

# The effects of brand associations on consumer response

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**Keywords** *Brand image, Brand equity, Consumer attitudes*

**Abstract** *This paper studies the dimensions of brand image, focusing on the functions or value of the brand as perceived by consumers. In this way, four categories of functions are identified: guarantee, personal identification, social identification and status. By way of hypotheses, it has been proposed that these functions have a positive influence on the consumer's willingness to recommend the brand, pay a price premium for it and accept brand extensions. The hypotheses have been tested in the Spanish sports shoes market and were partially supported. The results obtained confirm the convenience of analyzing brand associations separately and enable the ascertaining of the brand associations that are the most relevant in order to attain certain consumer responses.*

## Introduction

Over the last decade, firms have markedly increased their investments in the creation and development of brands. In fact, in most economic sectors a gradual brand generalization can be observed, even in those markets that have traditionally been more reluctant to use them (as is the case of food and agriculture or high tech product markets).

The creation of a brand implies communicating a certain brand image in such a way that all the firm's target groups link such a brand (and thus the products sold using its name) with a set of associations. Brand equity research in marketing, as exemplified by Aaker's (1991, 1996) conceptualization and Keller's (1993, 1998) framework, is rooted in cognitive psychology and focuses on consumer cognitive processes. Thus, this view of brand equity proposes that:

- the brand creates value for both the consumer and the firm;
- the brand provides value to the firm by generating value for the consumers; and
- consumers' brand associations are a key element in brand equity formation and management.

The issue of brand equity has emerged as one of the most critical areas for marketing management. Despite strong interest in the subject, however, to date little research has been conducted in order to investigate which brand associations have the strongest effects on consumer behavior. Some of these works only adopt a theoretical perspective, without performing an empirical test (Keller, 1993, 1998; Teas and Grapentine, 1996). Moreover, several of the empirical studies made analyze the overall relation between brand image and consumer response, that is to say, without considering the different dimensions of brand associations (Kamakura and Russell, 1991; Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995; Yoo *et al.*, 2000).

The objectives of this paper are two-fold:

## A certain brand image

## How to measure brand image

- (1) To analyze the brand associations based on the functions or benefits that the consumer associates with the brand. In particular, we will propose measuring these functions of the brand in accordance with four dimensions: guarantee, social identification, status and personal identification.
- (2) To study the influence exerted by each of these four dimensions on the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, recommend it to others and buy brand extensions.

### Theoretical foundations

#### *Definition of brand associations*

Although there has not always been agreement on how to measure brand image (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990), one generally accepted view is that, consistent with an associative network memory model, brand image can be defined as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the cluster of associations that consumers connect to the brand name in memory. Thus, brand associations are the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers.

One way to distinguish between brand associations is by their level of abstraction, that is, by how much information is summarized or subsumed in the association. In line with this criterion, Keller (1993, 1998) classifies brand associations into three major categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a brand, such as what a consumer thinks the brand is or has and what is involved with its purchase or consumption. Benefits are the personal value consumers attach to the brand attributes, that is, what consumers think the brand can do for them. Brand attitudes are consumers' overall evaluations of a brand.

The associations related to the functions represent a greater degree of abstraction than those referring to the attributes, and so are more accessible and remain longer in the consumer's memory (Chattopadhyay and Alba, 1988). A further specific feature of the functions is that they have a positive nature, that is, the brand value is greater, the higher the level. For these reasons, and given the interest of working with a multidimensional measure of brand associations, we will examine the associations concerning the functions.

#### *Dimensions of brand functions*

When delimiting brand functions the greatest difficulty lies in the small number and the diverging nature of studies examining their dimensionality. Furthermore, most works do not make an explicit distinction between product functions and brand functions. Product functions are associations related to the physical or tangible attributes, and so are present in all products, even in those sold without a brand or with an unknown brand. Brand functions, on the other hand, are associations related to intangible attributes or images added to the product thanks to its brand name, that is, they represent benefits that can only be obtained from products with a brand.

We propose measuring brand functions through the dimensions of guarantee, personal identification, social identification and status.

