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MASTER THESIS

Social Brand Perceptions:

Towards an understanding of human
consumer-brand relationships

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Abstract

Building on the well-established social perception Stereotype Content Model (SCM), the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) was developed to illustrate the perception of brands. The underlying essence of the model is the assumption that consumer-brand relationships resemble relations with people. This research expands the BIAF with Consumer Brand Engagement as an antecedent and purchase intentions, word of mouth and relationship satisfaction as consumer behaviour outcomes. Furthermore the original brand perception measures are extended with measures derived from the original model (SCM). The results show prevalent strong and positive connections between the two perception dimensions Warmth and Competence and the antecedent and outcomes. Cultural differences in perception play a less important role, showing no to small effects. Additionally, this research makes use of text mining to analyse consumer associations. Results show Competence as the primary topic of association and reveal the importance of brand-specific evaluations. This research adds to extant literature in the understanding of consumer-brand relationships and mechanisms underlying brand perceptions. The findings also lead to extensive implications for managers in terms of relationship programs, brand building and communication / marketing activities. Overall, the research extends the BIAF with relevant variables and results, takes different analysis approaches and determines essential theoretical and managerial implications.

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1.0 Introduction

Assuming that consumers value more than the features and benefits of a brand; relationships between consumers and brands have intriguing facets and are worth exploring. Introducing the human relationship theory, connections between consumers and brands were investigated by Fournier (1998), who found that consumer-brand relationships are comparable to human relationships. Different forms of relationships, such as best friends (enduring relationships) or flings (relationships that are short but highly emotional) were reported by consumers. Complementary, Aaker (1997) explored the human characteristics of brands by determining five brand personality dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness). The two researches generated substantial academic interest and served as ground to further investigate a variety of relationship facets, including antecedents and outcomes of as well as reasons for consumer-brand relationships.

Scholars are interested in different aspects of the consumer-brand relationship. Often discussed is the emotional bond between consumers and brands, serving as an antecedent or outcome of the relationship. Concepts such as loyalty, brand engagement, brand involvement, brand love and brand resonance have evoked from this notion and attempt to uncover how consumers feel towards brands and what feelings lead to specific relationship outcomes (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Hollebeek, 2011; Keller, 2012). Another interest when analysing relationships is, whether there are differences in how people relate to brands, depending on the product type or category of the product. Scholars have discussed product-related factors that could influence the intensity and even existence of consumer-brand relationships, finding e.g. no product-category specific differences in brand perception (Fetscherin, Boulanger, Filho, & Souki, 2014).

Other streams of literature consider personal characteristics to be important when discussing the consumer-brand relationship and emotional attachment. The study of Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger (2011) is concerned with the fit between the brands' personality and the consumers' ideal and actual personality. Relatedly, cultural differences impacting the perception of brands across cultures have been researched. Differences are investigated in the context of advertising perceptions, personality traits or general brand perceptions across cultures (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Foscht, Maloles, Swoboda, Morschett, & Sinha, 2008).

Combining various aspects of consumer-brand relationships, Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone (2012) offer a simplistic and comprehensible framework called the Brand as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF), to depict consumers' perceptions of brands. Their research and BIAF model serve as the base for this research. The BIAF differentiates itself from previous consumer-brand relationship research through a fundamentally different assumption. It posits that people perceive brands in the same way as people perceive people, leading to a more relational and humanistic approach to brand-consumer interactions. The assumption is related with anthropomorphism which is defined as the "attribution of humanlike traits and actions to non-human actors" (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Despite considerable argumentation against anthropomorphism (Schmitt, 2013), it has been proven that people assign human properties to brands and therefore draw comparable inferences about brands' personality, intentions and motivations (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Person impression theories state that observed behaviour leads to inferences about personality traits and therefore evaluation about this person (Srull & Wyer, 1989), in this case brand. This is substantially different to theories like attachment or brand love, which are built on the premise that brands are non-human and relationships therefore only serve as a metaphor for how consumers interact with them (Fiske, Malone, & Kervyn, 2012). Resulting concepts are developed in isolation from our understanding of people and their relationships.

To narrow this discrepancy, brand perceptions are compared with social perceptions. Kervyn et al. (2012) used the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) from social science and applied it to display human perceptions of brands on a two-dimensional matrix. The dimensions cover good intentions of brands (representing the ‘Warmth’ dimension from the SCM) and the ability to act on these intentions (corresponding to the ‘Competence’ dimension from the SCM). For each of the resulting quadrants, people elicit specific emotional reactions. The authors found that the model was applicable in a brand context and mapped divergent brands and the respective emotions of people towards those brands on an intentions and ability map. They also found positive relations between the dimensions and purchase intentions as well as behavioural loyalty. Confirming the social perception of brands, Kervyn et al. (2012) contribute significantly to the consumer-brand relationship literature and offer a simplistic framework on which cognitive and affective consumer perceptions towards a brand are reflected.

Although the BIAF proved strong empirical support, for scholars like Schmitt (2012), the question of the models’ applicability remains. This is to be clarified in a replica of the study, where the original measures, which prove the fit, are repeated and in a second step combined with transferred measures from the social perception model. Furthermore the BIAF is tested in a European setting, adding to the original sample with American results, in terms of reliability and cultural independency of the model.

In context of the discussion around the BIAF, and with the intentions to increase the insights gained from the model as well as to increase market applicability, the following statement will be answered in this study:

*To what extent can the understanding of the BIAF be expanded by a replica
in a European context?*

As testing all European countries, is outside the scope of this study Germany and the Netherlands will serve as focal countries. In specifying the spectrum of these questions, several sub-questions are answered. The first question is to clarify the emotions consumers elicit when having specific perceptions: *How does a positive perception of brands influence the emotions towards the brand?* The second question aims to investigate a potential antecedent of human brand perceptions: *How does consumer brand engagement influence brand perceptions on the Warmth and Competence scale?* Thirdly, positive perceptions of Warmth and Competence might influence consumer behaviour which is to be answered in the following sub-questions: *How do positive brand perceptions influence word of mouth, relationship satisfaction and purchase intentions?* To integrate the cultural setting, a last question entices the differential influences of national cultures on brand perceptions: *To what extent does nationality influence the perceptions of brands?*

The questions of this research were derived from the discussion of the BIAF in the literature. The value of the SCM and BIAF is extended by examining consumer and market relevant outcomes which is covered in this study (MacInnis, 2012). As proposed by Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs (2012) outcomes from being rated as highly competent and warm should be examined. Proposed measures are willingness to buy, consumer engagement, connection and loyalty. Complying with the notion to test relevant marketing outcomes that reflect relationship essentials, this study will investigate consumer brand engagement as an antecedent and word of mouth, relationship satisfaction and purchase intention as outcomes. As suggested by Fournier and Alvarez (2012) the roles of Warmth and Competence will be further explored, as to what extent a single dimension (i.e. Warmth) drives a particular outcome (i.e. word of mouth), giving closer managerial insights for firms using the model.

In answering the above-posed research questions, this study is expected to make various contributions to literature and practice. It adds to the understanding of the model by setting it

into the context of consumer behaviour variables. In turn outcome variables reveal implications for marketing activities and relationship management as superordinate fields. Practical implications are expected to be especially relevant for the branding literature and practice. Overall, the results are to clarify the link between consumers' brand perceptions and the resulting behavioural outcomes.

This research is structured as follows: the underlying literature of concepts used in the BIAF will be explained and explored. Potential outcomes and antecedents are identified and related to the focal model, from which hypothesis are derived. In the analysis of the data, empirical findings are reported and their theoretical and managerial implications are discussed. Concluding remarks about applications of the results and potential for further research finalise this paper.

2.0 Hypotheses Development

In this section the theoretical background of the original research will be elaborated on. The two social dimensions are described and an antecedent, as well as expected outcomes of brand perceptions are theorized. Following each concept's literature revision, the expected effect will be hypothesized. The chapter is completed by demonstrating the hypothesised relationships with a conceptual model.

2.1 Intentions and Ability

As previously mentioned, this research is to expand the notion and research of Kervyn et al. (2012) on brands as intentional agents. The two dimensions of Intention and Ability are at the core of the human brand model, and are to represent the brands' intention towards a person or group and the ability to act upon those intentions (Kervyn et al., 2012). The dimensions are derived from the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), where they are called Warmth and Competence. Along those dimensions the majority of perceptions about others are formed

(Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). The Warmth dimension is described with helpfulness, sincerity, friendliness and trustworthiness, whereas Competence is associated with efficiency, intelligence, conscientiousness, and skill (Fiske et al., 2002). Distinct clusters are placed along the transferred dimensions of Intentions and Ability, which represent the social perception of specific brand groups and elicit certain emotions of people towards them as depicted in Figure 1.

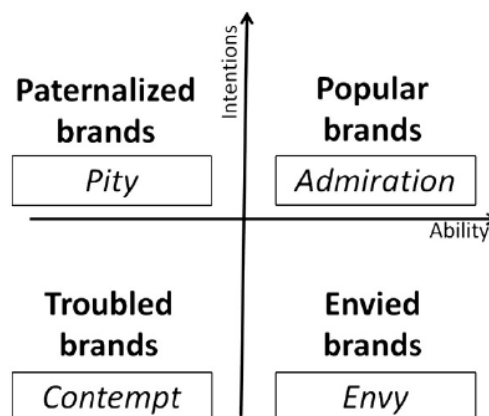


Figure 1. Brands as Intentional Agents Framework dimensions, clusters and emotions
(Source: Kervyn et al., 2012)

The goal of the BIAF (Brands as Intentional Agents Framework) is to show that consumers perceive brands along the dimensions of Intentions and Ability. These perceptions lead to similar emotions and behaviours as in the well-established SCM (Fiske et al., 2012). Through the empirical support of the BIAF, Kervyn et al. (2012) propose that consumers judge and form relationships with brands in ways that are similar to their interactions with people. Distinct clusters are found, which represent the four combinations of the two dimensions (able/well-intentioned, unable/ill-intentioned, able/ill-intentioned, and unable/well-intentioned) and respondents elicit certain emotions according to the cluster. High perceptions on both Ability and Intentions lead to a feeling of admiration. Figure 2 shows distinct clusters of brands, which are mapped along the Intentions and Ability dimensions.

