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Stakeholder-oriented brand management: A Venn-diagram approach to monitor brand associations

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective on brand management, this paper discusses different methodological approaches that allow for a cross-stakeholder evaluation of associations the brand triggers. Our main contribution is the proposal and illustration of a Venn-diagram approach as a simple-to-implement, yet insightful methodology to visualize findings from free association questions. This approach helps brand management understand and compare the associations attached to a brand by multiple stakeholders and their degree of match with management-desired brand associations. We illustrate the managerial relevance of this approach with results from an international study comparing brand associations desired by the management of a company with brand associations elicited by customers and employees, with some 1500 respondents respectively. For the particular case investigated, we find that management-desired associations may not (yet) be top-of-mind for customers, employees or both groups, while these groups hold (and partly share) associations not desired by the organization. The findings also show that specific types of associations are more likely to be top-of-mind with multiple stakeholders than others. We discuss how brand management should use the insights gained via this Venn-diagram approach in their brand-building efforts.

1. Introduction

Favorable and enduring customer brand associations (i.e. what comes to mind when stakeholders think of or perceive a brand-related stimulus, such as the name or logo of the brand (Keller, 1993)) have a positive effect on various consumer-relevant KPIs, for example trust, recommendation, loyalty or willingness to pay (Fryxell & Wang, 1994; Keller, 2016; Mühlbacher, Raies, Grohs, & Koll, 2016). The link between associations and performance also applies to other stakeholders whose favorable associations could translate, for instance, into an inclination to buy from, to work for, to report about or to invest in an organization (Balmer, 1995; Hillebrand, Driessen, & Koll, 2015; Rampl & Kenning, 2014). Adopting a stakeholder-ecosystem perspective (Kastanakis et al., 2019) renders brand building and monitoring an even more challenging job than building strong consumer brands. According to this perspective, multiple stakeholders interact and engage with each other and with brand-related stimuli, contributing to a social process that continuously affects and alters what these stakeholders associate with brands (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, & Espersen, 2017; Wider, von Wallpach, & Mühlbacher, 2018). Under such dynamic circumstances, the managerial task of shaping attractive brand associations becomes trickier because each of these groups has a unique set of expectations, interacts with different peers, and evaluates its relationship with the organization based on specific criteria and alternatives. Also the task of monitoring multiple stakeholders' brand associations becomes more complex and requires collecting information from groups that differ with respect to size (how many persons are part of this stakeholder group?), approachability (does the organization have the necessary information to get in touch with these persons?), expected mode of communication (should the organization interact face to face or in writing, offline or online?) or information sought (which organization–stakeholder relationship facets matter to this group?).

Take the example of the NFL team based in Washington, DC which, despite strong pressure from various stakeholder groups, waited until July 2020 to drop the team's nickname (Redskins). The move was deemed necessary after a minority owner who also happens to be the CEO of the company holding the naming rights to the stadium where the team plays threatened to stop support. Other stakeholders have either demanded a similar move for years (e.g. parts of the fan base and media,

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representatives of native American interest groups, the city of Washington) or opposed it (e.g. other fans, the majority owner). While one could argue that the decision was a simple one given the obvious insult to the Native American community, it also highlights the need for brand managers to continuously monitor and make sense of multiple stakeholders' brand associations and evaluating their match with management-desired associations (Berthon et al., 2009; Wilson, Bengtsson, & Curran, 2014).

The evaluation of brand perceptions across stakeholder groups has received scant attention in the literature with some studies comparing stakeholder perceptions of whole industries (Peloza, Loock, Cerrutti & Muyot2012), while research with a brand focus either applies scale-based measures, for example regarding brand personality (Roper & Davies, 2007), or free elicitation of brand associations (Koll & von Wallpach, 2008). The match between actual and management-desired associations has been discussed for the relationship with single stakeholder groups only with a focus on either the antecedents (Malär, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, & Hoyer, 2012) or consequences of match (Koll & von Wallpach, 2014). Given the importance that (corporate) branding scholars attribute to stakeholder brand building (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; 2009; 2010; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Merz et al., 2009) it is surprising that literature does not suggest an easy-to-implement approach to gather, analyze and interpret brand associations of multiple stakeholder groups. Overseeing stakeholder brand associations appears even more relevant in times of brand co-creation, where stakeholder brand associations are no longer only triggered by company-initiated brand-related stimuli, but also by other stakeholders (Wipperfürth, 2005), and are thus more likely to diverge from managerially desired brand associations, while eventually converging with other stakeholders' associations. One prominent format to compare the relationship between different sets of elements (i.e. the brand associations elicited by different stakeholder groups) is by drawing closed curves that contain a specific set of elements and allowing these curves to overlap if certain elements belong to either set. While such relationships have been expressed in verbal terms for centuries, John Venn (1880) is credited for creating a graphical format to display these relationships. Today Venn diagrams are popular far beyond their original field, mathematics, as demonstrated by a Google doodle in 2014 celebrating John Venn's 180th birthday (google.com/doodles/john-venns-180th-birthday).