The guarantee function, understood by this the promise or guarantee of quality, is based on the appraisal that the brand is reliable, efficiently carries out its performance qualities and meets the generated expectations (Ambler, 1997). Similarly, it is fitting to associate this function with the perception

## Small number of studies

### **Social identification function**

that the brand is linked to products with a suitable level of performance and is concerned about conveniently satisfying consumer needs, contributing variety and innovation (Sheth *et al.*, 1991; Dubois and Duquesne, 1995).

The personal identification function is related to the fact that consumers can identify themselves with some brands and develop feelings of affinity towards them. In the literature on brand influence, a basic theory refers to the congruence between the consumer's behavior, his self-image and the product image. This theory is based on the idea that individuals can enrich their self-image through the images of the brands they buy and use. In this way, the theory upholds that the greater the consistency between the brand image and the consumer's self-image, the better the consumer's evaluation of a brand and the greater his intention to buy it (Graeff, 1996; Hogg *et al.*, 2000).

The social identification function is based on the brand's ability to act as a communication instrument allowing the consumer manifesting the desire to be integrated or, on the contrary, to dissociate himself from the groups of individuals that make up his closest social environment (those people with whom he currently interacts or aspires to do so). Consumers interested in this function will positively value those brands that enjoy a good reputation among the groups with which they belong to or aspire to form part of (Long and Shiffman, 2000).

The status function expresses the feelings of admiration and prestige that the consumer may experience upon using the brand (Solomon, 1999). According to Vigneron and Johnson (1999), this function is based on five characteristics of the brand:

- (1) symbol of the individual's power and social status;
- (2) reflection of social approval;
- (3) exclusivity or limitation of the offer to a small number of people;
- (4) contribution of emotional experiences; and
- (5) technical superiority.

### **Status function**

In this way, the status function, just like the social identification function, is revealed thanks to the need of individuals to communicate certain impressions to people in their social environment. However, the difference between the two functions lies in the fact that the social identification function is related to the desire to be accepted by and feel members of certain groups. On the other hand, the status function corresponds to the individual's desire to achieve prestige and recognition from others, without this necessarily meaning that the brand is representative of their social group. Therefore, the status could even impede the individual's identification with certain social groups. That is in line with Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, the status and social identification functions are respectively related to the needs of ego and social.

#### *Effects of brand functions on the consumer response*

The above functions will generate value to the firm in the extent that they condition the consumer response to the marketing of the brand. Hence, Keller (1993, 1998) defines brand equity as the differential effect that brand knowledge (awareness and associations) has on consumer response to the marketing of the brand (in terms of consumer perceptions, preferences and behavior, e.g. brand choice, comprehension of copy points from an ad, reactions to a coupon promotion, or evaluations of a proposed brand

## Competitive advantages

extension). In this way, he understands that brand equity is positive (negative) if consumers react more (less) favorably to a product and the way it is marketed when the brand is identified, as compared to an unnamed or fictitiously named, and thus unknown, version of the product.

The effect of brand functions on consumer response constitutes a highly important subject when analyzing the value the brand has for the firm. The competitive advantages that result from a positive brand image can be categorized into three general components:

- (1) *advantages related to current performance and profitability* – the brand's ability to command higher margins and/or volume, more inelastic consumer response to price increases, increased marketing communication effectiveness and greater trade co-operation;
- (2) *advantages related to longevity of profits* – brand loyalty, less vulnerability to competitive marketing actions, less vulnerability to marketing crises; and
- (3) *advantages related to growth potential* – possible licensing opportunities, generation of positive word-of-mouth, brand's ability to introduce new products as brand extensions.

Researchers have found that brand associations have a positive influence on consumer choice, preferences and intention of purchase, their willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, accept brand extensions and recommend the brand to others (Park and Srinivasan, 1994; Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995; Agarwal and Rao, 1996; Hutton, 1997; Yoo *et al.*, 2000).

With the exception of the work of Hutton (1997), the study of brand image has focused on grouping all the associations into a single dimension. However, it is foreseeable that brands of equal value for the consumer, in overall terms but not dimension by dimension, are differentiated as to the level and type of consumer response. Therefore, it is also interesting to analyze the individual effects of each of the different dimensions. This will enable marketers to guide brand decisions more appropriately, identifying which associations have to be strengthened in order to achieve the desired consumer response.

