Projective techniques for brand image research

Two personification-based methods explored

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Abstract

Purpose – Since it is hard for consumers to express their feelings and views regarding brand images, market researchers increasingly use projective and enabling techniques to collect rich and meaningful data. The purpose of this paper is to describe the development and use of two methods of brand image research based on personification. Both methods were used to investigate the personality of four beer brands.

Design/methodology/approach – The first method was based on mood boards: participants were asked to make collages of celebrity photographs representing the beer brands (n = 16). The second method used a job-sorting task: participants were asked to connect jobs with the beer brands (n = 100). The results of both methods were related to a list of brand personality traits.

Findings – Holistic interpretations of the mood boards and the jobs associated with the beer brands reveal highly similar results among the two methods, which strongly discriminate between the four beer brands. A translation of these findings to scores on personality dimensions further underlines the similarity of the two methods used, but does not convincingly distinguish between the four beer brands.

Research limitations/implications – The similarities in the results underline the congruent validity of the two methods. The observation that the two methods lose their discriminating value when holistic impressions are translated to personality dimensions scores calls for more research into the way projective research data may be interpreted and used.

Originality/value – This study is a first attempt to compare the results of two different but related projective techniques for brand image research. It demonstrates the importance of methodological research in this area.

Keywords Brand image, Brands, Consumer behaviour, Qualitative research, Beer

Paper type Research paper
Introduction
Brands have always played a crucial role in the marketing of products and services. It is generally acknowledged that consumers base their buying decisions not only on rational considerations regarding, for instance, the price-quality ratio, but also to a great extent on their subjective estimations and associations. The value added to a product by its brand, which is usually referred to as “brand equity,” comprises both brand reputation (the long-term overall impressions of price and quality aspects of a brand) and brand image (e.g. a brand’s personality and the associations it evokes). For years, marketing professionals and academics have been developing and using research techniques to investigate brand image and brand reputation.

Particularly for brand image or personality research, open and qualitative data collection techniques may be an obvious choice. It is hard to capture all relevant associations consumers have with a particular brand using, for instance, pre-structured questionnaires. Qualitative in-depth analyses based on consumers’ own perspectives may be expected to produce more informative results. A complicating factor in this respect is that people typically do not have the standard vocabulary to extensively discuss and explain their views on the image or personality of a certain brand or product. Brand images often involve implicit knowledge and judgments, which will have to crystallize during a research session.

For this reason, projective research techniques are considered to be very useful in marketing practice. Morrison et al. (2002, p. 63) give an insightful definition: “Projective techniques involve the use of stimuli that allow participants to project their subjective or deep-seated beliefs onto other people or objects.” Based on this general principle, a wide variety of specific techniques is available (Gordon and Longmaid, 1988; Will et al., 1996; Donoghue, 2000; Morrison et al., 2002; Boddy, 2007). These are usually subdivided into five categories of methods – association (connecting the research object with words, images or thoughts), completion (finishing sentences, stories, arguments), construction (answering questions about the feelings, beliefs or behaviors of other people, completing speech bubbles in a cartoon), choice ordering (ranking product benefits), and expressive (role-playing, story-telling, drawing, or other creative activities).

This categorization is mainly based on the tasks given to participants, and may obscure the fact that some of the methods within the same category are essentially different. For instance, methods included in the association category are word association, which focuses on the top-of-mind characteristics people immediately attach to a research object, as well as methods based on metaphors and visual cues, which enable participants to explore the research object by means of analogies. At the same time, there are similarities between methods from different categories. For instance, sentence completion tasks (“When I think of beer . . .”) may in fact closely resemble word association assignments. Furthermore, Will et al. (1996) deservedly question whether all techniques labeled as such are really projective; some of them do not seem to involve the projection of participants’ own feelings onto other people or objects, and are merely enabling.

