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in
International Marketing

Understanding the post-effects of co-branding on the individual partnering brands: the case of the athletic brand Reebok

By
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December, 2010

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Acknowledgments

Generally speaking, writing an academic paper is always challenging for a student because he has to overcome a large range of hurdles that goes from identifying the appropriate issues of a given topic to structuring his thinking and ensuring the relevance of the arguments put forward.

I have to admit that this dissertation was by far the most difficult assignment I have ever dealt with since I'm a student because it gave me the impression that I had to build up a monument from scratch with my own hands. Hopefully, several persons guided me through this long journey in giving me their moral and academic support therefore I would like to thank them with this first section.

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Abstract

The present research paper explores the co-branding post-effects on the constituent brands. More specifically, the author looks at the possible spillover effects of a new co-brand "**Reebok/EA7**" (EA: Emporio Armani) on one of the parent brands: Reebok.

In order to investigate this issue the researcher has chosen to carry out a qualitative made up on the basis of a "before-after" experiment as the "before-after" approach is often used to analyze the consequences of a marketing phenomenon (Cegarra & Michel, 2003)

Two focus groups were then conducted. Participants from the first group were asked to give feedbacks about their beliefs and perceptions toward the brand Reebok in the form of associations. This first group was nicknamed the "pre-co-branding group". Later, subjects from the second group were exposed to the co-brand "**Reebok/EA7**" before being asked to draw out associations they hold about Reebok. This group was nicknamed the "post-co-branding group".

Data collected from the "pre-co-branding group" and the "post-co-branding group" were analyzed and compared through brand associative networks.

The findings suggested that some fashion-related and luxury-related associations were drawn out by participants from the "post-co-branding group" to characterize the brand Reebok. Therefore, quite significant co-branding spillover effects were observed.

Introduction

Research background and motivation

Last year, I took a course of strategic brand management within the framework of my master degree. I had the opportunity to review the strategic alliances of corporate brands, which led me to look at the area of co-branding. I thought this type of brand extension strategy was very original and therefore truly interesting because it went at the opposite way of the traditional brand thinking that I was taught since the beginning of my studies in the field of marketing. Indeed, in the classic “marketing strategies and communications” courses, it is usually stated that marketers need to be concerned about protecting and differentiating the brand image of their company from the one of competitors in order to be successful in their respective market. Sharing the core assets of your brand equity with another brand could be perceived as giving the most precious recipe of your success to a firm next door for free. However, if we pay closer attention to what has been going on for the past fifteen years in the area of co-branding, we quickly realize that this branding strategy turns out to be more beneficial than damaging for companies in terms of brand image. Indeed, the marketing history showed that reputable brands encounter many difficulties in attempting product line extensions. When brand equity departs too far from the original product, brand equity of renowned brands is diluted (Washburn et al., 2000). Indeed, co-branding appears to overcome this problem simply because a brand interested in doing a product extension will partner with another brand that already possesses expertise and credibility in the new product’s category targeted. Figures speak for themselves, according to McKinsey & co, in 1994; the worldwide annual growth rate of co-branding strategy was equal to 40% (Simonin et al., 1994). Since then, this branding technique has been increasingly used in many sectors such as the car industry, the mobile phone manufactory, the athletic world and so on. If we think about it for a few seconds we are surrounded by co-branded products in our daily life: the SonyEricsson and LG’s prada mobiles phones, the Nike+Ipod mp3 player, the Adidas-Goodyear trainers, the American Airlines or British airways Visa cards. In realizing this, I decided to write a dissertation on the topic of co-branding, however I didn’t know from which angle I would approach the issue. In reading as much as I could about the co-branding literature, I came to acknowledge that most of

the researches that have been carried out in the co-branding area have largely focused on three issues. The first one was: what possible impact a co-branded product could have on consumers' perceptions? So the main focus was to understand how consumers perceive co-branding in order to evaluate its attractiveness. (Leuthesser et al., 2002). This former issue brought a huge part of the literature to focus on explaining the underlying advantages and disadvantages of a brand alliance. And finally, it seems that marketing researchers gave much attention to the various factors accounting for the success of co-branding.

However, It appears that few researches have concentrated on co-branding's post effects on parent brands. As matter of fact, few findings from the literature, based on empirical studies, showed that co-branding has the ability to modify subsequently the perception towards the partnering brands (Simonin et al., 1994). Simonin and Ruth were the first and almost the only ones to investigate this issue. Their findings suggested that the brand alliance represents new evaluations and associations for both brands and therefore that co-branding could add or alter a brand's existing associations in the mind of the consumer. Later, in the year 2000, Washburn et al. suggested that consumers develop a set of associations with brands names that are subsequently paired in a co-branding situation. Therefore, I decided that the goal of this research paper would be to explore the potential "co- branding" has in updating brand image and in transferring associations from one parent brand to another.

Research issue statements

1. Does co-branding changes the perceptions that consumers have about an individual brand? Are brand perceptions and brand beliefs updated when consumers are exposed to a co-branding?
2. How much a brand alliance affects subsequently one of the parent brands in terms of brand associations?
3. Does one brand transfer some of its own associations to the other brand through a co-branding?

Implications and significance of the research

Co-branding is a branding strategy that has gained increasingly more attention among the marketing practitioners in the past fifteen years. As the market competition becomes fiercer every year in every given sector and in taking into consideration that the world economic environment is still on the recovery, the co-branding's strategy has many chances to be at the forefront of many companies' marketing department in the years to come. Therefore, understanding the effects of such a branding technique on consumers' perception appears critical for future marketers and entrepreneurs. The researcher hopes that the present paper will draw attention to undergraduate students interested in the area of branding or perhaps contribute to help a marketing scholar in the implementation of a more thorough and extensive research study towards the co-branding's post-effect on the partner brands.

Literature Review

Findings in the area of the co-branding effects on the brand equity of parent brands display clearly that when a co-branded product trial is positive, the strategy becomes a “win-win-win” situation in the sense that all the parts get satisfaction, both of the brands involved in the alliance and the consumer as well (Washburn et al., 2000). As a matter of fact, low equity brands shows significant brand equity increases following a positive product trial, regardless if they partner with a high or low equity brand. However, we don't know exactly by which process the equity of a brand is enhanced after being involved in a strategic alliance.

Within this research paper, we will use the “brand associations” as a tool to assess if a co-branding has the potential to transfer subsequently elements of the brand equity of one parent brand to the other. Therefore, in this part, it appears critical to define and explain the meaning of the terms “brand equity”, “brand association” and most importantly “co-branding” in relying on the appropriate literature. As brand equity represents the first stage to understand the role of the brand associations within a strategy such as “co-branding”, the author considers that it is critical to begin this section in defining the term “brand equity”.

1. Brand equity

Brand equity is a concept that emerged in the 1980's, which consists in placing the brand at the center of marketing strategies. Since then, marketers have struggled to conceptualize and measure Brand equity in one common way, as the concept has been defined from different angles and for different purposes in the marketing area. However, most of brand specialists agree on asserting that Brand equity represents "*the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand*" (Keller, 2008). Kevin Keller, a renown marketing professor who dedicates his expertise to improve the understanding of brand management, came up with one of the best examples to illustrate what brand equity is all about. He took the instance of the *Christie's* world famous auction house to demonstrate how deeply a brand can change people's perceptions about a product and the price they are willing to pay to obtain it. *Christie's* usually auctions items that belonged to celebrities and people give a priceless value to these items just because they used to pertained to someone idolized. "In 2000, actress Judy Garland's slippers which cost only \$12.50 to make in 1938 sold for over \$800000" (Keller, 2008). Typically this sums up the concept of brand equity, which is providing "added value" to a product or a service by associating it to a positive image. Moreover, in bringing this example, Kevin Keller shows us that the brand is the element that permits consumers to evaluate a product beyond its physical features and therefore to increase the intrinsic value of a product. Furthermore, brand equity can be studied from a financial standpoint, which implies to measure it using financial tools. However it seems that those quantitative indicators are more oriented to accounting purposes in the sense that they only provide information on the brand's health and financial valuation on the short-term (Washburn et al., 2004). As these measurements don't take into consideration the consumer's perceptions to assess the brand equity, the author will disregard the financial approach used to evaluate brand equity.

David Aaker developed the idea that Brand equity encompasses four underlying dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand Loyalty and brand associations (Washburn et al., 2000). Brand awareness is the brand's presence in the consumer's mind. Then the perceived quality driver relies on the importance that consumers must perceive the quality of what is being offered. As for brand loyalty, this driver is essential to ensure a long-term success for the brand and is maintained through the positive brand associations that are created. Finally and most importantly

brand associations are responsible for the building of the brand identity (Rothschild, 2001).

Nevertheless, Aaker's approach incorporates both perceptual (brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality) and behavioral (brand loyalty) dimensions since he combines the consumer perceptions and actions into a single marketing measure of brand equity (Myers, 2003). In fact, this paper aims to explore only the perceptual impact of "co-branding" on brand equity therefore just half of Aaker's work is suitable to our issue. Based on its own thinking, the researcher believes that a "brand association" represents the cornerstone tool that allows building the 3 dimensions that are "brand awareness", "perceived quality" and "brand loyalty". Indeed, a brand that manages to build a strong association with a celebrity or a place can reinforce its quality perceptions, its awareness and its customer loyalty at the same time (Uggla, 2005). The celebrity David Beckham himself can illustrate the powerful impact of brand association on the three other brand equity's components. David Beckham has a very strong brand association, brand recognition and loyalty among Asian fans. When the athletic brand Adidas endorsed the famous football player David Beckham, Adidas did not only partner with a talented athlete, the brand increased its brand loyalty, awareness and perceived quality towards Asian consumers at the same time only through its association with Mr. Beckham.

Keller seems to devote much attention to the importance of "brand associations" within the brand equity construct than Aaker does. Indeed, Keller defines brand equity from a consumer perspective based on consumers' memory associations (Pappu et al., 2005). According to him, "customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory" (Keller, 1993). He considers that the customer's knowledge about a brand represents the foundation of brand equity because "the power of the brand lies in what resides in the minds of customers". As a matter of fact, consumers start to give some value to a brand as soon as they acquire sufficient knowledge about this brand in their memory, a knowledge that fits with their beliefs and attitudes. This brand knowledge encompasses two components: brand awareness and brand image.

Being an underlying element of the brand equity, we cannot ignore referring to brand awareness, however, as it represents just a rudimentary level of brand knowledge, we will not cover it in greater detail.

A. Brand awareness

Brand awareness is related to the strength of the brand trace in memory and this is reflected by consumers' ability to identify the brand under different condition (Keller, 1993). There are two major levels to assess how the brand is embedded in the consumers' mind: brand recognition and brand recall. "Brand recognition refers to the consumer's ability to confirm prior exposure to the brand when given a brand cue"(Keller, 2008). There are typical questions that allow evaluating brand recognition such as: "Have you heard about this brand?" or "Is this logo familiar to you?" Brand recognition is simply an assertion from the consumer that he has heard or seen the brand previously.

As for brand recall, it permits to test if a consumer is able to identify a specific brand when given the product's category (what brands of running shoes can you recall?). Therefore, Brand recall demands that consumers correctly generate the brand from memory (Keller, 1993)

Keller along with other authors such as Herzog (1963) and Newman (1957) conceptualized brand image as being represented by a brand node in the memory to which various associations are attached (Keller, 1993). In considering Keller's thought, Brand awareness, described just above as being the confirmation of the brand 's existence in the mind, appears to be the brand node in the memory. Thus, it is suggested that brand awareness is the first step in building a brand image in which series of perceived associations are connected to the brand node. In the following section the author places the emphasis on brand image to first demonstrate that this concept is built up through all the associations held by a consumer about a brand. Secondly, the further section attempts to give an insight on how brand image can be depicted using human character traits.