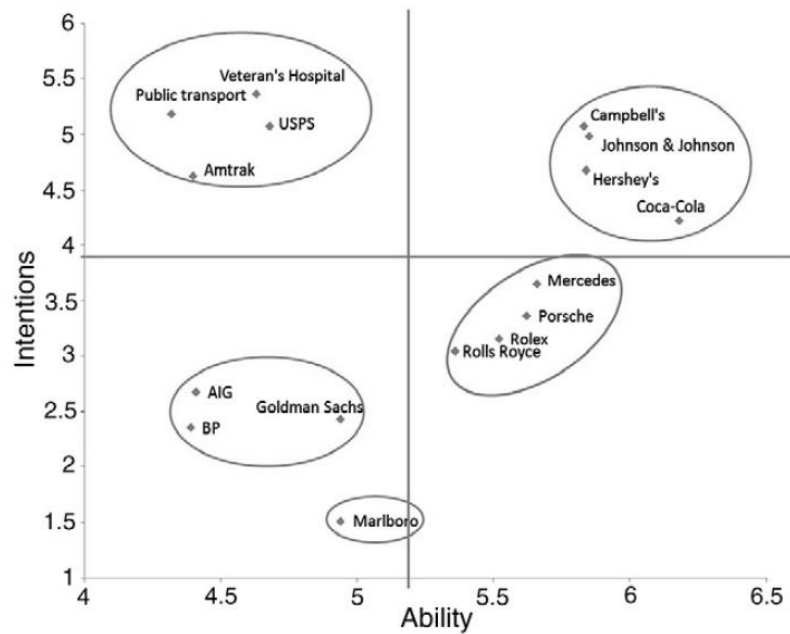


Figure 2. Intention and ability scores of different brands (Source: Kervyn et al., 2012)

In addition to mapping the brands on the Intentions and Ability dimensions, Kervyn et al. (2012) tested the outcome variables purchase intent and brand loyalty. Both positively and independently influenced perceived Intentions and Ability, which aids in understanding and influencing consumer behaviour. As Aaker et al. (2012, p. 193) put it: “warmth and competence interactively affect purchase intent, such that being high in both dimensions provides firms with extra benefit that surpasses the individual contributions of each”. The findings suggest that instead of placing great emphasis on product features and alike, brand managers should consider perceived relational intentions as strong predictors of purchase intent and brand loyalty (Kervyn et al., 2012). The pathway suggested by the SCM and likewise the BIAF starts with perception and moves towards cognition to emotion, developing into behaviour (Fiske et al., 2012).

As mentioned in the research motivation section, there has been a vivid discussion of the BIAF research. Several factors were addressed by scholars with a similar research interest. Firstly, the authors discussed that brand relationships were too complex for being captured by

two dimensions, as there are more concepts involved and therefore different perspectives and analyses are required (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Keller, 2012). Responding to this, Fiske et al. (2012) rely on the well-established ground from the SCM and positively illuminate the advantages of simplicity, but admit that it is useful to add complexity in tailoring the model to specific situations. Secondly, it was criticised that the model leaves out the perceivers' characteristics. Fournier and Alvarez (2012, p. 178) argue that "a relationship is a mutually co-created entity" and therefore interactions would be more properly captured when recognizing at least two parties. Complying with this notion MacInnis (2012) argues that consumers are different in how they interact with brands and suggests that attachment styles could influence the consumer-brand relationship. Additionally consumer characteristics such as demographics (Bennett & Hill, 2012) and psychological characteristics (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012) are proposed to be taken into account. While no demographic differences are shown in consecutive research (Bennett & Hill, 2012), Fiske et al. (2012) acknowledge that factors such as emotional intensity or attachment styles are worth pursuing. Thirdly, the need for clarification in the basic premise of the model arose, due to questions whether brands could act intentional and whether anthropomorphism could serve as a basis for the model. Here Fiske et al. (2012, p. 207) state that in essence "consumer perceptions, emotions, and relationships with brands are not with the inanimate objects themselves, but rather with what they know and believe about the people and social groups that produce and sell them". Therefore it is likely that social perception models are applicable and influence consumer behaviour.

The measures of Intentions and Ability are taken as a basis in this study to replicate the original results. Additionally, Warmth and Competence items from the SCM are measured following the human brand research of Ridderbos (2015), to get additional insights on brand perceptions and to better reflect the emotional intensity of relationships as part of the

concepts. The items are derived from Fiske et al. (2002) but adapted to better fit the brand context. Changes are to decrease redundancy of the scale, which occurs as measures of Kervyn et al. (2012) are included in the questionnaire. The exact wording and changes can be understood in Appendix A. After careful conceptual and statistical consideration of the two measures, it is concluded that they are sufficiently conceptually similar and add to each other, which is why they are united as a single construct to represent both Intentions and Ability and brand warmth and brand competence. As the final measure has the SCM as a basis and because of simplicity reasons, the measures are called ‘Warmth’ and ‘Competence’.

It is expected that the focal brand will be placed on a clearly distinguishable position, and therefore cluster along the two dimensions, which confirms the notion and study of Kervyn et al. (2012). This is not hypothesised as it is a mere graphical representation of values respondents report. The first hypothesis investigates emotions that are expected to be elicited with high ratings in Warmth and Competence. As the focal brand is commonly perceived as a ‘popular’ brand, the respective feeling, namely admiration, is expected to be positively connected to the Warmth and Competence perceptions.

H1a: *Perceptions of Warmth correlate with feelings of admiration towards the brand.*

H1b: *Perceptions of Competence correlate with feelings of admiration towards the brand.*

2.2 Antecedent: Consumer Brand Engagement

Next, a concept which is expected to precede brand perception formation is investigated. Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) is a recently developed concept, which is expected to be linked to and influence the perception of brands on the Warmth and Competence scale. CBE is derived from the relationship marketing literature and presents a transcendent relationship perspective, where consumers are at the centre of interactive experiences (Brodie, Ilic, Juric,

& Hollebeek, 2013). The concept is used to explore the role of emotional and cognitive relations to the brand in the brand perception process as a predictive consumer characteristic.

The general understanding of ‘engagement’ is “being involved, occupied and interested in something” (Higgins, 2006). In the marketing literature engagement has gained relevance, as it describes the customers’ behavioural dynamics *during* the interaction with the brand, whereas concepts such as satisfaction or word of mouth focus on the state or actions resulting from consumer-brand-interactions (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014, p. 152). Hollebeek (2011, p. 565) describes CBE as “the level of an individual customer’s motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in brand interactions”. The cognitive activity captures thought- processing and elaboration, emotional activity (affection) involves “positive brand-related affect” within the interaction, while ‘activation’ captures the behavioural interaction, with consumers’ effort and time spent in a consumer-brand-interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). This conceptualisation is applicable in the human brand context as it captures both the emotional and cognitive aspects of interaction similarly to the BIAF, but focuses on relational components. The behavioural aspects are examined in a further step of the analysis when looking at outcome variables mentioned in the next section.

The engagement process can be regarded as a highly social act. In line with the argumentation of the BIAF, it is conceivable that someone would rather ‘engage’ with a brand, if the people behind the brand instead of the non-human commercial entity interaction were in the perceivers’ mind. The perceiver immediately associates the people and their attributes with the brand, suggesting a direct link between the two concepts. The higher the CBE the more positive cognitive, affective and behavioural processes which positively influence the evaluation of the two dimensions and therefore the overall brand.

H2a: *Consumer Brand Engagement leads to higher perceptions of Warmth.*

H2b: *Consumer Brand Engagement leads to higher perceptions of Competence.*

As high brand engagement entails sustained interactions between consumers and brands, psychological bonds are formed and sustained into the future (Dwivedi, 2015). This can then positively impact other relational outcome variables, which are explored further in this study.

2.3 Outcomes of Positive Brand Perception

2.3.1 Purchase Intentions

As analysed in the focal study purchase intentions will be considered an outcome of Warmth and Competence. Purchase intention describes the consumers' plan to make a purchase of a certain brand or product in the future. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) suggests that consumers attitudes directly affect their behavioural intention, which in turn influences purchase behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). There has been criticism towards the accuracy of purchase intentions in predicting purchase behaviour, as the attitude towards a brand can be positive, without the customer acting on these positive intentions, i.e. not purchasing the brand (Seiders, Voss, Grewal, & Godfrey, 2005). Besides the criticism, the purchase intentions measure is commonly applied in a setting where exact sales data and alike are lacking.

The plan to purchase a brand requires a holistic judgement of the brand and is therefore an important measure when analysing a consumers' perception of a brand. The measure adds to market relevance of the BIAF, as the dimensions are expected to influence consumer behaviour towards different brands, depending on their perception of the brand (Kervyn et al., 2012). Comparably, consumers' brand attitude and the intention to buy that brand have already shown positive and significant relations (Teng, Laroche, & Zhu, 2007). Based on the original study and related concepts, it is expected that purchase intentions of consumers are positively influenced by their perceptions of Warmth and Competence.

H3a: *Perceptions of Warmth positively influence purchase intentions.*

H3b: *Perceptions of Competence positively influence purchase intentions.*

2.3.2 Word of Mouth and Net Promoter Score

Another relational outcome of brand perceptions that we posit is Word of Mouth (WoM). Its importance has increased due to high information flows between consumers and firms and among customers, facilitated by the internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Word of mouth captures consumption- and product-related communication, and is mostly spread online, but also occurs via offline channels. Generally speaking it is the exchange of information between companies and their offerings among consumers (Brown, 2005). There are various reasons for consumers to engage in WoM; such as impression management, information acquisition, or emotion regulation but also to persuade others of the product or service (Berger, 2014).

