

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

*PAUL CURRAN, GREG HEIST,
WAI-KWAN LI, CAMILLE NICITA, BILL THOMAS
GONGOS AND ASSOCIATES, INC.*

BACKGROUND:

In today's dynamic competitive environment, more and more brand managers are moving their positioning strategy from traditional value propositions (quality, value, etc.) in favor of more emotionally-charged value propositions. Mega brands such as McDonalds, Cheerios, Pillsbury, and Pepsi are seeking ways to touch consumers' emotions as well as communicate traditional cost-benefit selling propositions.

In our work at Gongos and Associates, we have helped many of our key clients use qualitative research to better understand the emotional ties that consumers have with their brands. In our research, we have found that consumers are motivated to purchase products based on attributes that reinforce a specific "emotional connection." We define "emotional connections" as consumer-identified emotions and values that connect the consumer with a product or brand. These connections represent the personally relevant role the product/brand plays in the life of a consumer.

While qualitative methodologies are certainly valid, it would be very helpful for a brand manager if the impact of these emotional connections could be quantified. This paper attempts to accomplish two objectives: (1) report a choice-based conjoint application that gauges the relevance of various emotional connections for a product category and (2) assess the impact of emotional connections on purchase consideration.

In a typical quantitative survey, respondents would be asked to reflect their opinions on an X-point scale. However, as argued in Gerald Zaltman's thought-provoking book, How Customers Think, up to 95 percent of consumer thinking happens in our subconscious. This begs the question: Does commercial market research rely solely on logical reasoning and rational thought processes to gauge consumer behavior or design products? If yes, to what extent are we missing out on a powerful component of consumer behavior—one's emotional connection to a brand?

This argument is probably especially true for product categories and brands for which consumers express a high degree of emotional intensity. In cases such as these, a traditional quantitative survey, which requires respondents to read the survey questions and provide answers consciously, would not be the best tool in quantifying emotional connections and brand associations. To truly assess consumers' emotional connections to a brand we need to devise a way to collect respondents' opinions while holding conscious thinking to a minimum.

For several years, Gongos and Associates has been using a technique for understanding—qualitatively—consumers' emotional connections to brands. In this approach, we explore and identify relevant emotional connections and interrelationships within a category and for specific brands.

The qualitative approach is generally done through a series of one-on-one, in-depth interviews. A typical IDI lasts approximately two hours. Prior to coming to the interview, respondents are asked to put together a collage of images, pictures and/or words that illustrate their feelings toward an ideal brand/product. The images, pictures and/or words help respondents express the emotional ties more easily as it is often difficult to articulate such feelings. The collage also identifies inter-relationships among the images and aids in the development of qualitative output such as consensus maps.

Using the research tool described above, clients are able to help define the brand by validating current beliefs and creating a future positioning strategy and product development "roadmap." This research also allows us to understand both the corporate and customer perspectives, which can identify realignment opportunities to infuse emotional connections into all marketing activities.

The key in understanding consumers' emotional connections to brands is to make a link between a product/service/brand and the consumer's life. It is not unreasonable to suggest that understanding these emotional links and translating them into tactical actions (e.g. product characteristics, the retail environment, packaging, communications, etc.) significantly increases product success rates, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty. Furthermore, understanding emotional connections can likely make the difference between a product that looks good on the drawing board but fails on the store shelf. In the end, client organizations are better able to develop products and services that win the heart and mind (and pocketbook) of the consumer.

Still, even with the powerful insight these qualitative sessions provide, it is difficult for brand managers to move forward with marketing outlays without the support of some type of quantitative measures. Quantitatively, corporate-level decision makers often seek to:

- Assess the impact of emotional connections on traditional market research metrics (purchase likelihood, customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, etc.).
- Prioritize the relative importance of various emotional connections.
- Determine which emotional connections are associated with which brands— Which emotional connections does their brand “own” and which are “owned” by the competition?
- Pinpoint an important yet unclaimed emotional connection—identify any “white space” in the market that our client’s brand can grab?