One group of methods that are clearly projective are the methods using metaphors. Participants are asked to connect the research object to phenomena from an entirely different domain. This may be done in the form of an association task, but also as a sorting task or a more expressive assignment. Various examples of the use of metaphors for research purposes can be found in the literature. Oswick and Montgomery (1999), for instance, asked managers to compare their organizations to animals and car parts.
Grady et al. (1996) developed a metaphor-based questionnaire about the images of schools, in which participants had to compare schools to other types of organizations (prison, orchestra) and communities (herd, beehive). Hussey and Duncombe (1999) developed a metaphor-based instrument, in which participants had to compare food products to animals and car brands. In all cases, the researchers were enthusiastic about the possibilities of metaphor-based, projective research.

A specific group of metaphor-based research techniques are the methods using personification. Instead of comparing research objects with trees, animals, cars, etcetera, participants are asked to compare them to people. The most common method using personification is the photosort method: participants are presented with a deck of photographs of a wide range of people – either restricted to their facial expressions or photographed in certain contexts or in action – and are asked to connect the photos to brands or organizations (Van Riel et al., 1998). Personification is usually considered to be a specific subcategory of metaphors. When it is used in brand image research, however, there is an important difference with other metaphor-based techniques: participants may connect the research object in more than one way to the cues presented. If brands are to be compared to animals or cars, analogy is the only principle that can be used by the participants. If brands must be compared to people, participants may use the same analogy principle but may also try to point out the typical buyers or users of the brands. This is not a priori better or worse than more univocal metaphor procedures, but it may certainly make a difference.

Several possible advantages of projective research approaches are mentioned in the literature. First, they allow participants to express their feelings without requiring them to put their feelings into words first. Starting from a social science methodology that is dominated by straightforward and verbal types of data collection, we may tend to see the use of metaphors and visual stimuli as an unnecessary detour, but it would be equally justified to consider verbal descriptions as an unnecessary extra step in image research. After all, it is argued that images are essentially non-verbal (Van Riel, 1992). A similar line of thought can be seen in the design appreciation research by Desmet et al. (2000), who developed and validated a series of animated characters to help participants express their emotions about certain products. A second advantage is that projective techniques allow participants to provide their initial opinions intuitively (Catterall and Ibbotson, 2000; Donoghue, 2000). When assigning photographs or metaphors to brands, participants do not have to be concerned with the need to motivate any of their decisions yet. Only afterwards they may be asked about motives. This allows the participants to primarily give their emotional and even unconscious responses to the brands investigated. They are not encouraged to rationalize their opinions. A third advantage is that participants seem to like creative and unconventional research approaches more than mainstream research methods such as questionnaires and interviews (Van Riel, 1992; Van Riel et al., 1998; Catterall and Ibbotson, 2000). This may not be of immediate importance for the validity of the data collected, but in a time of increasing research-tiredness among potential participants it is a factor that must be taken into account. Some authors argue that projective techniques are especially useful for research among children (Banister and Booth, 2005).

In spite of these possible advantages, however, very little research has systematically focused on the pros and cons of projective research techniques in marketing research (Boddy, 2005). Comparisons of the results of similar projective research methods may
shed light on the congruent validity of these techniques. In this paper, we therefore describe the development and comparison of two personification-based projective techniques for brand image research. The research was conducted in the context of Dutch beer brands: the eventual aim was to distinguish four beer brands from each other. We considered beer to be a suitable research object, as it appears to be hard for beer drinkers to distinguish brands purely on the basis of functional characteristics (taste, color), and beer is often strongly connected with image (Pettigrew, 2002). The first method was a mood-board approach: participants had to clip photographs of celebrities from magazines and assign them to the four beer brands. The second method was a job-sorting task: participants had to connect jobs to the four beer brands.

In the analysis of the results, we focused on similarities and differences between the two methods, and on their ability to distinguish between the images of the four beer brands. We analyzed the results in two complementary ways. We first looked at the intermediate results for a more or less holistic impression of the four beer brands: we compared the types and numbers of celebrities (mood boards) and jobs (job-sorting task) that were associated with each brand. Second, we analyzed the brand personality characteristics that were connected to the celebrities and jobs, and therefore to the beer brands. To do so, we used a list of personality characteristics – i.e. the SWOCC Brand Personality Scale (Van den Berge, 2002), which is a further elaboration of Aaker’s (1997) earlier brand personality research (Table I). The scale contains 73 different personality items, divided into six dimensions (some of which are sub-divided into facets).