Mostly, word of mouth has been identified as an outcome of satisfaction and perceived value, representing one stream of literature (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2014). Positive word of mouth is a key driver of brand purchase probability (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008), adding to the concept's relevance in the branding literature. The consumers' relationship with the brand influences in turn the word of mouth behaviour (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). As WoM has informal and personal attributes, consumers perceive their peers as reliable sources for purchase decisions and attitudes towards brands. This makes WoM a powerful and credible source of communication (Harrison-Walker, 2001) and worth investigating in a brand perception context. Additionally it was found that consumers engaging in WoM show higher scores on dimensions such as brand identification, brand trust and community commitment (Kim et al., 2014), relating closely to the brand perception concept investigated in this study. As word of mouth relies on social relations to others, the brand is arguably part

of the social construct, which is why we expect the measure to align with the BIAF and positively relate to the dimensions of Warmth and Competence.

H4a: *Perceptions of Warmth positively influence word of mouth.*

H4b: *Perceptions of Competence positively influence word of mouth.*

A related measure of Word of Mouth is the Net Promoter Score (NPS) which was introduced by Reichheld (2003) and has received considerable attention due to its industry relevance and simplicity. The score is claimed to better predict revenue growth than satisfaction (Anselmsson & Bondesson, 2015). Additionally there seems to be a direct link to firm's financial result (Deshmukh & Karandikar 2007). The NPS allows for insights into the advocacy behaviour of customers and is immediately related to satisfaction, which makes it an important measure despite some controversy of its accuracy in predicting performance measures (Kristensen & Eskildsen 2014). As previously established, the advocacy behaviour is related to consumers' brand perceptions, which is why a positive relationship is expected.

H4c: *Perceptions of Warmth positively influence the Net Promoter Score.*

H4d: *Perceptions of Competence positively influence the Net Promoter Score.*

2.3.3 Relationship Satisfaction

Adding to the original research model of Fiske et al. (2012), this research examines 'Relationship Satisfaction' as an outcome of the social perception of brands. Customer satisfaction is one of the most researched topics in marketing, as it is crucial to the long-term organisational success (Jones & Suh, 2000). Satisfaction occurs when products and / or services perform as expected by the consumer (Babin & Griffin, 1998). If expectations are met the affective response is satisfaction, while disconfirmation of expectations results in dissatisfaction (Patterson, Johnson, & Spreng, 1997). Relationship satisfaction describes the consumers' affective state resulting from the overall satisfaction with the relationship (Bloemer, Odekerken-Schröder, & Kestens, 2003). Contrary to transactional satisfaction,

relationship satisfaction builds on cumulative satisfaction which is more stable over time and therefore more reflective of the consumers' overall perception of brand.

In relating satisfaction and brand relationships, studies depict the impact of customer satisfaction on brand equity, such that customer satisfaction positively influences brand loyalty (Nam, Ekinici, & Whyatt, 2011). The concept of brand equity includes functional (compare: cognitive) and symbolic (compare: emotional) attributes. This closely relates to the Intentions and Ability dimensions of the BIAF, where the brand is perceived and judged according to emotional and cognitive aspects. Due to the nature of accumulated satisfaction and the theorized positive relation of attributes to the Warmth and Competence, we expect a positive influence of brand perceptions on relationship satisfaction.

H5a: *Perceptions of Warmth positively influence relationship satisfaction.*

H5b: *Perceptions of Competence positively influence relationship satisfaction.*

2.4 National Culture

In addition to the concept described above, we propose that there are cultural differences in the consumer perception of brands. The symbolic meaning of brands can be represented by the values and beliefs of a culture (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Cultural differences in attributes associated with brands were found in a study by Sung and Tinkham (2005). A study by Caprariello, Cuddy, and Fiske (2009) testing the SCMs' universality, revealed differences in the way societal groups were rated. The differences were attributed to scores of collectivism or individualism, suggesting that there are more prominent differences between Western and Asian cultures, compared to i.e. European cultures. Although national cultures might be more similar, differences can be found in the Hofstede dimensions, which serve as the ground of evaluations (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). The cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation and indulgence are used to depict country-specific differences (Hofstede, 2015). The two countries examined in

this study (Germany and The Netherlands) show quite different scores in cultural dimensions. The most prominent differences in the cultural dimensions between Germany and the Netherlands can be seen in the ‘Masculinity’ dimension, on which the German culture scores quite highly (66 on a scale to 100), while the Dutch culture has a rather low score (16/100). Also on the dimension of ‘Indulgence’ Germans and Dutchman score differently (40 and 68 respectively). As the dimensions can be interpreted quite differentially, the hypothesis merely states that there will be significant differences due to cultural influences.

H6a: *National culture influences the perception of Warmth.*

H6b: *National culture influences the perception of Competence.*

Summarizing the above established concepts and their impact on each other, the following framework is introduced to clearly depict the relationships.

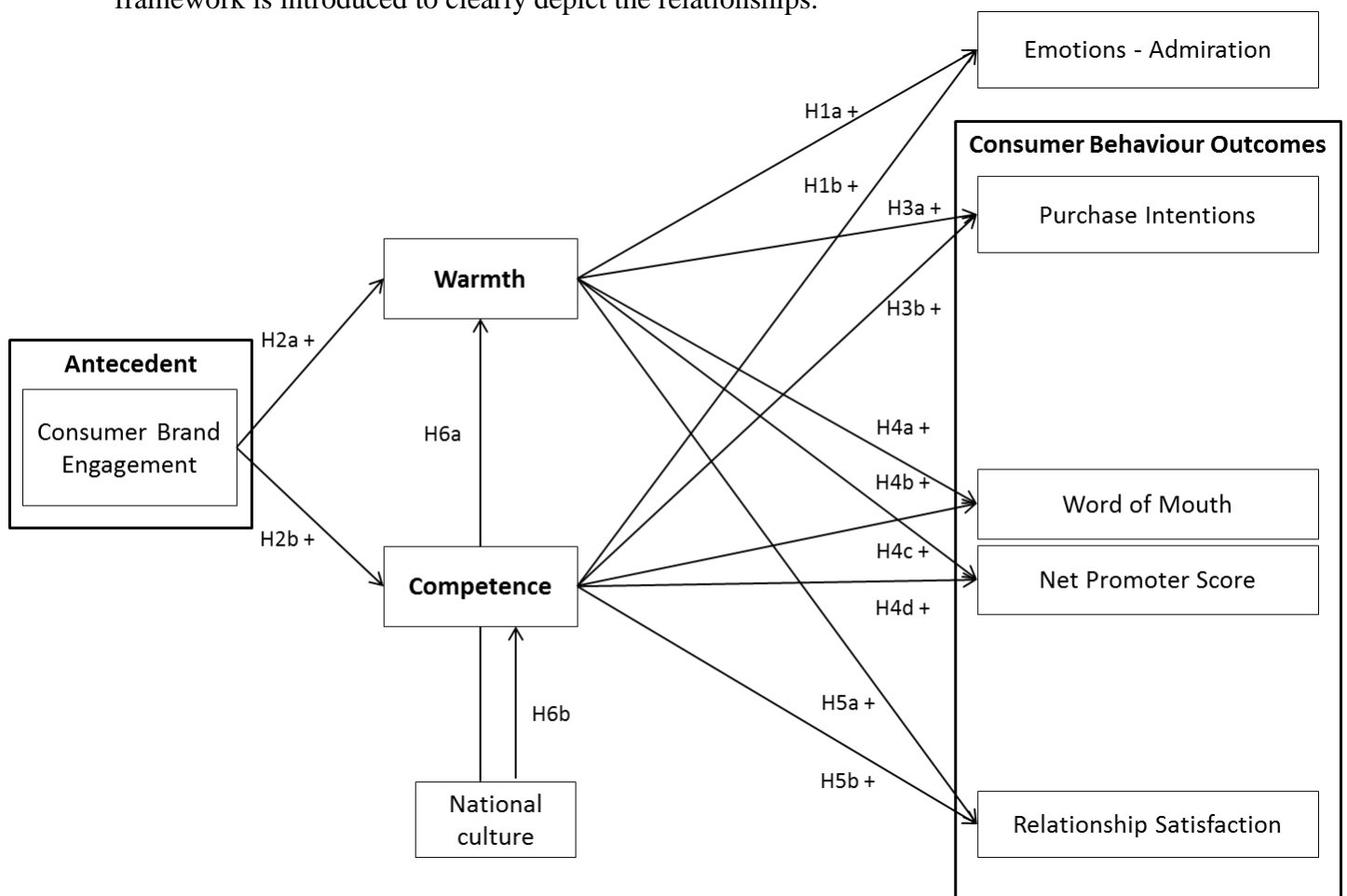


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework

3.0 Methodology

The main objective of the study was to replicate results from the BIAF research in Germany and the Netherlands and find antecedents and consumer behaviour outcomes resulting from brand perceptions. In addition elicited emotions were tested and influences of cultural differences are explored. Firstly, the admiration item was regressed against the Warmth and Competence scores. Secondly, Consumer Brand Engagement was tested as an antecedent through two separate regressions. Then, the influence of Warmth and Competence on the four consumer behaviour outcomes was analysed in a regression model with the two dimensions functioning as the independent variables. Finally the differential impact of culture was investigated with an analysis of variance. As a more investigative analysis component, the nature of consumer associations was explored with an open question and analysed with a text mining approach.

Data was gathered with an online survey developed with the online software ‘Qualtrics’. The survey was distributed via Email and Facebook, randomly gathering the required data. Primarily students answered the survey, matching the main consumers of the focal brand. Quantitative data analysis was conducted with ‘IBM SPSS Statistics 21’.

3.1 Questionnaire Design

Respondents were first introduced and familiarized with the procedure in an opening text. Following, a screening question was inserted to ensure prior contact with the focal brand, as to retrieve information based on actual experiences. In a next step, general associations with the focal brand were asked as an opening question, to generate thought about the firm and gather unbiased associations with the brand and avoid leading respondents to answer in certain ways (Malhotra 2010). Subsequently questions according to the hypothesized concepts and relations were asked, ordered in ascending difficulty. Questions were asked with ordinary words, containing single meaning and designed to overcome respondents’

unwillingness or inability to answer. Personal information was collected at the end of the study.