2. Brand image

Brand image is a term that has been subjected to many divergences among researchers who dealt with this concept. Indeed, it seems that a larger number of different definitions exist towards the area of brand image with various approaches that aims to measure it. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that most of the researchers agree on the fact that brand image is largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon since it is closely related with words such as “perceptions”, “feelings”, or “beliefs”. According to Aaker, marketers create the brand identity that is communicated to consumers mostly through advertising; this brand identity is then interpreted as the brand image (Ouwersloot & Tudorica, 2001). Gardner and Levy (1955), in their effort to explore the consumer’s motivation to purchase, were the first ones to bring this significant contribution to the understanding of brand image. In their article “the product and the brand” from 1955, they wrote:

« A brand name is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumers many things via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time. It will also convey meanings which advertising, merchandising, promotion, publicity have created» (Gardner & Levy, 1955, p134)

This statement upholds the idea that brand image includes a wide range of associations that is first created by branding strategists through marketing activities and then conveyed to consumers. These sets of ideas, feelings and attitudes that people have about a brand contribute to forge a brand mental picture (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Low & Lamb (2000) share this opinion on brand image since they define it as “the reasoned or emotional perceptions consumers attach to specific brand” (Hafey & O’Loughlin J., 2003). Based on the previous definitions, it appears that the emotional factor plays an important role in the creation of a brand image within the mind of a consumer. This observation brings us to infer that what you think about a brand is somehow very much related to what you feel about a brand. S. King stated that “*people choose their brand the same way they choose their friends in addition to skills and physical characteristics, they simply like them as people*” (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Marketers were the first ones to recognize the fact that brands possess human being personality traits and gave birth to the term “brand personality” (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Kapferer asserts that consumers have no difficulty attributing personality traits to brands because they perceive them as having a specific personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Advertising plays a critical role in

the personality creation (Ouwersloot & Tudorica, 2001). Indeed, the personification of brands comes to consumers' mind even more naturally since marketing practitioners made celebrities endorsed brands. When stars are endorsed by brands they tend to lend their personality to those brands therefore brands themselves start to possess desired human personality traits (Ouwersloot & Tudorica, 2001).

A. What is brand personality?

The theory of animism is very helpful to explain the phenomenon of brand personality. According to the researcher Susan Fournier, this theory implies that there is a need for people to anthropomorphize objects in order to facilitate the interactions with the nonmaterial environment (Ouwersloot & Tudorica, 2001). Anthropomorphisation happens when human characteristics (“youthful”, “gentle”, “tolerant”) are attributed to non-human items such as, for this case, brands. When consumers describe their perception of a brand using a succession of human characteristics, it results in shaping the brand personality and by extension a part of the brand image. A brand personality can be defined as a set of human characteristics associated with a given brand. (Lee et al., 2004). Brand personality is a very useful tool for marketers because it helps them build and maintain the brand identity. In addition, it enables consumers to create a relationship with the brands in the sense that they can relate to brands the same way they do with people.

B. Relationship between brand image and brand personality

Even though no empirical studies has proved the nature and existence of the relationship between brand image and brand personality, the two terms have been interchangeably used in the literature (Hosany et al., 2007). Moreover, some authors believe that brand personality represents the emotional side of brand image (Ouwersloot & Tudorica, 2001). Plummer conceptualizes brand personality in asserting that it is a component of brand image (Keller, 1993). Keller defines brand image as “*Perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer mind*” (Keller, 1993) and brand personality as reflection of how people feel about a brand rather than what they think the brand is or does (Hafey & O’Loughlin J., 2003). In the meantime, Ouwersloot and Tudorica stated, “*personalities are*

particularly useful for the creation of brand associations". Therefore, we can state that there is much confusion about the nature of the relationship between brand image and brand personality because no logical explanation has been given so far in the literature. In some cases, academicians believe that brand personality equates to brand image whereas in other cases, brand personality is described as an integrated part of brand image. In this research paper, the author will use brand personality as a differentiating tool for brand image that "helps the brand stand out from the crowded marketplace" as J. Aaker asserts (Hafey & O'Loughlin J., 2003). Consequently, it will give the researcher a bright insight on the non-functional dimensions of the image of the two brands under study.

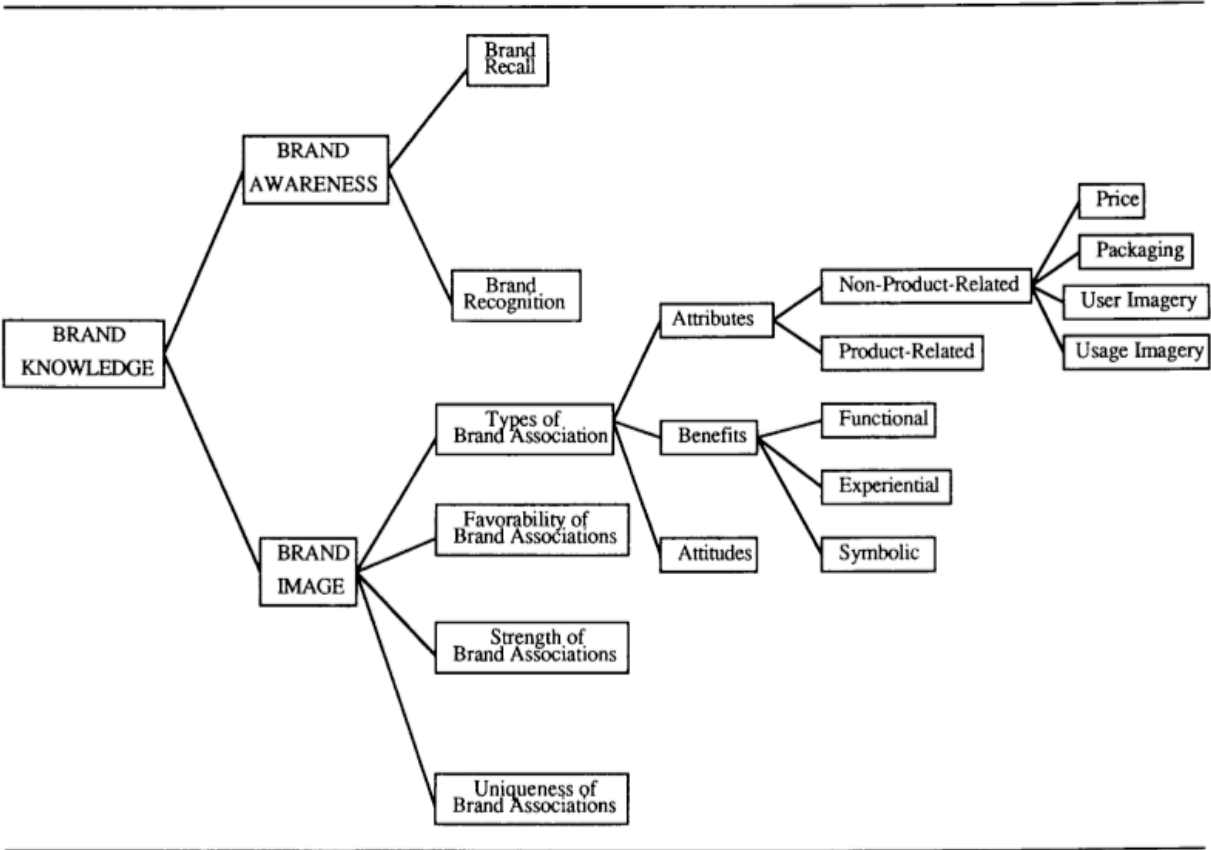
C. Aaker brand personality scale: a valid tool of measurement

The brand personality scale of Jennifer Aaker is the most valid methodology available to date to examine the personality of any one brand (Keller, 2008). Since 1997, it has been applied in many academic research papers to assess brand image differences (Lee et al., 2004; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). This brand personality theory has been adapted from the use of trait theory to evaluate human personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Indeed, J. Aaker has inspired herself from the "Big 5" human personality dimensions, which is a theory used to determine human personality traits. J.Aaker conceived her brand personality scale relying on the data collection of ratings of 114 adjectives across 37 brands in various product categories by over 600 people representative of the American population (Keller, 2008). Thanks to this study, J.Aaker built up a scale that reflected five factors of brand personality and each factor came along with their own relevant facets. Each facet encompassed various personality traits. The researcher will further use J.Aaker's brand personality scale to observe if significant changes occur in consumers' perception of the brand "Reebok" after having acknowledged that Reebok was involved in a co-branding with the fashion brand "Emporio Armani".

We've just seen that brand associations could be defined as human personality traits so far. Personality attributes prove to have some limitations in the sense that it encompasses only emotional-based associations. Indeed, brand personality basically

captures all that is not bound to the product-related physical attributes and benefits (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). However, the brand image includes emotional-related associations and physical associations such as functional and design attributes (Keller, 1993). The scheme below (Figure 1) depicts clearly Keller's conception towards the types of associations that are comprised in the brand image. In fact, we can observe that brand associations can adopt many types of nature. The next section will be dedicated entirely to the brand associations in order to study their varieties but also the way they are held in consumer memory.

FIGURE 1
Dimensions of Brand Knowledge



Source: Keller, 1999

3. Brand associations

Brand associations represent “the meaning of the brand for consumers” (Keller, 1993). Keller provides a very probing analysis of the brand associations. Thus, the researcher considers that Keller's breakdown of the brand associations is particularly valuable to explain the different type of associations that are held in the consumer's mind.

A. The different natures of brand associations

Keller thinks that the brand associations fall into three main groups: the attributes, the benefits and the attitudes.

Let's examine his first association's component: the brand attributes. It represents features that characterized a product or a service. Two sub-groups are comprised in this element: the product-related attributes and the non-product-related attributes. Product-related-attributes are defined by Keller as the product's physical composition. Product or service's categories attached to a brand mostly embody the product-related-attributes. In other words, this type of association gives answers to the questions: which particular products the brand reminds consumers of (Keller, 2008)? For example, vacuum cleaners are so strongly embedded with the brand “Hoover” that people use the brand name “Hoover” to call a vacuum cleaner (James, 2005). The same assertion can be made about the brand “Bic” that consumers often refer to when talking about the pencil 's product category.

The “non-product-related attributes” sub-group is composed of 4 main elements: price information, the packaging, the user imagery and the usage imagery (Keller, 1993).

Price and packaging are considered as non-product-related attributes because they are both part of the consumption process and, most of the time, they are not directly related to the product performance (Keller, 2008). Price is a really essential association for consumers because it is a factor that allows them to evaluate the brand's value.

According to Keller the user and usage imagery give answers to the questions: “where and in what types of situations the product is used?” And “Who uses this product?” Associations of an average brand user rely mostly on demographic factors (gender, age, income, race, location...) and psychographic factors (lifestyles, interests, activity...). Associations of a traditional usage situation might depend on the time of the day, week or year, the location, the kind of activity...etc. For instance, the brand “Kleenex” is very closely linked with the usage association: “blowing your nose” (James, 2005). Moreover, usage and user image attributes are likely to create brand personality attributes, especially for brands that are involved with product’s categories where few physical differences are apparent (Aaker, 1996). For instance, within the mineral water market, it is very difficult for a consumer to make an opinion about one particular brand in relying only on physical features therefore in this product category, the brand personality will be critical for the brand differentiation. If we take the example of the mineral water brand “Contrex”, we can state that it is very much associated with the facet of “Femininity” since the label on the packaging of each plastic bottle depicts a slender women with the famous slogan: “my weight loss partner”. We could make the exact same observations with product categories such as cigarettes or coffees because these products are consumed in a social setting where the brand can make a visible statement about consumer (Aaker, 1996). Finally, we could add the country of origin’s association to Keller’s non-related product attributes because in some cases it plays a very influential role in how people perceive a brand.

