

Evaluating the effectiveness of brand-positioning strategies from a consumer perspective


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Evaluating the effectiveness of brand-positioning strategies from a consumer perspective

Effectiveness of brand-positioning strategies

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Received July 2008

Revised March 2009

May 2009

Accepted May 2009

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to explore empirically the overall relative effectiveness of alternative positioning strategies from a consumer perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – Two studies (within- and between-subjects design) are conducted aimed at evaluating the positioning success of four distinct positioning strategies of real brands in terms of consumers' perceptions of brand favorability, differentiation, and credibility, while controlling for brand-specific, product category-specific, and socio-demographic influences.

Findings – The results show that the type of positioning strategy used affects the positioning success of a brand. More specifically, the study confirms normative arguments about the overall relative effectiveness of main positioning strategies by revealing that benefit-based positioning and surrogate (user) positioning generally outperform feature-based positioning strategies along the three effectiveness dimensions. The findings also demonstrate that no single strategy outperforms all the others on all dimensions.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited in terms of the number of positioning strategies and product categories evaluated. The paper introduces an alternative approach to measure the effectiveness of positioning strategies of real brands. Moreover, the results of the paper show empirically that measuring positioning effectiveness must extend beyond capturing unidimensional brand attitude measures.

Practical implications – The findings should guide brand managers in selecting the most appropriate positioning strategies for their brands in high-involvement markets such as the automobile market.

Originality/value – The study sheds initial light on the overall relative effectiveness of major positioning strategies. The study differentiates itself from existing studies by focusing on the conceptually most prominent positioning strategies, a different dependent variable, and employing real-life brands and advertisements.

Keywords Product positioning, Marketing strategy

Paper type Research paper

Today, companies compete in markets that are fragmented and crowded with offerings, where even strong brands face difficulties in creating sufficient differential advantages over their competitors (Clancy and Trout, 2002). To overcome this

The authors are indebted to Kevin Voss and William Baker for valuable comments on previous versions of this paper and for insights into the issue of positioning effectiveness measurement, respectively.



problem, marketing managers and advertising executives seek to establish appropriate brand associations in the mind of consumers to differentiate the brand from competitors (Keller and Lehmann, 2006) – they do this by employing brand positioning. Brand positioning “is the act of designing the company’s offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market. The end result of positioning is the successful creation of a customer-focused value proposition, a cogent reason why the target market should buy the product” (Kotler, 2003, p. 308). In general, a well-positioned brand should appeal to the particular needs of a customer segment because a differential advantage/value proposition is created (Keller, 1993; Wind, 1982), since consumers’ needs are more exactly satisfied (Day, 1984). Indeed, according to the literature, positioning is expected to shape the preferences of consumers and lead to high consumer loyalty, consumer-derived brand equity, and willingness to search for the brand (e.g. Kalra and Goodstein, 1998; Keller, 2003; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007). Thus, the decision of selecting the most effective positioning strategy constitutes a main challenge for marketers since it is central to consumers’ perceptions and choice (Aaker and Shansby, 1982; Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002). If positioning is done effectively it has the potential to build powerful brands; however, if done incorrectly, it can also result in disaster (see, for example, Haig, 2005; Ries and Trout, 1986).

Despite the importance of brand positioning, however, limited empirical attention has been paid to the question whether the use of certain positioning strategies (e.g. benefit-based positioning) results in more superiorly positioned brands than the application of other strategies (e.g. user-based positioning) (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002). The purpose of the current study is to close this gap and compare the effectiveness of prototypical positioning strategies of real brands from a consumer perspective and thus provide brand managers and advertising professionals with empirically-based insights for making sound positioning decisions. We conceptualize positioning effectiveness as a multidimensional construct capturing consumers’ evaluations of a brand’s position in terms of credible and favorable differentiations in relation to competing brands, thus enabling an assessment of the extent to which the brand in question occupies a credible, distinct, and positively valued position in the minds of consumers. Our comparison of positioning strategies is therefore undertaken along three key dimensions (i.e. favorability, differentiation, and credibility) which jointly determine overall positioning success; our analysis also controls for extraneous influences such as corporate brand associations or advertising creativity that may potentially confound the effect of positioning strategy on the aforementioned dimensions.

In the next section, we provide a brief conceptual background on the notion of brand positioning and follow this by a conceptualization and operationalization of brand positioning strategies and effectiveness. Next, we present the results of two separate empirical studies designed to offer complementary insights into the perceived effectiveness of different positioning strategies employed within a given product category (compact cars). We conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of the findings, its limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Literature background

To avoid confusions about the meaning of the positioning concept, it is important to distinguish between brand positioning and strategic (market) positioning (see

DiMingo, 1988; Ellson, 2004). Strategic (market) positioning refers to the competitive market standing of a firm against its competitors (Evans *et al.*, 1996; Porter, 1979), whereby firms seek to find ways for deploying firm-specific resources and assets to build positional advantages in product-markets (Day and Wensley, 1988; Morgan *et al.*, 2003). For instance, if a company intends to become the technology leader in a product category, it needs to develop the skills or allocate resources to enable this position (for example, through high R&D investments or other initiatives).

Brand (operational) positioning, on the other hand, focuses on (the process of creating and altering) perceptions of consumers about a firm's products or brands (Crawford, 1985). Strategic positioning sets the basic direction for the development of the brand positioning (Ellson, 2004; DiMingo, 1988; for a discussion, see also Hooley *et al.*, 2007). Conceptually, brand positioning is similar to the brand image construct, which is defined as "the concept of a brand that is held by the consumer – which is largely a subjective and perceptual phenomenon that is formed through consumer interpretation, whether reasoned or emotional" (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990, p. 117). The key difference between brand position(ing) and brand image is that the former uses an explicit frame of reference, usually the competition (Aaker and Shansby, 1982; for a detailed explanation of the differences between these concepts and other related concepts such as brand identity or brand reputation see, for example, Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2006; Dowling, 2001; Ellson, 2004).

To better understand the nature of brand positioning itself, a distinction between intended, actual and perceived positioning needs to be drawn.