## Influence on brand functions

For this, the present research attempts to examine the influence exerted by each of the dimensions of the brand functions on three variables that reflect the consumer's willingness to:

- (1) pay a price premium for the brand (competitive advantage related to current performance and profitability);
- (2) recommend it to others; and
- (3) accept brand extensions (competitive advantages related to growth potential).

Based on the idea that brand functions generate an added value for the consumer, we aim to test whether those variables depend positively on brand functions (see Figure 1).

### *Development and formulation of hypotheses*

In the brand extension literature, it has been widely tested that the perceived quality of the original brand positively conditions the success of extensions (Rangaswamy *et al.*, 1993; Bottomley and Doyle, 1996). In addition, another of the factors that appears to have a positive effect is the credibility deposited in the brand regarding its ability to offer products that meet market needs

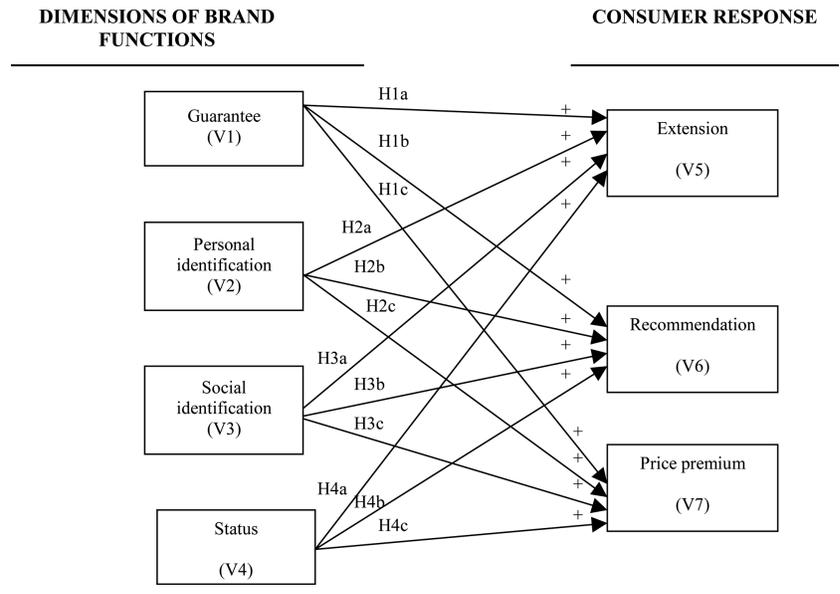


Figure 1. Original model with all hypothesized paths

(Keller and Aaker, 1992). In conclusion, this leads us to propose the following: the closer the association of the brand with the guarantee function, the greater the acceptance of the brand extension. On the other hand, according to Hutton (1997), the recommendation of the brand to others usually entails great uncertainty for the consumer, even greater than that when buying the brand for himself. Therefore, it is to be expected that the consumer tends to lower this uncertainty by recommending those brands for which he perceives a high guarantee. Similarly, it is foreseeable that the higher perceptions of the guarantee function entail a more favorable evaluation of the brand, which will make the consumers more willing to pay a higher premium price. Thus, as shown in Figure 1, we present the following hypothesis:

*H1a:* The association of the brand with the guarantee function positively affects the consumer's willingness to accept possible brand extensions to other product categories.

*H1b:* The association of the brand with the guarantee function positively affects the consumer's willingness to recommend the brand.

*H1c:* The association of the brand with the guarantee function positively affects the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand.

### Emotional experiences

With respect to the personal identification function, Westbrook (1987) suggests that consumers will be more inclined to recommend the brand when they associate this brand with highly relevant emotional experiences. For this, it can be assumed that the greater the consumer's affinity and personal identification towards the brand, the greater his motivation to recommend it. In the same way, it is fitting to expect that the personal identification function has a positive influence on the acceptance of the brand extensions and on the amount of the price premium. These outcomes are illustrated in Figure 1 and stated as the following hypothesis:

*H2a:* The association of the brand with the personal identification function positively affects the consumer's willingness to accept possible extensions of the brand to other product categories.

## Good reputation

*H2b*: The association of the brand with the personal identification function positively affects the consumer's willingness to recommend the brand.

*H2c*: The association of the brand with the personal identification function positively affects the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand.