We move on to the second component of brand associations based on the Keller’s model: the benefits. Generally speaking, the benefits are strongly related to what does the brand to make the consumer meet his needs. Therefore this type of association can be understood through the Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Keller divides the brand benefits into three main categories: the functional, experiential and symbolic needs. The functional benefits are the intrinsic advantages of a product or a service; they are linked with the basic needs of Maslow’s hierarchy (physiological and safety needs). For instance, the main functional benefit of a car is to get you from point A to B in a fast way and in any weather circumstances. Then, the experiential benefits fulfill the desire for products to provide “sensory pleasure, variety and cognitive stimulation” (Keller, 2008). Typically, when driving a sport-car with high braking and acceleration’s performances, a consumer can feel an “adrenaline rush” and extreme speed sensation. Finally, the symbolic benefits are “designed to

associate a person with a desired group, role or self-image” (Keller, 2008). Indeed, this kind of benefits satisfies the needs for self-enhancement, ego identification, group membership or even social approval. For instance, purchasing a luxury-car will bring a consumer symbolic benefits such as exclusivity, sumptuous lifestyle, prestige, beauty, refinement, elegance and so on.

Finally, Keller believes that “attitudes” is the last component of the brand associations. He defines it as “the consumer’s overall evaluation of a brand”.

B. Associative networks: consumer’s mental map

“Understanding the content and the structure of the brand knowledge are essential because they both influence what comes to mind when a consumer thinks about a brand” (Keller, 1993). In the previous section, the author presented the content of the brand knowledge that was embedded in the consumer’s mind. In this present section, the researcher tackles the structure of brand knowledge, in other words, the way brand associations are represented in the consumer’s mind.

Since the 1970’s, Psychological researchers such as Anderson and Bower have recognized the fact that consumers store information in memory in the form of networks (Henderson et al., 1998). They effectively support, in bringing empirical evidences, the idea by which knowledge in people’s mind are represented as associative networks that are composed of nodes. Based on the associative network model, the brand image in the consumer’s mind can be depicted as one original node (brand node) that is attached to many other nodes. The other nodes that are linked to the “brand original node” represent the perceived brand associations that are tied to the brand name. In 1975, Collins and Loftus, two cognitive psychologists, came up with the “influential network model” that relies on the spreading-activation theory (Keller, 1993). Their model help to understand better the memory retrieval process of a consumer when prompted to give information about a given object. Indeed, according to the concept of spreading-activation, when a person is confronted to a stimulus, activation of the node related to that stimulus occurs. Then, activation spreads from the node that has just been stimulated to other linked nodes in the memory (Henderson et al., 1998). This spreading-activation model explains how knowledge linked to a brand is extracted from our memory. *Fig.2*, just below,

presented by Mathiesen, displays that when the brand Nike is activated, the consumer will attached primary associations to it such as: Nike’s “swoosh” logo, “Running shoes”, “Michael Jordan” and “Child labor”. These four nodes represent primary associations because they are directly linked to the original node “Nike”. We can notice that the links that make the connection between the original brand node and the four other nodes have a different thickness. It means that the strongest primary association to be retrieved from memory will be “Running shoes” and then, in respective order the “swoosh”, “Child labor” and “Michael Jordan” (Mathiesen, 2007). In addition, we can state that the four other nodes “NBA”, “African American”, “Air Pads” and “Pakistan” are secondary associations for Nike as they are not directly linked to the original node. Moreover, the “swoosh” logo and Michael Jordan represent unique associations as no other athletic companies are directly connected to these nodes.

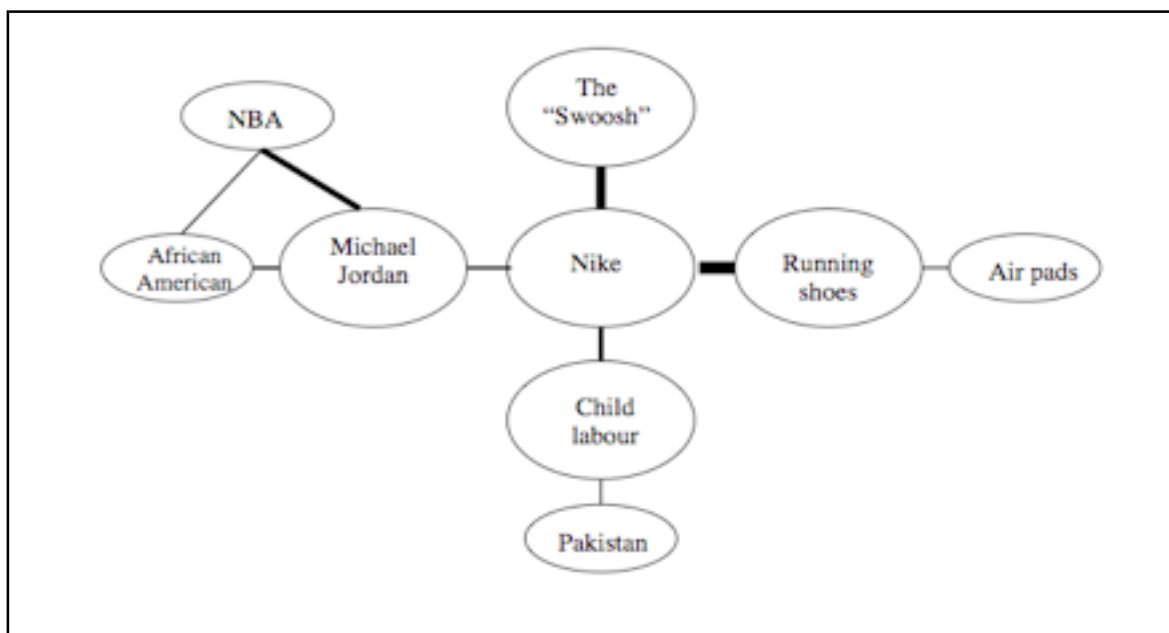


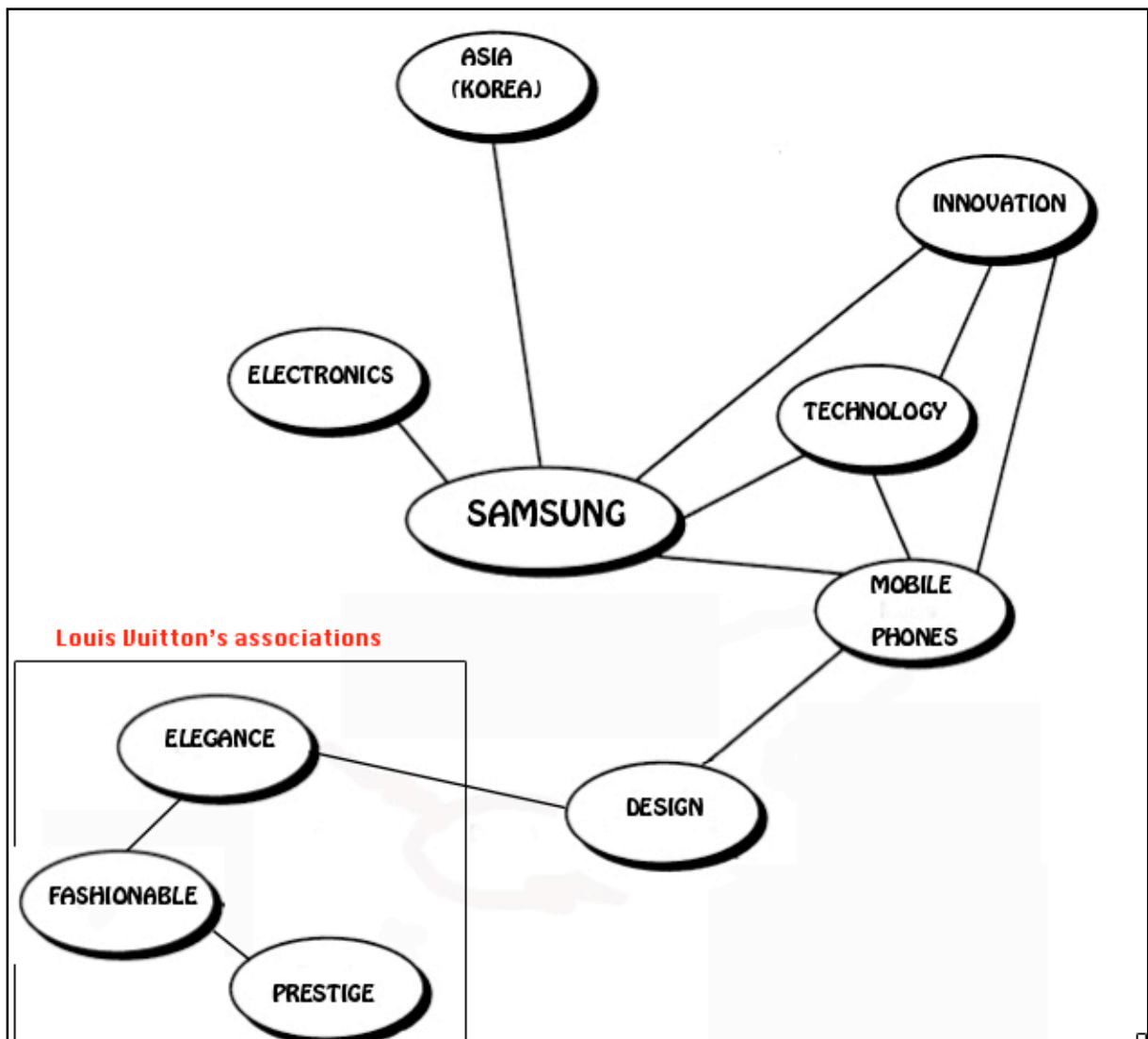
Fig.2. Mathiesen (2007) Nike’s network

C. Co-branding's impact on brand associative network

« Brand alliance potentially represents new evaluations and associations for both brands » (Simonin and Ruth, 1998)

The cognitive consistency's theory, put forward by psychologist, implies that the fact of partnering a brand with another entity creates a new set of associations for the brand that comes from the entity (Keller, 2008). The mechanism works like this: when a consumer has acknowledged a link between a brand and another entity, he assumes that some of the specific associations that characterize the entity may characterize the brand as well. Most of the time, the associations, which are transferred from the brand to the other entity, are not primary but secondary. Indeed, primary associations represent attributes that are strongly linked to the brand and might be irrelevant to the other entity's image therefore the transferability of this knowledge is unlikely to happen (Keller, 2008). For instance, if the luxury brand Louis Vuitton were to partner with Samsung to make a co-branded mobile phone, even if the co-branded product is positively evaluated, consumers would not hold a core or unique Louis Vuitton's attribute in their mind such as "leather luggage-maker" because this association has absolutely no relevant connection with the brand Samsung. However, Louis Vuitton could lend brand associations such as "Prestige" or "Fashionable" or even "Elegance" to its partner associative network. Then, Samsung would possess some of Louis Vuitton 's attributes as third degree associations in its network as it is shown on *Fig.3*, which depicts a possible Samsung's associative network subsequent to a co-branding.

Fig.3. The possible spillover effects of Louis Vuitton on Samsung associative network subsequent to a co-branding



4. Co-branding

A. Co-branding and its various types

It is essential to define the term co-branding to fully understand its broad effects on the involved brands but also its more specific impacts on consumers perceptions and parent brands equity. The literature of co-branding shows that there is not one universal accepted definition of co-branding for the simple reason that different forms of co-branding exist. However, the common characteristic that can be found in each type of co-branding remains the idea of collaboration between two independent brands whether it occurs at a technology development level, a marketing level or a production level (Soojin et al., 2006). Blacken and Boad (1999) made a general definition that grasps the concept of co-branding: “ a form of cooperation between two or more brands with a significant customer recognition, in which all the participants’ brand names are retained” (Motion et al., 2003).