3.2 Scales

Measures for most constructs were obtained from literature and adapted to suit the retail context of the focal brand. As touched upon in the hypothesis development, the original measures of Kervyn et al. (2012) were used to replicate the results. Two questions per dimension (Ability and Intention) were asked and answered with a 7-point Likert scale anchored at ‘totally disagree’ and ‘totally agree’. Furthermore, the emotion items from the original study were asked. In addition to the established measures, questions based upon the SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) were integrated to clearer extrapolate the social dimensions of brand perception. Here a bipolar, 7-point scale was used to examine the two dimensions. The positive end of the scale was represented by trustworthy, friendly, responsive, honest and good service; as attributes of the Warmth dimension. The Competence dimension was covered by competence, expertise, efficient, intelligent, and good quality attributes (Ridderbos, 2015). The negative end of the scale was depicted with the opposite of the respective attribute.

The scale of Consumer Brand Engagement was taken on from Hollebeek et al. (2014), who established a three factor model including cognitive processing, affection and activation. The questions were slightly adapted to fit the sentence structure and focal firms’ products. Similarly, the measures for relationship satisfaction (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001), word of mouth (Price & Arnould, 1999), the NPS (Reichheld, 2003) and purchase intentions (Putrevu & Lord, 1994) were used in the survey, all measured with a 7-point Likert scale. A summary of the scale items can be found in Appendix B.

3.3 Focal Brand Ikea

Ikea was used as the focal brand to test the different concepts. Ikea is very well known, especially to students, who were expected to be the largest group of respondents. Due to the public's familiarity with the brand, respondents were expected to have experiences with the Ikea brand and the products. The Ikea brand arguably relates to both Warmth and Competence. The Warmth dimension reflects perceptions of positive lifestyle attributes that Ikea conveys through affordable design furniture. The Competence perception could be formed through Ikea's quick service, rapid assortment adaptations and the ability to produce very cheap furniture through optimized processes.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results

This chapter provides an overview of the analyses conducted. It starts with stating general statistics and continues with investigating the scale with factor and reliability analysis. Next, the hypotheses are tested and regression results are reported. As an additional and abstracted analysis tool, text mining is introduced to further examine consumers' perceptions of the focal brand and gain a deeper understanding of the dimensions underlying this perception.

In total 255 respondents completed the questionnaire, but also partly answered questionnaires were taken into account, leading to higher counts in some measures. Of all respondents, 95.56% were familiar with Ikea and answered the screening question with 'yes'. Results from people unfamiliar with the brand were not taken into account. The age of respondents ranged from 15 to 57 years. The average age of the sample is 26.2 years, with 52.9% male and 47.1% female respondents. 46.5% of the respondents were university students, while the second highest occupation was working professional with 36.0%, followed by 16.7% of young professionals who just entered the workforce. The descriptive statistics for the measures of the inherent model are displayed in Table 1.

Variable	N	Mean	Range	Standard Deviation	Variance
Consumer Brand Engagement	257	3.51	1-7	1.12	1.25
Warmth	268	5.04	1-7	0.96	0.92
Competence	270	5.36	1-7	0.74	0.55
Relationship Satisfaction	267	4.60	1-7	1.12	1.25
Word of Mouth	269	5.18	1-7	1.35	1.82
Purchase Intentions	265	5.22	1-7	1.45	2.11
Net Promoter Score	268	6.81	0-10	2.31	5.48

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

4.1 Scale Purification

4.1.1 Factor Analysis

To gain insights into the measures adequacy, a factor analysis was conducted on all the relevant items of the survey. In a first step, all the items were analysed together in a principal components analysis with oblimin rotation, which allows for factor correlation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure for sampling adequacy indicates a high score of 0.921. Although the measures show high reliability scores, the factor analysis does not yield adequate support for the measures. From the Scree plot and the Components Matrix only one factor is suggested. Furthermore there is a lack of unidimensionality as there are cross loadings for the majority of items, as well as negative loadings on some items. Only 8 out of 34 items load above the suggested value of 0.7 (Pallant, 2013).

In a second step the different constructs were separated to disentangle the items. The 10 items of consumer brand engagement were analysed with principal component analysis and oblimin rotation. The KMO measure shows an acceptable score of 0.839 and three factors are extracted after the evaluation of the Scree plot, Eigenvalues and variance explained which is 80.9% containing three factors. The pattern matrix shows high loadings on all items, except one item which is split to two factors as elicited in Table 2. The other loadings confirm the

three sub-concepts of Consumer Brand Engagement of Affection, Activation and Cognitive Processing as the loadings are grouped according to these items.

Items from the two scales measuring Warmth and Competence were tested in another separate factor analysis. The KMO measure indicates sampling adequacy with a value of 0.867. The different elements shown in the factor analysis yield mixed results: while the Scree plot indicates one factor, the cumulative Eigenvalue percentages suggest three factors, and the pattern matrix suggests three components, separating the Intentions, Ability and social brand perception items. Because there are two cross loadings and negative loadings for the two Intentions items, these results are inconclusive. Results for this factor analysis are reported in Table 4. Analogous to this analysis, the consumer behaviour outcome measures were undertaken a principal components analysis, showing a sufficient KMO value (0.938) but no comprehensible factor extraction, as for these measures only one factor was extracted (see Table 3). Overall the factor analysis indicates problematic performance of almost all scales and little fit with the underlying constructs.

Warmth and Competence Scale	Factor Loadings		
	1	2	3
Competent	0.852		
Expert	0.746		
Efficient	0.892		
Intelligent	0.727		
Good Quality	0.593		
Trustworthy	0.437		-0.520
Friendly	0.718		
Responsive	0.545		
Honest	0.469		-0.439
Good Service	0.709		
Good intentions			-0.858
Publics best interest			-0.835
Ability to implement intentions		0.848	
Skilled & effective in achieving goals		0.820	

Table 4. Factor Loadings Warmth & Competence (Pattern Matrix)

Consumer Brand Engagement Scale	Factor Loadings		
	1	2	3
Affection_1	0.826		
Affection_2	0.897		
Affection_3	0.937		
Affection_4	0.861		
Cognitive Processing_1		0.935	
Cognitive Processing_2		0.970	
Cognitive Processing_3	0.474	0.499	
Activation_1			0.668
Activation_2			0.982
Activation_3			0.936

Table 2. Factor Loadings CBE (Pattern Matrix)

Outcome Variables	Factor Loadings
	1
Purchase Intentions_1	0.842
Purchase Intentions_2	0.819
Purchase Intentions_3	0.804
Word of Mouth_1	0.839
Word of Mouth_2	0.888
Word of Mouth_3	0.894
Net Promoter Score	0.919
Relationship Satisfaction_1	0.730
Relationship Satisfaction_2	0.715
Relationship Satisfaction_3	0.532

Table 3. Factor Loadings Outcome Variables

4.1.2 Reliability

In order to investigate that the scale is free from random error and that the items of the scale measure the same underlying attribute, the internal consistency of the scale is analysed (Pallant, 2013). For this, the Cronbach's coefficient alpha is reported for all the measures. While ranging from 0 to 1, a minimum level of 0.7 is recommended for the scale to be reliable. The Cronbach's alpha values for the scales in this research are reported in Table 5. It can be seen that all the values are above the reported minimum level of 0.7 and are similar to the previously reported values (reported Cronbach's Alpha from scales referred to in Chapter 2). With this result and according to the criteria, the scale is deemed reliable.

Scale	Reported Cronbach's Alpha	
	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha
Antecedent		
Consumer Brand Engagement - Cognitive Processing	0.833	0.825
Consumer Brand Engagement - Affection	0.926	0.907
Consumer Brand Engagement - Activation	0.876	0.894
Consumer Brand Engagement - Total	0.886	0.933
Human Brand Perceptions		
Warmth	0.850	
Competence	0.781	
Outcome Measures		
Purchase Intentions	0.877	0.910
Relationship Satisfaction	0.715	0.88, 0.84 & 0.78*
Word of Mouth	0.920	0.950

Table 5. Cronbach's Alpha Report

* for the US, Netherlands and Belgium

4.1.3 Correlations

The zero-order correlations of variables in the model show values from 0.402 (between CBE and Competence) to 0.887 (between the NPS and WoM). All the correlations are positive and significant. As the correlations are above 0.3, the independent and dependent variables have enough of a relationship to be further analysed. As correlation between Word of Mouth and NPS is high (> 0.7) the results of the regressions should be quite similar, but should not impede the regressions as the measures are regressed separately. Interaction terms are omitted due to high collinearity, suggesting multicollinearity. The individual correlations are displayed in Table 6.

	Consumer Brand Engagement	Warmth	Competence	Purchase Intentions	Relationship Satisfaction	Word of Mouth
Consumer Brand Engagement	1					
Warmth	0.439**	1				
Competence	0.402**	0.601**	1			
Purchase Intentions	0.608**	0.546**	0.418**	1		
Relationship Satisfaction	0.532**	0.605**	0.406**	0.665**	1	
Word of Mouth	0.608**	0.664**	0.501**	0.780**	0.693**	1
NPS	0.633**	0.627**	0.456**	0.796**	0.703**	0.887**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Correlation of Variables

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypothesized relationships, linear regression analyses are conducted. Warmth and Competence ratings of the Ikea brand are evaluated in terms of their predictive power over the dependent variables (purchase intentions, word of mouth and relationship satisfaction). For each outcome a separate analysis is conducted, including the independent variables. The antecedent is tested such that, CBE influences the variance of Warmth and Competence.

Before looking at how the two dimensions of Warmth and Competence influence or are influenced by the different variable, the overall perception of the focal brand Ikea is depicted in Table 7. As depicted in the descriptives, the dimensions show positive perceptions with means of 5.04 and 5.35 of Warmth and Competence respectively, where 7 is the maximum score. The clustering of respondents' perceptions around a positive score for both dimension, confirms the original notion and impression of the brand. Few respondents evaluate Ikea lower in either Warmth or Competence.