### Method 1: mood boards
Mood boards are collages of, for instance, magazine clippings representing the way participants think or feel about the research object. The assignment given to the participants is often entirely open: they may clip whatever seems appropriate to them (Warsen, 2002). In practice, they will clip people, animals, things, colors, and even words. The latter, of course, is a little odd, given the non-verbal rationale behind the method. In our study, however, we used a somewhat more focused approach with an emphasis on personification: participants were asked to identify celebrities that, in their view, were typical for the four beer brands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Facets</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Sympathy</td>
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<td>Preciseness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Solidity</td>
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<td>Sympathy</td>
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<td>Excitement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cheerfulness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Activity</td>
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<td>Creativity</td>
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<td>Ruggedness</td>
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<td>Distinctiveness</td>
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<td>Distinctiveness</td>
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</table>

**Source:** Van den Berge (2002)
In individual sessions, participants were presented with piles of magazines such as television guides and sports, news and gossip magazines. They were also given four large sheets of paper, each of which carried the logo and name of one of the four beer brands. The participants were asked to glance through the magazines, and to concentrate on the celebrities and other people portrayed in them. Every time they saw a person that matched well with one of the beer brands, they had to clip the photograph and glue it to the sheet of paper of that particular brand. The first part of the research session ended when the participants indicated that their mood boards were sufficiently filled. It resulted in four collages per participant, one for each beer brand.

In the second part of the session, the participants were asked to link each celebrity on their mood boards to a dominant personality characteristic. They were offered the aforementioned list of 73 personality items (in alphabetic order), and were asked to choose one of these items for each celebrity selected. Since, the personality items in the list are, in principle, bipolar (someone may either be very friendly or not friendly at all) the participants were allowed to use the characteristics positively as well as negatively.

The mood-boards study was conducted with 16 participants (all potential beer consumers over 18 years old). Within the group of participants, the male-female ratio was 3:1, which is in line with the consumer population.

**Method 2: job-sorting assignment**

The second method we used involved cards representing various jobs. Based on a 3D grid (physical load, intellectual complexity, and salary level), eight jobs were selected, one for each combination of extremes on the three axises:

1. lieutenant-colonel;
2. minister;
3. stockbroker;
4. professor/researcher;
5. gym teacher;
6. artist;
7. window cleaner; and
8. gardener.

For each job, a laminated card with a picture and the name of the profession was made. To make sure that participants would only judge on the characteristics of the job itself (and not on, for instance, the looks, gender or expression of the person depicting the job), we used a well-known cartoon character (Donald Duck) to illustrate the job on each card. In addition to, the eight job cards, four cards were made with the logo and name of the four beer brands.

In individual sessions, participants were first offered the alphabetical list of 73 personality characteristics, and were asked to go through it carefully. When ready they were asked to select three personality items for each (in random order presented) job. Like in the mood-board study, they were offered the possibility to use the personality items in a positive (e.g. the lieutenant-colonel and masculine) and a negative (e.g. the gym teacher and not lazy) way. In the second part of the sessions, they were
given the four beer brand logo cards, and were asked to match every brand with one of the job cards.

The job-sorting study was conducted with 100 participants (again potential beer consumers over 18 years old), and the male-female ratio was the same as in the mood-board study (3:1).

**Results**

The most current way of analyzing the results of projective research methods is by looking at the overall impression the participants’ associative activities make. For the mood boards, this means a scan of the types and numbers of celebrities attached to each beer brand. For the job-sorting assignment, a holistic impression is given by looking at the various jobs associates with the brands. Another way of analyzing the results involves translating celebrities or jobs to the personality characteristics per brand and comparing the resulting personality scores.