In the literature several terms refer to co-branding, some are synonyms (brand alliance, composite branding, joint marketing) and others represent more specific types of co-branding (ingredient branding, joint promotion, cross promotion, bundled product, collaboration on core components). Here we can distinguish two main categories of co-branding: the physical alliance and the symbolic alliance. Their ultimate goals are quite different because one strategy will just focus on the symbolic effects elicited by a brand alliance whereas the other will go beyond involving a merger at production level of the branded product.

It is important to identify the types of co-branding that are embedded within the physical alliance family in order to understand their final purposes.

First, there is the “ingredient branding” strategy that happens when one brand manufactures a product that integrates one of the main technology or component of a second brand (Cegarra, 2003). For instance, the Microprocessor’s brand Intel is a component brand of many computer brands. In the sportswear industry, the technology of the brand Gore-Tex is integrated in clothes and apparels manufactured by many world-known athletic brands. Consequently, this form of co-branding consists in transferring one physical attribute from one brand to a product manufactured by a second brand.

Secondly, the “collaboration on core components” strategy represents another type of physical co-branding which is less unilateral than the “ingredient branding” in the

sense that it is not just one asset from the first brand integrated in one basic product from the second brand. Indeed, in this case, two brands bring their skills and know-how together to manufacture one unique product (Mathiesen, 2007). The example that illustrates the best the “collaboration of core components” remains SonyEriksson where Sony Company brought the Cybershot and Walkman technologies into a cell phone developed by Erikson brand. Within the athletic industry, the Nike + Ipod technology is another instance that shows what “collaboration of core components” is all about. As a matter of fact, Nike conceived specific running shoes that comprise a cavity under the insole designed to host a sensor elaborated by Apple. The sensor allows recording the distance and pace of a walk or a run.

Consequently, it seems that physical alliances are implemented to gain access to know-how, competence and production facilities that one company doesn't possess.

Now we moved on to the symbolic alliance family, which does not involve any collaboration at the conception or production level. Symbolic alliances are mostly represented by two forms of co-branding: the “joint promotional campaign” and the “bundle product”. The “joint promotional campaign” strategy has several synonyms such as cooperative advertising, joint sales promotion or advertising alliance and they all consist in associating a first manufacturer's brand to a second brand that will generate added symbolic attributes (Cegarra, 2003). Companies are keen to use this co-branding technique especially within the mobile phone and car industries because it allows an association transfer from one brand to another by merging the associative networks of the two. Most of the time, the brand that accepts to give its trademark to another brand receives financial compensation. LG's Prada, Samsung/Armani or Nokia/Versace mobile phones are perfect examples of Joint promotional campaigns. Renault has partnered with Perrier, the mineral gas water brand, in order to launch a unique edition of the “Twingo” featuring Perrier original color and logo. By making a “Roland Garros” special edition of its 307 model, the carmaker Peugeot obviously strives to link its products with the international grand Slam tennis tournament's positive values such as “sports” and “prestige”.

Finally, the last type of symbolic co-branding is called the “product bundling”. In the literature it is defined as “two or more products marketed in a single package” (Simonin and Ruth, 1998). In other words, it is a sales promotion strategy that occurs when one brand makes an offer comprising its own products with another branded product. This kind of co-branding is particularly used in the context of a complementary of brands towards the usage of their products. The best example of

“product bundling” is implemented by the brands Bacardi and Coca-cola that package their products together due to the success of the so-called “Bacardi Cola”. In the next section, the author looks at the underlying factors that influence the most consumers’ judgments about a co-branding. It is a really essential issue that has to be covered here, as the consumer’s overall evaluation of the co-branding itself is likely to affect subsequently its perceptions towards the individual brands in the co-branding (Simonin and Ruth, 1998).

B. Which elements determine the likeability of a co-branding?

Simonin and Ruth are among the few researchers who made significant advances in the area of co-branding related to consumer issues. As a matter of fact, their empirical studies put the stress on how people react to a given co-branding and what effects does it have on their attitudes towards each individual brand. Their findings reveal the existence of various factors that are likely to influence the favorableness of consumer’s perception about a co-branding. They found that prior attitudes toward each brand, the perceived fit of products, and the perceived fit of brands represented the main three factors that affect consumer’s judgments about a co-branding (Simonin and Ruth, 1998). The perceived fit of products refers to the perceived compatibility and complementarity of the parent brands’ product categories whereas the perceived fit of brands is related to the perceived similarity of the images of the two parent brands (Leuthesser et al. 2002). These findings were consistent with results from different studies in the arena of co-branding. Indeed, in 1996, Park et al. made their investigation on the effects of product complementarity on co-branded product’s perception. They exposed two fictitious co-branding to subjects: “Godiva cake mix by Slim-fast” with high complementarity and “Godiva ice cream mix with Haagen-Dazs“. The high complementarity of the first co-brand accounted for by the fact that “Godiva cake mix was perceived to be good tasting, but high on calories, whereas Slim-Fast cake mix was perceived to be low on calories and low on taste » (Leuthesser et al. 2002). The low complementarity of the second brand accounted for by the fact that both brands were perceived to have rich tasting and high-calories products. Godiva/Slim-Fast co-brand resulted in getting better ratings among respondents than Godiva/Haagen-Dazs alliance despite the fact that Haagen-Dazs

rated much higher than Slim-Fast in terms of global brand image (Haagen-Dazs was perceived as a premium brand). Therefore, the results of this study suggested that complementarity product was an appeal factor in co-branding because complementarity permits the brand alliance to inherit the desirable attributes of each partnering brand (Leuthesser et al. 2002).

C. Main opportunities and pitfalls of co-branding

Many brands have increasingly implemented co-branding strategies these past recent years because this branding technique seems to have a broad range of benefits that goes from enhancing almost every aspect of the marketing funnel to limiting the burdensome expenditures related to the implementation of a new product (see *Fig.4*). In the subsequent section the author look at the main advantages brought by a co-branding strategy.

Firstly, the act of associating a brand with another can generate additional revenues. As we mentioned previously the “product bundling” is a typical way for a brand to generate more sales in using the appeal of a complementary brand. For instance, Bacardi’s buyers are given a free bottle of coke. In addition, an “ingredient branding strategy”, which is really close to a licensing strategy in terms of financial arrangements (royalties), contributes to generate additional revenue. For instance, the ingredient brands “Gore-Tex” (intelligent clothe), “Lycra” (intelligent clothe), “Intel” (processor chip) or even “NutraSweet” (artificial sweetener used in “Diet” coke) earn revenues from many brands only in giving them the right to integrate their technology into their products.

Secondly, co-branding is an alternative to overcome the traditional brand extension related problems such as lack of credibility feeling from consumers, the perceived lack of expertise or even product incompatibility with original brand. Indeed, if a brand wants to launch itself a new product that is too far from its original brand product category, it could faces several problems. First of all, it is likely that the brand failed to reach the suitable consumers in choosing an irrelevant distribution channel because of its lack of vision in this particular market. In addition, this new product faces the risk of having no credibility for consumers in this specific category in the sense that consumers won’t recognize any experience and know-how from the brand in the extended category therefore predictive negative image effects are to expect.

For instance, when the brand “Red Bull” associated with “danger” and “speed” for its famous energy drink full of chemicals has launched a natural and organic beverage last year called “Red bull Cola”. The Red bull’s brand extension seemed to have failed in terms of sales because of that lack of credibility’s problem, as the image behind the product introduced was absolutely irrelevant with the original brand image of Red Bull (“healthiness” and “nature” don’t fit with the original values of Red Bull). Contrary to Red Bull, the boating shoe manufacturer Sperry Top-Sider, that wanted to take advantage of the trend among the younger boaters, which consisted to wear sneakers instead of traditional boat shoes, selected the co-branding option to extend its products. Sperry Top-Sider realized that it didn’t possess enough competencies and the manufacturing expertise to seize this market opportunity successfully therefore the brand decided to partner with the athletic shoe company “New Balance”. Co-branding is likely to limit the risk of entering into a new product category in which consumers may question the firm’s expertise (Washburn et al., 2000). In the case of Sperry Top Sider’s co-branding, it proved to be very beneficial in terms of brand image as New Balance enjoys a worldwide reputation for quality and experience in the field of “running shoes” (Nunes et al., 2003). Moreover, it turned out to be financially advantageous as well if we consider the fact that partnering with another brand contributes to reduce the product introduction related costs, innovation and R&D’s costs.

Thirdly, it is important to tackle the co-branding effects on the brand equity of each parent brand. In the co-branding literature it is believed that the act of linking two brands, regardless of their initial equity perception, confer a more positive image to customer. Additionally, authors state, on the basis of empirical results, that high equity brands seem to not be diluted by their alliance with low equity brands and that this positive impact affected both the co-branded product and the brand equity of each co-brand ally (Washburn et al., 2000). Co-branding is clearly a strategy that allows a brand to acquire an equity that cannot be obtained without the contribution of a partner. For instance, this year, the carmaker Volkswagen pairs with Adidas to release a special edition of the “Golf TDI” it is not only to attract a new target of drivers but also to gain a certain type of brand equity associated to a successful athletic brand. Indeed, Volkswagen and Adidas have almost nothing in common except the country of origin that gives enough legitimacy to their new partnership through the eyes of the consumers. If the co-branded product is positively evaluated, it is likely that several desirable attributes attached to Adidas transfer to

Volkswagen's product image to leverage its overall equity. Few years ago, Renault implemented a similar strategy in launching the Twingo/Kenzo's co-branding car to reinforce its stylish 's image (Geylani et al., 2005). In respect to the "integration theory", the additional brand name provides information to the consumer about the presence of desirable attributes that may appear into the co-branded product (Rao & Ruekert, 1994).

In the above section, we went over the underlying opportunities that go along with co-branding strategies in order to give a better understanding of how a brand alliance can positively affect both of the organizations involved. The next and last paragraph of the literature review is dedicated to the dangers that can bring a thoughtless co-branding.

As we explained previously, product complementarity is believed to be a key to the success in co-branding, however in some cases, it seems that this parameter is taken for granted which results in a brand mismatch that is likely to affect both the co-brand and the parent brands negatively. Moreover, negative effects can occur when a consumer had a negative bad past-experience with one of the parent brands in the co-branding. This consumer might have reluctant feelings towards the co-branding itself and the other brand partner as well. For instance, when Intel experienced quality problem with its Pentium processors, Dell and Gateway 2000 were concerned about the negative spillover on their brands (Simonin and Ruth, 1998).

Finally, brand dilution is defined as "when the brand loses its meaning to consumers" (Nunes et al., 2003). Brand confusion or brand dilution might happen when consumers are exposed to a co-branding that comprises two brand's images that are inconsistent or dissimilar (Geylani et al., 2005) The brand Calvin Klein, one of the greatest names in the fashion-clothing world faced large dilution problems at the beginning of the years 2000 with one of its main licensee "Warnaco". As a matter of fact, Warnaco had the CK's Jeanswear and underwear license and was selling a tremendous volume of products bearing the famous CK logo to discount stores and low-cost retailers. Calvin Klein sued Warnaco for "improper sales", charging its partner for diluting the equity of its brand. After several lawsuits from the two sides, Warnaco had still the right to sell CK's products in discounters at "dramatically reduced volume" (Keller, 2008)

Fig.4. The advantages and disadvantages in implementing a co-branding

Advantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Borrow needed expertise- Leverage brand equity- Reduce cost of product introduction: sharing costs with partner- Source of additional Revenue (broader your customer-base)- A way to reposition the brand- Gain market place exposure
Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Loss of control- Risk of brand equity dilution- Negative feedback effects- Lack of brand focus and clarity

Research Methodology

1. Research design

The method research literature tells us *“which type of research design to employ depends on the nature of the problem. When the nature of the topic under study cannot be measured in a structure and quantifiable manner, exploratory research is appropriate.”* (Malhotra and Birks, 2006)

In this paper, the nature of the problem is qualitative as we ask people about their brand’s perceptions and beliefs, the researcher expect them to draw out associations from their mental associative network. We consider that this task demands time, reflection, but also interactions with other people, as no one is frequently asked to think of all the possible associations linked to a brand. Therefore, an exploratory research based on a qualitative method seems to be the most suitable to collect specific perceptual associations.

