

## Brand Image: Past, Present and Future

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### ABSTRACT

Strategic role of brand image has been proven in extensive literature as it is considered as distinct component in designing the marketing mix to building sustainable competitive edge. So, this paper presents divergent perspectives defining the brand image concept and concluding the debate about its multidimensionality. Five major clusters of definitions of brand image construct are observed such as generic definitions, meanings/messages, symbolic definitions, personality based definitions and cognitive/psychological definitions. Another important milestone in the evolution of brand image is the theory behind the concept of brand positioning. Brand Image is a multi dimensional construct that is triggered by cognitions, emotions, symbols, values and attitudes of consumers. However, many researchers measured it as uni-dimensional construct. Initially benefits based dimensionality was used to measure brand image (Park, 1986). Later, associative network model was used to measure brand image. Researchers advanced functional, symbolic, experiential, affective, economic, social, personality, self-esteem, corporate and utilitarian dimensions which could be summarized as dual model of brand image comprising of cognitive or affective domains. Prior research mostly showed confirmation with the established models of brand gurus such as Park, 1986; Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993. Measurement of brand image has been remained a concern by researchers whether measured on attitudinal scales or using projective techniques. But the use of numerous qualitative techniques failed to capturing consumer thoughts and feelings at non verbal and unconscious level due to lacking in vocabulary or awareness. So the focus qualitative research for measuring the brand image is now a latest trend in brand image research. The suggestions for future research are presented, too.

**KEYWORDS:** Brand Image, Concept, Measure, Review

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### INTRODUCTION

Brand image is an integral component of brand equity as it conveys the worth of the brand to the consumers. Kotler (2001) defined image as "the set of beliefs, ideas, and impression that a person holds regarding an object" (p. 273). So when we talk about brand image, it is about the mental representation of the brand based on individual consumer's beliefs, ideas and impression. It is perceived differently by both consumers and organization. The way consumers or the target audience of the brand views or interprets is known as perceived image while the other is the desired image, which is the way company wants to position its brand matching the consumer's perceived image. Organizations make assumptions about the perceived image it is known as presumed image. These levels of image can be contradicting because managers may not exactly know what is going on in the mind of the consumer. This gap is filled by the research on the construct in various disciplines which guides the practitioners and opens new horizon to understand their consumers. Ever since the introduction of construct "brand image", it has been defined in multiple ways. Every definition is based on its conceptualization on various aspects. For instance, Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) defined that "brand image is largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon that is formed through consumer interpretation, whether reasoned or emotional." It is about how consumers perceive. So it can largely vary depending on the mental representations of respective consumer. According to Aaker (1991) brand image is referred to as "a set of associations, usually organized in some meaningful way" (p. 109) and in the same context Keller (1993) defines it as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory". Both of these definitions lead to the fact that there are various abstract features that may reside in the consumer's mind about the brand, either objective or subjective. According to Definition of Low & Lamb (2000), "Brand image is the reasoned and emotional perceptions of consumers attached to specific brands". One thing that each of the definition conveys is that it is automatically formed depending on what consumers take meaning of the brand and each brand can have as many images as its consumers.

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### Conceptual Evolution of Brand Image

Gardner and Levy (1955) were credited with the introduction of the construct in the 1950s, and described its social and psychological nature. The construct had its roots in the discipline of psychology that is why it captured its place in the consumer behavior research. It is based on different psychological variants which describe the consumer behavior (Gardner & Levy, 1955). With the development in the concept in its era of the 1960s and early 1970s, it was researched and conceptualized on the basis of social psychological construct "attitude". Bird *et al.*, 1970 defined it as "an attitude about a given brand" (Bird, Channon, and Ehrenberg 1970). It soon found to be playing a vital role in marketing manager and captured the attention of marketing managers when empirical research supported its importance during purchase decisions (Dolich 1969). For instance, Gensch (1978) in his research on brand image, found a significant relationship between brand image and brand preference. Then in the 1980s, attitude-based image research dominated in the research, and created more hype in linking the brand image with the consumer behavior and marketing management (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). The concept of semiotics was applied in 1988 by Noth. From this perspective, "objects of the marketplace are claimed to form semiotic systems, and commodities are studied as signs whose meaning is the consumer's brand image". Researchers continued to work in the same direction in the 1990s, and brand image became the key component of brand equity (Hsieh, 2004).