The intended positioning is how a company wants/intends to have the brand perceived by the target consumers. For example, an automobile company's intended positioning of a particular SUV model may be that target consumers should perceive its cars as being superior with reference to safety, and/or that the particular model was the pioneer in the SUV category. The initial ideas about the intended positioning (i.e. target position) may be grounded in the strategic (market) positioning of the company and can be driven by factors such as the core competence or capabilities of a company (Ellson, 2004; see also Porter, 1979). At the brand-specific level, the intended positioning is likely to be driven by the aim of finding the position with the highest utility for customers, touching the largest or most profitable customer segment, or being well differentiated from competitors.

Whereas the intended positioning reflects the associations a company intends to create with a brand, the actual positioning is reflected in the positioning information actually presented to the consumers (i.e. the execution of the intended positioning and not what consumers finally perceive). This is typically done with different marketing communication tools, but primarily via advertising, which is regarded as the main tool for building a brand's position (Krishnan, 1996; Lilien and Rangaswamy, 2003). Advertising serves as a means of transport of positioning (Dillon *et al.*, 1986; Seggev, 1982) in that any advertisement typically consists of a creative/artwork part and a positioning part (containing brand information). Via the creative element of the ad, the attention of the consumer is drawn and directed to the positioning of the brand (Easingwood and Mahajan, 1989). Trout and Rivkin (1996) advocate that advertising with imagery alone and without any positioning claim gives consumers no reason to buy the brand. Thus the difference between the intended and the actual positioning (i.e.

what is actually communicated) lies in the execution of the advertising program (Blankson and Kalafatis, 2007; Roth, 1992).

Based on the actual positioning, as captured in the ad (as well as on word-of-mouth and previous experiences), consumers form their own perceptions of the brand and position the latter in their minds; this is the perceived positioning, which indicates the complex set of perceptions or beliefs, thoughts, feelings and impressions that consumers hold for the brand compared to competitor brands (Ellson, 2004; Ries and Trout, 1986). The perceived positioning may vary depending on the individual consumer, because consumers may interpret the same positioning information (i.e. brand claims) differently, depending on their current personal goals, objectives, values or usage situations (e.g. Friedmann and Lessig, 1987; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007).

Given that establishing a brand's position is a long-term process connected with massive investment especially in advertising (Bhat and Reddy, 1998), companies choosing the "wrong" positioning, (i.e. selecting positioning dimensions which are not perceived as being relevant and important by consumers and/or do not sufficiently differentiate the brand from rivals' brands), run the risk of harming the perceived positioning of a product, consequently leading to diminishing sales. Similar problems might be faced if the intended positioning is well chosen but its execution (i.e. the actual positioning) fails to result in an effective perceived positioning by consumers. Thus, positioning effectiveness can be compromised by choosing the wrong positioning strategy (poor intended positioning), by poorly executing a sound strategy (poor actual positioning), or a combination of both.

Positioning strategies

In principle, companies can position their brands on an almost infinite number of associations (e.g. a mobile phone can be positioned upon its size, shape, handiness, user-friendliness, stylishness, etc.). Several authors have classified these associations into distinct groupings based upon alternative bases of positioning (e.g. Aaker and Shansby, 1982; Crawford, 1985; Myers and Shocker, 1981; Wind, 1982; for a review, see Blankson and Kalafatis, 2004). The positioning bases underlie the positioning strategy of a brand.

Table I summarizes main positioning bases commonly discussed in the literature. Conceptually, the classification of the positioning bases in Table I is based on the hierarchies of the means-end chain concept (Gutman, 1982; for a discussion how the means-end-chain concept is linked to positioning, see Vriens and ter Hofstede, 2000) in which information (or knowledge) is categorized based on different levels of abstraction. Concrete brand positioning bases such as features are more related to the product itself, whereas abstract bases such as indirect benefits to the consumers themselves and their values (Reynolds *et al.*, 1995). Even though in theory a brand positioning strategy can consist of a set of positioning bases, most brands are positioned along one dominant positioning base (Bridges *et al.*, 2000; Crawford, 1985).

A rather thorny issue in brand positioning research concerns the question of which positioning strategy is "best"; for example, do brands that are positioned on tangible brand aspects (i.e. features) perform better than brands positioned on intangible aspects (e.g. user imagery)? Interestingly, past empirical research has paid only limited and indirect attention to this research question. Specifically, existing studies have investigated the impact of various frequently applied product positioning alternatives

Type of positioning	Literature (extracts)	Description	Examples
Features (concrete attributes)	Aaker and Shansby (1982), Crawford (1985), Keller (1993), Vriens and ter Hofstede (2000), Wind (1982)	Company highlights the concrete attributes of the brand in order to create a differential advantage; concrete attributes are characteristics of the brand advantage; they are objectively measurable, mostly tangible and typically “search features”; they are also specific to the product category	Knee airbag; cylinders; horsepower; price; air-conditioning; hybrid engine
Abstract attributes ^a	Reynolds <i>et al.</i> (1995); see also Snelders and Schoormans (2004)	Often regarded as bundles of concrete attributes; attributes that are frequently comparable across product categories; they are not tangible	Quality; style; sporty; fast acceleration; innovativeness
Direct (functional) benefits	Aaker and Shansby (1982), Bridges <i>et al.</i> (2000), Crawford (1985), Keller (1993), Tybout and Sternthal (2005), Vriens and ter Hofstede (2000), Wind (1982)	Communicate advantages of (the usage of) a brand; the personal value consumers assign to product or service features; closer related to oneself than product attributes; not directly observable; reflect whether a brand works as intended; mostly attribute-based benefits; refer also to problem solutions and functional needs	Cost reduction; park in smallest lots; comfort; convenience; durability; superior service; ease-of use
Indirect (experiential/ symbolic) benefits	Crawford (1985), Gutman (1982), Keller (1993), Tybout and Sternthal (2005), Vriens and ter Hofstede (2000)	Benefits that satisfy experiential/hedonic needs; psycho-social consequences out of the use of the product that have a hedonic, expressive, or symbolic function; give consumers an indirect advantage of the consumption of a product; perception of a self- or a social-image benefit	Car X draws people’s looks; makes driver feel younger; gives you respect; driving experience; driving fun
Surrogate positioning	Aaker (1991), Bridges <i>et al.</i> (2000), Crawford (1985), Friedmann and Lessig (1987), Keller (1993)	Designed to create consumer associations about external aspects of a brand; says something about the brand that allows the consumer to come to individual conclusions; <i>not</i> attributes and benefits; creation of inferred (secondary) associations; refers to intangible aspects of the brand	User type “for people who never grow up”; making associations with Formula 1 or great writers; highlighting the pioneer status; product category disassociations; “the bestselling car”