**Holistic interpretation of the results**

The mood-boards study resulted in 64 collages. We analyzed the numbers and types of celebrities selected by the participants and the general impression the various mood boards made. Several interesting observations could be made. A first interesting result was that participants appeared to have difficulty connecting celebrities to one of the brands: compared to the other three brands, the mood boards of brand B were scarcely filled. One of the participants even left the entire mood board empty. A clearer indication of a weak and meaningless image is hard to find. Furthermore, there were remarkable differences in the types of celebrities selected for the other three brands. The mood boards of brand A typically contained local (Dutch) celebrities, which seem to refer to an ordinary, popular and accessible brand. The mood boards of brand C included many pop and rock singers and other artists, which seems to refer to an independent, artistic, rock ‘n roll lifestyle. The celebrities associated with brand D were the most versatile both in age and in types (e.g. athletes, members of the royal family, but also popular singers), which refers to a leading, established and broadly-accepted beer brand.

The job-sorting study resulted in a frequency score of the various jobs connected to the four beer brands. The job scores per brand ranged from 0 to 100. In the hypothetical case that all participants would connect the same job to the same beer brand, the maximum score of 100 is reached. A first striking result is that one of the jobs was scarcely associated with beer at all: the professor/researcher scored very low on all four brands. Regarding the differences between brands, it appears that brand A was often matched with the gym teacher (24 times) and the window cleaner (23 times), and only sporadically with the artist (2 times), which reinforces the image of an ordinary, popular and accessible brand. Brand B had no specifically high or low scoring jobs, which reflects the weak and meaningless brand image that was also found in the mood-boards study. Brand C had high scores on the artist (25 times), and relatively low scores on the minister (7 times), which emphasizes its independent and artistic image. Finally, brand D was very often associated with the stockbroker (32 times), and scarcely with the artist (3 times), which underlines the brand’s established and leading position.

In all, the results of both methods appear to generate insightful information about the four beer brands. The two methods make it possible to highlight differences between the four brands, and the results of both methods seem to point in the
same direction. This is a first indication of the methods’ congruent validity. However, it must be acknowledged that the practical interpretation of such holistic data may be difficult and impressionistic.

**Personality characteristics of the four brands**

The 73 personality items used in both studies consist of six underlying dimensions (competence, excitement, gentleness, ruggedness, annoyingness, and distinctiveness). In the mood-boards study, participants were asked to assign one personality item to each celebrity included in their collages. As mentioned before, the personality items could get a positive or negative score. In our analysis, the numbers of personality items per dimension were totalized for each beer brand. For ease of comparison, percentage scores of the six dimensions were computed by dividing them by the total number of personality items mentioned (and multiplying the outcome with 100 percent).

In the job-sorting study, participants assigned three personality items to each job. Since, each beer brand was connected to one of the eight jobs, a total number of 300 personality items were attached to each beer brand. Again, the participants could also dissociate certain personality items from a certain job (and indirectly brand). For these scores, too, a percentage score per dimension was computed for each brand.

Tables II and III give an overview of the representation of the six personality dimensions for the four beer brands. We established the degree of overlap between the two studies by computing the correlation scores, comparing the mood-boards and the job-sorting distribution for each beer brand. In all four cases, the correlation appeared to be very high, varying from 0.89 (brand D, \( p < 0.05 \)) to 0.96 (brand C, \( p < 0.005 \)). So even though the two methods used different kinds of personification and different procedures, the outcomes were largely comparable. This is another indication of the congruent validity of the two methods.

The only consistent difference between the two methods involves the gentleness dimension: in the mood-boards results, gentleness invariably ended up on the third

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Brand A</th>
<th>Brand B</th>
<th>Brand C</th>
<th>Brand D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleness</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruggedness</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoyance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinctiveness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table II.**
Brand personality scores (percentages) based on the mood boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Brand A</th>
<th>Brand B</th>
<th>Brand C</th>
<th>Brand D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruggedness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoyance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinctiveness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table III.**
Brand personality scores (percentages) based on the job-sorting assignment
place of often-mentioned personality dimensions; in the job-sorting results, gentleness was always last. This is likely to reflect differences in the types of stimuli: it may be more obvious for participants to connect celebrities to gentleness items than to do so with jobs. This finding, of course, must be considered to be a drawback of projective methods, inhibiting straight-forward and literal interpretations of their results.