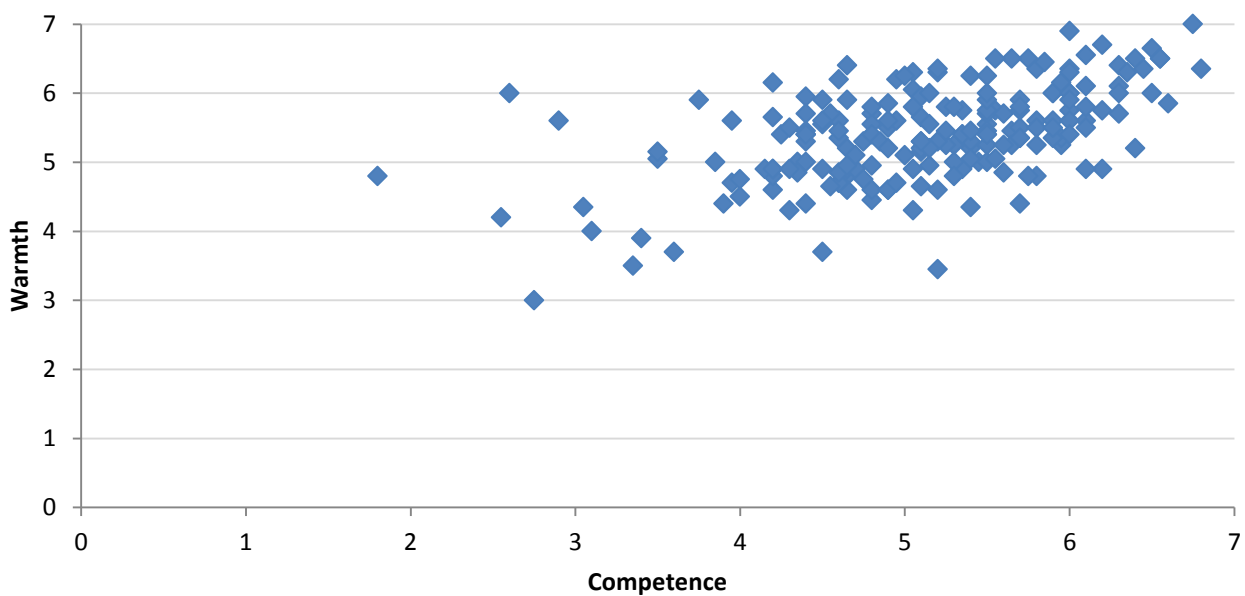


Table 7. Human Brand Perception of Ikea

Emotions (H1a & H1b): The influence of Warmth on admiration is significant and positive. The regression shows a significant t-value of 7.61 and a beta coefficient of $\beta=0.429$. Warmth explains 18.4% of the variance in admiration reported by respondents. This supports H1a. Similarly the influence of Competence on Admiration is significant and positive. The t-value is 7.75 and significant, while the beta coefficient is 0.434. Competence explains 18.9% of the variance in respondents' admiration of the Ikea brand. H1b is supported. For the sake of completeness the other emotion items derived from the SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) were also analysed, but no conclusive results were found. Results are reported in Appendix C.

Consumer Brand Engagement (H2a & H2b): The regression results for the antecedent of Consumer Brand Engagement are reported in Table 8. CBE explains 19.3% of the variance in Warmth and 16.2% in Competence. The β -coefficient values suggest that CBE suitably influences both measures. H2a and H2b are supported.

	Warmth		Competence	
	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value
Consumer Brand Engagement	0.439	7.625*	0.402	6.843*

*significant on a level of alpha=0.05

Table 8. Effects of Consumer Brand Engagement on Brand Perception

The primary regression results concerning consumer behaviour outcomes are reported in Table 9. Additional information is provided in the following section.

Purchase intentions (H3a & H3b): Both dimensions, Warmth and Competence are significant and positive in explaining purchase intentions (support of H3a and H3b). This confirms the original study of Kervyn et al. (2012) where purchase intentions were impacted significantly and positively. The regression coefficient is higher for Warmth, which indicates that the variable holds a stronger influence than Competence. Together, Warmth and Competence explain 31.0% of the variance in purchase intentions.

Word of mouth (H4a – H4d): The regression results for Word of Mouth and the two dimensions show a strong influence of Warmth with a comparably high t-value and a β -coefficient of 0.575. The Competence measure is lower, suggesting less influence on Word of Mouth than Warmth. In summary the Warmth and Competence model explains 46.2% of the variance in Word of Mouth. The results support both hypothesis 4a and 4b. Similarly, the regression from the Net Promoter Score (NPS) shows significant positive results. The Warmth measure has a t-value of 9.022 and a β -coefficient of 0.552. While reaching statistical significance, the Competence measure shows lower values for both the t-value and

β -coefficient (2.029 and 0.124 respectively). The model summary states that the two measures explain 40.3% of the variance in the NPS. H4c and H4d are supported.

Relationship satisfaction (H5a & H5b): The analysis with relationship satisfaction as a dependent variable yields differential results. Results of the Warmth dimension are significant and positive and thus support the hypothesised relationship (H5a). The direction of the Competence dimension is as expected but there is no significant influence on relationship satisfaction, leading to the rejection of H5b. The model summary shows a good fit, explaining 36.9% of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

	Purchase Intention		Word of Mouth		Relationship Satisfaction	
	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value
Warmth	0.461	6.982*	0.575	9.941*	0.566	8.999*
Competence	0.141	2.131*	0.155	2.678*	0.066	1.045

*significant on a level of alpha=0.05

Table 9. Effects of Brand Perception on Consumer Behaviour Outcomes

National culture (H6a & H6b): Cultural differences were assessed by comparing the Warmth and Competence perceptions across the cultural groups with a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). A significant impact of culture on the perception of Warmth was found in support of H6a. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level in Warmth score for the two cultural groups. The effect size (eta-squared) was calculated to be 0,03 which is considered to be small. Analysing H6b, differences in Competence perceptions across cultures was assessed, showing no significant differences between the cultural groups with an ANOVA significance level of 0.431. Therefore H6b is rejected.

4.3 Additional Analysis

The influence of age on Warmth and Competence ratings was tested with an ANOVA. The results for Competence show that there are no significant differences between the age groups. This can be seen in the different means that range from 5.21 to 5.45 for Competence. Warmth shows significant differences between the two younger age groups (till 25 years) and the oldest age group (above 41 years). This is reflected in the means, which are 5.31 and 5.08 for < 20 year olds and 21-25 years respectively versus 4.54 for the above 41 year olds.

The potentially differential ratings of males and females were tested with an independent sample t-test. While Competence shows no significantly different mean scores according to gender, Warmth is perceived significantly warmer by females than males. The effect size is small ($\eta^2=0.048$).

Table 10 summarizes the above described results, giving an overview over the hypothesised relationships among the variables and their statistical significance.

Hypothesis	Explanatory Paths	Direction	Results
H1a	Warmth →Admiration	+	Support
H1b	Competence → Admiration	+	Support
H2a	CBE → Warmth	+	Support
H2b	CBE→ Competence	+	Support
H3a	Warmth →Purchase Intentions	+	Support
H3b	Competence → Purchase Intentions	+	Support
H4a	Warmth →Word of Mouth	+	Support
H4b	Competence → Word of Mouth	+	Support
H4c	Warmth →NPS	+	Support
H4d	Competence → NPS	+	Support
H5a	Warmth →Relationship Satisfaction	+	Support
H5b	Competence → Relationship Satisfaction	+	Rejection
H6a	National Culture → Warmth		Support
H6b	National Culture→ Competence		Rejection

Table 10. Summary of Hypothesis Analysis

4.4 Text Mining (Brand Associations)

To further explore the dimensions of Warmth and Competence and potential other dimensions that consumers associate with the brand, an open question was posed. With the question ‘What comes to your mind when you think about IKEA?’ unbiased associations with the brand were gathered. In order to analyse these texts, a text mining procedure was conducted. The text-mining procedure of the research is performed with the assistance of Gerdien Ridderbos, the Customer Intelligence Analyst at Underlined¹ who is specialized in the field of text mining through her previous work on consumer perceptions (Ridderbos, 2015). In an initial step of the text mining the messages were scanned for re-occurring patterns and themes. After careful consideration 4 categories were defined, with several sub-categories, depending on the different schemes identified in the messages. The main categories were Competence, Warmth, Service and Company Culture. Additionally the sentiment within the message was reported as positive, neutral or negative. Next, counts were made for each messages, where one person could score multiple times within the sub-categories, but only once in the overall categories. This was decided to get an accurate count of the messages’ content without taking messages more than once into account in the overall view. As the language for the answers differed according to nationality, a separation was made according to national culture in analysing the text. The Dutch messages were analysed by Ms. Ridderbos, the German and English messages by the author.

The German responses were divided in the same categories to make results comparable and consist out of 189 stories. Results of the categories and sub-categories are displayed in Figure 4. The majority of messages are found within the Competence category, containing messages about quality (40), convenience (61), innovation and design (44) and price (95). Germans

¹ Underlined is a company specialized in customer value creation. It assisted the research with the text-mining analysis and contributed to the constructs of Warmth and Competence of the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework. Underlined was the first company to validate the BIAF in the European market, by researching brand images of Dutch financial service brands according to the Warmth and Competence dimensions.

talked about Warmth elements such as friendliness and family categories, but had a lower count than Competence. Another important measure filtered from the brand associations are service related messages (49) with a lot of respondents talking about the do- it-yourself aspect of Ikea and some stories concerning the in-store services. In terms of general associations with the company culture, the country of origin (52) and the food (78) that is sold at Ikea stores are highly discussed. The sentiment in the messages is mainly positive with 108 positive messages. Some people also neutrally describe things about the store and the brand (48) and some negatives are expressed (30), mainly about the quality and service, but also about the difficulty of assembly.