Note: ^aWhile abstract attribute positioning and direct benefit positioning are conceptually distinct (the former refers to the product, whereas the latter to the user) in practice, the difference between the two strategies is often marginal (see Snelders and Schoormans, 2004). This is the reason why we did not distinguish formally between abstract attribute positioning and direct benefit positioning in the empirical study

such as value positioning, comparative positioning, or endorser positioning on consumers' willingness to pay (Kalra and Goodstein, 1998). In a related study, Pham and Muthukrishnan (2002) compared concrete, attribute-based positioning strategies with abstract positioning strategies in terms of how they generate brand evaluations that are resistant to challenges put forth in the form of new (challenging) brand information. Recently, Blankson *et al.* (2008) provided initial evidence that the type of positioning strategy has an impact on core financial performance measures such as sales, profits, or return on investment. These authors found that several positioning sub-strategies (e.g. "top of the range" or "reliability") are more successful in terms of bottom-line measures than others (e.g. "attractiveness", "country of origin") in the credit card market. Finally, Crawford's (1985) seminal study found that firms most frequently position their brands on direct benefits and therefore implied a certain degree of effectiveness associated with the latter (which, however, was not tested empirically).

The present study differs from the above studies in three major ways. First, we investigate positioning strategies that are outlined in the most prominent positioning typologies and are thus distinct from the ones studied in previous research. Second, we use different dependent variables aiming to capture multiple facets of a successfully positioned brand. Third, we employ a different study design than in previous studies (i.e. survey research or laboratory experiments). Specifically, we conduct two field experiments using real-life ads and brands with the goal of attaining a high degree of external validity, while at the same time preserving a solid level of internal validity.

In the following section, we provide theoretical arguments underpinning different positioning strategies and derive several hypotheses regarding their relative effectiveness.

Study hypotheses

Contrasting the positioning bases outlined in Table I against each other, several arguments can be brought forward to suggest that benefit and surrogate positioning are likely to be perceived by consumers as more effective positioning strategies than feature positioning.

An initial argument for this is that consumers buy benefits and not features (Sengupta, 2005). Benefits that are realized from the brand are more relevant to the consumer's evaluation than the physical characteristics (i.e. features) of the brand (Bagozzi, 1986) because they are actually intended to solve a need or a problem. Moreover, brands increasingly introduce features that fail to provide consumers with benefits that are meaningful and important to them (Broniarczyk and Gershoff, 2003). In this respect, current markets are crowded with brands that consist of almost identical and common features (Ries and Trout, 1986) – setting oneself apart from competitors with feature-based positioning can thus be very difficult (Aaker, 2003), particularly in product categories where the functional performance of products is perceived as very similar (Mahajan and Wind, 2002; Vriens and ter Hofstede, 2000). Particularly due to the contemporary technological progress, the differential advantage created by feature positioning is frequently only short-lived (Hsieh, 2002), because most product features can easily be copied by competitors (Moe and Fader, 2001). As a result, feature positioning may simply lead to "me-too" perceptions (Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason, 1993); indeed, Thompson *et al.* (2005) find that consumers experience a

feature fatigue. In this context, “consumers are more likely to agree on the similarity of physical characteristics [feature] than on more abstract information” (Gutman, 1982, p. 63).

A further drawback of feature positioning, which especially becomes evident in highly technological or complex product categories (i.e. digital cameras, computers, automobiles), concerns the fact that the communicated product-related information (i.e. features) can be too product category-specific to be comprehensible to consumers (Mukherjee and Hoyer, 2001; Mahajan and Wind, 2002; Vriens and ter Hofstede, 2000).

In light of the above, it is not surprising that “benefits are felt [by managers] to be more effective than features as positioning approaches” (Crawford, 1985, p. 253; see also Wind, 1982). Benefit as well as surrogate positioning strategies tend to produce more self-relevant meanings which are closer to consumers’ needs and values, and should thus be more strongly related to brand attitudes than information that creates meanings about the product (MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989). Indeed, “consumers should be more persuaded by thoughts about what products can do for them and a product’s relevance to personal goals or objectives than by thoughts about physical product characteristics” (Graeff, 1997, p. 178). For example, with user positioning – a widely employed form of surrogate positioning (see Crawford, 1985, and Table I) – favorability is created by associating consumers with their desired or actual membership group, role or self-image (Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason, 1993; Sirgy, 1982) and thus consumers needs for self-expression or social-approval are satisfied (Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Moreover, user positioning is believed to be much harder to be duplicated (Ennis, 1982). A further argument for the superiority of benefit and surrogate positioning over feature positioning is the premise that abstract positioning strategies (i.e. benefit and surrogate positioning) provide more information to consumers than concrete positioning options (i.e. feature positioning), as they are inclusive of the respective features (Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002). Specifically, consumers who are exposed to benefit or surrogate information also often (implicitly) infer the features that underlie the focal benefit (Snelders and Schoormans, 2004), or are associated with the surrogate (Friedmann and Lessig, 1987).

Based on the above discussion, we therefore expect that:

- H1.* Benefit positioning (direct and indirect) is more effective than feature positioning.
- H2.* Surrogate (user) positioning is more effective than feature positioning.

When contrasting benefit and surrogate positioning strategies, it is widely acknowledged that benefit positioning is the most superior positioning strategy (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007; Wind, 1982). However, this belief is primarily grounded in the argument that consumers tend to value brands based on their (expected) benefits *per se* (Ratneshwar *et al.*, 1997). Benefits, by their very nature, are the primary motivation underlying consumers’ preferences (Myers and Shocker, 1981; Ratchford, 1975). Indeed, drawing on information processing literature, Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason (1993) found that benefit information is more relevant in shaping preferences than feature or surrogate (i.e. user, imagery) information. This leads to the expectation that benefit positioning is more effective than surrogate positioning.