Different meanings are always assigned to the construct based on varying research focus (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). Researchers sometimes use interchangeable words and terminology for the construct, for instance brand identity, perceived image, and brand personality. Aaker (1996) warned against a "brand image trap" in the literature. He cleared and explained the significant difference between brand image and brand identity. However, both have roots in associative network theory. He defined that "Brand identity is a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68), it comes from the organization, whereas brand image is "how a brand is perceived by consumers" (Aaker, 1996, p. 71), it has its origin in the minds of consumers. Images are the interpretation of their beliefs and values. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) gave the classification of human beliefs as (i) descriptive, (ii) informational and (iii) inferential. Descriptive beliefs are drawn from direct experiences consumer have with the product. Informational are the ones that are predisposed by outside stimuli and sources such as society, ads and communities. Inferential beliefs are the ones that are the result of interpretations on the basis of past experiences with the product. Discussed levels of beliefs held understanding the diversity of images that can be formed on the basis of these beliefs.

While conducting his research on hospital brand image, Kim (2008) explained that "brand image is not absolute; it is relative to brand images of competing brand". He described that brand image is also formed on the basis of direct experience with the brand (Kim *et al.*, 2008a). In addition, brand image acquires a strategic function for the marketers. They can manage the marketing activities in creating positive brand image and differentiate it from the competitors (Javalgi *et al.*, 1992). Another important milestone in the evolution of brand image is the theory behind the concept of positioning. The word positioning was coined in 1972 by Al Ries and Jack Trout in the article series "The Positioning Era" published in a business magazine *Advertising Age*. Ries and Trout (1981) later argued that positioning is not something you do with the product itself; instead, it is about the target group. The marketers' aim is to put the product into the mind of the customers. Hence, when outlaying the positioning strategy, it does not change anything about the core product but instead concentrates on the surrounding elements of the product. For instance, a company could choose to make alterations to the price strategy, product name, or the package. All these changes are external to the product and are made to ensure the desired position in the customers' mind. Following Ries and Trout's theory, positioning has soon become a strategy that gained in popularity, especially among advertising agencies. Instead of only using commercials and slogans including words "first," "best," "the most beautiful," etc., companies now tried to find other innovative ways to reach the customers by putting emphasis on better-thought-out campaigns to evoke stronger reactions.

As globalization has accelerated (e.g. Levitt, 1983; Yip, 1989; Szymanski, Bharadwaj, Varadarajan, 1993) consumers have various choices in the market where they can choose from numerous local and foreign brands. It has raised the issue that different consumers perceive the products differently and it will affect the purchasing choices differently. Therefore, a business competing in the international markets must position its brands according to consumer's perceptions (Hsieh, 2002).

### Significance of Brand Image

Since the inception of the concept, its practical significance has been of importance. Its impact on the purchasing behavior of the consumer has been evident through its use and relevance in "technical and casual applications" (Fishbein 1967; Johnson and Puto 1987). Brand image is proved to have its strategic role in marketing management (Srivastava and Shocker 1991; Keller 1993; Park and Srinivasan 1994; Aaker 1996) and brand image management is a distinct component in designing the marketing mix for the product. Its communication in an effective manner helps consumers identify the needs the product can satisfy of its users (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986). It can be communicated in a way which can make it stand different from the competitors in the market (DiMingo 1988; Reynolds and Gutman 1984). Roth (1995) described it as a key to product's success.

Its theoretical foundations can be found in discipline of psychology; such as social psychology, cognitive psychology. Further, Noth (1988) conceptualize it under semiotics perspectives. Moreover, Associative network theory has been basis of many researcher works such as Aaker (1991), Keller (1993) and Roth (1995). Associative models have helped measuring the construct on symbolic level where it is considered as unconscious and non-verbal one (Cian & Cervai, 2011). Its application in various industries dealing with both tangible and intangible goods is recognized through plenty of research work in creating empirical evidences (Low & Lamb, 2000, Hsieh, 2004, Sandho, 2007, Kim et al, 2008, Park, 2009).

**Taxonomy of Brand Image Dimensions**

When summarizing the definitions and conceptualizations of brand image from 28 studies in the literature, Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) and the literature we reviewed, five major categories are identified: Generic definitions, symbolic definitions, meanings/messages, personality based definitions and cognitive/psychological definitions. On the basis of these definitions and operationalization of brand image, significant number of dimensions of the concept has emerged. A number of researchers focus on the function of single aspect of brand image (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Kwun & Oh, 2007; Ryu et al., 2008), while many other researchers put forward a multidimensional constitution of brand image. In the studies conducted after 1990, multidimensional perspective of brand image prevailed. Empirical evidences were generated confirming the multidimensionality of the construct. Table 1 shows few of the studies that are endorsing multidimensionality of the brand image construct.