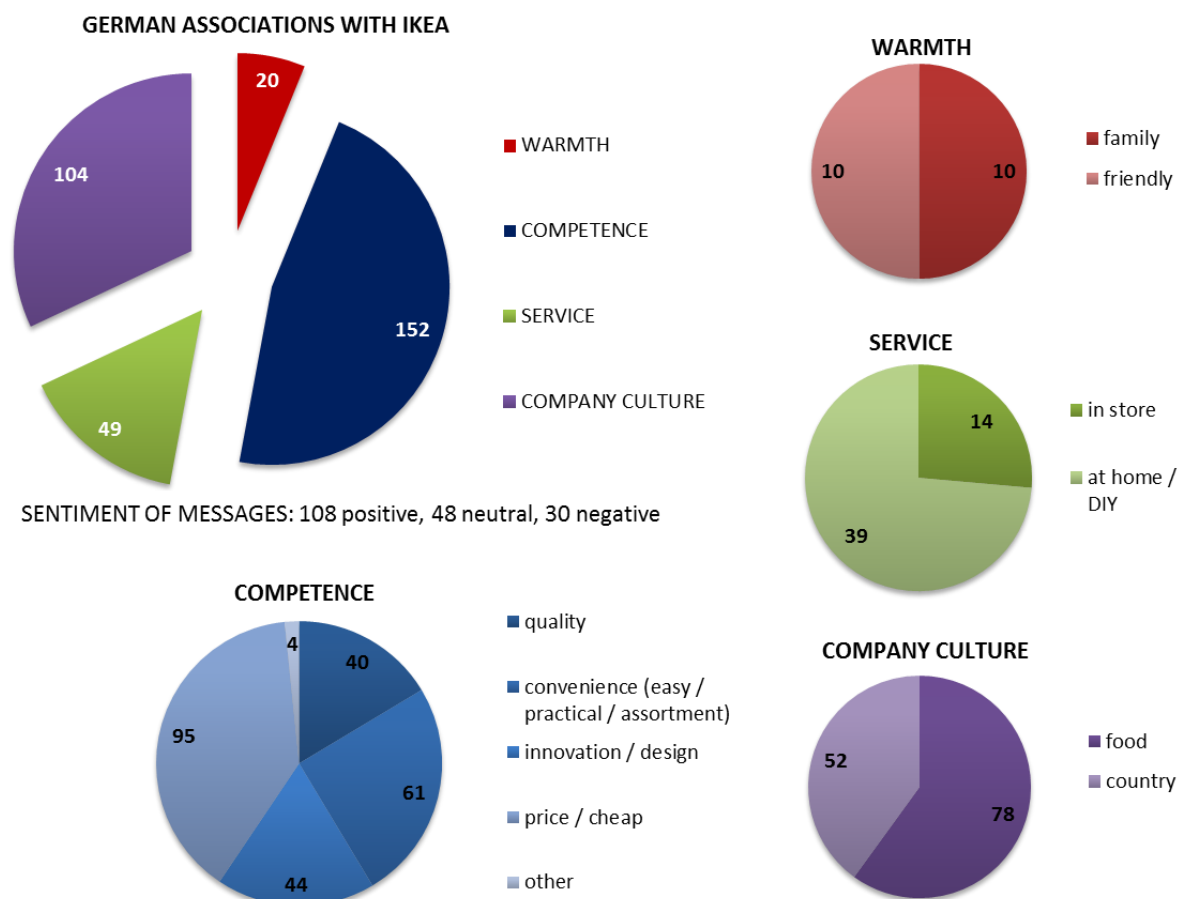


Figure 4. Text mining of German messages about Ikea

There were a total of 44 Dutch messages. Most of the messages (39) contained messages about Competence which is comprised of the same sub-categories. Convenience and price have the highest count (29 and 24 respectively). Furthermore, respondents associated the company culture including the food and the Swedish origin with the brand. Half of the messages (22) discussed one of the two service categories: the in-store service and the do-it-yourself aspect of the products. In general, the positive attitude of respondents towards Ikea is reflected in the messages, where 17 positive and 25 neutral but only 2 negative messages were identified. Only two of the texts contained messages about Warmth, which is why it is not represented in Figure 5, where the other results are illustrated.

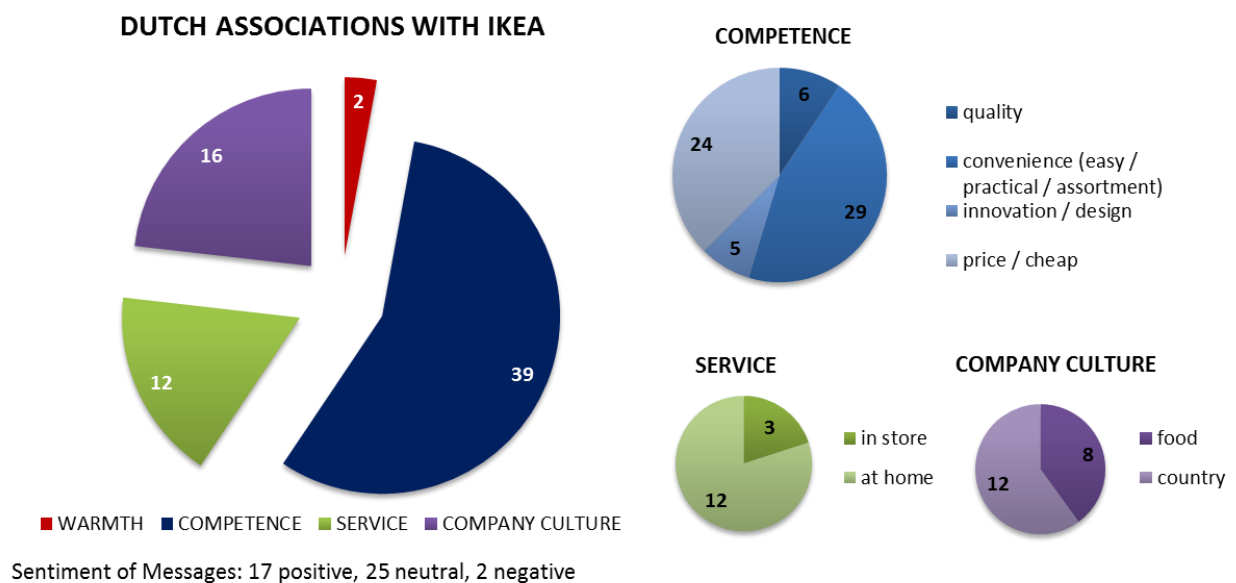


Figure 5. Text mining of Dutch messages about Ikea

To exemplify the consumers' associations, Table 11 demonstrates terms used for the different categories. As reported previously, the dimension of Competence is most prominent among the factors for all languages and nationalities. The number of words does not necessarily represent the count within the association sample. The respective wording of consumers in their respective language can be found in Appendix D.

	Warmth	Competence	Service	Company Culture
Association Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family ▪ Comfy ▪ Nice atmosphere ▪ Friendly ▪ New beginnings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good value ▪ Cheap and convenient ▪ Organised & practical ▪ Creative, innovative ideas ▪ Large Assortment ▪ Cheap quality ▪ Minimalistic design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-assembly ▪ Stressful shopping experience ▪ Do-it-yourself ▪ Showrooms ▪ Easy construction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sweden ▪ Meatballs and Hotdogs ▪ Blue and yellow

Table 11. Citations and Translation from Ikea Brand Associations

5.0 Discussion

In this chapter, the results from Chapter 4 will be discussed and compared with expectations from the theoretical framework (Chapter 2). The literature will be put into context of the findings of this research and discussed with respect to alternative explanations. First, the general findings of BIAF are examined, followed by implications of CBE as an antecedent and inferences of the consumer behaviour results. Finally the text mining discussion expands the context of findings.

5.1 Applicability of the BIAF

In answering the initial question to what extent the understanding of the BIAF could be broadened and replicated in a European context, the brands' positioning, according emotions and national culture are analysed. It was expected that the brand is situated in the upper right corner, due to the general popularity and success of the Ikea brand. The display of Warmth and Competence ratings shows that Ikea is perceived as equally warm and competent (Table 7), with minor differences in the mean score (5.0 and 5.35 respectively). This not only confirms the expectation that Ikea is a popular brand but also the BIAFs' applicability in the European context and with a different brand. The rating of Competence shows no differences in age groups or between females and males. Contrarily younger age groups and females elicit higher ratings of Warmth, which is the more subjective measure and might therefore be subject to individual perceptions. On the other hand differences are small and unsystematic,

therefore they can be neglected. From these results, the universality of the BIAF is reflected as no major differences in demographics are identified.

To complete the transition from the Stereotype Content Model to the BIAF, the emotions associated with a certain brand perception were analysed. The question of how perceptions influence the emotions towards a brand was herein answered. Positive perceptions and clustering of a brand are expected to elicit the emotion of admiration (Figure 1), according to the underlying principles of the SCM (Kervyn et al., 2012). As the Ikea brand and the people associated with it are rated positively on both Warmth and Competence, the perceivers likely admire them. The results support the original expectations with Warmth explaining 18.4% and Competence explaining 18.9% of the variance in admiration (H1a and H1b). It can be concluded that high Warmth and Competence perceptions have a positive influence on the ratings of admiration. The other emotions suggested by the BIAF were also regressed, but did not lead to conclusive results (Appendix B), which to some extent impedes the conclusions that can be drawn from the emotion analysis. Regarding admiration, the pathway from perception to emotions is confirmed, which is suggested to be followed by behaviour (Fiske et al., 2012). The connection to behavioural aspects is made through analysing consumer behaviour outcomes. In the context of the SCM admiration follows from “assimilative” and “upward (high status) social comparison” (Fiske et al., 2002, p. 896). Transferred to the inherent brand context, admiration results from adapting (assimilating) to the brand. This means that the consumer, in looking up to the brand, matches intrinsic characteristics with the brand, which arguably influences behavioural outcomes.

In adding to the comprehension of the applicability of the BIAF in the European context, it was investigated whether national culture influences brand perception. As Germany and the Netherlands elicit different scores for the cultural dimensions according to Hofstede (2015), it was suggested that culture could influence both dimensions, Warmth and Competence. The

results show that there is a small difference in the perception of Ikea in Warmth (H6a) but not Competence (H6b). The Dutch perceive Ikea as higher in the Warmth dimension than the Germans. Looking at the Hofstede culture dimensions, Germany and the Netherlands show the highest differences in the masculinity dimension (66 and 14 respectively), while other dimensions show less prominent differences and are therefore not consulted for further analysis. A low masculinity score means that society is governed by caring for each other and quality of life. Because the Dutch have a culture that relies more on caring aspects, which can relate to Warmth, they might be inclined to positively rate a brand that they perceive high in this dimension. In a culture which is governed by achievements (high masculinity score) like Germany a warm brand might receive a lower score, as the concept is not so prominent in societal understanding. As the reported effect size is small ($\eta^2=0,03$), the differences between nationalities should not be over-evaluated. As cultural differences within the SCM research are limited to the individualism score on which Germany and the Netherlands are rather similar (Cuddy et al., 2009), it can be concluded that in this context the BIAF is universally applicable across countries. The consumers' perceptions of Competence undermine the universality of the model, as no significant differences are found. This could be due to the fact that rating Competence is more objective than perceived Warmth, which is a more subjective evaluation.