However, there are also compelling arguments favoring surrogate positioning over benefit positioning. Specifically, surrogate positioning tends to create brand

associations about external aspects of the brand (e.g. secondary associations) and can, therefore, be regarded as an alternative means for effectively differentiating a brand from competitor brands (Bridges *et al.*, 2000; Keller, 1993; Kalra and Goodstein, 1998). Surrogate positioning strategies have the advantage that they can give individual meanings to consumers. For example, the automobile producer Renault associates various of its models with Formula 1: some consumers might infer that their cars are commensurate with the state-of-the art in automobile technology, others transfer the luxury and exclusivity associated with Formula 1 to the brand, and still others may make associations of excitement, danger, and cosmopolitanism. Thus, the associations created by surrogate information are “tailor-made” and may correspond better to individual consumer needs than benefit positioning strategies. Surrogate positioning is further suggested to constitute a sound way to attract a variety of different segments and, therefore, to be particularly appropriate for major brands (Aaker and Shansby, 1982; Friedmann and Lessig, 1987).

Benefit as well as surrogate positioning strategies are also associated with weaknesses. One potential downside of benefit positioning is that it is, along with feature positioning, the most frequently used positioning strategy in the marketplace (Crawford, 1985). As a result, consumers are likely to become tired of hearing the same “old” (feature and benefit) arguments drawing to the superiority of these brands. Surrogate positioning strategies, on the other hand, are deemed to be more risky than benefit positioning strategies (Aaker and Shansby, 1982) as they can lead to a confused brand image (Bridges *et al.*, 2000) since, inevitably, some control of the latter is given up (Keller, 1993). The main reason for this is that, as already noted, surrogate positioning information may be interpreted completely differently by different consumers (Crawford, 1985) – an advantage which, however, can also turn out to be a weakness. Specifically, making associations about external aspects of a brand via surrogate positioning is only viable if consumers already have existing associations with the used surrogate (e.g., company, person, an event, etc.) and these associations are in line with the desired brand associations (Keller, 1993; Krishnan, 1996; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989); should there be a deviation, surrogate positioning is likely to fail.

Given the presence of numerous relative strengths and weaknesses of benefit versus surrogate positioning, it is not possible to postulate a priori which strategy is likely to outperform the other. Hence, we only offer an exploratory hypothesis specifying the existence of differences in the effectiveness of the two strategies but not their direction. Specifically, we hypothesize that:

- H3.* Benefit positioning (direct and indirect) and surrogate positioning differ in terms of their effectiveness.

Benefit positioning can be further subdivided into direct (functional) benefit positioning and indirect (experiential/symbolic) benefit positioning (see Table I). Direct benefit positioning refers to the communication of the intrinsic advantage of using or possessing the brand (Crawford, 1985; Keller, 1993). Direct benefits are primarily derived from brand features and tend to be functional in nature. Indirect benefits, on the other hand, are conceptualized as “follow-on” results from direct benefits (Crawford, 1985; Keller, 1993; Gutman, 1982) and tend to satisfy experiential (i.e. sensory pleasure, fun, excitement, cognitive stimulation, etc.) or symbolic (i.e. self-fulfillment, social acceptance and approval, self-esteem, etc.) needs (Keller, 1993;

Park *et al.*, 1986). Accordingly, implementing indirect benefit positioning may be specifically valid for hedonic goods (e.g. designer clothes, luxury watches, sports cars, etc.), which base their superiority on fun, pleasure and excitement (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000; Schmitt, 1999). However, in utilitarian product categories (e.g. alkaline batteries, vacuum cleaners, computers, etc.) direct benefit positioning which creates primarily functional performance-related associations (Keller *et al.*, 2002) may be more congruent with consumers' needs (utilitarian) and, therefore, also more effective than indirect (experiential/symbolic) positioning (Johar and Sirgy, 1991). As in the current study, we examine the relative effectiveness of alternative brand positioning strategies using a utilitarian product category (compact cars; Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000) as our empirical setting, we expect that:

H4. Direct benefit positioning is more effective than indirect benefit positioning.

To test our research hypotheses regarding the relative superiority of different positioning strategies, we employ three complementary measures of consumer-judged effectiveness as discussed below.

Positioning effectiveness

In this study, we adopt a consumer-based perspective to positioning effectiveness, where we focus on the perceived positioning of a brand. Accordingly, we define positioning effectiveness as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to occupy a favorable, differentiated and credible position in the minds of consumers. We base the latter on the very purpose of brand positioning as "emphasising the distinctive characteristics that make it different from its competitors and appealing to the public" (Kapferer, 2004, p. 99). This reveals that differentiation (i.e. the brand must be perceived as different/unique from competing brands) and favorability (i.e. the brand must be liked by consumers) constitute the two main building blocks of positioning. In this context, Keller (2003) argues that strong, favorable, and unique brand associations that distinguish a brand from other brands in the same frame of reference are crucial for effective brand positioning. Furthermore, credibility has also been proposed as a central component of successful positioning in the literature (e.g., Keller, 2003; Kotler, 2003; Mahajan and Wind, 2002; Myers, 1996). Credibility is defined as "the believability of the product position information contained in a brand, which depends on the willingness and ability of the firms to deliver what they promise" (Erdem *et al.*, 2006, p. 34). We conceptualize the credibility of positioning as the extent to which the differentiation between the focal brand and other brands is believable (Keller, 2003).

Study 1

Research design

To compare the effectiveness of distinct positioning strategies we chose the compact car market as our empirical setting. This choice was based on a pilot study (using content analysis of advertisements) in different product categories, which revealed a great deal of variety in the positioning strategies followed by firms in the automobile market. Furthermore, positioning is highly relevant in this market as also reflected in a wide array of positioning studies for automobile brands (e.g. Wilkes, 1977; Johansson and Thorelli, 1985; Meade, 1987). Last and perhaps most importantly, the focal product category seems to be representative of high-involvement product categories.

We selected four print advertisements of compact cars, each employing a different brand positioning strategy (i.e. comprising one dominant positioning base)[1]. A summary description of the ads and the specific positioning strategy associated with each (as based on Table I) is given in the upper panel of the Appendix. Our selection of ads was based on a content analysis of advertisements which has been shown to be a sound and widely accepted approach for identifying the actual positioning strategies of brands (Blankson and Kalafatis, 2007; Crawford, 1985; Easingwood and Mahajan, 1989) and which is consistent with the view that “the way a product is positioned in advertising or other efforts is more meaningful than the way the marketers intended it to be positioned” (Crawford, 1985, p. 245). To characterize the brands’ positioning strategies, we used an expanded version of Crawford’s (1985) well-known positioning typology, which also encompasses the schemes proposed by Aaker and Shansby (1982), Kotler (2003), Myers and Shocker (1981) and Wind (1982). Each ad was coded independently by three expert coders into one of the four focal categories, representing distinct positioning strategies:

- (1) feature positioning;
- (2) direct (functional) benefit positioning;
- (3) indirect (experiential/symbolic) benefit positioning; and
- (4) user positioning.