**Table 1: Taxonomy of Brand image Construct**

| Author                                     | Dimensions  |  |  | Critical Note   |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| Beil, 1992                                 | Corporate Image   | Image of the User  | Image of the Product   | These dimensions relate to the entities related to a particular brand   |
| Keller (1993)                              | <b>Attributes</b><br>"Attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a product or service" | <b>Benefits</b><br>"Benefits are the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes" | <b>Attitude</b><br>"consumers' overall evaluations of a brand (Wilkie 1986)" | Here benefits means the customer values as "the meaning of "customer value" is a level of return in the product benefits for certain amount of customer's money (i.e., the price) in a purchase exchange" (Lai, 1995)         |
| Gartner 1993                               | Cognitive   | Affective  | Conative   | This model does not particularly discuss attributes, benefits and attitude. It describes image perceptions being cognitive and affective that can be based on various customer values. all three dimensions are inter-related |
| Baloglu & McCleary (1999)                  | cognitive   | Affective  | Global   | Here the dimensions pertain to destination image  |
| Mahsa Hariri and Hossein Vazifehdust, 2011 | Functional Image  | Affective Image  | Reputation   | Reputation falls under the affective image, so this model overall carries overall two dimensions such as functional and affective image   |
| Matos et, al. 2012                         | Cognitive   | Affective  | Conative   |   |

**Brand Image Based on Benefits**

Several researchers have worked with benefit based dimensions of brand image (see table 2). It holds need theory behind it whereby brands provide benefits to the consumers fulfilling their needs. For example, Park et al. (1986) proposed three concepts regarding brand that consumers hold: symbolic concepts, experiential concepts and functional concepts that can be defined as "brand-unique abstract meanings" and are known to be formed on the basis of various needs of customers. Keller (1993) used it in describing benefits based associations that consumers link to the brands.

**Table 2: Benefit Based Dimensions**

| Authors                 | Dimensions |             |                 |              |                     |
|-------------------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------|
| Park, 1986              | Functional | Symbolic    | Experiential    |              |                     |
| Roth, 1995              | Functional | Social      | Sensory;        |              |                     |
| Hsieh 2002              | Sensory    | Utilitarian | Symbolic        | Economic     |                     |
| Kehle & Kim, 2006       | Functional | Symbolic    | Experiential    |              |                     |
| Sondoh jr. et, al. 2007 | Functional | Social      | Symbolic        | Experiential | Appearance Enhances |
| David Aaker 2009        | Functional | Emotional   | Self-expressive | Social       |                     |

### **Brand Image based on brand associations**

Much of the research on brand image is based on associative network theory. Many researchers (Aaker, 1991; Biel, 1992; Keller, 1993; Roth, 1995; Hsieh, 2002) conceptualized and operationalized the construct on the basis of associative network model. Associative network model memory is said to be consisted of multiple linkages and nodes where "links represent relationships (positive or negative, weaker or strong), and nodes represent concepts (e.g. brand associations) and objects (e.g. brands)". Associations are classified on the basis of level of abstraction and are evident from the means-end theory. As Koubaa (2008) explains in his study that "mean-ends theory reflects the memory linkages among attributes (i.e. means), consequences, and attitude (i.e. end) (Gutman, 1982) on the basis of the notion that the product and the consumer's sense of self may be hierarchically linked through an interconnected set of cognitive elements along with different levels of abstraction" Koubaa (2008).

Discussing the Aaker's (1991) model, he explained that people have multiple associations attached to the name of the brand (Aaker, 1991). Aaker (1991) categorized these associations in 11 groups including product attributes; intangibles; customer benefits; relative price; use/application; user/customer; celebrity/person; life-style/personality; product class; competitors; and country/geography (Aaker 1991). It is not only brand associations that explain the brand image but brand personality is another concept that forms the construct. When both associations and personality factors are combined, it explains the construct in more detail (Aaker, 2001). Friedman and Lessig (1987), Kirmani and Zeothaml (1991) and Keller (1993) working on brand associations in their brand image model classified those into three categories; attribute, benefit and attitude. Keller (1993) defines attributes as "those descriptive features that characterized a product or service", benefits are "benefits are the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes" and attitude as Wilkie (1986) explains is "consumers' overall evaluation of the brand". In an ideal situation, consumer's perceptions consists of all three categories of brand associations (Hsieh *et al.*, 2004), which supports the multidimensionality of brand image (koubaa, 2008).