In addition, the authors Malhotra and Birks state that *“primary objective of exploratory research is to provide insights and understanding of marketing phenomena”* and this dissertation aims at understanding better a branding phenomenon which is: how people perceive a brand before and after seeing this brand involved in a co-branding situation? Consequently, it seems that this research paper has clearly an exploratory objective.

A. Exploratory research objectives

Exploratory comes from the word exploration therefore it seems logical that “The goal of exploratory research is to discover” (McQuarrie, 2006). This paper has also an exploratory research objective as I am trying to seek answers to the questions just below:

1. How much a brand alliance affects subsequently one of the parent brands in terms of brand associations? Are brand perceptions and brand beliefs updated when consumers are exposed to a co-branding?
2. Does brand transfer some of its own associations to the other brand through a co-branding?

B. Qualitative Research

The research method literature states that “*quantitative results by themselves lack insights into perceptions, motivations and attitudes: such insights come from well-devised qualitative enquiries*” (Malhotra and Birks, 2006). Moreover, it is asserted that qualitative research usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman and Bell, 2007). In this paper, the researcher aims at collecting and analyzing “brand associations” that are held within the mind of consumers. Therefore this research appears to be qualitative in its nature, as we will place emphasis on human data rather than physical data.

2. Method to collect primary qualitative data

This dissertation aims at assessing the post effects of a brand alliance between Armani and Reebok on consumer’s perceptions towards one of the partner brands, which is, in this case, Reebok. To investigate this issue, firstly, we need to evaluate if the associative network of a brand have been updated through co-branding exposure and secondly, we have to detect if a transfer of associations operate from one brand to another in the consumer’s mind. To do so, firstly, the researcher needs to look at the associations held in people’s mind about Reebok and Emporio Armani without being exposed to their co-branding. Secondly, the researchers must collect associations held about Reebok by people who are previously exposed to the co-branding. Then, the researcher will strive to detect if the brand Emporio Armani influences Reebok’s image and perception through the co-branding. The author must collect primary data in the first place in using two small discussion groups to gather a substantial number of brand associations related to the brands Reebok and Emporio Armani.

“Small discussion groups”

The method research literature suggests that brainstorming has been commonly used in the context of management and marketing issues because it makes ideas flow freely from interactions between members. Interactions help to create a favorable atmosphere to generate ideas. Moreover, within a brainstorming group, it is believed that “people feed off each other and creatively reveal ideas” (Malhotra and Birks, 2006). Based on the previous statement, the researcher considers that conducting a brainstorming group is an appropriate method to encourage and stimulate people to draw out associations related to a given brand.

Traditional problems related to the brainstorming groups

- Production blocking: happens when a participant has an idea but someone else is already talking. If people wait too long before being able to share an idea with the group, they can forget the idea they were about to say out loud or think that their idea is redundant or no more interesting. Production blockings are likely to occur when the group discussion is too large or if one person is too talkative (Malhotra and Birks, 2006).
- Evaluation apprehension is another drawback that can occur when group members are reluctant to speak out on something because they feel intimidated, shy, or they become anxious about what others think of their ideas. Evaluation apprehension is likely to occur when groups tend to be too small or too large (Malhotra and Birks, 2006).

3. Techniques of elicitation

A. The method “elicitation of free associations” within the discussion groups

« *Elicitation of free association is a straightforward and informative way to capture brand associations* » (Danes et al., 2010)

The method of “elicitation of free associations” will be used to generate as many associations as possible from the participants (Cegarra & Michel, 2002). Typically, this method consists in asking the simple question: “When you think of Microsoft, what comes to your mind?”

The main objective is to let people talk freely about a main topic; the role of the moderator is very reductive because he doesn't intervene a lot however he can stimulate the participants at the beginning of the focus group. If the respondents struggle in getting started in their descriptions, the moderator should give an easily understood example (Keller, 2008).

K. Keller states in his publication that, the simplest and direct way to measure brand personality and brand image by extension, is to request open-ended responses to a probe in asking questions such as: “if the brand were to come alive, what would it be? What would it do?” (Keller, 2008). Without giving a proper name to this technique, it is though really clear that Keller refers to the « elicitation of free association »

Traditional problems related to the method “elicitation of free associations”

The lack of brand familiarity or brand awareness can results in providing poor feedbacks from the respondents. For instance, if participants don't have enough knowledge towards a given brand, they won't be likely to draw out many associations related to this brand. The researcher implemented a pilot test with a group of seven participants to verify the reliability of this technique. The main conclusion drawn from this pilot test was that the participants were not inspired enough to draw out a significant amount of associations simply with the intrinsic knowledge they possess about the brands Reebok and Emporio Armani. Consequently, the researcher found that giving supportive material to encourage participants to draw out associations that fit the best the brands.

2. The Stimuli

According to Anderson (1981), “Information integration theory” describes the process by which stimuli are combined to form beliefs or attitudes. This theory suggests that, “attitudes or beliefs are formed and modified as people receive, interpret, evaluate and then integrate stimulus information with existing beliefs or attitudes” (Simonin et al, 1994). If we rely on the “information integration theory”, the use of a stimulus for the brands “Reebok”, “Emporio Armani” and “EA7/Reebok” could help us discovering how a co-branding between Armani and Reebok could subsequently affect the brand “Reebok” in terms of values and associations. We hope that those stimuli will have an impact on the respondents’ feedbacks towards the brands in order to assess whether a transfer of associations and values occurred from “Armani” to “Reebok” after the acknowledgement of a brand alliance.

Moreover, the brand EA7/Reebok was created in January 2010 and hit the retail in Europe last July. So far, the distribution has been very limited to Emporio Armani Boutiques and the online Reebok’s store (Reebok Corporate release, 2010a). Since the world introduction of EA7/Reebok at the FW’10 Emporio Armani fashion show in Milan last January, no advertising effort has been done to promote the brand with the exception of one spectacular advertising campaign in Moscow which managed to showcase the 2010 EA7/Reebok collection on a giant animated digital screen with dimensions of 220m x 15m. (Reebok Corporate release, 2010b)

The newness of the brand combined with a limited distribution strategy suggests that currently a large majority of mainstream customers are not aware of the launching of this brand yet. As a matter of fact, the likelihood that consumers identify “EA7/Reebok” is very low and therefore the likelihood that pre-existing consumers’ perceptions of Reebok would already be influenced by Armani should be low as well. This is the reason why I have chosen specifically this co-branding to carry out my experiment as it is based on an current new born co-branding and not a fictitious one, which seems to be the case of the studies that have covered the topic of brand alliance so far.

Finally, as French consumers are not aware yet of the “Reebok/EA7” existence, it is essential to hand out a stimulus presenting the products, the essence and spirit of the brand through pictures. The research has been implemented in Nice, which is located in south of France. Since the brand is not accessible in brick and mortar stores (with the exception of one Emporio Armani Boutique) and not visible at this moment in Nice (no billboards have been installed, no ads on news papers yet, no broadcast on radios or TVs), respondents were not exposed to an actual product from EA7/Reebok but to a material that grasps the essence of EA7/Reebok. The document provided a broad range of pictures comprising the brand logo and various EA7/Reebok products. All these pictures were retrieved from the Internet. In addition to the pictures, a 20 seconds advertising video clip taken from the web have been used to elicit more feedbacks and reactions from the respondents. This stimulus represented their first exposure to this new co-branding.

3. J. Aaker’s Brand personality Scale

It is essential to point out that the author of this paper did not have any intention of reproducing a brand personality test as the researcher J. Aaker did. As a matter of fact, J. Aaker’s purpose was to make some 600 respondents rate 37 different brands according to her personality scale. Her final objective was to observe how much a given brand scored in each of her five underlying factors that encompassed several personality traits. To do so, every participant had to rate how descriptive each given personality trait was on a 7-point scale (Keller, 2008). However, in this paper, the author aimed at using only the personality traits that were comprised in the test for different purposes. In fact, the researcher asked to each participant involved in the experiment to select the adjectives that characterized the most the two brands under study among the 42 adjectives (traits) at their disposal. No 7-point scale was used in the experiment, as the objective was not to grade Reebok and Emporio Armani but more to make respondents define the brand identity according to their own beliefs and perceptions. One of the researcher main concerns was also to get respondents in the right frame of mind to further make them draw out their own associations. Indeed, a pilot test conducted on 8 subjects group revealed that participants were not much inspired to draw out brand associations if prior a personality test had not been given to them. Therefore, the test was given more as a means of elicitation than a technique utilized to compare in details the personality of our two brands.

Fig.5. Mathiesen, (2007) J.Aaker's brand personality scale

Trait	Facet	Factor
down-to-earth	Down-to-earth	Sincerity
family-oriented		
small-town		
honest	Honest	
sincere		
real	Wholesome	
wholesome		
original		
cheerful	Cheerful	
sentimental		
friendly	Daring	Excitement
daring		
trendy		
exciting	Spirited	
spirited		
cool	Imaginative	
young		
imaginative		
unique	Up-to-date	
up-to-date		
independent	Reliable	Competence
contemporary		
reliable		
hard working	Intelligent	
secure		
intelligent	Successful	
technical		
corporate		
successful	Upper class	Sophistication
leader		
confident		
upper class	Charming	
glamorous		
good looking	Outdoorsy	Ruggedness
charming		
feminine		
smooth	Tough	
outdoorsy		
masculine		
Western	Tough	
tough		
rugged		

4. Samples of Respondents for small “brainstorming” groups

Geography:

Participants of the focus groups were students from The IPAG Business School of Nice located in South of France.

Profile:

Participants were exclusively French students who enroll at IPAG. In the first place, the author wanted to conduct the discussion groups in English with foreign students involved in an international program at IPAG to avoid translating the stimulus materials and the results as well. However, a pilot test was implemented and it revealed that selecting foreign students to conduct a brainstorming group in English wasn't productive and efficient in terms of feedbacks. As a matter of fact, foreign student encountered difficulties to draw out brand associations in English because they didn't have enough vocabulary to express all the associations they thought about. The pilot test enabled to prove that “production blocking” could result from a lack of language knowledge.

Age:

As the international program of the School includes undergraduate and post-graduate, age varied from 19 to 25 years old. This segment of the population is likely to be relevant to each parent brand that targets the segment of young adults. As a matter of fact, EA7 and Emporio Armani represent the activewear labels of Armani's brand. According to Martin Roll, a world-renowned brand analyst, these Giorgio Armani's sub-brands design apparel dedicated to one specific target customers, which is, young adults in the 18 to 30 years old age group (Roll, 2010). As far as Reebok is concerned, the athletic brand targets obviously consumers who adopt an active lifestyle in order to sell their sports apparel. Generally speaking, young adults from 18 to 35 years old represent the category of the population that is the most involved in playing sport or doing exercises. Therefore, we can consider that Reebok perceives young adults in the 18 to 30 years old age group as a priority key target.

Gender:

According to the information taken from Reebok and Armani official websites, Reebok/EA7 designs products for men and women. Therefore, the research had no need to focus on a specific gender segment to implement my brainstorming groups.

Structure:

The researcher managed to recruit 18 participants to conduct the 2 brainstorming groups. 9 participants per focus group seems to be a good number as a group discussion is generally composed from 6 to 12 members to make sure that synergies of idea sharing provide a large number of data. Groups of fewer than six participants might miss the prime objective of generating group dynamics (Malhotra and Birks, 2006). Moreover, It is believed that the fact of having too many people in an interaction group can have inhibiting effects on individual such as production blocking, social loafing or evaluation apprehension (Danes et al., 2010).