Knowing clients' desire for this type of quantitative support, a team of researchers at Gongos and Associates set out to develop a technique that would provide the desired output but stay true to the conceptual framework of Zaltman's work and, by association, our well-established qualitative approach. With that said, we knew that any technique we were to develop would have to follow the following guidelines:

- Use a measurement tool that provides high discrimination but minimal conscious effort on the part of the respondent.

- Use visual stimuli to reflect emotional values, replicating the qualitative process whereby respondents use images and words to represent emotional values.
- Hinder overly-conscious thinking to ensure respondents react to stimuli in an emotionally-charged manner.

The major goal of our quantitative approach is to allow respondents to reflect their responses with minimal conscious effort. In other words, we want them to let us know what they feel—which should only involve minimal conscious thinking. To accomplish this, we rely on three specific techniques:

- Use pictures collected from qualitative research as stimuli to reflect the emotional connections. By eliminating as much verbiage as possible, the conscious thinking should then be minimized.
- Use elements of “negative priming” (Titz, Behrendt, and Hasselhorn, 2002; Janiszewski 1990) to inhibit conscious thinking.
- Use a choice-based conjoint with extremely simple paired-comparison choice tasks so as to minimize the amount of cognitive effort needed to respond.

THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT:

In 2001, Saturn wanted to better understand how its customers connect with their brand and product offerings. The research used our qualitative emotional connections technique described previously. A series of IDIs were completed with Saturn owners as well as owners of competing makes. From this research, we were able to identify the following emotional connections relevant to their brand as well as the product category:

- Success/Accomplished
- Independent/ Self-Reliant
- Comfortable/Relaxed/Happy
- Peace of Mind
- Smart/Practical
- Care for Others/Family
- Fun to Own
- Saturn Family/Community

Given the amount of qualitative research we had already completed, we felt Saturn would be an ideal client for which we could develop our quantitative survey instrument. Armed with the results of our qualitative research and the guidelines we had established, we set out to design a quantitative survey instrument that would meet our research objectives.

A key component to the approach involved the selection of the competitive set. In this case, we selected three competitive, yet distinctive, vehicle brands: Honda,

Volkswagen, and, of course, Saturn. Selection of the competitive set is critical since an underlying assumption is that each brand has a certain level of emotional intensity.

After some initial screening questions, our instrument begins by presenting respondents a series of vignettes. These vignettes were, more or less, actually built by the IDI participants during the qualitative phase. Each vignette included a photograph along with a “story” as written/described by the IDI participant. For each emotional value, the respondent identifies the vignette to which they most strongly relate. One respondent-identified vignette is used to represent each emotional value being tested. The images associated with the vignettes become proxies for the specified emotional connection later in the survey. Once the respondent-specific stimuli are established, the respondent is taken through the negative priming exercise and then onto the two choice exercises.

Perhaps the most provocative component of our approach is the negative priming exercise. “Priming” is a facilitated cognitive process that produces a faster reaction time or higher recall rate, due to the cues provided by the “primer.” Suppose, for example, you are asked to pick out breakfast items from the following list of words: butter, bread, paper, orange juice, phone, and computer. To prime you, before entering the lab you are kept in a waiting room that is infused with the scent of freshly baked pastry. While you are waiting your mind is focusing on all these bakery items, such as bread and butter. In theory, your reaction time to the experimental task would be much faster than that of a respondent kept waiting in a scent-free environment. The discrepancy between the unprimed and the primed respondent would be referred to as a “priming effect.”

Negative priming refers to a slowed response to visual stimuli that is initially ignored and later presented as the target. This decrement in performance is due to the interference of the irrelevant stimulus on the processing of the relevant stimulus. While some argue that the interference slows the processing of relevant stimulus, this is actually what we seek to accomplish. That is to say, we show irrelevant pictures to interfere with respondents’ ability to cognitively process the relevant pictures (those the respondent associates with the emotional connections).