This paper contributes to extant literature by introducing a diagnostic methodological approach that combines the free association retrieval technique (to gather brand associations) with Venn diagrams (to compare stakeholders' actual associations and management-desired associations). This approach supports managers in assessing brand association overlap between stakeholders (*similarity* throughout this paper) and the overlap between each stakeholder group's associations with management-desired brand associations (*match* throughout this paper). The main contribution of this paper is therefore managerial, that is, it provides brand management with a valid and comprehensive, yet intuitive and easy-to-use methodological approach for monitoring stakeholder brand associations.

2. Stakeholder brand associations

A large part of the literature adopting a cognitive perspective on brands relies on "widely accepted conceptualizations of memory structures involving some type of associative model formulation (Anderson 1983; Wyer and Srull 1989)" (Keller, 1993, p. 2). Brands accordingly exist as cognitive phenomena in consumers' minds (Merz et al., 2009) and are "conceptualized as consisting of a brand node in memory to which a variety of associations are linked" (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Brand associations result from experiences with brand-related stimuli and can be represented verbally or non-verbally (including multi-modal and emotional representations) in stakeholders' minds (Keller, 1993; Koll, von Wallpach, & Kreuzer, 2010; von Wallpach & Kreuzer, 2013).

Brand theorists and practitioners agree that the valence of these associations matters and that favorable consumer brand associations lead to positive outcomes for the company (Fryxell & Wang, 1994). Corporate branding theory applies a more systemic perspective and argues that brands not only matter to consumers, but to stakeholders outside and inside an organization (Olins, 2000). Associations held by these stakeholders shape their exchange relationship with the corporate brand—how the stakeholder behaves, talks or strives for a relationship. Potential and current employees evaluate a corporation as an attractive employer because of what they have learnt about its culture, workload or employee benefits (Mölk & Auer, 2018). Shareholders may base their decision to buy on the reputation of top management to identify growth opportunities, to cut slack or because it is known to have satisfied customers (Pahud de Mortanges & Van Riel, 2003). Similar considerations could be extended to stakeholders like suppliers, the public, intermediaries, media, and so forth. The brand becomes an important argument in convincing multiple stakeholders to seek and maintain an exchange relationship with the organization (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

An integrative framework that supports the study of corporate brand associations from a multi-stakeholder perspective has been proposed by Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten (2006, p.100-101). Their focus was on distinguishing different stakeholder perspectives regarding an organization(al brand). We extend this framework (see Fig. 1) to focus on differences between actual and desired associations of a stakeholder group (i.e. the degree of *match*) and the extent to which the brand associations of different stakeholder groups overlap (i.e. the degree of *similarity*).

While a match between desired and actual associations may not be necessary for high brand equity (Koll & von Wallpach, 2014), strong deviations could be detrimental. Consider, for example, the case of the corporate brand Gate Gourmet, one of the world's largest airline catering and logistics provider. Even though the company's value statement pointed out how important their employees are for the success of the organization and how much they are valued, a labor rights scandal caused by the company in 2005 resulted in stakeholders thinking of Gate Gourmet as an immoral employer (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

Apart from the gap between desired and actual thinking of one stakeholder group, brand associations across stakeholder groups might differ (Berthon et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2014). Reasons for such differences can be manifold but are foremost a result of unique expectations towards a corporate brand (Whetten & Mackay, 2002). Stakeholder expectations will vary due to the unique role each stakeholder group plays in the organizational system (Payne, Ballantyne, & Christopher, 2005), corporate actions vis-à-vis these stakeholders (Hillebrand et al., 2015; de Chernatony, Cottam, & Segal-Horn, 2006), and stakeholder's former experiences with brand-related stimuli; for instance, products, press releases, service encounters or contact with other stakeholders (Mahon & Wartick, 2003). In addition, all stakeholder groups are not only influenced by company-created brand-related stimuli, but also by brand-related interactions with other stakeholders and stimuli originating from this wider stakeholder network (Pitt, Watson, Wynn, & Zinkhan, 2006). A stakeholder evaluates each encounter with the brand and forms corporate brand associations that are significant for this specific stakeholder or stakeholder group, but potentially irrelevant for another one.