Regarding the social identification function, Aaker (1991) indicates that the consumers will evaluate brand extensions more favorably in the case of leading brands that enjoy a good reputation and are purchased by many people. This observation has been corroborated by Hutton (1997), who also found a positive relation between brand reputation and the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium and accept brand extensions. On this basis, we expect that:

*H3a*: The association of the brand with the social identification function positively affects the consumer's willingness to accept possible extensions of the brand to other product categories.

*H3b*: The association of the brand with the social identification function positively affects the consumer's willingness to recommend the brand.

*H3c*: The association of the brand with the social identification function positively affects the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand.

## Image of prestige favors the extension of the brand

Finally, the results obtained by Park *et al.* (1991) suggest that the status function acts as a determinant of brand extension acceptance. They reach the conclusion that the image of prestige favors the extension of the brand to a wide number of product categories, even those that are functionally very different. On the other hand, the associations of prestige, luxury and status imply a social distinction of the brand, that generally affords the consumer positive emotional experiences. In this way, it is fitting to expect that the status function has a positive effect on the brand recommendation and premium price. On these grounds we suggest that:

*H4a*: The association of the brand with the status function affects the consumer's willingness to accept possible extensions of the brand to other product categories.

*H4b*: The association of the brand with the status function affects the consumer's willingness to recommend the brand.

*H4c*: The association of the brand with the status function affects the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand.

## Methodology

### *Selected product class and brands*

To test the hypotheses posed, non-specialized sports shoes (suitable for sport and casual wear) were taken as a reference. This market was chosen as it presents four characteristics that enable us to research brand functions without overcomplicating the data collection. First, some of the most relevant characteristics of sport shoes are experience-based – difficult to evaluate prior to purchase – such as, for example, foot protection, lesion prevention and performance improvement. In line with the signaling theory, in this type of product all else being equal, the guarantee function associated to the brand is particularly important. Second, brand associations can also play an important role due to the fact that sport shoes are products that are usually used in public (conspicuous or visible consumer products) and in

## Selection of brands

which fashion together with the technical aspects have considerable importance in the purchasing decision. Third, the consumer has, in general, sufficient knowledge of the main brands of sports shoes, since consumers have usually tried more than one brand and the high figures of advertising and sponsorship investment. Fourth, the concentration of almost half the sales of sports goods in only three brands (Adidas, Nike and Reebok).

Regarding the selection of the brands studied, we followed the recommendation of Leuthesser *et al.* (1995) of analyzing brands that are sufficiently well-known to the consumer. For this reason, as a preliminary step to the study, 400 individuals were personally interviewed, being requested to indicate on a list of 28 brands of sports shoes those they had used and of which they had sufficient knowledge of their different features. In line with the percentages attained for the different brands, we decided to focus our research on six brands:

- (1) Adidas (64 percent);
- (2) Fila (17 percent);
- (3) Kelme (27 percent);
- (4) J'hayber (16 percent);
- (5) Nike (57 percent); and
- (6) Reebok (65 percent).

In this way, the research was aimed at users of these brands that had bought sports shoes in the last two years.

## Face-to-face interviews

### *Data collection*

The information necessary to carry out the empirical study was collected in the Spanish market through face-to face interviews accompanied by survey questionnaire administration. The choice of the sample was made taking as a reference the data provided by Sport Panel (1997) for Spain concerning the characteristic profile of the purchasers of sports articles. In order to avoid differences with respect to the population we carried out a proportionate stratification in terms of age and gender[1]. A total of 1,054 personal interviews were conducted, which resulted in 1,000 valid surveys and 1,726 brand assessments (each individual was requested to evaluate two brands out of the six considered in the study).

### *Measures*

A pool of sample measures was generated based upon:

- definitions established in our research and the items used in the literature;
- two focus groups with sports shoes users;
- in-depth interviews with various distributors in the sector;
- consulting specialized journals and studies available on the market analyzed.

This list of items was submitted to the opinion of a group of experts in subjects related to the performance qualities of sports shoes and/or to the design of measurement scales studying the consumer. Similarly, a pre-test was carried out in order to detect any necessary changes in the wording of the items and the range to be used in order to evaluate these. As a result of this process, a total of 16 items were obtained and can be seen in the

#### Four aspects

Appendix. With the exception of the price premium, the variables considered were measured on an 11-point Likert scale (ranging from 0 to 10).

