower than the 50% threshold, however, we have decided to introduce these associations as well. These were selected by the most frequently mentioned criteria (table 2).

Table 2. List of negative associations included in the research

No.	Negative Associations	Frequency
1	Stress	24
2	Sleepless nights	22
3	Boredom	20
4	Headaches	19
5	Anger	19

The second stage was also a qualitative research carried out through 100 personal interviews, using the interview guide as an instrument. At this stage, the respondents were asked to make a conceptual brand map for Alexandru Ioan Cuza University using the associations made available, which we selected in the first stage. To this end, we developed a plan that contains the associations identified in the first stage.

Respondents were asked to select a set of associations they considered as specific to Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. Having an example of a conceptual map of associations, respondents built their map of associations for Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. A mandatory condition in making these maps was to establish links between associations by drawing simple, double or triple lines between them (single lines - weak link, double lines - medium intensity link, triple lines - strong link).

Volume and structure of the population

The volume of the population for the first stage was made up by the students of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, especially from the final years or the master, as they are the main consumers of this brand and after 3 or 4 years of study they managed to form a rather clear attitude regarding this brand capable of generating competent and relevant associations. A number of 25 respondents were investigated, as this is considered the optimal and sufficient number for this stage according to the research model identified in the specialty literature.

For the second stage, the population is represented by the students in the Iasi university center, which are registered in the five state universities. The universities were contacted to get the total number of students from each one, as well as their number in terms of gender. These accessible data for 2014 were then processed using the quota sampling method, so we obtained the number of students depending on the gender to be interviewed:

- Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi: 30 women, 15 men;
- Gheorghe Asachi Technical University of Iasi: 8 women, 20 men;
- Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iasi: 10 women, 6 men;
- Ion Ionescu de la Brad University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine from Iasi: 4 women, 4 men;
- George Enescu University of Arts in Iasi: 2 women, 1 man.

It can be seen that the sample targeted 54 women and 46 men, which we chose depending on the university. Since the sample consisted of students, their age was between 18 and 27 years of age.

Students from private universities in Iasi are not part of the population of this research, as we can say that they benefit from other types of services, with specifications other than those specific to the public education system.

Research results

In order to achieve the objectives of this research, it is opportune to first and foremost show how we encoded the data obtained during the interview. From each individual association map we extracted the following information:

- The presence of the 23 brand associations.
- The type of lines (single, double, triple) linking to each other or to the brand.
- The level at which the associations were placed (Level 1 - Directly Linked to the Brand, Level 2 - Linked to Level 1 Associations and so on).
- The position of associations (overriding or subordinate).

Calculating the indicators

Using the encoded data, we performed several calculations that are needed in the process of building brand conceptual maps (Bruner & Hensel, 1996, pp.67-83). Thus, we have calculated the following indicators for both consumers and non-consumers:

- A. The frequency of mentioning brand associations represents wherever an association appears in the respondents' maps. For example, "Session" is the association most commonly mentioned by brand consumers. The relative frequency is the percentage value of the frequency of the brand association.
- B. The number of interconnections represents how many times an association is connected with other brand associations. In the specialty literature, interconnectivity is presented as an important element in assessing the degree of centrality of a component within the general association system. For example, the highest value of this indicator belongs to the "session" association. Frequently mentioned associations that have a high number of

interconnections are those that will be considered primarily when selecting base brand associations.

The next three indicators are needed to determine the level at which the associations will be placed within the conceptual maps, directly related to the brand or indirectly.

- C. The frequency of mentioning first-level associations represents how many times associations have been placed on individual maps that are directly related to the brand.
- D. The first-level association report is the percentage ratio between the frequency of the first-level associations and the frequency of the associations.
- E. The type of interconnection indicates how often associations are placed over (overdrive) or under (subordinate) other associations within individual maps. For example, brand consumers not only frequently referred to the association of "projects", but they also placed it most often over the other associations (in the case of 14 individual maps).