5. Research layout: implementation plan

Prerequisite

In order to improve the trustworthiness of the data collection method the researcher used an audio recorder for both focus group sessions. Moreover, it was ensured that each participant has previously answer negatively to the questions: “Do you know the brand EA7/Reebok?” & “Have you ever heard about the brand EA7/Reebok?”

Group 1

In this group, the purpose was to elicit participants to draw out associations they held about Reebok and Emporio Armani. The research proceeded brand by brand not to bring the confusion among the group members.

Step 1

Participants were exposed to stimulus material related to Reebok, about 10 minutes was given to them to allow them to immerse themselves in Reebok’s culture and identity.

Step 2

The personality test sheet was handed out to each one of them. Respondents were asked to circle the human personality traits that best described the brand under study. No limits were imposed regarding the amount of traits that could be circled. Participants had about 10 minutes to execute this task then the researcher collected all the brands personality test.

Step 3

The method of “elicitation of free associations” was used towards the brand Reebok. The researcher asked the question to the whole group: When you think of Reebok, What comes to your mind?

The researcher gave 15 minutes to all the group members to think and talk together about this question. Then, the researcher told the participants to write down at least two associations on a paper that best described the brand. Finally, the researcher asked participants one by one to give their associations out loud and each time a participant drew out an association, the moderator wrote it on a board.

It is important to point out that the researcher guided the participants if needed, in giving examples of the types of associations that are relevant for the study (brand

image attributes, functional associations, emotional associations, products of the brands...)

Idem: the exact same procedure was carried out for Emporio Armani to collect the brand associations

Group 2:

Step 1

Participants from the second group were exposed to the “EA7/Reebok” stimulus at the beginning of the session. The stimulus images and video material gave them an overall picture of the brand. A certain time was allocated to allow them to shape and form their own brand image, as it was their first exposure and experience with the new co-branding. The moderator encouraged them to express themselves about the new co-branding in order to get them in the right frame of mind. In the meantime, the stimulus linked to Reebok, that was used to elicit associations in group 1, was also displayed to the subjects. The moderator justified the exposure to the Reebok stimulus in explaining that the tasks would target only Reebok and not the co-brand.

Step 2

10 minutes later, the personality test sheet was handed out to each one of them. Participants were asked to circle the human traits that best represented the brand “Reebok” solely. Participants had another 10 minutes to execute this task then the researcher collected all the brand personality tests. The brand Emporio Armani was not under study in this group.

Step 3

NB: Participants were asked to execute the exact same tasks than in group 1 but only towards “Reebok” this time.

Data Analysis:

The researcher observed if a transfer of associations occurred within the participants' mind from Armani to Reebok based on the brand alliance's exposure. To do so, a comparative analysis in the form of associative networks was undertaken based on the results collected in group 1 and group 2. The author strove to model the brand networks thanks to all the associations drawn out by the participants. The main objective of the researcher was to notice if some of Armani's associations collected from group 1 appeared within the Reebok's associative network modeled with the data collected in group 2.

FINDINGS

The quality and relevance of the research's results depends on the way data is analyzed. The information collected has to be analyzed bearing in mind the main objective of this study. Therefore, it appears critical to remind that this research paper aims at exploring firstly, whether or not a brand image is updated after an exposure to a co-branding and secondly, if this exposure allows a transfer of associations from one parent brand to the another. As we studied previously, the brand image is stored in the memory through a network made up of various associations (Keller, 1993). Moreover, the literature asserts that associative networks are believed to be important to mapping the effects of co-branding (Henderson et al., 1998). Indeed, in the past, associative networks allowed branding researchers to provide a better understanding of the perceptions consumers have of brands (Henderson et al., 1998). Therefore, the author decides to adopt a consumer brand associative network approach to detect whether co-branding affects subsequently the image of the parent brands. To do so, the researcher must model the respondents' perceptions as associative networks in taking into consideration the brand personality results combined with the free associations drawn out by participants.

1. Findings depicted as brand associative networks

The researcher mapped the collected results of the group 1 and 2 as brand associative networks for two main reasons. First of all, networks allow rich qualitative data to be represented in a visual way that gives a really great insight towards the structure of the brand associations linked to the brand (Henderson et al., 1998). This structure is essential because it reflects how associations are organized in the consumer's mind. Indeed, the graphic depiction gives indications about the strength of the associations related to the brand insofar as the thickness of the tie and the distance between an association node and the brand node are relevant to how strong the association is embedded in the brand.

Second of all, the researcher chose to model his findings through associative networks because it permits to assess easily whether or not the brand image has been updated after a co-branding exposure. As a matter of fact, associative networks do a great work in giving instantly a visual insight on which associations contribute the most or the less to define and build the brand's image.

Finally, it is important to point out that only the most dominant personality associations appear in the following associative networks as the researcher gave the priority to the associations drawn out by the participants themselves instead of the ones from the given personality's list (see Fig. 6,7,8)

2. Findings from the first group

The first group of respondents was not exposed to the co-branding EA7/Reebok stimulus. Subjects were only confronted with stimuli related to the parent brands separately. The initial idea was to elicit the participants to make them draw out Reebok and Emporio Armani's associations. In the first place, the researcher uncovered the brand associations that were drawn out on the basis of the brand personality test. It was discovered that, for Reebok, 28 associations out of 42 were used to describe the brand whereas for Emporio Armani results were much more concentrated with 13 associations used out of 42. The personality associations used most frequently to define Reebok were: "*cool*", "*original*", "*outdoorsy*" (see Fig. 6).

As Armani was concerned, "*upper-class*" appeared in every personality sheet of paper; "*trendy*" and "*glamorous*" came just behind in term of frequency (see Fig. 7).

Then, "*successful*", "*glamorous*", "*exciting*" and "*feminine*" were less stronger associations related to Reebok than the previous ones insofar as they appear a little less frequently but these proved to be dominant as well in the sense there were mentioned verbally many times by respondents.

Secondly, most of the associations that were given based on the "elicitation of free association" were quite relevant to the personality traits selected previously and seemed coherent with the main products and activities developed by the two brands. Reebok elicited associations were mostly related to the sport industry such as "football US", "performance", "*speed*", "*rebound*", "*competition*", "*contest*", "*athletes*", "*trainers*" (see Fig. 6). The "**sports**" cluster targeting Reebok was well represented with 11 associations out of 19.

As for Emporio Armani, characteristics found to describe the brand were closely associated with high-end products and the luxury market. Thus, Participants identify the brand according to some of the following words: "*exclusive*", "*prestigious*", "*arrogant*", "*untouchable*", "*superficial*" (see Fig. 7). Not surprisingly, the "**fashion**" cluster ranked high in term of number of associations given with 10

Finally, the researcher noticed that there was a contrast between the two brands regarding the negative associations that were given in the group 1. There were 7 associations out of 20 describing Emporio Armani as being: “Fake”, “pretentious”, “arrogant”, “cocky”, “superficial”, “macho”, “tacky”. However Reebok had only 3 out of 23.

Fig.6. Perceptual Associative network of Reebok: pre-alliance sample

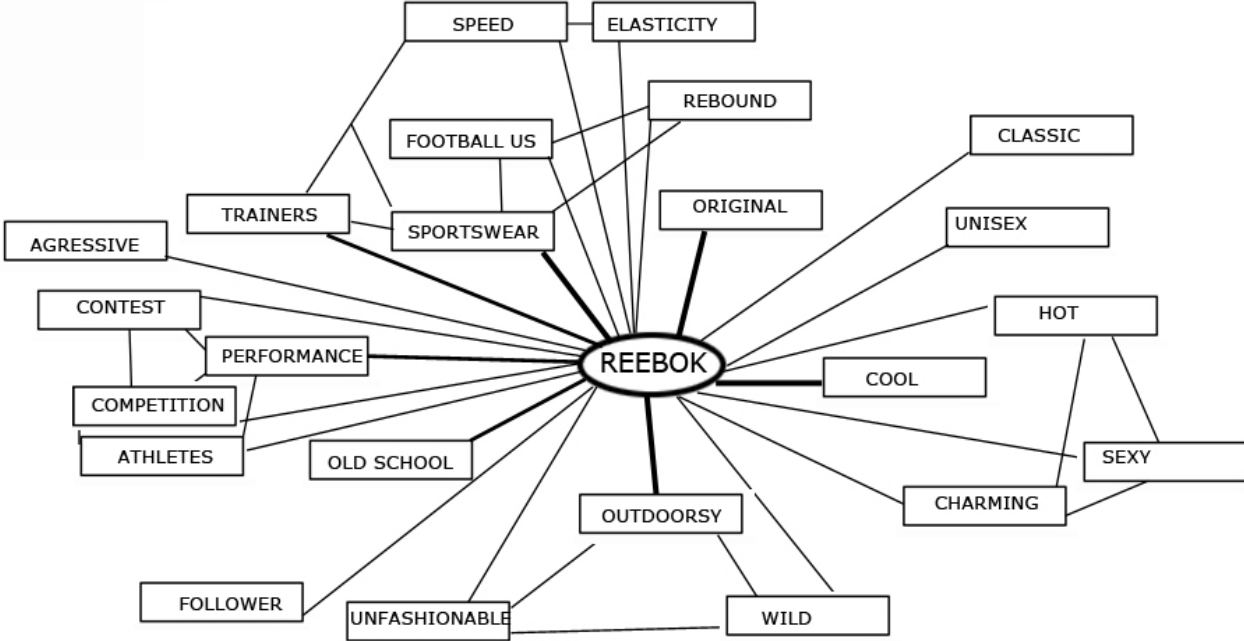
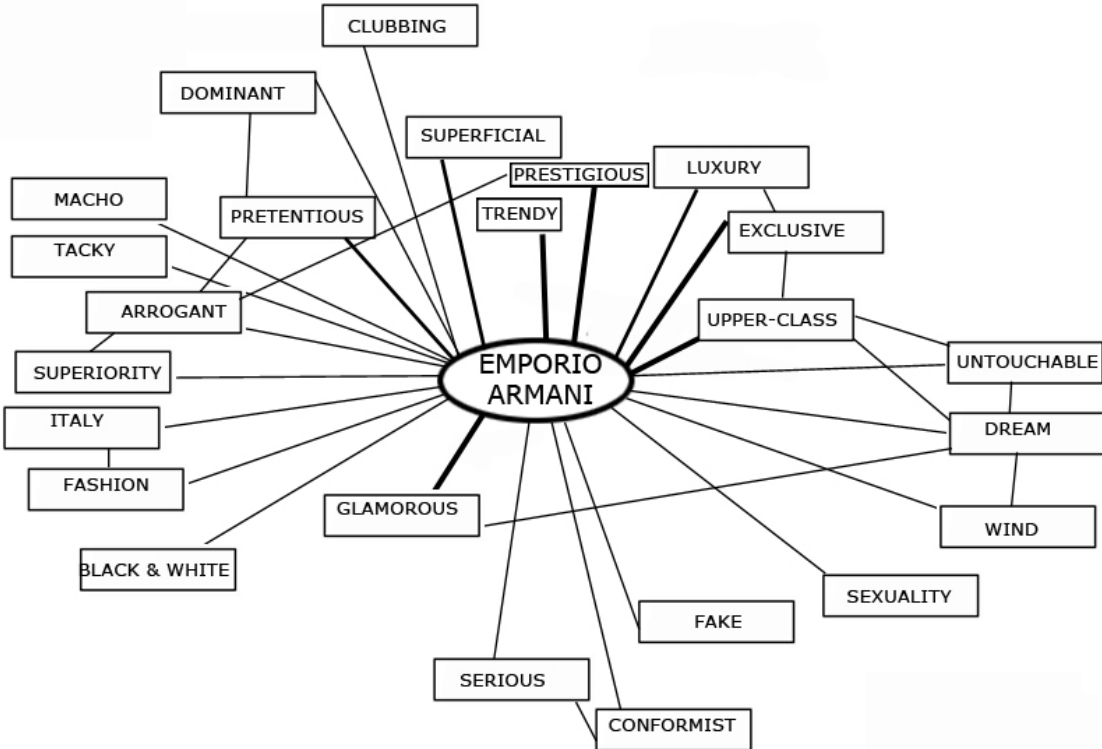