Comparing the personality scores of the four beer brands, it must be noted that the similarities between the brands are more striking than the differences. For all four brands, both methods showed that competence and excitement were the most important personality dimensions of beer. The other four dimensions were considerably less important. Differences between brands were only found sporadically and they were not always consistent between the two methods. For instance, especially in the mood-boards results, brand A appears to score relatively low on excitement. And both methods showed that brand B scored relatively low on ruggedness. As a consequence, the discriminating value the holistic results appeared to have seems to be lost when the mood-boards and job-sorting results are translated into scores on personality dimensions. The personality scores convey a clear overall image of beer, but prove to be less sensitive for differences between brands.

A possible explanation for this lack of discriminating value would be that the six personality dimensions would be too coarse-grained to facilitate the distinction between brands. Therefore, we also conducted the same analysis with the 12 personality facets instead of the six dimensions (Table I). The results of that analysis indeed showed more variation, but one of the remarkable differences was between the two methods. The correlations of the facet scores appeared to be non-significant, varying from 0.11 (brand B, \( p = 0.73 \)) to 0.39 (brand D, \( p = 0.21 \)). Owing to the lack of consistency in the results, we did not further analyze the differences between brands on the facet level.

Conclusions

This paper describes a first attempt to systematically analyze the similarities and differences in the results of two projective research techniques in the context of brand image research. We developed two-personification-based research methods and used them to investigate and compare the image of four Dutch beer brands. Two criteria were used to evaluate the results:

1. the convergence between the two methods; and
2. the discriminating value of the methods.

Our analyses focused on three levels. On the level of a holistic analysis, we found that the two methods produced largely similar results, which clearly highlighted differences in image between the four brands. The differences found have some face validity, as they appear to reflect actual differences in the advertising strategies of the four brands. On an analysis level of (coarse-grained) personality dimensions, the results of the two methods were still very similar for each beer brand, but failed to discriminate between the four brands. On the more fine-meshed analysis level of personality facets, the similarity between the two methods disappeared, which raises doubt on the validity of either method for this level of analysis.

On the one hand, the results underline the practical relevance of projective research techniques for brand image research. The participants in our research sessions
(both in the mood-boards and in the job-sorting study) produced consistent insights that cannot be easily obtained using questionnaires or interviews. On the other hand, the research also raises some concerns about projective techniques. A first concern is based on the differences between the two methods regarding the gentleness dimension. Apparently, the specific stimulus domain used may affect the results. A more systematic comparison of different projective techniques would be needed to further explore this phenomenon, which may be a serious threat to the validity of projective techniques. A second concern involves the holistic interpretation of the results. It was not difficult in our study to analyze the types of celebrities assigned to a brand or to count the number of times certain jobs were attached to a beer brand, but the step from such “rough” overall results to assumptions about the brands’ image seems to be rather big. It would be interesting to see how different marketing professionals make inferences on such holistic projective data. A third concern is about the translation from holistic data to more specific results, such as the personality characteristics we used. In our study, the translation from the projective results into personality scores was not successful (either in terms of distinctiveness, on the level of personality dimensions, or in terms of stability, on the more fine-grained level of personality facets), which raises the question if it is at all possible to validly translate overall projective data into more analytical scores, and if so, what would be the ideal procedure to do this.

These concerns all call for systematic research attention for projective research techniques. And there is even one more question we should add: to what extent do projective and more straightforward measurement techniques produce comparable results? This question is in fact about the added value of projective techniques. Are there aspects of brand images that can only (or better) be uncovered using projective techniques? It is, in our view, surprising that so few researchers have taken up the challenge to critically examine the methodology of these creative and highly appealing research approaches. If these methods are to be part of the market researcher’s toolkit, than it is important to learn more about their strengths and weaknesses. The study described in this paper can be seen as a first step in that direction.

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