There was full agreement among the coders confirming the correct classification of positioning strategies. As with practically all car brand advertisements, the chosen set of ads contained a picture of the brand, a main (dominant) positioning claim and also additional small-fonted brand information.

The selected ads were subsequently shown to a purposive sample of 50 consumers who were potential buyers of automobiles (i.e. current owners or individuals who would generally consider buying compact cars in the future). Respondents were on average 30 years old (ranging from 21 to 59 years) and 60 percent were male. They also differed in terms of education levels and occupation. Each respondent rated the four brands illustrated in the ads with regard to the positioning effectiveness measures (notably favorability, differentiation, and credibility) and control variables (to be discussed below). The order in which the ads were presented to respondents was randomly rotated to minimize order effects (Mitchell and Jolley, 1996).

Given that several extraneous influences can confound consumers’ evaluations of the overall effectiveness of positioning strategies, three sets of covariates were also included as potential control variables. The first set aimed at controlling for *brand-specific* effects and included advertising creativity, corporate brand attitudes, and brand familiarity. We advocate that advertising basically consists of a creativity part (executional part) and a positioning part (positioning claim). By controlling for the creativity part of the ad, we are able to “isolate” the positioning part of the ad. Ad creativity, which is reflected, among others, in the artwork, cleverness, and originality of the advertisement, is prominent for effectively transferring the positioning in consumers’ minds (Zinkhan, 1993). Thus, by incorporating ad creativity as a covariate, we control for ad execution as a confounding factor. With reference to corporate brand attitudes, we sought to control for the transfer of existing corporate brand (image) associations such as the brand heritage to the positioning of the brand (Brown and

Dacin, 1997; Keller, 2003) as well as context effects (Brown and Dacin, 1997). We also incorporated brand familiarity as a covariate which is intended to control for consumers' magnitude of existing associations with the brand and has been shown to moderate the perceptions of positioning strategies (e.g. Dubé and Schmitt, 1999).

The second set of covariates sought to capture product class effects and included product class knowledge and involvement (e.g. Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Sujan and Bettman, 1989), which are also likely to bias consumers' ratings of brand's positioning effectiveness. The final set of covariates consisted of *socio-demographic* characteristics (namely age, sex, education and income), which might also influence consumers' perceptions of positioning (e.g. Friedmann and Lessig, 1987).

Measures

The description of the constructs included in Study 1, their measures and associated psychometric information are shown in Table II. The scale unidimensionality was established by running confirmatory factor analyses which revealed a stable structure both for the positioning effectiveness measures and the control variables (Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). The standardized factor loadings are all high and significant and the reliability of the measures is very satisfactory (all construct reliabilities exceed 0.80). In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) values clearly exceed the benchmark of 0.5, indicating convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). While the dimensions of the positioning effectiveness measure are all positively correlated, their coefficients lie below the 0.70 benchmark, thus also demonstrating discriminant validity (Ping, 2004). More precisely, the correlation between favorability and differentiation is 0.53 ($p < 0.01$), between favorability and credibility 0.66 ($p < 0.01$), and between differentiation and credibility 0.65 ($p < 0.01$), respectively. In summary, all measures used in Study 1 display highly acceptable psychometric properties.

Analysis procedure

Given that all participants in Study 1 were exposed to all four advertisements, an analysis strategy appropriate for a within-subjects research design was adopted. More specifically, in a first step, we ran two repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) with the brand-specific covariates (i.e. corporate brand attitudes, brand familiarity, and ad creativity) as dependent variables to investigate whether we need to adjust for the impact of these potentially confounding variables. The analyses revealed that the four brands did not differ in terms of brand familiarity ($F[3, 47] = 0.47$, $p > 0.10$), ad creativity ($F[3, 47] = 0.67$, $p > 0.10$) and corporate brand attitude ($F[3, 47] = 1.89$, $p > 0.10$); thus, these covariates were excluded from further analysis.

In a next step, we tested the influence of product-class and socio-demographic variables on each of the three effectiveness dimensions (i.e. favorability, differentiation and credibility) using repeated measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). In particular, we modeled each effectiveness dimension as the main (within-subjects) effect, sex and education as between-subjects factors, and product class knowledge, product class involvement, income, and age as covariates. We identified product class involvement, age and income as significant covariates; all other covariates were not significant and were dropped from further analysis. In a final step, we ran a repeated-measures ANCOVA on each effectiveness dimension together with their respective significant covariates identified in the previous stage.

Variable	Description	Number of items ^a	Stand. item loadings ^b	Composite reliability	AVE	Source of measure
<i>Effectiveness measures</i>						
Favorability	The degree to which consumers have a positive (favorable) attitude toward a brand (Alpert and Kamins, 1995)	4	0.87-0.96	0.85	0.84	Bello <i>et al.</i> (1983), Holbrook and Batra (1987)
Differentiation	The degree to which a brand is perceived as unique or different compared with competitor brands (Sujan and Bettman, 1989)	4	0.82-0.91	0.93	0.76	Netemeyer <i>et al.</i> (2004), Sujan and Bettman (1989)
Credibility	The degree to which consumers perceive the differences between the focal brands and competitor brands as believable (Keller, 2003)	4	0.88-0.97	0.96	0.87	Beltramini (1988), Kent and Allen (1994)
<i>Control variables</i>						
Ad creativity	The extent to which consumers view the advertisements as creative, well-designed, entertaining, clever, and attention-grabbing (Moriarty, 1983; Schlinger, 1979)	5	0.77-0.94	0.92	0.72	Bello <i>et al.</i> (1983), Moriarty (1983), Schlinger (1979)
Attitude towards corporate brand	The degree to which consumers have a positive attitude towards the parent brand or organization (Kirmani <i>et al.</i> , 1999)	4	0.77-0.94	0.92	0.75	Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran (1998), Kirmani <i>et al.</i> (1999)
Brand familiarity	The degree to which consumers are aware and knowledgeable of a specific product or brand (Kent and Allen, 1994)	3	0.92-0.95	0.96	0.88	Kent and Allen (1994)
Involvement (product class) ^c	Consumers' perceived relevance of (objects in) a product class based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985)	3	0.87-0.99	0.95	0.86	Beatty and Talpade (1994)
Knowledge (product class) ^c	Consumers' perceptions of what and/or how much they know about a product class (Park <i>et al.</i> , 1994)	3	0.64-0.92	0.87	0.69	Park <i>et al.</i> (1994)