The variation in the expectations stakeholder groups hold vis-à-vis a brand influences their interpretation of brand-related stimuli (Berthon et al., 2009) and the criteria used in evaluating them (Wartick, 2002). Hence, dissimilarity between stakeholders' brand associations would not be surprising. At the same time, co-creative processes involving different stakeholders and the firm also have the potential to generate a certain degree of convergence in terms of stakeholder perceptions of specific brands (Berthon et al., 2009).

Navigating brands in today's complex and dynamic stakeholder environment requires a continuous brand monitoring effort to help companies in their creation of brand-related stimuli and interactions

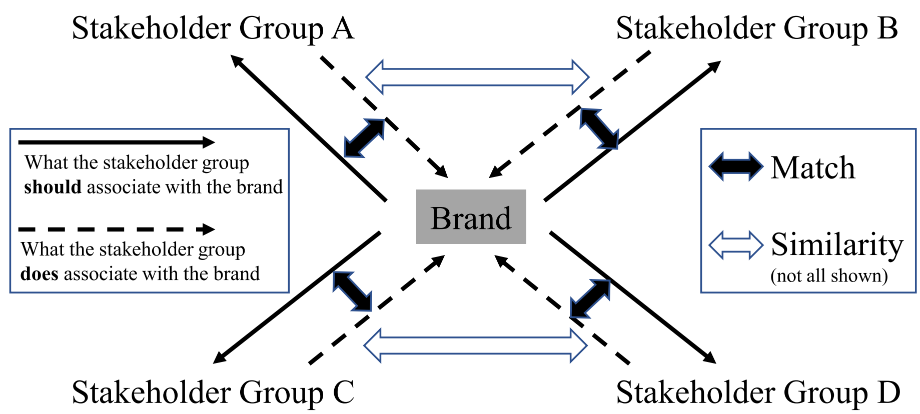

Fig. 1. Similarity and match of stakeholder brand associations (adapted from Brown et al., 2006). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

with different stakeholder groups. Collecting and interpreting brand associations on a continuous basis informs organizational decision-makers about the effectiveness of brand-building activities, including co-creation processes, and should support them in taking appropriate next steps in the never-ending task of branding.

3. Stakeholder brand association monitoring

Learning about the degree of similarity between different stakeholders' brand associations and their match with management-desired associations is an important source of information for brand management. Organizations can choose between a wide array of techniques to learn what stakeholders think about a brand. We refer the interested readers to other publications for a more in-depth discussion than we can provide here (Burmann, Riley, Halaszovich, & Schade, 2017; Koll et al., 2010). For illustration purposes we highlight two extremes on the qualitative-quantitative continuum (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013), and then suggest an approach we believe bridges this divide by offering information-rich, yet easy-to-gather, diagnostics regarding stakeholder brand associations, their similarity and their match with management-desired associations.

Desired brand associations could be translated into a number of statements that summarize the most important perceptual elements an organization aims to create in the minds of stakeholders. Members of different stakeholder groups could then be solicited to indicate their level of agreement with these statements. High agreement across stakeholder groups indicates high match between management-desired and actual associations as well as high similarity between stakeholder groups. Consistently low agreement levels are an indication of high similarity between stakeholders, but low match between management-desired and actual associations. Differing levels of agreement between stakeholder groups are an indication of limited association similarity and potentially an indication that certain associations show more match than others. The advantages of this approach (i.e. easy to administer, low-cost data collection, simple analysis) are as obvious as the disadvantages (i.e. limited to preselected, likely desired associations and no insights into how these perceptions have developed).

More qualitative approaches, like ZMET (Coulter & Zaltman, 1995), multi-sensory sculpting (von Wallpach & Kreuzer, 2013), visual techniques (Shin, & Rohani, 2014) or storytelling (Escalas & Stern, 2003) offer a much more thorough understanding of stakeholder brand perceptions. They allow uncovering elements beyond what the researcher provides, they provide insights about the source of these elements and they can be probed for their valence. This deep understanding comes at a cost: data retrieval is complex, time-consuming, and requires knowledgeable researchers for both data collection and analysis (Koll et al., 2010). In addition, subjective comparisons across stakeholders and with desired associations may limit credibility among people less inclined to qualitative research (much like scholars relying on qualitative research may question the value of scale-based comparisons). Unsolicited feedback from stakeholders (e.g., online discussions, comments by owners at shareholder meetings, employee feedback systems) could provide an additional source for learning about stakeholder brand associations, but suffers from similar drawbacks.