Fig.7. Perceptual Associative network of Emporio Armani: pre-alliance sample



3. Findings from the second group

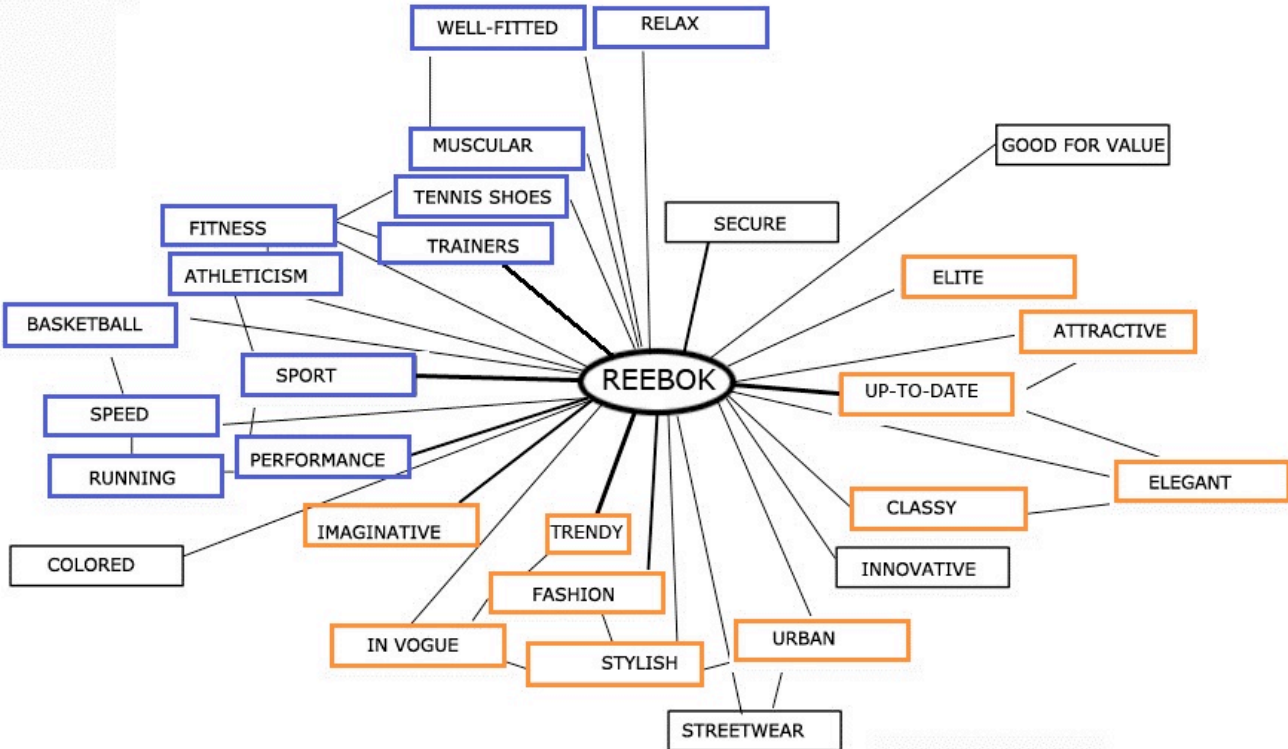
The second group of respondents was the cornerstone of this research in the sense that the results collected would reveal whether or not a co-branding affects consumers beliefs and perceptions toward one of the parent brands. Indeed, in this section, the researcher will assess the changes that occur towards Reebok's image between group 1 (not exposed to the alliance) and group 2 (exposed to the alliance). We start the findings of the second group by dealing only with the associations from the J. Aaker 's brand personality test.

The first notable difference between group 1 and 2 was that only 16 personality traits out of 42 were used to describe Reebok whereas in the first group there were almost the double (28 different personality associations). Furthermore, in relying on the parameter of frequency, the strongest descriptive associations for Reebok in order of recurrence were: *"up-to-date"*, *"trendy"*, *"imaginative"* and *"secure"*. Thus, within group 2, the most dominant personality associations of Reebok didn't match with the ones given within group 1. Indeed, it was surprising to observe the high rank of the terms *"trendy"* and *"up-to-date"* within group 2 since very few respondents referred to them within group 1. This contrast represented the sharpest change from group 1 to group 2 therefore it was legitimate to raise the following question: "Is this drastic variation due to the effects related to the exposure of the co-branding?" The outcomes of this experiment seemed to answer positively this question since the adjective *"trendy"* went from being irrelevant for describing Reebok's brand image in group 1 to representing the most appropriate one in group 2. Moreover, the other significant change that could be ascribed to the co-branding exposure is the high rate of the personality trait *"up-to-date"*. As a matter of fact, within group 2, 8 respondents out of 9 mentioned the *up-to date's* association whereas within group 1 no participant paid attention to this qualifier. Respondents from group 1 rather used the term "old school" which has the extreme opposite meaning. Again, it appears that the co-branding, involving a fashion brand naturally characterized as being *"trendy"* (term mostly used for qualifying Emporio Armani within group 1 might have played an important role in shaping the Reebok's brand image for participants from group 2. These findings suggested that the Armani/Reebok's co-branding produced spillover effects on the parent brand "Reebok" (Simonin & Ruth, 1998)

Now, we move on to the associations drawn out among the respondents from group 2 that were freely elicited. The main change compared to the Reebok's associations from group 1 came from the appearance of a "fashion's cluster" encompassing many

associations normally used to characterize a fashion brand. The “**fashion**” cluster comprised 8 associations: “*Urban*”, “*Elegant*”, “*High-end*”, “*In vogue*”, “*stylish*”, “*Innovative*”, “*Elite*”, and “*Classy*”. Furthermore, the researcher paid attention to the fact that no negative association was employed to characterize Reebok within group 2 whereas in group 1 an amount of 3 pejorative associations were registered. Finally, the major point of convergence between the Reebok’s associations found within group 1 and the ones found in group 2 came from the strength of the “**sport**” cluster that turned out to be steady.

Fig.8. Perceptual Associative network of Reebok: post-alliance sample



- Associations related to the sport’s cluster
- Associations related to the fashion’s cluster

4. Key Findings

- Within group 1 (not exposed to the brand alliance), the personality associations used the most frequently to characterize the brand Reebok were respectively: “*outdoorsy*”, “*cool*” and “*original*” (see Fig. 6).
- Within group 1 (not exposed to the brand alliance), the most frequent associations drawn out freely about the brand Reebok were respectively: “*Sportswear*”, “*old school*”, “*performance*” and “*trainers*”(see Fig. 6).
- Within group 1 (not exposed to the brand alliance), the personality associations used the most frequently when referring to the brand Emporio Armani were respectively: “*upper-class*”, “*trendy*” and “*glamorous*” (see Fig. 7).
- Within group 2 (exposed to the brand alliance), the most frequent associations drawn out freely about the brand Reebok were respectively: “*Sport*”, “***fashion***”, “*performance*” and “*trainers*”(see Fig. 8). The term “***fashion***” being one the main aspects characterizing Emporio Armani, this finding suggests that the co-brand Reebok/EA7 generated spillover effects on the parent brand Reebok.
- Within group 2 (exposed to the brand alliance), the personality associations used the most frequently to characterize the brand Reebok were respectively: “*up-to-date*”, “***trendy***” and “*imaginative*” (see Fig. 8). The term “***trendy***” represents one of the major connotations related to the fashion brand therefore this change might be due to the Emporio Armani/Reebok co-branding’s spillover effect (post effects) on the brand Reebok.
- Within group 2 (exposed to the brand alliance) the brand Reebok elicited the emergence of a “***fashion***” cluster composed with a set of words referring to the fashion and luxury areas: “*Urban*”, “*Elegant*”, “*High-end*”, “*In vogue*”, “*stylish*”, “*Innovative*”, “*Elite*”, and “*Classy*”(see Fig. 8). This finding supports the theory of the co-branding spillover effects on the parent brands because before the exposure to the co-branding between Emporio Armani and Reebok no fashion or luxury related association was drawn out by participants however after being exposed to the co-brand stimulus respondents characterized Reebok with the above luxury’s terms (Simonin and Ruth, 1998).

- Within group 2, none of the participants expressed negative associations to evaluate Reebok's brand image whereas pejorative terms were given towards the same brand within group 1. This finding is consistent with Washburn et al. (2000) conclusions that backed up the idea that when a brand (Reebok) pairs with a high equity brand (Emporio Armani) it increases its own brand equity and by extension it is likely to enhance the whole range brand associations (see Fig. 6,7 & 8).
- Within both groups the “**sport**” cluster remained really strong within the overall range of associations drawn out to refer to the brand Reebok. Indeed, It resulted in being always the most represented category in terms of number of associations given by the respondents (see Fig. 6 & 8).

5. Limitations of the research

5.1. Trustworthiness and Generalizability

It appears essential to stress the fact that this research is not without limitations whether it was related to the experiment itself or to the qualitative nature of our research. The fact of exposing the limitations of our research is important insofar as the limitations seem to often affect the trustworthiness of the study.

Since the issue of “validity” is an important matter to consider in a research paper, it is necessary to define this term before going further. To the best of our knowledge, validity means the ability of the dissertation to measure what is intended to measure, therefore it relates to “whether you are observing, identifying and measuring what you say you are” (Bryman and Bell, 2007). It seems that the term “validity” have little bearing on our qualitative paper as the objective was to generate understanding from the observations made on the basis of focus groups and not to measure given quantitative variables (Bryman and Bell, 2007). As a matter of fact, it is indispensable to point out that the prime intent of this research paper was to collect data in order to support the theory of co-branding spillover effects put forward by Simonin & Ruth (1998). Moreover, the literature asserts, “Human data are different from physical data. Most notably, measurements on humans are subject to much greater

uncertainty than measurements taken on things, and are more mutable” (McQuarrie, 2006).

In addition, the nature of this research is automatically affected by the issue of generalizability as a very small sample was used to explore the post-effects of co-branding on the parent brands. Consequently, it makes it difficult to make any generalization out of our findings because sampling just comprised a total of 18 persons, which is not large enough to be assimilated to the whole population.

Furthermore, the author acknowledges that fact that in order to increase the trustworthiness of the conclusions made from this qualitative research, it would be necessary to replicate the following experiment several other times and in different cultural context as well.

5.2. Limitation of the experiments

A. The elicitation Methods:

First of all, the J.Aaker’s brand personality test showed some limits in the sense that the 42 personality traits provided in the list represent only positive associations. At first, the element had the effect of bothering the respondents because they felt like the personality test was a brand descriptive tool that was one-sided. This is one of the main reasons that forced the researcher not to exploit this test as the unique collection method of brand associations. This limit justifies the fact that the brand personality scale was used half to describe the brand according to non-product related characteristics and half as a stimulation method to further get participants to draw out freely their own brand associations.

Secondly, the amount of personality traits should have been restricted to a certain number. Typically, within group 1, Reebok had almost two times more personality associations than Emporio Armani. Consequently, just a few associations seemed to rise above others therefore it sometimes was quite challenging for the researcher to take make a distinction between the dominant and less dominant personality associations in order to identify a trend out of the results.

Thirdly, it seemed that some of the brand associations given by the participants were too directly related to the stimuli provided during the group session. Indeed, it was observed that the influence of the brand stimuli got to the point where subjects tried more to describe the images than the brand itself through the overall available

images. They were confused because they didn't know if they had to rely mostly on the images provided or take out their raw perceptions of the brands. It resulted in collecting, in some cases, certain associations that were highly close to the pictures offered by our stimuli.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that some of the group participants encountered difficulties to ascribe human qualities to the brands under study either because they lacked brand knowledge or because they did not seem to grasp the brand's personality concept. The best way found by the researcher to overcome these difficulties was to give meaning examples to the participants such as: "Marlboro brand inspires masculinity, ruggedness, freedom, adventure... or Axe brand makes us think of seduction, womanizers, sensuality..."