Notes: ^aItems for attitude toward the ad, involvement (product class) and knowledge (product class) were measured on a seven-point "strongly disagree/strongly agree" scale; all other constructs were measured on seven-point bipolar semantic differential scales. ^bRanges of the factor loadings as based on the CFAs. ^cAs only three items were available, we set two loadings equal to each other prior to performing the CFAs

Findings

As can be seen from Table III, the analysis revealed significant main effects of positioning on all three effectiveness dimensions. The effect sizes in terms of partial eta squared (η^2) can be regarded as high across all dimensions (Cohen, 1988). We also conducted a power analysis, which revealed that the sample size is large enough to generalize the results. For all dimensions, the power statistics – based on an α of 0.05 – exceed 0.99, which reveals that our analysis is associated with high levels of statistical power. With respect to the covariates, as expected, product class involvement had a significant effect on favorability ($F[1, 46] = 4.59, p < 0.05$), whereas involvement, age and income produced significant effects on credibility ($F[1, 46] = 4.69, p < 0.05$; $F[1, 46] = 5.48, p < 0.05$; and $F[1, 46] = 3.58, p < 0.10$, respectively).

Looking at the adjusted means in Table III, it can be seen that, consistent with our expectations, feature positioning is the least effective strategy, whereas direct benefit positioning is, overall, most effective across all three effectiveness dimensions. To explore the observed differences in more detail, pairwise comparisons between all four positioning strategies were conducted; the significant effects are summarized in Table IV.

As predicted by *H1*, direct benefit positioning produces significantly higher scores on the three effectiveness dimensions than feature positioning. Indirect benefit positioning also achieves significantly higher levels of differentiation and credibility than feature positioning. Taking these findings together, we find support for *H1* for both benefit positioning strategies. Similarly, and consistent with *H2*, surrogate (user) positioning outperforms feature positioning with respect to favorability, differentiation and credibility. Thus, feature positioning is, from a consumer point of view, the least effective positioning strategy.

Focusing on the relative effectiveness of benefit versus surrogate positioning, no differences in any effectiveness dimension could be identified between surrogate (user) positioning and either direct or indirect benefit positioning (see Table IV). This provides no support for *H3* and indicates that, at least in the compact car market, benefit and surrogate positioning seem to be equally effective options.

Positioning strategies	Mean values (adjusted mean values)		
	Favorability	Differentiation	Credibility
Feature positioning	3.75 (3.75)	2.17	3.27 (3.27)
Direct benefit positioning	4.68 (4.68)	2.67	4.13 (4.13)
Indirect benefit positioning	4.16 (4.16)	2.56	3.95 (3.94)
Surrogate (user) positioning	4.30 (4.30)	2.68	4.14 (4.14)
<i>F</i> -value (3df)	3.55	3.47	6.16
<i>p</i> -value	<0.05	<0.05	<0.01
Partial eta squared (η^2)	0.19	0.18	0.30
Significant covariates	4 ^b		4 ^b , 6 ^b , 9 ^a

Notes: For differentiation, the adjusted means equal the observed means as none of the covariates was significant. Covariates: 1, attitude toward corporate brand; 2, ad creativity; 3, brand familiarity; 4, product class involvement; 5, product class knowledge; 6, age; 7, sex; 8, education; 9, income. ^a $p < 0.01$; ^b $p < 0.05$

Table III.
Results of Study 1
(within-subjects design)

Table IV.
Comparisons of
positioning strategies
(Study 1)

	Feature	Direct benefit	Indirect benefit	Surrogate: user
Feature		Low favorability ^a Low differentiation ^b Low credibility ^a	Low differentiation ^b Low credibility ^a	Low favorability ^b Low differentiation ^a Low credibility ^a
Direct benefit	High favorability ^a High differentiation ^b High credibility ^a		High favorability ^c	
Indirect benefit	High differentiation ^b High credibility ^a	Low favorability ^c		
Surrogate: user	High favorability ^b High differentiation ^a High credibility ^a			

Notes: Entries in each cell refer to the superiority (inferiority) of each row strategy in relation to the column strategies. Empty cells indicate no significant differences. Note also that the upper triangle presents the inverse findings of the lower triangle. ^a $p < 0.01$; ^b $p < 0.05$; ^c $p < 0.10$

Finally, contrasting the two sub-forms of benefit positioning, and consistent with *H4*, direct benefit positioning was found to create more favorable brand attitudes than indirect benefit positioning. At the same time, the two positioning strategies do not differ with regard to differentiation and credibility perceptions. We therefore find support for *H4*, but for the favorability dimension only.

Table IV also shows that if a brand outperforms competitor brands on one positioning effectiveness dimension, it does not automatically mean that the focal brand also outperforms them on the other two dimensions. In other words, a positioning strategy that, for example, yields high brand favorability ratings does not necessarily also lead to high differentiation and credibility perceptions. Thus, the three effectiveness dimensions capture distinct (but complementary) aspects of positioning success and indicate that relying on any one dimension can result in a biased picture of the overall positioning success of a brand (e.g. Voss *et al.*, 2003)

Study 2

Research design

Having established that the focal positioning strategies of different brands are perceived differently on the effectiveness dimensions in a within-subjects study design, we undertook a follow-up study seeking to compare the positioning effectiveness of distinct positioning strategies employed by the same brand using a between-subjects design. We were particularly interested to further test the difference between direct and indirect benefit positioning strategies, as the testing of *H4* in Study 1 produced results that were significant at the 10 percent level only. For this purpose, we sought to identify print advertisements of compact cars that use direct and indirect benefit positioning strategies (and hence also different ads) for exactly the same model. We were able to identify two ads that met these criteria (see lower panel of the Appendix).