A compromise between these two extreme approaches lies in identifying stakeholders' top-of-mind thoughts triggered by the brand via free association techniques, for example via the unique corporate association valence (UCAV) approach, which elicits and rates individual brand associations (Spears, Brown, & Dacin, 2006). While such an approach allows respondents to freely verbalize their thoughts regarding the brand in question, consistent coding of answers and the ability to assess frequency provides data that can be used to compare associations across stakeholders as well as with management-desired associations. Once the most important associations of stakeholder groups of interest are available, their translation into intelligible visualizations becomes key. To the extent that information is only as useful as it enables the organization to act, it can be argued that visualization has moved center stage when managing brands, particularly if one is to implement a multi-stakeholder approach to brand management.

4. Brand monitoring with Venn diagrams

A time-proven method for logically relating different entities can be found in Venn diagrams, named after the English philosopher John Venn. Venn diagrams are a depiction tool suitable for visualizing relationships, particularly commonalities and differences between different entity sets or categories (Borah & Tellis, 2016; Wierenga, 2002). Venn diagrams intuitively convey two layers of information: the scope of different entity-sets or categories, as well as their logical relations to each other. Unlike concept maps, scales or similar forms of data visualization, Venn diagrams require no additional explanation, no key, in order to convey a quick understanding of the relationships between entity sets or categories, which makes them a particularly useful tool for providing an easy-to-grasp visualization of the relationships between the brand associations of multiple stakeholder groups. They also help to express configurations of multiple attributes linked to specific outcomes identified, for instance, via qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), as exemplified in managerial and organizational contexts (e.g., Berger, 2016; Berger & Kuckertz, 2016; Freitas, Gonçales, Cheng, & Muniz, 2011; Greckhamer, Furnari, Fiss, & Aguilera, 2018).

In the context of this paper, Venn diagrams can help to highlight and answer various managerially relevant questions with respect to stakeholder brand monitoring (questions see Fig. 2). Specifically, the approach helps to strategically reflect commonalities and differences

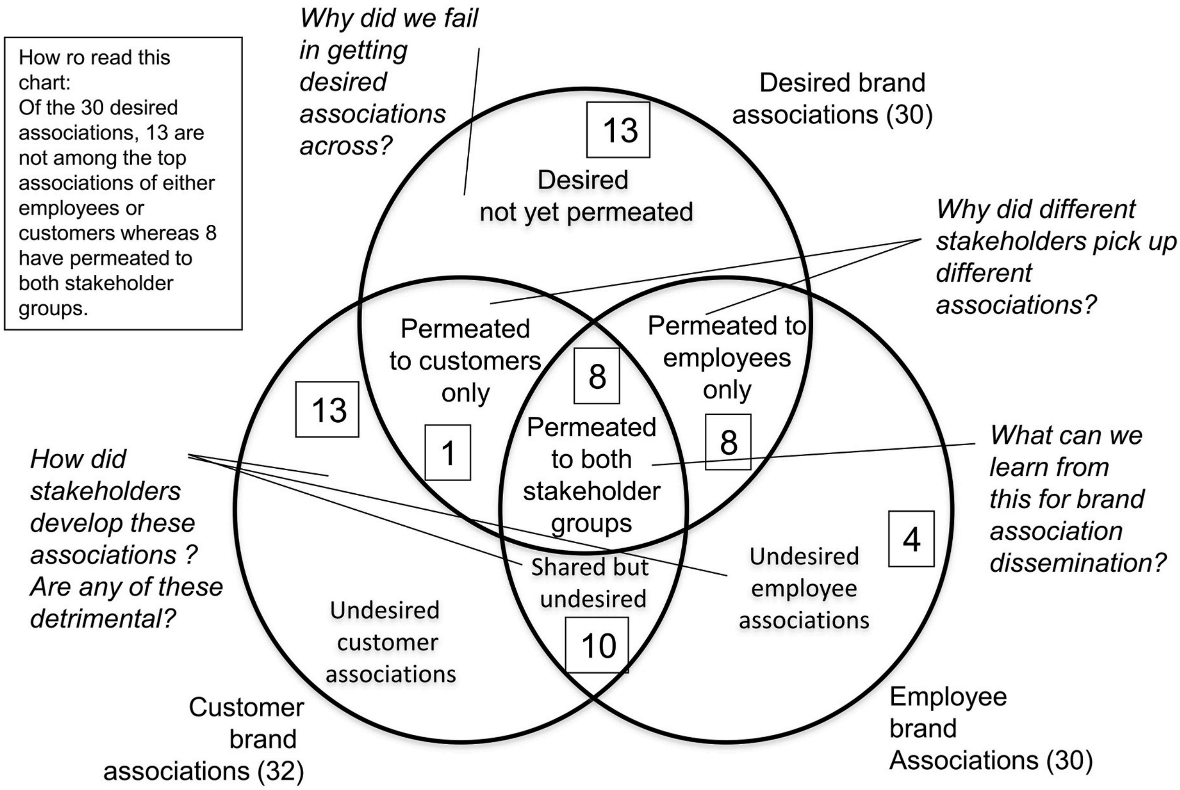

Fig. 2. A Venn diagram approach to visualize and learn from association similarity and match.