*Dimensions of brand functions.* To measure the guarantee function we have used four items developed from the scales of Martin and Brown (1990) and Lassar *et al.* (1995). In this way, the respondents were requested to evaluate four aspects of the brand:

- (1) the confidence it inspires;
- (2) the concern about consumer interests;
- (3) the superiority of its performance qualities; and
- (4) value-for-money.

The personal identification function has been measured through two items aiming to collect, respectively, the brand's ability to express the individual's self-concept and establish a strong emotional link. These items were adapted from the works of Mittal and Lee (1989) and Lassar *et al.* (1995). Similarly, in order to measure social identification we took as a reference the study by Martin and Brown (1990) and Lassar *et al.* (1995). Thus, we have stated four items that attempt to reflect brand reputation and its acceptance in the environment closest to the individual. With respect to the status function, we have summarized the measures proposed by Bhat and Reddy (1998) into two items that express the association of the brand with prestige and social distinction.

#### Willingness to pay a price premium

*Consumer response.* We focus on the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, recommend it to others and buy brand extensions. These are three aspects of the consumer response able to generate competitive advantages for the firm. As can be observed, we examined the behavioral intention rather than the actual behavior for three reasons. First, for the variables being studied, it was not feasible to control actual behavior in the research. Second, the behavioral intention reflects the autonomous inclination of a person to display a certain kind of behavior in the (near) future (Franzen, 1999). In this way, through the behavioral intention we aim to approximate the competitive potential that the brand entails for the firm. Third, actual behavior can be a response to motives other than brand strength (for example, a low price strategy).

The consumer's willingness to accept possible brand extensions has been obtained through a single item. Adapting the proposal of Hutton (1997), the respondents were requested to evaluate to what extent they would buy other products of the same brand other than those that had been commercialized to date.

The consumer's willingness to recommend the brand to others was measured based on the contributions of Selnes (1993), Andreassen (1994) and Hutton (1997). In line with these authors, the respondent was asked to what extent he would recommend the purchase of the brand.

The price premium that the consumer is willing to pay for the brand has been evaluated compared to an unknown brand of similar physical characteristics. According to Yoo *et al.* (2000), the same physical product without the brand name is the best referent object for measuring brand equity. A generic or store brand may not be a proper referent because it has its own brand equity resulting from store reputation and product utility.

For this, each respondent was asked two questions. First, he was asked for the maximum price he would pay for sports shoes of brand *m* (*Pofer*). Then,

after evaluating the brand characteristics, we attempted to put the respondent in the following situation: he is in a retail outlet and observes two brands of sports shoes, both similar at first sight, although one brand is known to him whereas the other is not. Thus, in this context, he was asked for the maximum price he would pay for a brand he had never heard of and whose sports shoes were apparently similar to those of brand *m* (*Ppdto*). In line with the arguments of Rangaswamy *et al.* (1993), it can be assumed that the consumer evaluates the brands that are unknown to him taking into consideration basically their observable physical attributes at the time of purchase. In this way, it is fitting to interpret that *Ppdto* is the price that the consumer assigns to the physical attributes of brand *m* without the guarantee of the brand or the symbolic aspects associated to it, and so the difference between *Pofer* and *Ppdto* corresponds to the price premium of this brand.

### **Analysis of results**

#### *Measurement analysis*

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the validity and reliability of the scale proposed to measure the brand functions (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The EQS program was employed. Thus, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed with the 12 items proposed to measure the different dimensions of the functions that the consumer perceives of the brand. This model provided dissatisfactory goodness of fit indices, since the GFI statistic is lower than 0.8 ( $S-B\chi^2(48) = 534.615$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; RMSEA = 0.094; NFI = 0.914; GFI = 0.685, CFI = 0.923). For this, and in the light of the standardized residuals matrix, we then eliminated the item relative to the brand's value-for-money. In this way, the model presented sufficiently acceptable fit indices ( $S-B\chi^2(38) = 384.980$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; RMSEA = 0.089; NFI = 0.932; GFI = 0.847, CFI = 0.941).

Following the procedure of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we then calculated the composite reliability coefficients for each of the four dimensions, their reliability being verified as all the coefficients are greater than the minimal level of 0.6 recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). Equally, the convergent validity was confirmed upon finding that the parameters that related the items with the predicted factor reached significant levels and standard values over 0.5 (Steenkamp and Trijp, 1991). Similarly, the discriminant validity could be corroborated as all the interconstruct correlations were significantly below 1.0.