As in Study 1, each ad was coded independently by three expert coders according to its underlying positioning strategy. There was full agreement among coders on the positioning strategy used by the focal brands. Subsequently, a sample of 50 consumers, who qualified as potential buyers of compact cars, was drawn for each ad, resulting in a total of 100 participants. Overall, the sample was similar in terms of socio-demographic characteristics to the sample used in Study 1 (average age: 30 years, ranging from 18 to 55 years; 46 percent male, different in terms of level of education and occupation). Moreover, the same measures as in Study 1 were used and, as Table V shows, they demonstrated highly acceptable psychometric properties. Consistent with Study 1, the correlations among the effectiveness dimensions were positive and highly significant; the correlations between favorability and differentiation was 0.54 ($p < 0.01$) and between favorability credibility 0.57 ($p < 0.01$), respectively. The correlation between differentiation and credibility came to 0.60 ($p < 0.01$).

Analysis and findings

We ran a set of analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) on the three effectiveness dimensions (favorability, differentiation, and credibility) with the positioning strategy (direct benefit versus indirect benefit positioning) as the main (between-subjects) effect and the previously discussed control variables as covariates.

The comparisons between direct benefit positioning and indirect benefit positioning are fully in line with the findings of Study 1. Specifically, they reveal that direct benefit

Variable	Number of items ^a	Stand. loadings ^b	Composite reliability	AVE
<i>Effectiveness measures</i>				
Favorability	4	0.81-0.97	0.94	0.79
Differentiation	4	0.76-0.98	0.93	0.78
Credibility	4	0.76-0.94	0.92	0.73
<i>Control variables</i>				
Ad creativity	5	0.78-0.87	0.90	0.70
Attitude toward corporate brand	4	0.80-0.93	0.92	0.75
Brand familiarity	3	0.80-0.99	0.92	0.81
Involvement (product class) ^c	3	0.81-0.99	0.93	0.81
Knowledge (product class) ^c	3	0.80-0.97	0.91	0.78

Notes: ^aItems for attitude toward the ad, involvement (product class) and knowledge (product class) were measured on a seven-point “strongly disagree/strongly agree” scale; all other constructs were measured on seven-point bipolar semantic differential scales. ^bThe ranges of the factor loadings are derived from CFAs. ^cSince only three items were available, we set two loadings equal to each other

Table V.
Construct measurement
(Study 2)

positioning outperforms indirect benefit positioning in terms of favorability ($F[1, 85] = 4.56, p < 0.05$), whereas the differences between the two strategies are not significant with regard to differentiation and credibility (see Table VI). We thus find support for *H4* but, as was also the case in Study 1, only with respect to favorability. The partial eta square (η^2) value is 0.05, which, according to Cohen (1988), is a medium large effect size. The associated power of the test (0.63) can be deemed as still acceptable.

As can be seen from Table VI, corporate brand attitude has a significant impact on all effectiveness dimensions (favorability, $F[1, 85] = 36.98, p < 0.01$; differentiation, $F[1, 85] = 2.82, p < .10$; credibility, $F[1, 85] = 3.65, p < 0.10$). Furthermore, the perceived creativity of the ad has a highly significant impact on favorability ($F[1, 85] = 23.43, p < 0.01$) and differentiation ($F[1, 85] = 6.30, p < 0.05$). With regard to the product class variables, involvement produces a marginally significant effect ($F[1, 85] = 3.42, p < 0.10$) on credibility. The remaining covariates (including all socio-demographic variables) did not yield significant results.

Positioning strategies	Mean values (adjusted mean values)		
	Favorability	Differentiation	Credibility
Direct benefit positioning	3.75 (4.30)	2.41 (2.73)	3.61 (3.88)
Indirect benefit positioning	4.36 (3.77)	3.50 (3.16)	4.17 (3.89)
<i>F</i> -value (1df)	4.21	1.93	0.02
<i>p</i> -value	< 0.05	NS	NS
Partial eta squared (η^2)	0.05	–	–
<i>R</i> ² -value ^a	0.56	0.32	0.24
Significant covariates	1 ^b , 2 ^b	2 ^c	4 ^d

Table VI.
Results of Study 2
(between-subjects design)

Notes: Covariates: 1, attitude toward corporate brand; 2, ad creativity; 3, brand familiarity; 4, product class involvement; 5, product class knowledge; 6, age; 7, sex, 8, education; 9, income. ^aBased on the total model with positioning strategy and covariates. ^b $p < 0.01$; ^c $p < 0.05$, ^d $p < 0.10$

General discussion

The aim of this research was to make inferences about the overall relative effectiveness of prototypical brand positioning strategies, measured from a consumer perspective. Based on two separate studies (emphasizing within- and between-subjects designs, respectively), we found support for the notion that the type of positioning strategy does indeed affect the positioning success of real-world brands. In this context, the dimensions of positioning effectiveness are perceived significantly distinct from each other, depending on the specific brand positioning strategy selected. This finding complements initial insights provided by Blankson *et al.* (2008) who revealed that the type of positioning strategy has generally an impact on the corporate performance (measured by financial bottom-line measures) using a consumer perspective.

Consistent with *H1* and *H2*, benefit and surrogate (user) positioning strategies outperform feature positioning strategies across all effectiveness dimensions (i.e. favorability, differentiation and credibility). These findings imply that marketers should be cautious using feature positioning as a dominant positioning strategy in their advertising initiatives, at least in the compact car market which stands for a high-involvement product category. The findings are also consistent with assertions outlined in normative literature suggesting that benefit-based positioning is superior over feature-based positioning (e.g. Wind, 1982; see also Graeff, 1997; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989).

Relative to feature positioning, the remaining positioning strategies (i.e. benefit and surrogate positioning) all produce acceptable results in terms of positioning effectiveness. However, benefit (direct and indirect) and surrogate (user) positioning strategies are *not* distinct in terms of positioning effectiveness – the results of Study 1 (*H3*) reveal that they produce similar scores on the three positioning effectiveness dimensions. We therefore can conclude that surrogate positioning constitutes a sound alternative to benefit positioning, which is also in line with arguments put forth by Crawford (1985). From a managerial point of view, marketing managers should at least consider various forms of surrogate positioning as a potential alternative to traditional forms of positioning (i.e. feature and benefit positioning).