regarding dominant brand associations across different stakeholder groups. Each of the seven sections depicted contains associations that are mentioned by either none, one or, in this case, both stakeholder groups (the Venn diagram logic could be applied for more than two stakeholder groups as well). This way Venn diagrams provide an intelligible way for determining to what extent the management-desired set of associations matches or does not match with associations elicited by different stakeholder groups and which associations not desired by managers are present among one or more stakeholder groups.

5. Empirical study

We report results of an international study focusing on the associations of an internationally operating Austrian corporate brand from both an employee and a customer perspective. The study was administered in cooperation with the focal company that wants to keep its brand and the specific associations mentioned confidential. Since we present results to illustrate the diagnostic value of the methodological approach we suggest and the type of conclusions that can be derived the actual associations are not relevant. The assortment the company offers consists largely of jewelry and accessories and the most important sales channel are company-owned stores. The employee survey was administered globally to all employees of the corporation via a mail questionnaire. The response rate was 26%, resulting in 3444 useable answers. The customer samples, surveyed online, consisted of 500 respondents for each of 14 countries. For the analysis, we limit both samples to respondents from Austria, Switzerland and Germany for four reasons: (1) most importantly, the majority of employees is based in these markets; (2) branding activities in these markets are standardized (otherwise the degree of match would have to be evaluated separately for each market), (3) the brand has been available for many decades respectively (whereas it has been introduced much more recently in many of the other markets) and (4) the countries are rather similar regarding their culture. This choice prevents (to some degree) variation of associations within and across stakeholders due to other sources of heterogeneity (e.g., brand prominence, local marketing activities, cultural variation). The customer sample contains 1500 respondents (about 50% of which had purchased from the brand in the previous year, and 50% were potential customers that were aware of the brand and had considered it in a recent purchase decision) and the employee sample contains 1665 respondents. We collect brand associations of both customers and employees through the Unique Corporate Association Valence approach (Spears et al., 2006). The advantage of this approach is that it accounts for individual stakeholders' unique associations and is based on both qualitative assessment and quantitative scoring (cf. Koll & von Wallpach, 2014; Spears et al., 2006). Accordingly, each respondent provides and rates associations that come to mind when confronted with the corporate brand. First, respondents note down a maximum of five associations when thinking of this brand. Respondents next indicate how negative or positive they perceive each of the previously elicited associations on a five-point Likert scale.

The analyses focus on (1) the actual content and similarity of the two groups' free associations, and (2) their match with the organization management's desired associations. Based on a codebook developed from a sub-sample of respondents respectively all associations were independently coded by two research assistants. Inter-coder agreement was 89%—disagreements were solved through discussion between the two research assistants and one of the authors. To determine match we link customer- and employee-generated free associations with the organization's desired brand associations, based on the organization's centrally defined key brand claims. Each of these claims contains a set of management-desired associations (between three and seven per statement) which we retrieved via internal discussions with brand managers (what should customers and employees associate with our brand given each key claim?) as well as a careful analysis of prior brand surveys eliciting brand associations (which customer- and employee-generated associations identified in these studies are consistent with the seven key claims?). In total, the seven claims encompass 30 desired associations.

6. Results

To allow a meaningful comparison between the brand associations held by the two stakeholder groups we limit the analyses to a subset of all associations mentioned, namely the top 30 codes for each group (32 for the customers because three associations are tied at position 30). This cut-off was chosen because—in line with the scree plot criterion used in factor analysis—we respectively find a drop in the number of respondents mentioning the next frequent association and, coincidentally, this number matches the number of management-desired associations. The top 30/32 codes cover 80% of employee associations (with frequencies ranging from 38% for the #1 association to 6% for the #30 association) and 90% of customer associations elicited (with frequencies ranging from 48% for the #1 association to 2% for the #32 association). Hence the choice of associations allows to assess a sizeable proportion of brand-relevant perceptions respectively. In total, the customer sample elicited 4331 associations (3905 are covered by the top 32 associations), an average of 3.1 associations. Employees elicited 9802 associations, an average of 5.89, with 7822 covered by the first 30 associations. Besides the substantial gap in the number of associations elicited by each group (5.9 vs 3.1), which likely results from the respective relationship intensity with the corporate brand in question, we also find differences in the respective contents. Table 1 uses the Venn diagram logic to distinguish between stakeholder-specific associations elicited by each group and those which are elicited by both groups. In addition, this diagram also shows how many associations respectively match the management-desired associations.