Overall the positioning of the brand, the positive emotion of admiration and the unity of perceptions across cultures and demographics confirm the BIAF and therefore the basic premise that people perceive people, instead of non-human constructs of brands. The notion of comparing the consumer-brand relationship has been long-established (Fournier, 1998), but the truly humanistic essence of brands has often been neglected. Despite actual human contact with representatives of the brand, which lead to social perception of brands, people subconsciously refer to the people behind a brand. This might be the reason why popular

brands are able to build such close and emotional relationships with their customers. People that report emotions such as admiration or love for a brand might express their aspiration for the people of the brand and their inferred characteristics. Exemplified, this could mean that someone who rates Ikea high in Competence, sees him-/ herself as, or aspires to be efficient, organised and competent. The resulting positive and personal relation to the brand is expressed in the emotional response.

5.2 Antecedent of Warmth and Competence

The concept of consumer brand engagement was introduced to explore what drives consumers' brand perceptions. Therefore the question of how CBE influences Warmth and Competence was posed and hypothesised with CBE as an antecedent of the two dimensions (H2a and H2b). As the concept reflects involvement and interest in the product, it was expected to strongly and positively influence the respective dimension. The expectations were confirmed by the results, with CBE explaining 19.3% in Warmth and 16.2% in Competence. The influence of CBE on Warmth can be clearly supported by the literature. CBE contains aspects that reflect positive evaluations of a brand such as affection, activation and cognitive processing (Hollebeek et al., 2014). If a person is engaged with a brand in these ways, he or she will likely elicit a positive perception of the brand. Arguably an engaged consumer values the brand as a relational agent, which is why the applicability of the BIAF in this context is confirmed. Hence relational benefits are offered in brand engagement, which strongly connects to the social and relational perception of brands in the BIAF. In a different research context, 'dedication', reflecting the emotional component of brand engagement, was extracted as the strongest dimension of the concept (Dwivedi, 2015). This potentially corresponds to the emotions involved in the BIAF and illuminates the deep bond that is involved with brand engagement (Dwivedi, 2015). Correspondingly a new topic: 'social brand engagement' evolved which refers to a "meaningful connection, creation and

communication, in which the relationship widens from person-brand to person-person brand” (Kozinets, 2014, p. 10). Resulting from the above discussion, the hypothesised positive relationship is confirmed and the strong conceptual connection of CBE to the BIAF is reflected on.

5.3 Outcomes of Warmth and Competence

In expanding the understanding of the BIAF and the two dimensions of Warmth and Competence, we considered different behavioural outcomes that are formed from positive brand perceptions. This is supported by the notion that from perceptions, cognition and emotion processes are evoked and finally result in behaviour (Fiske et al., 2012). This general assumption is confirmed in most cases by the results from the regressions on purchase intentions, word of mouth and relationship satisfaction.

Purchase intentions. Following the original research of Kervyn et al. (2012) purchase intentions were explored. In this research the question was posed whether purchase intentions are influenced by brand perceptions. It was expected that Warmth and Competence positively influence purchase intentions because the plan to purchase a product or brand requires an overall judgement of the brand, which is in essence reflected by brand perceptions. As hypothesised (H3a and H3b), the results show positive relationships between the two dimensions and purchase intentions.

As both dimensions have a significant unique impact, they can be separately evaluated. Perceptions of Warmth can influence purchase intentions in such a way that Warmth is connected to the anticipated pleasure of the next brand contact (i.e. shop or website visit), which is recalled when reflecting about purchase intentions. If the perceiver thinks of the brand as competent, purchase intentions might be positively influenced through inferences about quality of products and service, expertise and efficiency that stem from this perception.

In this context Warmth and Competence can be seen as extensions of a mere evaluation of brands' features and benefits because they entail the social dynamic of brand perception.

Looking at the results from the regression, Competence reports a less strong influence on purchase intentions, which can be evaluated in terms of what aspects are important when someone thinks about a future purchases. Although people might judge a brand along both dimensions, one dimension might be more prominent for estimating own future behaviour. The results suggest, that Warmth attributes such as friendliness, trustworthiness and responsiveness are more important than for example expertise, intelligence or efficiency. Evidence for this notion might be derived from relationship marketing, where the measure of trust (here compared to Warmth, due to strong social anchoring) is identified as a main compound of relationship and predictor of consumer behaviour outcomes (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Word of mouth: Introduced due to its importance in the consumer-brand context, word of mouth was explored for how Warmth and Competence influence this consumer behaviour. It was expected to be influenced positively, as consumers who place the brand in the 'popular' cluster, are likely to talk about it with their surroundings. This expectation was confirmed with the results, as Warmth and Competence influence word of mouth positively and significantly (H4a and H4b). The high explanation of variance (46%) of the model suggests that the two dimensions have a strong influence on word of mouth, which is logically supported by the theory. WOM has been associated with customer satisfaction and perceived value (Sweeney et al., 2014). These concepts can be compared with elements of Warmth and Competence.

Relatedly, research found that 'liking' something as a form of consumers' manifestation of engagement with the brand were more likely to report word of mouth as well (Leventhal,

Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2014). The reason for this behaviour was a perceived congruency between the brand meaning and their self-identity. Compared to the human brand model, the same notion is applied. People with an engaged relation to the brand, which precedes positive perceptions, are likely to report positive messages to others. One of the reasons for this is self-identification, which can be compared to the aspirational emotion elicited from positive brand perceptions. So the influence of Warmth and Competence on WoM lies within the relation to the brand and the reasons for relating to it.

The Competence dimension shows a lower influence on Word of Mouth than Warmth. As WoM relies on social concepts, the Competence aspects are apparently less important when talking to other people about brands. This could be due to the fact that Competence is a requirement, as people expect brands to be able to deliver their promises, and would rather be discussed if expectations are not met. As only positive WoM is investigated, this explanation cannot be reflected in the results. Nonetheless it is viable in reasoning differences in the explanatory power of Warmth and Competence. Being conceptually similar and showing analogous results, the Net Promoter Score results can be explained in line with the argumentation above.

Relationship satisfaction: Relationship Satisfaction was investigated to answer the question how brand perceptions influence it. It was expected to be positively influenced because it is a relational outcome that reflects a social connection to the brand and is arguably influenced by a human perception of the brand. This connection is demonstrated by the rating along the Warmth and Competence dimensions. The results confirm the hypothesised relationship for the Warmth dimension (supports H5a) but not so for the Competence dimension, as there is no significant influence (rejects H5b).

The Warmth measure is positive, significant and high in effect, supporting the hypothesised relationship, where Warmth is a major determinant of being satisfied with the relationship. This underlines, that a brands' Warmth perception is very important to the perceiver and influences how he or she thinks about the firm. As relationship satisfaction has been identified as a predictor of organisational success, it is crucial that consumers rate the brand highly on this outcome, and, as derived from this research, rate the brands' Warmth high, as it immediately influences relationship satisfaction.

Contrary to the expected, the influence of Competence on relationship satisfaction is not confirmed. It means that low Competence perceptions do not lead to lower relationship satisfaction, and high Competence perceptions do not lead to higher relationship satisfaction. This suggests that someone who perceives the brand as competent might not be satisfied with the relationship, and someone who perceives the brand as incompetent might still be satisfied. The lack of a linear relationship is illustrated in Table 12.

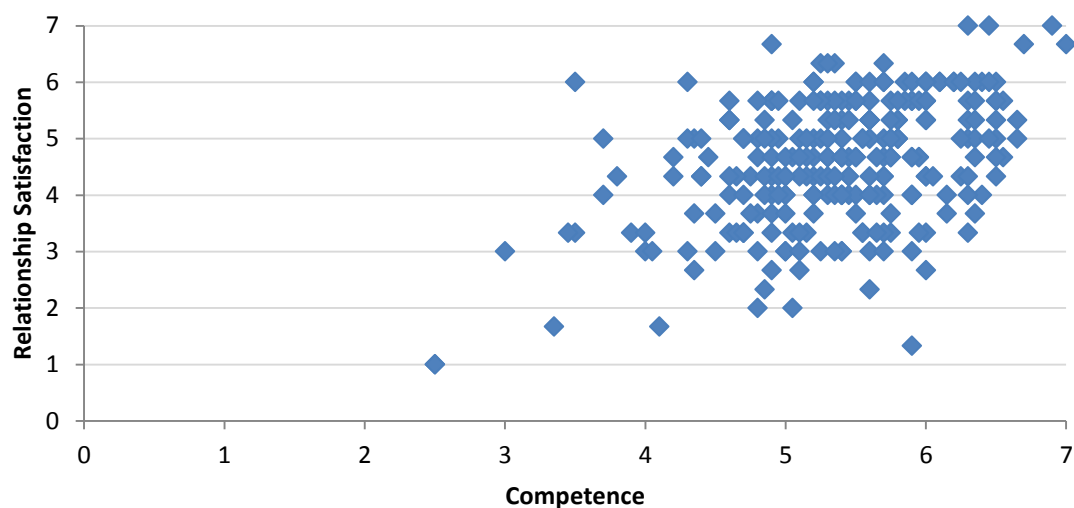


Table 12. Relationship satisfaction and Competence evaluations

A possible explanation for this might be the variety of Ikeas' product assortment and the value consumers extract from them. Some products are low priced and very useful, but others are more expensive and might not be as satisfactory. This could lead to an overall positive

Competence rating, but it does not necessarily mean increased satisfaction with the relationship, in terms of products. Other aspects of the relationship such as service encounters might reflect the same reasoning. The food service can be very positive, but the do-it-yourself aspect, with which some people have difficulties, might not lead to high satisfaction. Generally the mean of 4.57 reflects positive relationship satisfaction, but the diversity of experiences might restrict its connection to Competence evaluations. The diversity of consumer experience which impact satisfaction but not overall ratings of Competence, might serve as an explanation for this result.