Keller (1993, 2003) included the factors of Aaker (1991) as well like personality, user, usage and price under the category of non-product related attributes/associations of the brand. Further he added the benefit based associations, broadly classified as functional, symbolic and experiential based on Park (1986) brand concepts. In his model of brand image, Plummer (1985) had included personality instead of attitude. Based on brand personality, consumers perceive the brand similar to human or having human characters (Thakor and Kohli, 1996). People seek congruence between brand's personality and their own personality. Moreover, Demographics are an important component of a brand's personality (e.g. age, origin, gender and class) (Thakor and Kohli, 1996; Batra *et al.*, 1993).

Keller (2001) further added to the brand associations and explained that intangibles include various brand associations such as actual or apparitional user imagery; purchase and consumption imagery; and history, heritage, and experiences (Keller 2001). So history and heritage that a brand owns, also helps creating associations in consumer's mind. Brand origin is vital in explaining brands with heritage or nationality (Thakor and Kohli, 1996). Keller (1993) also categorized associations on the basis of strength, uniqueness and favorability. Another basic grouping for brand associations involves those associations that address the organization that lies behind the brand (Aaker 1996; de Chernatony 1999; Free 1999; Keller 1993). This includes associations with people, the values, and the corporate culture of an organization. These types of associations create a reputation for an organization, such as being innovative, trustworthy, socially responsible, and likeable or an expert (Keller 1993). One more important concept related to brand image associations is organizational associations, these are the associations regarding corporation's performance, and these associations are about the company's ability in delivering the promises to its consumers including corporate philanthropy as a vital component (Chen 2001). Organizational associations influence consumer's perception about the overall brand image.

### **Brand image based on brand perceptions**

Kotler's (2000) model of brand perceptions is popular in the marketing literature and widely adopted by practitioners in developing their strategies. The meanings given to the brand are categorized into attributes; benefits (functional and emotional); values; culture; personality; and users (Kotler, 2000). De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, (1997) presented taxonomy of brand perspective as input perspective, output perspective and evolutionary perspective. Input perspective include Legal instrument, Logo, Company and Identity of brand. Output Perspective includes image, personality, relationship, adding value regarding brand while Evolutionary perspective is about brand as evolving entity.

### **Brand Image based on consumption based value system**

Lai (1995) differentiated values from that of benefits, so considering his concept as foundation value based system is identified. Value has been component of various brand equity models (Feldwick 1996, Martin and Brown 1991, Lassar *et al.* 1995). Lassar *et al.* (1995) defined perceived value as "the perceived brand utility relative to its costs, assessed by the consumer and based on simultaneous considerations of what is received and what is given up to receive it". When consumers make a choice it is based on the balance between the price they are paying and against that price the benefits they are receiving (Lassar *et al.* 1995). Sheth *et al.*, 1991 explained the consumption

values on which the buying decision is made by consumers. According to them the values include: *Functional values*, "the utility level of the product (or service) compared to its alternatives"; *Social value*, described as "the willingness to please others, and social acceptance"; *Emotional values* are "choices made based upon feelings and aesthetics"; *Epistemic values* "describe the early adopters in the sense that it relates to novelty or knowledge-searching behavior (a person switching the regular cell phone to try new smart phone)". *Conditional value* refers to "a set of circumstances depending on the situation (e.g., Christmas, a wedding, etc.)". It includes socio-economic and physical aspects. Under this perspective, individual brands are representation of unique clusters of values. Consumers respond on the basis of these values, it means they have their perceptions built according to these values. Sheth (1991) has merged customer values with benefits while both are different but linked according to Lai (1995). Customer values are based on social and cultural factors while benefits are offered by products which are perceived by customers according to their values.

### **Operationalization of Brand Image**

Brand Image construct is measured both as uni-dimensional (Yoo & Dhontu, 2001; Park, 2009) and multidimensional construct (Hsieh, 2002; Kim, 2005; Kauba, 2007; Kim, 2008). Low and Lamb (2000) consider image and attitude (referring to a brand) as two correlated but distinct constructs. They quoted both Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) brand image definition "as a reasoned or emotional perception that consumers attach to specific brands" and Mitchell and Olson (1981) image attitude definition as "consumers' overall evaluation of a brand whether good or bad". Since 1980s, brand image research is mostly dominated by attitude based operationalization and measurement of the construct (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). This domain remained in focus and in practice in 1990s (Keller 1993). Attitude scale has been used widely by the researchers in their studies (Cretu & Brodie, 2005; Kubler & Albers ). Low & lamb (2000) have developed attitude based scales to measure brand image. It was product specific category scale to measure brand image construct. It was five items semantic differential scale.

