

A Visual Approach to the Assessment of Apparel Brand Personality and Its Relationship to Brand Equity

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We will develop a *visual lexicon* of brand personality that links apparel brands with the meanings a standardized set of images evoke. This methodology will allow us to generate a visual meaning map for each apparel brand we study. Much of the meaning of a fashion brand is conveyed visually – directly through the items of apparel (and accessories) themselves, and indirectly through the imagery the firm uses to support the brand via advertising, store design and so on. However, researchers typically measure brand meaning (or “brand personality”) using a verbal format. This methodology is ill-suited to truly understand fashion-related brands and the meaning these labels hold for different groups of consumers. Our objective is to systematically and empirically construct a *visual lexicon* of brand personality that can link the meanings evoked by a standardized set of images with apparel brands. The project will use apparel product categories characterized by their large market size (e.g., jeans), different usage situations (e.g., intimate apparel and casualwear), the presence of several prominent competing brands, and categories that appeal to male versus female consumer markets. The method we are developing will allow us to generate a visual meaning map for each apparel brand we study. We will analyze these meaning maps to gauge the consistency of meanings among consumers and relate them to financial and market measures of brand performance. Visual meaning maps can also inform brand managers how best to visually depict the intended meanings of their brands.

Our efforts to date include:

Meaning Visualization Pilot Study: We designed a pilot study to explore whether respondents could readily and consistently associate visual imagery with specific conveyed meanings and identify the meanings associated with those images. We focused upon the meanings they associated with three brands of jeans with distinct market positions (Diesel, Levis and Wrangler). As a point of comparison we also examined sets of non-textile brands with distinctive positions (Microsoft/Apple; Coke/Pepsi/ Jones Soda, BMW/Ford/Hummer; Nike/Reebok).

Although formalization of a coding scheme for linking a meaning “signature” with individual images is in progress, our preliminary analyses of the data reveal several interesting findings. First, as Figure 1 indicates it is indeed generally feasible to identify a set of visual images that respondents can readily and consistently

associate with different meaning dimensions. Particularly notable are the image associations for Diesel versus Wrangler jeans.

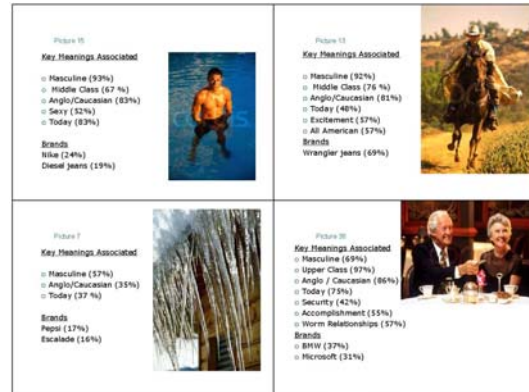


Figure 1. These four images illustrate different numbers of meanings conveyed by different images as well as differences in brand association.

As Figure 2 (below) illustrates it was also clear that our respondents associated different market positions with different visualizations and their associated meanings. The images associated with Diesel jeans simultaneously convey strong masculinity, femininity and sexiness. In contrast, all of the Wrangler imagery is heavily centered on masculinity, “all-American” and middle class. Levis elicits links to warm relationships, femininity and young adulthood. These samples from the pilot study illustrate similarities and differences in meaning profiles for different apparel brands.

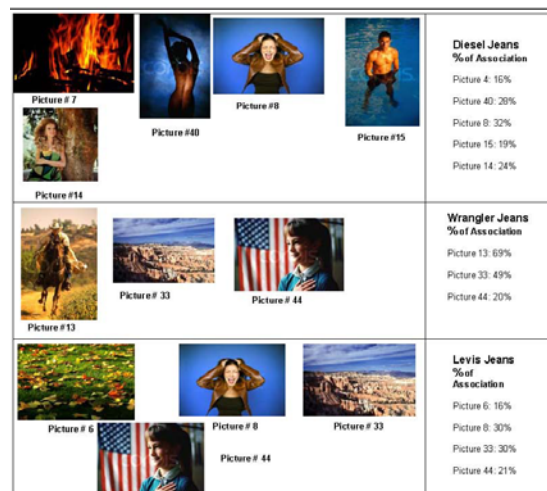


Figure 2. Differential associations among jeans brands and visual imagery.

Brand Logo Sorting Study: A related study is being launched using a national sample of male and female consumers. Two sets of gender-relevant apparel brands is being used and consumers are asked to sort these brands into consistent “meaning” groups. Respondents will then provide a narrative

description of the apparel brands. Results from this study will be used to select brands that have distinct, and different, cultural meanings for use in future studies. A link will be provided though our NTC project website that will allow visitors to see how data were collected in this study. (A more direct link to this application is provided at:

<http://www.brands.i-clickonline.net/index.php>

under project heading: "Brand Logo Sorting Study.")