Negative priming can then be considered a suppressed cognitive process, and, while its exact impact has had mixed assessments in the academic literature, there are some established mechanisms for generating the desired distraction/interference effect. Consistent with the work of Titz, Behrendt, and Hasselhorn (2002), we developed a negative priming exercise administered prior to each choice exercise. Respondents were challenged to remember various innocuous details from a set of 12 pictures. Respondents were told there would be quiz at the end of the survey in which they would be asked to recall as many of the details as possible. In theory, respondents would be distracted by the irrelevant pictures, which should effectively suppress them from thinking too much about the stimuli presented in the choice tasks. In addition, in their attempt to remember all the details from these irrelevant pictures, respondents would become mentally overloaded—leaving limited mental capacity directed towards the stimuli presented in the choice tasks. In this case, negative priming is used to suppress unwanted conscious processing of the stimuli representing the emotional connections.

Key to our research was the use of paired comparisons in the choice tasks. Paired comparisons are often used in psychometric and econometric research studies. In 2003,

Bryan Orme presented a paper in which he compares monadic ratings and paired comparisons. In this paper, Orme establishes how paired comparisons allow respondents to better discriminate among many similar items. Likewise, Burton (2003) describes various categories of paired comparisons and makes an argument for the use of a type of factorial design known as incomplete cyclic designs (ICDs). In testing his theories on ICDs, Burton finds that semantic similarity judgments can be collected with high reliability when using efficient designs and robust sample sizes. These bodies of work lend support to our technique in that we use highly efficient experimental designs and choice tasks that provide considerable discrimination.

Our first set of paired comparisons explores the “importance” dimension. Here we present respondents with a choice of two emotional connections and ask: How do you want to feel about a vehicle? After completing the first choice exercise, respondents are re-primed.

To measure the second dimension—brand association—each respondent is randomly assigned a brand from the competitive set. Respondents are then asked: Which image do you associate more with brand X? (Where X is either Saturn, Honda, or Volkswagen.)

OUR TEST

As noted previously, our primary objective was to develop a quantitative survey instrument to assess the impact of emotional connections previously uncovered in a series of qualitative interviews. It is important to note that the process we lay out should be considered a follow-up to thorough qualitative research and not a “stand-alone” approach.

The survey was administered over the Internet. We acknowledge that the Internet may not be the ideal methodology to administer this type of study compared to a more controlled central location test. However, given this is our first attempt to quantify emotional connections in such a non-traditional manner, we felt the Internet would be the most viable methodology.

The survey instrument was programmed using *GongosOnline* web tools, a set of proprietary online research tools developed at Gongos and Associates.

Respondents were recruited from Survey Sampling International’s SurveySpot online consumer panel. SSI maintains an automotive sub-panel from which highly targeted automotive samples can be drawn. A total of 1,662 Honda, Saturn, and Volkswagen owners participated in this study. Respondents were screened in such a way as to match the demographic composition of the qualitative phase. To this end, our final sample had the following characteristics:

- 831 owners of a new, not previously owned Honda
- 529 owners of a new, not previously owned Saturn
- 302 owners of a new, not previously owned Volkswagen
- All respondents were the primary driver and decision maker of their qualifying vehicle.

- Qualified respondents were screened to ensure they were not employed in/affiliated with the automotive or marketing services industries.

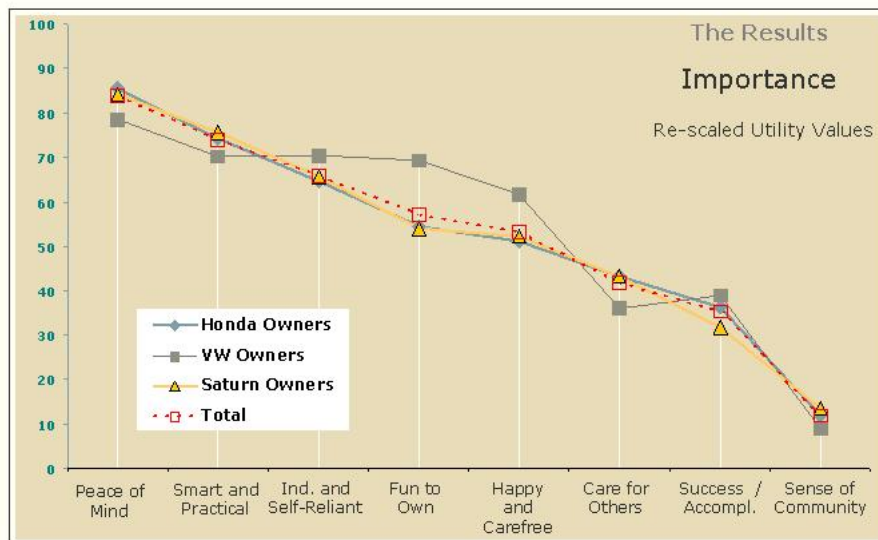
On average, the survey took respondents 16 minutes to complete.

