

# The Brand Perceptions of Former Users

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This is an extension of key brand image research conducted by Bird, Channon and Ehrenberg (reported in Bird & Channon 1969; Bird & Channon 1970; Bird, Channon et al. 1970; and Bird & Ehrenberg 1970). They found that 'former users' were more likely to associate a brand with a positive image attribute than those who had never tried the brand. This paper extends the findings of their research to a different method of (1) classifying 'former users' and (2) measuring associations with image attributes. The results replicate that found in the original study, reinforcing the assertion that an image response is substantially influenced by past usage. These findings make detecting any relationship between brand image and future behaviour a more difficult task, as the influence of past usage needs to be taken into account in any analysis.

Keywords: brand image research, former users perceptions

## Introduction

This research involves two extensions of key brand image measurement research conducted by Bird, Channon and Ehrenberg in the late 60's and early 70's (Bird & Channon 1969; Bird & Channon 1970; Bird, Channon et al. 1970; Bird & Ehrenberg 1970, collectively referred to as Bird et al.), and seeks to further build on that seminal work. It tests the extent to which their findings were an artifact of the categorisation and measurement techniques used.

Brand image is a popular area of research, often based on the belief that brand images that consumers hold influence their subsequent buying behaviour (Fishbein 1967; Johnson & Puto 1987). However, very little is known about the relationship between brand image and future behaviour. Studies conducted by Bird et al used a common technique where respondents were prompted for brand image attributes (e.g., 'good value for money') and asked which brands in the product category they associated with each attribute. Bird et al found 'current users' were the more likely to associate a brand with positive (i.e., desirable) image attributes than non-users, and surprisingly, 'former users' were more likely to do this than those who had never tried the brand. The average proportion mentioning the brand for an attribute were 50% of 'current users', 20% of 'former users' and 10% of those who had never tried the brand. This result suggests that the mention of a brand for a positive image attribute is related to current/past, rather than future, behaviour.

This finding is important in that it suggests that if image attributes (also referred to as beliefs) make up brand attitude (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen 1974), this attitude will be based (at least) in part on past behaviour, rather than being an indicator of future behaviour. In this research two conditions are tested to further extend the generalisability of Bird et al's research. These are based on the method used to categorise 'former users', and the technique used to measure association with image attributes.

## **Categorising Former Users**

Bird et al categorised respondents who had bought a brand in the four weeks prior to the survey as 'current users'. 'Former users' were those respondents who stated they had bought a brand previously but not in the 4 weeks prior to the interview. There are several potential reasons why, at the point of interview, a customer may not have bought the brand in the past four weeks. The first is that they may be light buyers of the category and had not bought *any* brand in that time period. The second is due to cycling through repertoire, whereby at the time of interview the respondent may have bought from another brand in their repertoire. In these two scenarios there is no reason why a respondent should **not** associate the brand with positive attributes when asked. The only barrier is the respondent just doesn't think of the brand at all, or as much, as other, more recently bought, and therefore more salient brands. For these respondents it would be expected that positive attribute associations would be elicited, but less frequently than for 'current users' who had bought the brand more recently. This was the empirical finding of Bird et al.

However, the third group of 'former users' in Bird et al's categorisation were those who have rejected the brand in favour of an alternative brand. It is reasonable to hypothesise that this group would be less likely to mention the brand for positive image attributes than other users (as per Bird et al). However because of this past rejection of the brand, this group should also be less likely than those who have never tried the brand, which is contrary to the findings of Bird et al. Thus using a 'former user' group that consists only of those who have rejected the brand should mean that the key finding of Bird et al would not be generalisable. This is detailed in Hypothesis 1.

**H1: 'Former users' who have rejected the brand will be less likely to mention the brand for positive image attribute than those who have never tried the brand.**

## **Important image attributes**

As previously mentioned, respondents were given image attributes and asked which brands are associated with each attribute. The provision of image attributes in the manner of Bird et al assumes that all attributes are equally important to all customers. Consumers may associate the brand with attributes that have been developed because of prior usage, hence the relationship between image responses and past usage. However, these attributes acquired after usage may not be the attributes that are important for buying behaviour. Based on past rejection of the brand, former users should be less likely than 'never tried' to use the brand in the future. Therefore, when only *important* brand attributes are included, former users should be less likely to mention the brand they rejected than those who have never tried that brand. This would mean the results of Bird et al would not be generalisable to this context. The hypothesis tested is as follows:

**H2: Former users will be less likely to elicit important positive attributes about the brand than those who have never tried the brand**

## **Method**

A total of 1300 questionnaires were sent out via mail to retailers in a specific industry. Retailers were sent the initial survey and then a reminder letter 10 days later. An incentive of entry into a draw for \$500 was also provided to increase the response rate. In total, 302

completed surveys were returned, giving a response rate of 23%. This relatively low response rate does suggest the possibility of non-response bias. However the penetration of the brands was considered to be reasonably accurate by one of the marketing managers. Additionally as the subjects were not aware of the purpose of the study, and the comparisons are between groups within the sample, it is not expected that any non-response bias will affect the study.

Two methods were used to collect the data on image attributes associated with the brands. The first was a table of the 5 main brands in the market and 14 image attributes. Retailers were asked to circle which brands they associated with each attribute. The method of data collection was similar to that of Bird et al, with the only difference was the use of a self-completion booklet rather than a face-to-face administered questionnaire. To test Hypothesis 2, the second method for collecting image attribute responses was to provide respondents with the brand names and ask them to state up to three key strengths for each brand (e.g, Krishnan 1996; Krugman 1966-67). The specific image attributes were identified through a series of in depth interviews. These were as follows:

Wide product range	Quality material	Excellent warranty
Seals effectively	Easy to install	Cheap
Trust to perform	Strong	Good value
Easy to assemble	Good reputation	Continuous supply
Quality threads	Would recommend	

In order to identify ‘former users’, retailers were asked to state if they currently stocked, had never stocked or used to stock each brand. This process ensured there was a clear distinction between those who had never tried a brand and those who have had some past history of using the brand. The use of retailers is also advantageous, as retailers stock the brand continually so there are no former users who are light buyers or cycling through repertoires.