The brand conceptual mapping procedure

In designing conceptual brand maps for consumers and non-consumers of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University we followed a five-step process that respects the recommendations of the research model identified in the specialty literature. In table 3, we briefly outlined the main aspects of the two conceptual brand maps.

Table 3. Rules for compiling brand conceptual maps

Steps	Indicators	Rules
1. Selecting core brand associations	The frequency of mentioning associations	The inclusion of associations that have been referenced in at least 50% of the individual maps.
	The number of interconnections	The inclusion of associations that have been mentioned in at least 40% - 49% of the individual maps, if the maximum plus the minimum divided by two of the indicator minus the number of interconnections is equal to or higher than the one of the key associations previously selected.
2. Selection of first level associations	The frequency of mentioning first level associations	The ratio of the frequency of mentioning the associations of the first level to the frequency of mentioning associations - at least 50%.
	The ratio of the frequency of mentioning the associations of the first level to the frequency of mentioning the associations	
	The type of interconnections	The inclusion of multiple overdrive interconnections as opposed to subordinate ones.

Steps	Indicators	Rules
3. Selection of lines for basic associations	The frequency of links between associations	Identification of the inflection point represents the equality between the number of different bindings and the frequency of occurrence of the links. The inclusion of links between associations that match or are larger than the inflection point.
4. Selection of lines for secondary brand associations	The frequency of links between associations	The inclusion of associations that are related to the basic ones, respecting the condition of the inflection point mentioned in the previous step.
5. Selection of line types (single, double, triple)	The average number of lines per link	Determination of the average number of lines for each link used in the previous steps, which will be rounded to the nearest whole number.

Thus, following the guidelines in the table above, we will continue to present the conceptual brand maps obtained for both consumers and non-consumers. The first purpose of this research is to build up the maps below (figure 1 and figure 2)

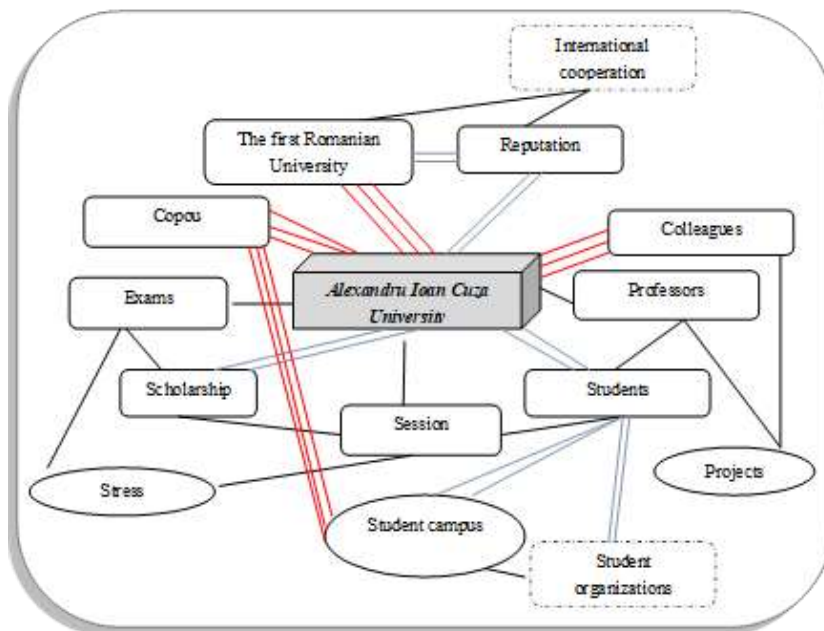


Figure 1. Conceptual brand map for brand consumers - students of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University