While measuring using attitude scales, all three dimensions i.e. cognitive, emotive and conative; should be present in the scale (Cian, 2011). The issue with these kinds of scales is that they lack effectiveness when the construct has to be measured on unaware and non verbal level. Overall, the presumption that attitude scales hold is that the brand image is a "conscious" and "fully verbalisable" construct. Consequently, they do not allow for a full investigation of the symbolic and emotional side of the brand (which is in part un-conscious and un-verbalisable) (e.g., Ballantyne et al., 2006; Hogg & Banister, 2001; Zaltman & Coulter 1995). Some scholars (Zaltman and Higie, 1993; Zaltman et al., 1995; Hussey and Duncombe, 1999; Hofstede et al., 2007) claim brand image to be a non-verbal construct. Pinker (1994) briefly claimed: "Is thought dependent on words? The idea that thought is the same thing as language is an example of what can be called a conventional absurdity" (Zaltman et al., 1995, p. 37). For this reason, they suggest that it should be measured using qualitative methods encompassing projective techniques (see: Cian, 2011) so it's symbolic and unconscious dimension can be measured. To measure brand image at unconscious level, Cian & Cervai (2011) developed a technique called MuSeS which measures brand image involving all senses of the respondent. It combines various other projective techniques such as Kelly Repertory Grid, Photo sort, laddering etc. Some authors measures the brand image construct based on the brand personality (Aaker, 1997; Ang and Lim, 2006; Caprara et al., 2001), in order to shift the attention on the brand's symbolic side. Aaker (1997) brand personality scale guides researcher to measure the brand personality based on various factors.

Although the qualitative and projective tools offer a greater opportunity in this direction, they still lack standardization, and they depend on the competences of the interviewers. Moreover, they require time and resources, and they are usually applied on small samples, so their results cannot be generalizable. However, statistics can nowadays offer tools to elaborate data resulting from small samples. Computer science has developed software to work on qualitative data, in overcoming the traditional opposition between qualitative and quantitative approaches (see, e.g., Cian & Cervai, 2011).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Prior research mostly showed confirmation with the established model of brand gurus such as Park, 1986; Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993. Extensive literature suggests that brand image is at the core of Marketing mix activities and a major concern of Brand Management (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Brand Image is a multi dimensional construct that is triggered by cognitions, emotions, symbols, values and attitudes of consumers. However, many researchers have measured it as uni-dimensional construct (Low & Lamb, 2001; Park, 2009). Initially benefits based dimensionality was used to measure brand image (Park, 1986). Later, associative network model was used to measure brand image, which explains that image is created through nodes that are linked to the memory of consumer (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Researchers advanced functional, symbolic, experiential, affective, economic, social, personality, self-esteem, corporate and utilitarian dimensions which could be summarized as dual model of brand image comprising of cognitive or affective domains. Measurement of brand image has been remained a concern by

researchers whether measured on attitudinal scales or using projective techniques. Attitude scales were found to be measuring the construct on semantic differential and likert-type scales to understand what consumers verbally and consciously know about the brand. But on realizing the fact that construct is subjective and should be measured at non verbal and unconscious level, various qualitative and projective techniques were adapted from psychology domain. These are able to untap the thoughts of consumers, to which they may not be able to describe verbally, lacks vocabulary or not aware about their existence. So the focus qualitative research for measuring the brand is now a latest trend in the research of brand image. Even brand image scales can be created using these techniques.

Based on the literature review, as several researchers (Keller, 2003; Hofstede, 2007; Cian & Cervai, 2011) emphasized on measuring the construct through qualitative techniques, it is needed to validate the existing tools used in qualitative research of brand image, which although may be promising (as photosort and other projective techniques), How to measure the brand image have not received enough attention in the literature. Consequently, they are still few known and rarely used, limiting their development. The concept needs to be strengthened more using other perspectives such as anthropology and ethnography (Keller, 2003). Anthropology is the domain that deals with symbols based on culture and society and symbolism is very important in brand image research as it is the latest domain to be worked on using qualitative techniques. Corporate social responsibility is an emerging issue in the branding. It should also be incorporated while measuring brand image. A few studies has considered it but there is room for extensive implementation in measuring and developing the construct as "Green Brand Image"

Since this is non-systematic review, so systematic reviews are required to understand the concept and answer the unanswered questions regarding the construct. Further meta-analyses are required for quantitative summary analysis regarding brand image construct on brand equity, consumer satisfaction, brand loyalty and market performance etc.

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