While the actual top-of-mind associations mentioned by each stakeholder group and the exact meaning of the management-desired associations are not relevant for this study, we group them into types of associations to help understand the description of the findings, but also to highlight which types of associations are more or less likely to permeate to stakeholders and to be shared. The 57 different associations mentioned (30 management-desired and 27 non-desired) split up into associations linked to materials (5), categories (7), benefits (7), corporate characteristics (11), price (2), product attributes (4), shops (1), quality (4), user types or usage occasions (8), job specifics (3) and technology (5).

When comparing the two stakeholder groups' associations, we find that they share more than half of the top 30 associations respectively. 10 out of the 18 associations they share are not desired by management. Of the associations the two stakeholder groups share, three respectively are related to certain benefits associated with purchasing and consuming the products of the organization, to a subset of the brand's product portfolio, to materials associated with the products as well as to corporate characteristics (e.g., the location and founding family). The associations that are unique to the customer group relate to additional product categories, user types or usage situations, reflecting a somewhat different exchange relationship with the organization when compared to employees: Their unique associations focus on production details, the history and geographic scope of the main production sites and to employee-policy topics (pay, working climate). The two most frequently elicited associations by each stakeholder group are identical. However, four out of the top ten employee and two out of the top ten customer associations are not among the top 30 of the other group – and only one more association in the top ten respectively is shared.

Out of the 30 associations desired by the organization's management, eight are among both the top 30 associations of customers and employees. Eight more have permeated to employees, and another one to customers. In other words, employees elicit more than half of the desired associations, customers elicit less than one third. The stakeholder group that typically experiences more and more intense contact with the focal organization attains a higher level of match. Three of the ten most frequent customer associations (elicited by between 8 and 48% of customers) are part of the desired associative network formulated by the organization. For employees, five of the top ten associations (mentioned by between 19 and 38% of employees) match the management-desired brand associations.

The top associations that are shared by the two stakeholder groups and management-desired relate to benefits a customer might experience when purchasing or consuming the brand, an important product category and a product attribute strongly related to the core material – this material is also the top association shared by the two stakeholder groups that is not among the management-desired associations. This latter association ranks second among customers and first among employees. Desired associations that have permeated to employees only mostly

Table 1
Types of Associations amongst intended, employee and customer associations and rank within respective stakeholder set of brand associations.

		Permeated to			Unintended			
Type of association	*Desired not permeated*	customers only	employees only	both	customers only	employees only	both	Sum
Category				C1_E2	C13 C17 C21	E18	C4_E12 C18_E15	7
Material					C3 C19		C2_E1 C6_E16 C8_E28	5
Benefit	*2*		E17	C10_E22 C14_E21 C16_E20	C24			7
Corporate	*1*		E8 E23 E25		C5 C20 C29	E19	C25_E24 C27_E3 C11_E13	11
Price				C15_E10			C7_E26	2
Attributes	*2*		E29	C9_E9				4
Shop							C12_E5	1
Quality	*2*			C26_E11	C23			4
Usage/Users	*3*	C30		C32_E14	C22 C28 C31			8
Job			E7			E4 E6		3
Technology	*3*		E27 E30					5
Sum	*13*	1	8	8	13	4	10	57

Cn - Rank of this customer association, En - Rank of this employee association.

relate to organizational capabilities in production and personnel. Of the elements that have not yet permeated to either group, we find a cluster of associations related to certain technological skills the organization claims to have and also user benefits that users of the product should experience.

7. Discussion and implications

7.1. Discussion of major findings

Stakeholder brand association management aims to create favorable associations with stakeholder groups while making sure that actual stakeholder brand associations match management-desired associations (cf. Aaker, 2005; Kapferer, 2004; Kotler, 2003). These two goals may be in conflict because the creation of favorable associations with each stakeholder group might necessitate individually managing stakeholder associations in order to fulfil particular expectations vis-à-vis the brand (i.e., stakeholder adaptive brand association management). Furthermore, the achievement of these two goals is influenced by the realization that stakeholders are not only exposed to company-generated brand-related stimuli, but also brand-related stimuli originating from the wider stakeholder network and interactions with other brand-interested stakeholders (Wipperfürth, 2005). Our contribution to existing brand management literature is twofold: First, we propose Venn diagrams as a visual tool providing a depiction of different stakeholders' brand associations. Besides the presentation in an easy-to-read and easy-to-interpret format, we also suggest using a specific set of questions (Fig. 2) to help interpret results and derive actions for brand development activities.