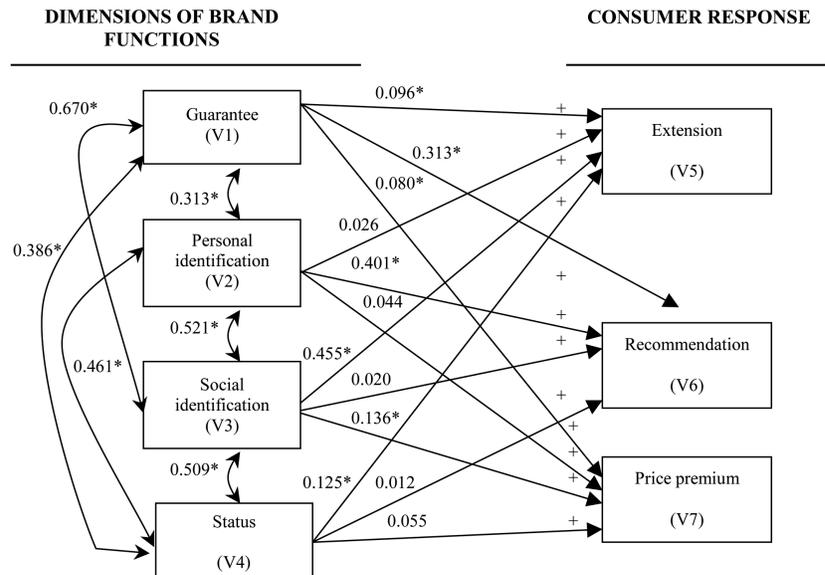
#### *Analysis procedures and findings: effects of the brand functions on the price premium, recommendation and extension*

To calculate the evaluation of each consumer regarding the four dimensions representative of the brand functions, the measurement variables associated with each dimension were averaged. In this way, based on the average values obtained, we performed a path analysis relating each of the dimensions with the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, recommend it to others and accept brand extensions.

The results obtained for this model showed an excellent fit ( $S-B\chi^2(9) = 0.577$   $p = 0.999$ ; RMSEA = 0.001; NFI = 1.000; GFI = 0.999; CFI = 1.000) and thus we went on to test the four hypotheses posed concerning the effects of the brand functions on the price premium, the recommendation and extension of the brand. In line with the value and the significance of the parameters (see Figure 2), the more positive the consumer's perception of the guarantee function exerted by the brand, the more willing he will be to pay a price premium for it, recommend it and accept brand extensions. In this way, *H1a*, *H1b* and *H1c* are corroborated.

**Composite reliability coefficients**

**Positive consumers' perception**



**Notes:** The standardized parameters are shown. (\*) Parameter significant at a confidence level of 95%. Although for purposes of clarity, we have not included in the graph the covariances between error terms corresponding to the variables of “recommendation” and “extension”, these are released in the model (and are all statistically significant).

Figure 2. Results of the causal model

**Willingness to recommend the brand**

With respect to the personal identification function it was found that this increases the consumer’s willingness to recommend the brand. However, this does not seem to affect either the price premium to be paid for the brand or the acceptance of the brand extension towards other product categories. Therefore, *H2b* is corroborated but *H2a* and *H2c* are rejected.

The social identification function showed a significant positive incidence on the variables of acceptance of brand extensions (*H3a*) and price premium (*H3c*) the postulated effect on brand recommendation being rejected (*H3b*). An explanation for the result could lie in the fact that the consumer experiences great uncertainty when recommending a brand (Hutton, 1997), and so would tend to base the recommendation on the associations he himself has of the brand (guarantee and personal identification), rather than on the associations other people have of his social environment.

Finally, in relation to the status function, it was observed that this only has a significant effect on the acceptance of brand extensions, which makes us reject *H4b* and *H4c*. In this way, and taking note of the value of the standardized parameters, it seems that status is the function with a generally lower incidence on the variables of results analyzed, which may be due to the fact that it refers to elements of the social environment less close to the individual. On the other hand, these results come to support the idea that the consumer recommends a brand in terms of his own perceptions and feelings in the face of the characteristics presented by it, without taking into account the social consideration and the links of the brand with certain aspirational groups. The fact that neither the status function nor the social identification function have an influence on the recommendation seems to indicate that the consumer considers it irrelevant to base his advice on aspects that are not derived from his personal interaction with the brand and that, on the other hand, may already be known to the person to whom the recommendation is going to be made.