Sawtooth Software’s CBC System for choice-based conjoint was used to create the experimental design. Using CBC, the study specifications called for a two-attribute study where attribute 1 was the eight emotional connections (eight levels) and attribute 2 was a dummy attribute not shown to respondents (two levels). We use the CBC paper-and-pencil module to output the design and then complete the programming using the GongosOnline web tools. To ensure a highly efficient design, a total of seven versions of the paper-pencil study were exported from the CBC system.

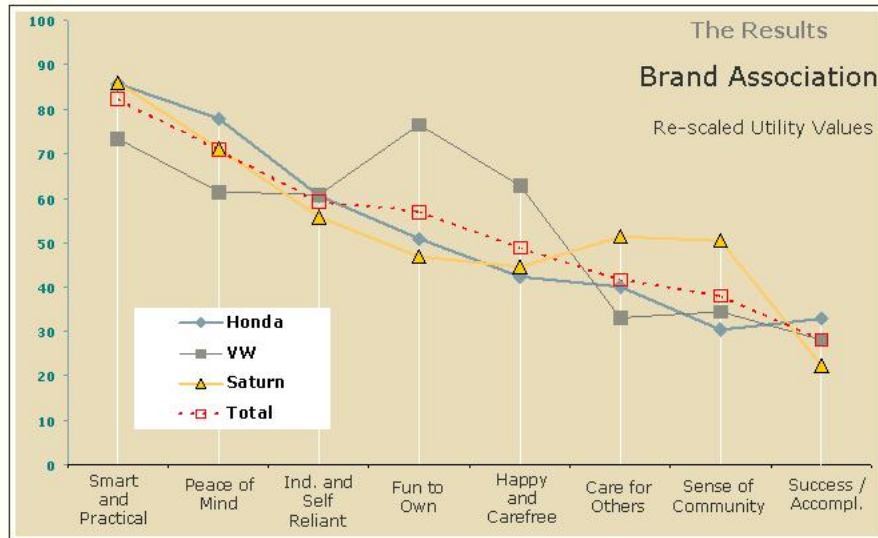
KEY FINDINGS

Using Sawtooth Software’s Hierarchical Bayes system, individual-level utilities were estimated for each of the two choice exercises, providing us a set of part-worths for each of the two dimensions we explored—importance and brand association. Using these utilities, we completed four separate analyses to assess the impact of various emotional connections. Given the nature of the analyses selected for this research, we rescaled both sets of utilities such that each respondent’s lowest rated emotional connection received a value of 1 and the highest value received a value of 100.

From the importance utilities, we are able to assess the relevance of eight emotional connections for automobiles among our client’s target market. The emotional connection “peace of mind” is shown to have the most impact while “sense of community” has the least. These findings confirm what was hypothesized in the qualitative phase.