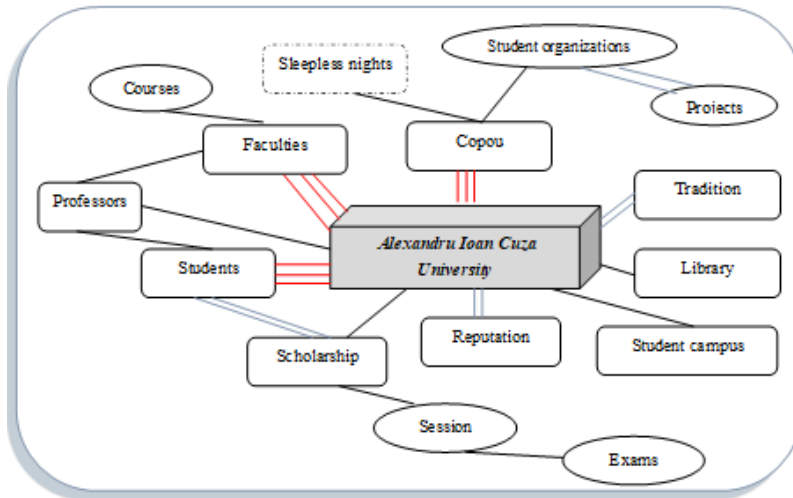


Figure 2. Brand conceptual map for non-brand consumers

Considering the second purpose of this research, we have verified the existence of significant differences between the intensity of the general feeling expressed by consumers and non-consumers towards the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand. To this end, we analyzed the answers provided by respondents to Section IV of the interview guide, namely the question: "Indicate on a scale from 1 - extremely negative to 10 - extremely positive what are your feelings about Alexandru Ioan University Cuza". The average consumer score was 7.78 ($M = 7.78$) and the non-consumer ratio was 7.44 ($M = 7.44$). It can be said that both the students of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University and the students from the other four state universities in Iasi have on average the same feelings for the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, the average of 7.78 and 7.44 respectively, denotes positive general feelings towards the brand.

Conclusions

Branding is the science as well as the art of managing consumer brand associations between a brand and public memories about that brand. It can be viewed from the perspective of two extremes, as a set of well-defined components that can be influenced to achieve a certain result, or as a set of confusing and elusive images of the consumer's mind.

The importance of brand associations in the mind of the consumer, therefore, appears to be the key determinant in the long-term relationship of the consumer with the brand. Moreover, the identification and measurement of these associations represent the main objective of the managers in defining the brand communication strategy and the main purpose of this work.

The results of this research have generated two conceptual maps for the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University brand, which were achieved following a five-stage algorithm. We have found that both consumers and non-consumers have in mind the following set of common associations: Copou, Reputation, Students, Professors, Scholarship, Student Organizations, Student Campus, Exams, Projects, Session. While those specific to consumers are: Colleagues, International Cooperation, First Romanian University,

Stress, and Non-Consumers: Library, Courses, Faculties, Tradition, Sleepless nights. One of the causes of the emergence of more common but specific associations could be the availability of these associations for both groups, as it can be seen that they are not related to the specific consumer experience and are rather general, possibly they could be applicable to other academic institutions.

Analyzing the number of links between associations and their type, we have seen relatively higher values for the consumer map than for non-consumers. Thus, although the associations are similar, the relationship between them and their intensity is no longer the same. This increases the intensity of links, due to the multiple experiences of consumers with the brand and the higher degree of familiarity.

During the interview, the respondents were also asked about the intensity of their general expressed sentiment towards Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, being asked to give a score on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 - extremely negative, 10 - extremely positive). The average consumer score was 7.78, and the average of the marks given by non-consumers was 7.44, as it can be seen, there were no significant differences between environments. Both environments suggest positive general feelings towards the brand, which should be appreciated by the management of the institution, but it was also intended to increase this degree in the future.

Finally, assessing the degree of familiarity and previous experience with the non-consumer brand, we noticed that only 11% of the respondents did not visit any of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University's headquarters and 13% did not know or did not meet students/professors / employees of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University.

Intentional or not, it is certain that Alexandru Ioan Cuza University has formed a brand image in the minds of students through a group of closely linked associations.

Useful future investigation directions to be mentioned here would be: simplifying the way data is collected from the interview to the application of an investigation, incorporating into the method the variables that could measure the nature of the links between the associations and could explain the reasons for linking the associations in a certain way, but also testing whether this research can be done through a survey based on an online questionnaire.

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