## Brand image

### Summary and implications

The present study has analyzed the brand image based on the functions or benefits that the consumer associates with the brand. The basic objective was to study the influence of these functions on certain aspects of consumer response capable of generating competitive advantages for the firm. For this, we have formulated four hypotheses that relate each of the brand functions with the consumer's willingness to recommend the brand to others, pay a price premium for it and accept brand extensions.

In short, it has been found that it is interesting for firms to analyze the different dimensions that make up the brand image. Each of these can have a different incidence on the possible consumer responses that determine the advantages that the brand can provide the firm with. In particular, in the sports shoes market, it has been observed that the association of the brand with the guarantee function favors the recommendation of the brand, the obtaining of a price premium and brand extension to other product categories. In turn, the social identification function has a positive effect on price premium and the acceptance of brand extension. On the other hand, the personal identification and status functions influence recommendation and extension respectively.

## A set of implications

### *Managerial implications*

From these results we can draw, for the firms in the market studied, a set of implications for managing brand image. The firms interested in extending their brand to other product categories should pay special attention to the brand associations linked to the functions of guarantee, social identification and status. Regarding firms wishing to apply a price premium to their products, it would be essential for them to promote associations related to the functions of guarantee and social identification. Concerning the ways of stimulating the users of a brand to recommend it to others, it would be fitting to basically resort to the functions of guarantee and personal identification. The development of these functions therefore entails for the firm a means of generating positive communications towards the brand. Just as we argued above, the recommendation of the brand seems to be determined by the consumers' own perceptions of it, rather than by the image and social prestige of the brand.

The above implications should not be interpreted in the sense that the firms should promote certain functions and completely ignore others in keeping with the proposed objective. It must be taken into account that the causal relations that we have not been able to verify exert, however, an indirect influence through their relation with the other brand functions. Therefore, the firms should combine the different brand functions giving priority to some dimensions and simultaneously maintaining a suitable balance between all of them. In this respect, another contribution of the model tested has been to relate the brand functions with variables that reflect competitive advantages for the firm in terms of growth (acceptance of brand extensions and recommendation to others) and profitability (price premium). Thus, we obtain an estimation of the incidence of the brand functions in both the long and short run. Hence, in the market studied the data point to the fact that the guarantee and social identification functions offer firms the opportunity to obtain advantages of growth and profitability, whereas the functions of personal identification and status generate advantages of growth.

### Limitations and further research

Finally, it is fitting to indicate the limitations this research is subject to and which have to be taken into account when considering the conclusions reached. The limitations mainly have their origin in three aspects: the study

**Identifying relative importance of various brand functions may be beneficial**

field, the field work and the variables contemplated in the model. The choice of the sports shoes market as a study population requires us to be cautious when interpreting the brand functions related to the individual's social environment since at the present time all things related with sport constitute a far-reaching sociological phenomenon. Regarding the field work, the sample is made up of individuals who have purchased and used the brands analyzed. This has produced a greater reliability in the responses and homogeneity in the sample, but in this way the perceptions of potential clients of the brands have not been recorded. On the other hand, only three aspects of the consumer response have been analyzed. This means that the value of the brand for the firm has been partially measured as it would be fitting to add other variables, such as the intention to purchase or demonstrated brand loyalty.

These limitations open the way to developing future research aimed at analyzing the relations between the brand functions perceived by the consumer and other competitive advantages obtained by the firm. It would also be interesting to conduct a comprehensive multicategory analysis in order to identify the relative importance of various brand functions in different product categories. Managerially relevant empirical generalizations can be drawn from such studies with respect to the relative importance of the brand functions (e.g. search versus experience products).

**Note**

1. More specifically, the sample is made up by 41 percent females and 59 percent males. The sample distribution by age range is as follows: 18 to 30 years, 53 percent; 30 to 40 years, 22 percent; 40 to 50 years, 17 percent, and over 50 years, 8 percent.