Software Development: We have begun work on the software that will administer the online image manipulation task. The aim of this tool is to permit respondents to assemble a "collage" of images that convey a brand's meaning to them personally. An demonstration version of this collage tool is available on the NTC project website. (A more direct link is provided at: <http://www.brands.i-clickonline.net/index.php> under project heading: "Brand Meaning Demo.")

Work In Progress: We are in the process of identifying the set of apparel brands we will use to represent the following dimensions as independent variables:

Brand Selection Criteria

1. brand strength (financially weak versus strong)
2. market size
3. usage situation (e.g., intimate apparel versus casualwear)
4. appeal to male versus female consumers.

We have also begun to refine the verbal measures that will be used in two forthcoming studies. The following provides an outline of the next series of studies:

Study 1. We will employ a two-stage process where respondents are shown a brand name and are asked to indicate whether or not a meaning dimension (e.g., gender) is relevant to that brand. For each relevant meaning dimension, we then ask the respondent which characteristic within the meaning dimension (e.g., male versus female) is relevant to the brand.

Study 2. Referring again to the brands we included in

Study 1, we will create scales that incorporate the dimensions along with the relevant characteristics chosen from Study 1 (e.g., "To what degree is [Image X] relevant to the meaning of this brand?"). We will employ discriminant function analysis to determine which dimensions/characteristics best differentiate among the brand set within each of the cells used in the design (e.g., male versus female brands).

Study 3. In Study 3 we will move to the mapping of visual images onto the meaning dimensions/characteristics we identified in Study 2. We will select visual imagery that captures the universe of meaning respondents identified as relevant in Study 2 and empirically "map" these photos onto the meaning dimensions/characteristics from Study 2. As a result, each of the images chosen will be assigned a *meaning signature*, or set of scores for each meaning dimension/characteristic relevant to that image. In the aggregate, the set of images chosen will capture all of the meaning dimensions/characteristics from Study 2.

Study 4. In the last step we will use the visual materials we developed in Step 3 to replicate the discriminant analysis we conducted in Study 2. The basic question we will address here is whether or not a visual-only collage-creation approach to the assessment of brand meaning yields the same/similar meaning map that would be obtained using a traditional verbal approach. Direct comparison between Studies 2 and 4 will provide an empirical test of the relative strengths of these competing models.

This will complete the development of the core "visualization methodology." The final study in the project will use the visualization method to assess brand meaning for a set of brands selected according to the above Brand Selection Criteria and will relate these brand meanings to measures of brand performance (market size and financial performance metrics).

Project Information

Contributors

Graduate Students: Tracy Rickman (Auburn University), Ou Zhang (Auburn University), Daniel Ulrich (Berry College)

Undergraduate Students: Jenna Brown and Patricia Dillard (Berry College)

Industry Collaborators: Desgrippes Gobe Group (a brand design firm whose clients include Victoria's Secret, Travelocity, Coca-Cola).

Project Web Address:

<http://www.ntcresearch.org/projectapp/?project=S06-AC04>

Project Statistics

graduate students involved in the research: 3
undergraduate students involved in the research: 3
presentations: 2
contacts with industry: 20

For Further Information

Publications

Englis, Basil G., Michael R. Solomon, Wi-Suk Kwon and Susan Fournier (2007), "Assessing Brand Meaning Through Visualization," *New Frontiers in Branding: Attitudes, Attachments, and Relationships*, Joe Priester, Debbie MacInnis and C. W. Park (eds.), Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, in press.

Fournier, Susan, Michael R. Solomon and Basil G. Englis (2007), "How Meanings Matter: Resonance as a Mediator of the Meaning → Strength → Value Brand Equity Chain," in *Handbook of Brand and Experience Management*, Bernd H. Schmitt (ed.). Boston, MA: Elgar Publishing, in press.

Presentations

Englis, Basil G., Michael R. Solomon, Wi-Suk Kwon and Susan Fournier (2007), "Assessing Brand Meaning Through Visualization," paper presented at the 26th Annual Advertising and Consumer Psychology Preliminary Conference, Santa Monica, CA.

Englis, Basil G., Michael R. Solomon, Wi-Suk Kwon and Susan Fournier (2007), "Visualising Brand Meaning," paper presented at the Thought Leaders International Conference on Brand Management, sponsored by the Academy of Marketing, Birmingham, UK.