B. The group's participants:

All the respondents were French post-graduate students from the researcher's business school. As it is quite difficult to find random participants willing and available to come for participating in a one-hour focus group's session, the researcher has to use his personal social network to gather a substantial number of people in order to undertake the experiment. Therefore, the sample was not very representative of the population insofar as people who have a master degree don't account for the majority of the population. This element might have contributed to bias the findings a little because the person involved in the focus group were knowledgeable about topics such as branding, marketing strategy, brand equity and so on. Therefore their feedbacks and descriptions were certainly richer or more developed than the ones of an average person taken randomly from the population. Although, the business and marketing's background possessed by each group's participant might have altered the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher considers it was advantageous because they could deliver a balanced feedback towards the brand image comprising pejorative and positive associations.

Moreover, the linguistic aspect could have diminished the trustworthiness of the collected data, as the overall information from the focus groups was primarily gathered in French to be then translated in English. The J.Aaker's brand personality test was also translated from English to French. Giving the fact that the researcher was not a native English speaker and was the one responsible for the linguistic manipulations, it is conceivable that the authentic meaning of some associations might have been lost in translation.

Discussion and Conclusions

According to Van Osselaer and Alba (2000), “Consumers learn to predict product quality based on brand and/or product attribute cues” (Washburn et al., 2004). In the mean time, Huang and Yu (1999) came to the conclusion that consumers acquire associations between a brand, brand attitudes and brand benefits over time either through direct (trial) and indirect experience (advertising). “These associations lead consumers to an overall perception of the brand”(Washburn et al., 2004). These findings from the literature uphold the idea that experience is a key factor in the building process of brand associations. Therefore, we can state that the results of our experiment prove to be consistent with the theories from literature in the sense that the finding from our research totally support the fact that brand acquires connotations in consumer’s through indirect experiences such as an exposure to a co-brand stimulus. Indeed, the research’s outcomes showed that subjects who experienced a co-branding exposure involving a fashion brand and an athletic brand, had subsequently a different perception towards the athletic brand from the subjects who were not exposed to this co-branding stimulus. Consequently, our findings appear to answer positively to the research first question: “Are brand perceptions and brand beliefs updated when consumers are exposed to a co-branding?” Though it is necessary to remind that the above findings represent the results from a study carried out with a limited sample of participants (two focus groups of 9 persons) therefore we cannot generalize these outcomes that would need further empirical research.

Moreover, our results seemed to back up another critical theory in the field of psychology that was put forward in the literature review in order to explain the transferability mechanism of associations from one brand to another. As a matter of fact, the cognitive consistency’s theory implies that when a brand is identified as linked to an entity, consumers may infer or assume that some of the associations or feelings that characterize the entity may also be true for the brand (Keller, 2008). This cognitive consistency’s theory has been well accepted in the branding area as renowned authors such as Kevin Keller use it to explain the co-branding effects on consumer’s existing brand knowledge (Keller, 2008). Our findings clearly suggested that the brand Reebok “borrowed” some of the associations attached to the brand Emporio Armani and that this cognitive mechanism was positively related to the

exposure of the co-brand Reebok/EA7. In the research paper, the second important question addressed was the following: “does brand transfer some of its own associations to the other brand through a co-branding?” This issue was directly referring to the findings brought out by the researchers Simonin & Ruth in 1998. Indeed, Their empirical study showed that co-branding generated spillover effects on each of the parent brands. Our research’s findings seemed to be consistent with Simonin and Ruth’s conclusions because they effectively revealed that after a co-branding exposure, one parent brand was perceived as having certain associations specific, peculiar to the other parent brand. However, it is wiser to express reservations about the significant spillover effects that Reebok/EA7’s co-brand had on the parent brand Reebok. Giving the fact that the sample of participants was very limited, it is therefore possible that none of them had enough brand knowledge about Reebok to draw out associations without being influenced by the other brand involved in the alliance. It has been empirically proved that co-branding generates a greater spillover on the less familiar brand compared with the familiar brand (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). We could suspect that respondents knew better the brand Emporio Armani than Reebok so with the co-branding post-effects, they tend to use many associations linked to Emporio Armani to characterize Reebok.

Finally, it seems that the qualitative research carried out throughout this dissertation has managed to bring light to the two main issues that were addressed relative to the co-branding post-effects on parent brands.

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Appendix

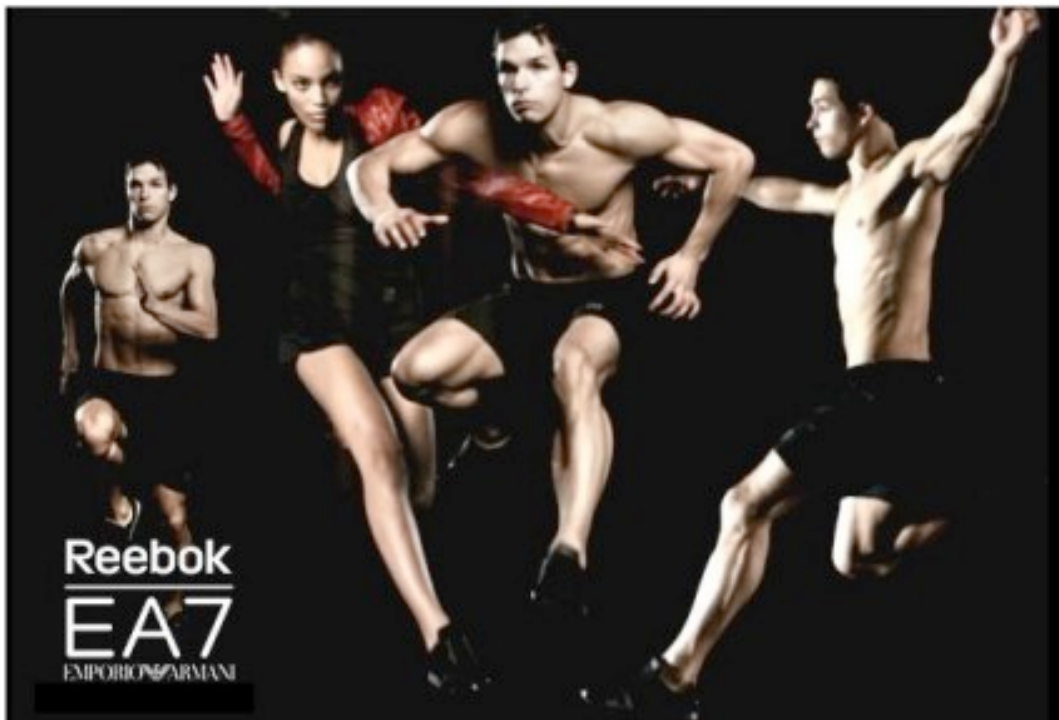
A little sample of the material exposed as stimuli that was introduced at the beginning of each focus group is provided here

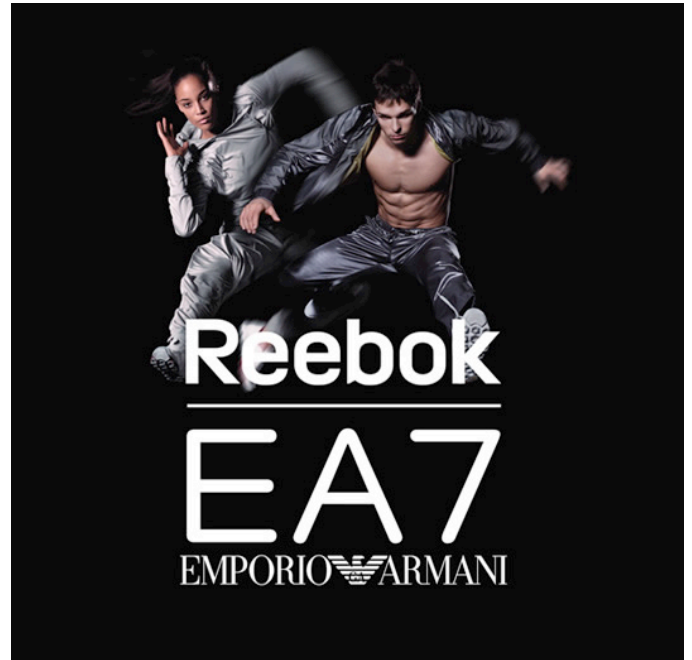
Appendix 1: material used as REEBOK/AE7's stimulus

Reebok

EA7

EMPORIO  ARMANI





Appendix 2: Collected data from the « pre-co-branding » group

participant 1	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
original daring trendy cool honest contemporary reliable secure technical successful leader outdoorsy masculine	upper-class young glamorous
associations found	
sportswear performance	superficial clubbing pretentious conformist

participant 2	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
secure reliable original down to earth rugged outdoorsy	upper-class trendy glamorous
associations found	
old school unfashionable	superficial fake luxury sexy tacky

participant 3	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
exciting cool imaginative reliable technical outdoorsy rugged charming glamorous	Trendy upper-class glamorous
associations found	
old school football us	dream untouchable exclusive

participant 4	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
independent successful leader cool outdoorsy	successful charming upper-class trendy
associations found	
performance sportswear	prestigious luxury unreal women exclusive

participant 5	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
feminine original daring exciting cool outdoorsy glamorous good looking charming	masculine confident secure upper-class
associations found	
elasticity hot rebound wild	superficial wind exclusive Italy prestige

participant 6	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
sincere outdoorsy original friendly exciting imaginative contemporary hard working successful leader good looking cool feminine	daring trendy secure upper-class
associations found	
attractive creative contest competition sportswear unisex speed	exclusive black serious prestigious macho dominant arrogant superior sexy

participant 7	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
original outdoorsy daring tough independant	sophisticated upper-class exciting feminine
associations found	
old school agressive sport-oriented follower classic	hypocritical prestigious sentimental arrogant

participant 8	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
cool outdoorsy hard-working successful glamorous rugged feminine	exciting contemporary upper-class glamorous trendy
associations found	
athlete trainers performance competition	exclusive luxury sexuality arrogant

participant 9	
Reebok	EA
brand personality test	
outdoorsy feminine daring tough cool	glamorous upper-class trendy feminine
associations found	
old school trainers sportwear athletes performance	splendid luxury fashion arrogant prestigious

Appendix 3: Collected data from the « post-co-branding » group

REEBOK
Participant 1
brand personality test
wholesome up-to-date contemporary technical imaginative
Associations found
Basket fitness performance fashion Tennis shoes Urban

REEBOK
Participant 2
brand personality test
Cool Up-to-date secure charming trendy
Associations found
fashion classy good for value high end elegant well fitted attractive muscular special material

REEBOK
Participant 3
brand personality test
Original Up-to-date Imaginative Intelligent
Associations found
sport fashion running female trainers

REEBOK
Participant 4
brand personality test
Trendy young secure corporate Moderne imaginative
Associations found
Basketball Sport Performance US Fashion streetwear

REEBOK
Participant 5
brand personality test
secure confident masculine trendy up-to-date imaginative
Associations found
Sport Trainers innovative stylish in vogue

REEBOK
Participant 6
brand personality test
Up-to-date young reliable smooth imaginative technical wholesome trendy
Associations found
trainers sport performace Athleticism speed individuality

REEBOK
Participant 7
brand personality test
trendy up-to-date secure
Associations found
masculin colored sport Relax fashion

REEBOK
Participant 8
brand personality test
secure sentimental reliable trendy up-to-date imaginative
Associations found
Sport Trainers elite fashion performance

REEBOK
Participant 9
brand personality test
up-to-date cool charming trendy
imaginative
Associations found
Sport Trainers colored fashion running