Our second contribution is to illustrate the difficulty of generating one consistent set of brand associations among all stakeholder groups that also match management-desired associations. Based on seven centrally defined key brand claims, the company under investigation sought to establish a set of brand associations that should be top-of-mind for different stakeholder groups. For this purpose, the touch point design (e.g., advertising, shops, etc.) across countries and across stakeholders (e.g., communication messages targeted towards customers and employees) was largely standardized. In line with extant research (Helm, 2007; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006) we find that different stakeholders digest different elements of the total association set the organization transmits through all communication channels. Given interest in and exposure to, for example, environmental activities or the company's heritage, employees may know more about these aspects than consumers. Even within a stakeholder group match with the management-desired brand associations can differ. For example, employees in management positions or with high levels of consumer/customer interaction tend to receive more brand related information (e.g., in trainings, employee meetings, consumer interaction, etc.) to prepare them for their role as 'brand ambassadors' during various stakeholder contact situations (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006).

The results show that the company's efforts to generate strong similarity between stakeholder associations and a high match with the desired brand associations were somewhat successful—especially with employees. The top 30 employee associations span all of the seven key brand claims defined by the organization. Brand management may conclude that employees have internalized the management-desired brand associations and exhibit strong brand match. On the other hand, employees also elicited 14 undesired associations (i.e., associations not defined in the key brand claims). The effect of these undesired associations might be beneficial or detrimental depending on, for example, the valence of these associations; that is, the positive versus negative connotation of the association itself and whether employees evaluate it positively or negatively. For example, the association "vain" may be less beneficial for almost all brands, whereas the association "American" may be evaluated positively or negatively depending on the brand in question. Moreover, 11 out of the 14 undesired associations were judged to have positive connotations by management while the remaining 3 associations are rather negative, and indeed undesired. Customer brand match is lower with only 4 out of the 7 key brand claims covered by 9 out of 30 customer brand associations. Also, 18 out of 23 undesired associations have a positive or neutral connotation—and the remaining 5 a negative one.

We interpret the fact that 13 out of the 30 management-desired associations have permeated neither group in several ways: One could argue that this is not problematic as long as each of the seven key claims is covered. Demanding for all 30 management-desired associations to be mentioned most frequently may simply be too much to ask. Still, even when taking this opinion, there is a gap between actual and management-desired customer brand associations because three of the seven desired key brand claims do not show up at all in the top 32 associations mentioned by customers. It could be that these associations have not been communicated (well) and need to be reinforced at relevant touch points.

While the company's standardized communication approach was successful in transmitting part of the management-desired brand associations to the two investigated stakeholder groups, it only resulted in rather limited similarity between employee and customer brand associations: the two groups share 8 out of 30 management-desired associations (covering 4 of the 7 key brand claims). Interestingly, both groups elicit 10 more associations that are not desired by management which results in rather high similarity of the two stakeholders' association sets. Two of the shared undesired brand associations are characterized by a negative connotation—the rest of the associations were judged as positive. The fact that stakeholders are exposed to a variety of touch points that are out of management control can explain the development of unintended brand associations. Common undesired brand associations may be the result of intense interaction between employees and customers or may be due to both stakeholders communicating with a third stakeholder, for instance, on social media, during which brand associations are continually negotiated (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

7.2. Implications for stakeholder brand association management

Our study has important implications for brand managers responsible for brand association and brand equity management: Managers should not only focus on customer brand associations but broaden their focus to consider all relevant stakeholders in their brand building and monitoring efforts. After deciding which stakeholders are most important for a brand, actual stakeholder brand associations need to be investigated, for instance, by means of a stakeholder brand survey. Learning about management-desired and less desired brand associations (collected via a free association task) present among different stakeholder groups provides management with an early warning system indicating whether brand management efforts were successful or whether brand perceptions move in a different and eventually undesired direction.

The combination of a qualitative association retrieval method with an easy-to-grasp illustration to identify non-permeated, unique and shared associations that are desired versus undesired helps management to monitor stakeholder "buy-in" or brand match and the level of similarity of brand associations across different stakeholder groups, and to incorporate market feedback in their decision-making regarding brand building. In addition to a descriptive use of the Venn logic—which associations are present in each Venn diagram segment—managers can also assess the importance of each of the areas. For example, if the eight shared and management-desired associations account for 30% of customer and 40% of employee associations and the ten shared but undesired associations account for only half that percentage, the conclusion would be more informed than just comparing the eight versus the ten associations in each section. Also, an analysis focusing on within-stakeholder differences (besides cross-stakeholder differences) can shed light on the degree of brand commitment in different units, countries and for different customer segments.