Based on the findings of Study 2 (*H4*), we empirically support the conceptual distinction between direct and indirect benefit positioning, because they are perceived differently in terms of positioning effectiveness – direct benefit positioning is associated with significantly higher levels of favorability than indirect benefit positioning. A possible reason for this finding is that the product category investigated in our study (i.e. compact cars) is advocated to be utilitarian in nature (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000). In this case, direct (functional) benefit positioning is likely to be more effective than indirect (i.e. experiential/symbolic) benefit positioning (Johar and Sirgy, 1991).

From a methodological perspective, external validity considerations dominated our study design – we therefore used real print advertisements of real-world stimuli while controlling for a wide array of potential confounding factors. With respect to such factors, we have demonstrated that the use of covariates is of paramount importance; failing to integrate covariates may lead to severe misinterpretations about the overall effectiveness of positioning strategies. Finally, the results of our study empirically support the proposition that measuring positioning effectiveness must extend beyond capturing solely unidimensional brand attitude (e.g. favorability of brand evaluations) measures (e.g. Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002; Voss *et al.*, 2003).

Limitations and directions for further research

Several limitations of the present study need to be acknowledged. Foremost, both Study 1 and Study 2 are limited in terms of the number of positioning strategies considered as well as in scope (i.e. single product category) and type of media used (i.e. print advertisements). Future studies are needed to assess whether our results are generalizable to other product categories (e.g. hedonic goods, services) and/or remain stable under various conditions (e.g. high involvement vs. low involvement situations) and using different media formats (e.g. television or internet ads). While the focus of the present study was on identifying the overall relative effectiveness of main positioning strategies (i.e. focusing on direct effects), we acknowledge that it would also be important to reveal under which specific conditions certain strategies might be more/less effective (i.e. focusing on moderator effects). The significant results of product category-related covariates in both Study 1 and Study 2 seem to suggest that the nature of the product category is likely to be such a condition. Hence, prospective studies should focus on how product category characteristics (e.g. high-tech versus low-tech markets, consumer versus business markets, self-expressive versus functional goods) moderate the effectiveness of particular positioning strategies (cf. Johar and Sirgy, 1991).

Moreover, despite the incorporation of a comprehensive subset of covariates (which have been shown to effectively control for moderator effects), there may be specific segments for which certain positioning strategies work better than others. For example, a value-oriented segment is likely to respond differently to a specific positioning strategy as compared to a luxury segment. Our study design did not address such possibilities, which therefore are open for future research. We further recognize that under our measurement approach, positioning effectiveness is considered only from a consumer perspective. Therefore, additional studies that use an alternative measurement approach (i.e. taking a managerial perspective) would be needed to demonstrate the robustness of our findings.

It should also be noted that not only the type of positioning strategy employed (e.g. feature, direct benefit, etc.), but also its specific content is likely to have an influence on positioning effectiveness. In other words, the selection of the focal benefit (e.g. either comfort, safety, durability, etc.) when using benefit positioning or the certain user information (e.g. either for rebels, for superwomen, for smart people, etc.) when employing user positioning, may also affect the brand's positioning effectiveness. In this regard, we have investigated brands positioned on features, benefits and surrogates that are common (i.e. typical) in the particular product category (i.e. compact car class) – we have not studied brands that are, for example, positioned on radically novel, trivial or branded features and/or benefits (e.g., Aaker, 2003; Broniarczyk and Gershoff, 2003).

In light of the above, future research on positioning strategies that have not been included within the scope of our study would furnish additional insights on their relative effectiveness. Specifically, surrogate positioning offers numerous alternative positioning bases that deserve further exploration (Crawford, 1985). In course of this study, we only analyzed positioning strategies that employ one dominant positioning base (i.e., “depth” positioning strategy). However, marketing managers should not ignore the possibility of employing a hybrid positioning approach in which elements from more than one positioning base are used (e.g. features combined with benefits;

cf. Lilien and Rangaswamy, 2003). Accordingly, future studies should, for example, investigate under what conditions brands using a “depth” positioning strategy outperform brands using “hybrid” positioning strategies (in which multiple positioning bases are emphasized) or vice versa.

We also need to stress that our study is *not* a laboratory experiment – instead, it is a study of prototypical positioning strategies incorporated in *real* advertisements of real brands. This means that our findings correspond to a “real life” scenario and are thus highly relevant in terms of practical application. However, as with most such studies, we may have gained external validity at the cost of internal validity (Winer, 1999). The current study could thus be complemented by a fully crossed factorial design of fictional scenarios in which the stimuli varied only by the actual positioning strategy (hence enhancing internal validity). Moreover, we acknowledge that our operationalization of positioning effectiveness does not encompass intentional or behavioral aspects. Hence, future studies are needed to link the positioning effectiveness measures to behavioral outcome measures or financial performance measures, which would also make the importance of positioning more transparent to marketing managers.

Note

1. Note that in course of this study, we only analyze positioning strategies that employ one dominant base.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Brand	Ad description	Positioning strategy ^a
<i>Ads in Study 1</i>		
Mitsubishi Colt	The ad highlights the following features: "MIVEC motors, ABS, EBD, power steering, 4 airbags, power windows, largest passenger compartment of its class" as well as price information	Feature
VW Polo	The ad displays the Volkswagen Polo, in which the safety of the car is claimed by stating "The new Polo, reassuringly safe"	Direct benefit
Peugeot 107	The ad positions the Peugeot 107 as a car that highlights the (driving) fun associated with the car; specifically, the ad states "Little Rascal"	Indirect benefit
Seat Altea	The ad shows the Seat Altea with the words "keep the rebel alive" and uses "bad boy" John McEnroe with his broken tennis racket as an endorser	Surrogate: user
<i>Ads in Study 2</i>		
Toyota Corolla	The ad displays the car with the words: "5 years guarantee" and "the most reliable of its class", pointing to the benefits of the car	Direct benefit
Toyota Corolla	The ad shows the Toyota Corolla in the form of a red hot chili and states "The hottest special edition of the year" and "Now with HOT extras inclusive!", drawing attention to the experiential value of the car	Indirect benefit

Table AI.

Note: ^aBased on Table I

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