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## **Appendix**

### *Measurement scale for the brand functions*

#### *V1: Guarantee*

- V1.1: Brand XX is concerned about continuously improving the performance qualities of the sports shoes.
- V1.2: Brand XX is very trustworthy.
- V1.3: Brand XX sports shoes are of excellent quality.
- V1.4: Brand XX gives the best value-for-money.

#### *V2: Personal identification*

- V2.1: You particularly like brand XX sports shoes.
- V2.2: XX is a brand totally in line with your lifestyle.

#### *V3: Social identification*

- V3.1: Brand XX sports shoes are in fashion.
- V3.2: Your friends have brand XX sports shoes.
- V3.3: Brand XX sports shoes have a good reputation.
- V3.4: XX is a brand leader.

#### *V4: Status*

- V4.1: Using a brand XX product is a social status symbol.
- V4.2: Brand XX sports shoes are recommended by famous people with whom you identify.

### *Measurement scale for consumer response*

#### *V5: Consumer willingness to accept possible brand extensions*

If Brand XX decided to sell products other than sports shoes, you would probably buy them.

#### *V6: Consumer willingness to recommend the brand*

You would advise other people to buy Brand XX sports shoes.

#### *V7: Price premium*

- V7.1: Think about Brand XX sports shoes and indicate the maximum price you would be willing to pay for them.
- V7.2: Imagine that in your next purchase you observe a brand that you have never heard of before, whose sports shoes are apparently similar to Brand XX sports shoes. What is the maximum price you would be willing to pay for these shoes?

*Note:* All items refer to the product category of sports shoes.



***This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present***

## **Executive summary and implications for managers and executives**

### ***The importance of brand associations***

*Much research has been carried out into the overall relationship between brand image and the response of customers. Brand image is the customer's perceptions about the brand, as reflected by the cluster of associations that he or she connects with the brand name in his or her memory. Belen del Rio et al. seek to analyse these brand associations, based on the functions or benefits that the consumer associates with the brand.*

*The authors measure these functions of the brand through:*

- *its promise or guarantee of quality, based on the appraisal that the brand is reliable, efficiently carries out its performance qualities and meets the generated expectations;*
- *the fact that consumers can identify themselves with some brands and develop feelings of affinity towards them;*
- *the brand's ability to help the consumer to communicate being a part of (or distant from) a certain group of people; and*
- *the feelings of admiration and prestige that the consumer may experience upon using the brand.*

*These are referred to as the guarantee, personal identification, social identification and status functions of the brand.*

### ***Investigation of the Spanish sports shoe market***

*Through research into the Spanish sports shoe market, Belen del Rio et al. study the influence exerted by each of these four functions on the consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand, recommend it to others and buy brand extensions.*

*The research reveals that the more positive the customer's perception of the guarantee function exerted by the brand, the more willing he or she will be to pay a premium price for it, recommend it and accept brand extensions.*

*The personal identification function increases the customer's willingness to recommend the brand. However, the personal identification function does not seem to affect either the price premium to be paid for the brand or the customer's acceptance of the brand extension towards other product categories.*

*The social identification function increases the customer's acceptance of brand extensions and his or her willingness to pay a premium price for the brand. It does not, however, make him or her more likely to recommend the brand.*

*The status function only has a significant effect on the customer's willingness to accept brand extensions. It does not affect his or her willingness to pay a price premium or to recommend the brand to friends and acquaintances. Naturally enough, then, consumers tend to recommend a brand on the basis of their own feelings about its performance, and not on the basis of its image or social prestige. After all, these may already be known to the person to whom the recommendation is going to be made.*

### ***Implications for business***

*Firms interested in extending their brand to other categories of product should therefore pay special attention to the brand associations linked to the*

*functions of guarantee, social identification and status. Companies wishing to apply a price premium to their products should promote associations related to the functions of guarantee and social identification. And businesses should resort to the functions of guarantee and personal identification to stimulate the users of a brand to recommend it to others.*

*In the Spanish sports shoe market, moreover, the research points to the fact that the guarantee and social identification functions offer firms the opportunity to obtain advantages of growth (acceptance of brand extensions and recommendation to others) and profitability (price premium), whereas the functions of personal identification and status generate advantages of growth.*

(A précis of the article “The effects of brand associations on consumer response”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for MCB University Press.)