In addition, it is worthwhile to either measure (Spears et al., 2006) or evaluate the favorability of the associations collected. Specifically, shared associations that are not desired and negative associations by either stakeholder group deserve special attention. While shared desired or positive undesired associations can reinforce each other at multiple touch points between stakeholders, negative ones may spin out of control (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013) and create tension in the stakeholder network (Hillebrand et al., 2015). Early identification of such associations may help management to take action. Adding a color code to individual associations or areas of the Venn diagram (e.g., green for highly favorable and red for highly unfavorable associations) would facilitate managerial sensemaking.

Besides investigating the actual status of brand associations, it may also be worthwhile to investigate how certain associations have entered the set of stakeholder-elicited brand perceptions. This should help to better understand which touch points affect the respective stakeholder group most, which activities at these touch points pay off, and whether certain associations have been created without active support of the focal organization (Wipperfürth, 2005). By continuously studying associations of multiple stakeholder groups, management may be in a better position to understand how much and in what way stakeholders interact—a key requirement for effectively managing organizations (DeWit & Meyer, 1999).

Finally, while our focus is the comparison between stakeholders, the approach is suitable for within-stakeholder comparisons as well, for example to examine the associations of more and less loyal customers, more and less tenured employees, or customers and employees from different regions. The findings of such a stakeholder brand survey should have important implications for brand-building activities of the focal organization (e.g., internal trainings, communication, POS design and behavior). A regular replication of the study over time will constantly guide these branding activities by showing how effective the latest brand association management activities have been and which elements need more attention; and whether new eventually undesired associations have developed, whose origin should be investigated.

8. Limitations and future research

The limitations of our study also lead to some future research avenues: We illustrate the suggested approach using an exemplary corporate brand and our focus is on easy-to-grasp visualization and interpretation of different stakeholders' brand perception. The approach could be implemented to examine a causal link between the degrees of similarity and match and an outcome measure. For example, it might be interesting to study whether in a service-driven industry more similarity of brand associations between customers and employees is desirable than in a less service-driven sector. Also, an extension to a wider set of stakeholders may provide insights as to whether common associations for more than two groups are worthwhile striving for.

Our analysis takes into account frequency or importance of an association only insofar that a threshold needs to be met for each association to be included in the construction of the Venn diagram. Two easy-to-implement extensions for the analysis come to mind: Each Venn diagram section, except the "desired not yet permeated" one, could be weighted by the number of respondents mentioning an association. This would inform whether the most frequently mentioned associations are desired or not and shared or not. Also, some associations may be sufficient and/or necessary for certain positive outcomes (e.g., loyalty, trust). By linking either stated brand attitude (e.g., the Net Promoter Score or the intention to recommend the organization as an employer) or available behavioral measures (sales or purchase frequency for customers, or performance for employees) to each association, their respective ability to further these outcomes could be evaluated. For example, associations that are predictive of both positive customer and employee outcomes are prime candidates to be more actively communicated, especially if not yet strongly present. This amendment would allow assessing the value of specific associations for stakeholder relationships (Jones, 2005).

Our study focuses on two stakeholders only. Including more than two stakeholders would allow to learn about and make sense of different degrees of both similarity and match across stakeholders. In addition, the case presented also features an identical set of desired brand associations across stakeholders. If an organization aims to develop different sets of desired brand associations for different stakeholder groups, then a trade-off between match and similarity is a necessary consequence and must be interpreted accordingly.

In this study a free association method—the Unique Corporate Association Valence approach (Spears et al., 2006)—was applied to identify actual stakeholder brand associations. While this is a frequently applied methodology, it relies on the assumptions that brand association networks (Keller, 1993) and the associations they consist of are explicit and can be accessed by direct questioning (Batey, 2008). There is evidence that these assumptions are somewhat oversimplifying and potentially miss out on a richer understanding of brands as cognitive phenomena. This approach also ignores the potentially much broader set of associations a respondent may have, but cannot reproduce in an open association task, and the relationships between these associations, a shortcoming that, for example, the Brand Concept Map technique (Schnittka, Sattler, & Zenker, 2012). Narrative research on brands shows that much of the information stored in and retrieved from memory is episodic, that is, memorized as a story (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008). Additionally, much of the information memorized on brands is implicit and cannot be accessed directly (Batey, 2008; von Wallpach & Kreuzer, 2013). Future studies might want to consider the application of a mix of methods (e.g., storytelling, laddering, critical incident technique or projective techniques) which allows accounting for these shortcomings.

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