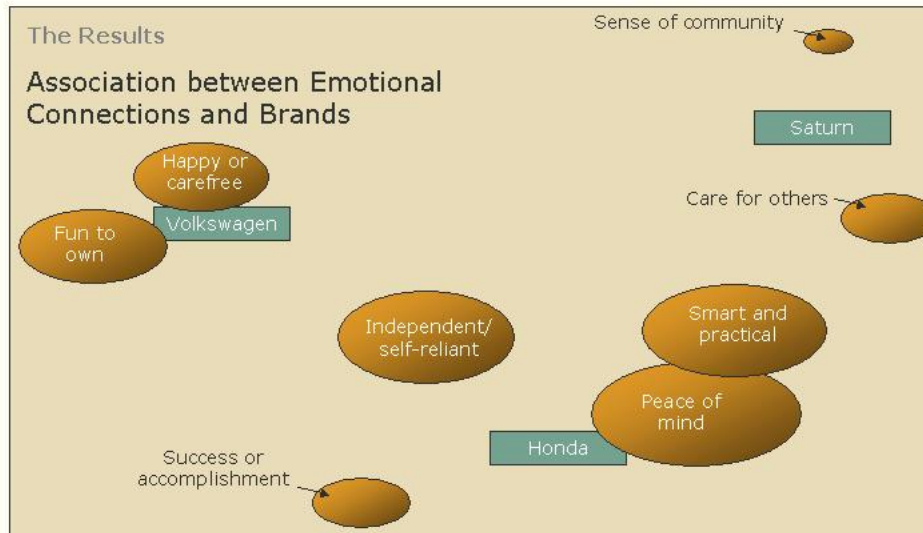


Using the brand association utilities, we were able to assess the differentiating relevance of the eight emotional connections for each brand. We found Volkswagen to be highly associated with “fun to own” while Honda is associated more with “peace of mind.” This analysis also paints the competitive landscape by revealing the “gaps” across brands on each emotional connection. We observed a big “gap” for “fun to own,” but a much narrower “gap” for “independent and self-reliant.”



Our third analysis, also from the brand association utilities, is a correspondence analysis. Using correspondence analysis we are able to build a perceptual map to help pinpoint which brand “owns” which emotional connection. While Volkswagen owns “fun to own,” Honda owns “peace of mind.” In addition, the results also reveal the unoccupied market niche, should a brand wish to reposition to gain better customer appeal and/or avoid competition. We are also able to incorporate the importance dimension into the map by varying the size of the elements on the perceptual map (where the size of the bubble reflects the importance of the emotional connection).

The perceptual map shows which brands are associated with which emotional connections; the size of the bubble reflects the relative importance of the value



Our final analysis uses a metric we call “emotional congruence.” Emotional congruence refers to the extent to which the brand satisfies one’s emotional needs. Emotional congruence is a derived measure based on the gap between a desired emotional connection (importance utilities) and the perceived emotional associations with the brand (association utilities). A match between the respondents’ preferred emotional connection and the perceived brand-specific emotional connection would result in a high emotional congruence score.

By correlating emotional congruence to purchase consideration of a brand, we can measure the impact to which emotional connections drive brand consideration. In our case, we observed significant moderate correlations between emotional congruence and purchase consideration (0.36 – 0.44), suggesting that emotional connections do, in fact, drive purchase consideration.

We were quite thrilled that each of the analyses provided our client a sound quantitative measure upon which they could build their brand strategy. Importantly too, we rely on the various analyses to triangulate the findings as we sought robust external validity for both the methodology and the results.

CONCLUSION

Traditional conjoint/choice research largely focuses on pragmatic, concrete product attributes (e.g., price or gas-mileage), although it is well documented that consumers’ choices and decisions are often affected by “soft” elements such as emotional connections. Emotional connections and other similar soft elements are difficult to quantify, and thus researchers tend to rely on qualitative methodologies to gather insights on such dimensions.

Through our work, we have demonstrated a unique application of choice-based conjoint and Hierarchical Bayes that allows one to gauge the relevance of various emotional connections for a product category. Further, by adapting this approach as a follow-up to a robust qualitative study, we show how the impact of emotional connections on purchase consideration can be established.

To that end, we feel we have been successful in:

- The development of a unique methodology for measuring soft elements, such as emotional connections, that impact purchase consideration.
- Outlining a plan of analysis to assess the relevance of various emotional connections and the extent to which emotional connections shape the competitive landscape.

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