## Results

As descriptive statistics, the brand penetrations for each usage group are shown in Table 1. Those who did not specify their usage status were put in the ‘never tried’ category.

**Table 1. Brand penetration across usage categories**

	Current users %	Former users %	Never tried %
Brand 1	79	13	7
Brand 2	45	19	36
Brand 3	11	7	82
Brand 4	4	9	87
Brand 5	0.5	2	97.5
Average	26	10	62

In Bird et al, former users comprised the largest usage sub-group (reported to be generally at least 50% (Bird, Channon et al. 1970)). Here, the average of the former user groups is 10%.

The results in Table 2 are for the four largest brands in the marketplace. The smallest brand had too few current and former users to make valid sub-group comparisons. The figures in Table 2 are the proportion of each user group that, on average, associate the brand with the attributes given to respondents. This is calculated in the same manner as Bird et al. For example, on average 83% of the current users of Brand 1 associated it with the image attributes provided.

**Table 2. Average % of user group associating the brand across all image attributes**

User groups	Brand 1 %	Brand 2 %	Brand 3 %	Brand 4 %	Average	Average (Bird et al)
Current Users	83	74	65	52	68	50
Former Users	54	41	13	11	30	20
Never Tried	57	26	6	2	25	10

Referring to Table 2, ‘former users’ were more likely to associate the brand with the image attributes than those who had never tried the brand. Therefore Hypothesis 1 is not supported. Having a method for categorising ‘former users’ that focuses on those who have previously rejected the brand does not change the patterns found by Bird et al. In all categories the average proportions were higher than Bird et al. This is probably a function of interviewing retailers, who would more knowledgeable about brands than end users. Bird et al also noted a tendency for brand leaders to have a higher than normal proportion of favourable responses from ‘former users’. This pattern was not evident in this study. However the lack of difference between the ‘never tried’ and ‘former users’ for Brand 1 suggests that this “higher than normal” proportion for the brand leader may be manifesting in the ‘never tried’ group instead of the ‘former user’ group.

The results for testing Hypothesis 2 are shown in Table 3. There is a consistent trend for ‘former users’ to be more likely to mention positive statements about a brand than the ‘never tried’. This supports the findings of Bird et al but not Hypothesis 2.

**Table 3. Mean number of important attributes mentioned by usage category**

	Brand 1 (mean)	Brand 2 (mean)	Brand 3 (mean)	Brand 4 (mean)
Current users	1.3	1.2	1.2	1.3
Former users	0.8	0.7	0.1	0.2
Never tried	0.6	0.3	0.06	0.02
P value (diff between former users and never tried)	0.4	0.007	0.61	<0.001

The number of important attributes mentioned by current users did not vary between brands. However, there appears to be a usage trend for ‘never tried’ groups, and to a certain extent, ‘former users’. The more users a brand has (as shown in Table 1), the higher the number of important attributes mentioned by both non-user groups.

## **Discussion**

This research tests the generalisability of the finding from Bird et al that 'former users' were more likely to associate a brand with positive image attributes than those who had never tried the brand. The first extension was the method used to identify 'former users'. Here 'former users' were only those who had past experience with the brand but had behaviourally rejected the brand. The second was the method of collecting associations with image attributes, which was changed to focus on important image attributes. In both cases the main results of the original study were replicated.

While the focus of this paper has been on examining the image responses given by 'former users' compared to those who have never tried the brand, the large positive difference in the image response levels given by 'current users' compared to non-current/non users should not be ignored. Traditional marketing theory (e.g., Fishbein 1967) generally asserts that these people are users because of their beliefs about the brand. However, it is also possible that most of the image beliefs are formed post-usage and therefore follow, not precede behaviour. In any event, this finding does suggest that brand usage is a key contextual factor in understanding and interpreting any brand image responses.

## **Implications, Limitations and Future Research**

A key implication of this research is the importance of understanding the usage history of respondents when interpreting brand image research. A link with future behaviour is more difficult to determine unless the influence of past behaviour can be controlled for in analysis. The lack of understanding of the relationship with past usage may be why brand image researchers have yet to find any solid relationships between customers' perceptions about the brand and their future buying behaviour.

A limitation of this study was the inability to investigate the effect of recency of usage. The focus of this study was on non-user groups, which were categorised based on past behaviour. An area for future research is to examine if, within current users, there are differences in propensities to give image responses based on recency of usage. The results of Bird et al suggest that more recent users are more likely to associate the brand with image attributes than less recent users.

Future research in this area should delve more deeply into the reason for former user status to see if this has an effect on the results. It may be that former users who have rejected the brand because of a failure on its part may be less likely to elicit positive responses about the brand than those who left because of an offer by a competitor. Also the role of negative perceptions should be explored. It may be that while the brand is perceived positively on most attributes, the presence of a single negative perception is all that is required for switching brands. Thus 'former users' are not evident by the absence of positive attributes, but the presence of negative attributes. Future image research in general should focus on seeing if, when the past usage of respondents is controlled for, there is any detectable relationship between image responses and the future behaviour of customers. Otherwise it is difficult to see any value in the measurement of brand image, except as an unwieldy way of measuring past usage.

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