5.4 Consumer Associations

As respondents freely associated with the brand, there were no prior theories or expectations for this analysis. The messages represented an overall view of Ikea, as positive and negative as well as various characteristics of Ikea were mentioned. It was found that for all three languages, the most discussed factor is Competence. After scanning for potential categories, it was decided that the Competence dimension comprised messages about quality (immediately linked to expertise), convenience, which entailed words such as easy, fast, practical or named the assortment (relates to the main features and values of Ikea), innovation and design, and the price. The Competence sub-dimensions found in the associations mirror items of which Competence measure of the quantitative research is comprised. Words like ‘efficient’ or ‘good quality’ were mentioned directly in the associations. Besides corresponding to the Competence dimension, many of the words reveal a close relationship to the positioning or image of Ikea, and might be brand-specific. This is conceivable as associations directly for the brand were asked for in the questionnaire.

The Warmth dimension seemed to be underrepresented in the free associations. Although it could clearly be identified through words such as ‘friendly’ (exactly an item in the questionnaire), positive atmosphere or ‘family’ references. A positive sentiment also reflected

a positive perception of Ikea on the Warmth dimension. Liking of products and its practicality expresses that people perceive Ikea as a brand that provides people with smart solutions in their everyday life, which can be evaluated as having good intentions. Service messages were summarized in a separate category, as messages relate more to brand-specific characteristics. Service entices aspects of both Warmth and Competence dimensions, as it reflects warm aspects such as employee-consumer contact but also Competence of the service interactions is evaluated. The lower reporting of Warmth facets could be explained by people attempting to appear rational in associations and providing relevant information rather than talking about their emotions or subjective evaluations.

In addition it was found that many specific brand attributes and associations were mentioned. The company culture category elicited the second highest count after Competence messages. People seem to recall the food, country and the do-it yourself aspect the most. This complements the findings on Warmth and Competence, in which a universal approach to perception is taken. The specific brand associations suggest that brand characteristics play an important role as well. Aspects which are considered in the brand perceptions formation are related to specific brand characteristics. It is not to say that results are divergent, rather that consumers include many facets of the brand in their perception.

The universality of perceptions is confirmed by results, where Warmth and Competence positively influence the majority of consumer outcomes. Generally Warmth was identified to better predict consumer outcomes than Competence. This is in line with the underlying concepts of the BIAF, where relational and emotional aspects are of great importance. Consumers might be more inclined to refer to those aspects when estimating their future purchase and advocacy behaviour as well as their satisfaction, because they are based on positive relational aspects. Competence might be less present for the consumer when evaluating the outcomes because they serve as a basis for the relationship, but are less

decisive when consumer outcomes are evaluated. Competence also includes the measure of Kervyn et al. (2012) of the ability of the brand to act on its intentions, which on its own, did not yield significant results and was reported to be hard to understand for respondents. As discussed in the upcoming chapter, the findings have various implications for literature and theory.

6.0 Implications

This final chapter evaluates the meaning of the results and discussion in outlining the implications for theory and managerial practice. In acknowledging the limitations, further research avenues are suggested before drawing an overall conclusion to this research.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This paper contributes to extant theory in various ways, three of which will be elaborated on in this section. Firstly, the Brand as Intentional Agents Framework was confirmed in an altered setting. The original study had investigated the theory in the USA, while this study examined the topic in a European setting, focusing on Germany and the Netherlands. The confirmation of results in a different country and hence cultural setting adds to the validity of the model. In addition the universality of the model was supported as there are no or minor differences in brand perceptions according to culture. Extrapolated from the results, a new understanding of brand perception and communication emerges. Consumers hold beliefs about the people behind the brand, which is the prominent way in which brands are perceived from society. Thus, this research contributes to the literature of consumer-brand interactions in consumer communication, marketing and relationship management. Brand relationships, which traditionally revolve around features and benefits, are newly defined through the universality and confirmation of the BIAF.

Second, this research adds to the literature in terms of measuring the two prominent dimensions of the model. While keeping the original measures of the BIAF as originally used by Kervyn et al. (2012), additional measures were consulted to increase the reliability of results. As these measures are derived from the SCM research of Fiske et al. (2002), social components are added to Warmth and Competence. Combined with the original measures, the BIAF is depicted more accurately and the measures provide an interesting starting point for further research on the measurement of the two dimensions.

Third, in the same notion of complementing the original study, free consumer associations were used to examine the facets of Warmth and Competence dimensions. The unique contribution of consumer associations comprises a richer understanding of what consumers think about brands, abstracted from a context where predetermined answers guide their statements. As discussed in Chapter 5, the associations reveal the dimensions' connection to the brands' cultural aspects as well as brand-specific Competence aspects such as quality, price and convenience. This adds to the existing theory concerning brand personalities, as these aspects show what characteristics are associated with the Ikea brand. These findings lead to a deeper understanding of consumers' brand perceptions.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Next to academic contributions, the findings of the underlying research reveal several managerial implications. First and foremost the understanding of consumer-brand relationships should be revised, as the BIAF proves that people perceive brands as people rather than the abstract constructs of a brand. The confirmation of positive effects on emotions and consumer outcomes, serves brand managers and marketing executives as a strategic foundation for the interaction with consumers. As a practical example, relationship programs such as loyalty cards might not show the desired effects due to a lack of a personal relationship. Such programs should base their interaction on the assumption that everything is

perceived in a social context and that certain behaviours will be reciprocated by consumers. Social brand perceptions exert a positive influence on behavioural outcomes, which is why this enhanced approach towards customer relationships is expected to impact brand performance.

Complying with this notion, consumer brand engagement was found to be an antecedent to positive Warmth and Competence perceptions. It can therefore be suggested that in perceiving the own brand as a social agent, the engagement of consumers should be stimulated. The change of companies towards a human brand orientation as a long term internal approach, should be implemented in order to achieve engagement, before investing into detailed customer engagement programs (Wong & Merrilees, 2015).

Another outcome of managerial importance derived from the BIAF is the rating on Warmth and Competence. Positive ratings are linked with increased purchase intentions, word of mouth and, to some extent, relationship satisfaction. Once a firm knows where it is located, it can act on this positioning. A firm which is lower in for instance Warmth could invest in training that fosters employee friendliness, which impacts brand perception (Engel, Tran, Pavlek, & Blankenberg, 2013). Firms perceived lower on Competence, might add intelligent features in their products and systems and engage in quality management for instance in their services. This would immediately add to perceived Competence as complaint handling is highly emotional and influences satisfaction and loyalty (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009).

As identified in the discussion, an important finding of this research evolves around the emotions of consumers. The feeling of admiration was found to be inherent in consumers when they perceive a brand as highly warm and competent. In the SCM the feeling of admiration is follows from a social comparison with assimilation and looking up to high social status (Fiske et al., 2002). In the BIAF context this can be interpreted as feeling

strongly connected to the brand and wanting to attain characteristics that one attributes to the brand. As this feeling reaches far beyond ‘liking’ a brand, this emotion shows a deep relational connection to the brand, from which positive outcomes such as long-term loyalty can certainly be expected. Thus emotional responses derived from Warmth and Competence perceptions should be considered in all aspects of the brand, as this is where the overall perception stems from. Especially traits that are inferred about the people who are involved should be considered. For instance product design, customer service, marketing activities etc. require aspects of Warmth and Competence, where product designers are attributed with intelligence, marketing staff are thought to be interesting and friendly and service representatives are competent in how they help you but also open and friendly. If this train of thought is integrated in a brands’ management, positive emotions will elevate consumer-brand relationships.

Overall the BIAF suggests various avenues for implementing managerial actions in order to bring brands and consumers closer together and form more social and meaningful relationships.

6.3 Limitations and Further Research

Besides the many contributions of this research, three considerable limitations of the study are acknowledged and translated into various further research suggestions. First, there is scope to add consumer characteristics to enlarge the frame by which the consumer-brand relationship is depicted. The dyadic nature of relationships was pointed out as an important aspect left out in the BIAF research (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; MacInnis, 2012). Despite the fact that the SCM claims universality of perceptions, in a brand context individual differences might be more important to investigate, as the abstraction from the model focuses on consumer-brand relationships, not mere perception. In addition, implicit personality theory supposes that we hold personal biases and beliefs which influence the formation of

impressions (Colman, 2008). Especially the aspect of how consumers identify with brands could add to the understanding of individual brand perceptions. Relatedly, research has shown that engaging with inner-self expressive brands increases the likelihood to offer Word of Mouth for that brand (Leventhal, Wallace, et al., 2014). Contrary, consumers who engage with socially expressive brands are more likely to accept wrongdoing from a brand. The difference in outcomes underlines the importance of the reason why we engage with a brand. Comparably, Dwivedi (2015) suggests to include relationship orientation as a variable when regarding the influence of CBE on loyalty intentions. In a similar notion, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) depict variables such as the inner self and the social self as antecedents to brand love, which, translated into the BIAF context, suggests that individual differences of consumers influence their relationship to the brand and makes these factors worthwhile investigating.

Secondly, the potential deviation from exact accuracy of self-reported measures limits the validity of the results. Exemplary, as touched upon in Chapter 2.3.1 purchase intentions are an approximation of what is actually of interest: the purchase behaviour of consumers. Testing if brand perceptions lead to actual changes in consumption would increase the credibility of results. Similarly, customer loyalty could be tested with repurchase rates, the satisfaction measure would benefit from immediate ratings after a purchase and Word of Mouth could be tracked by analysing for instance online messages (Ridderbos, 2015).

A third limitation is identified in the focal brand. As Ikea is positioned in the popular sector, the results concerning consumer outcomes are accessibly positively influenced. In order to further explore the meaning of the social dimensions of Warmth and Competence, it would be interesting to investigate brands that exhibit cross ratings, of low Competence and high Warmth, or high Competence and low Warmth. Arguably, the perception of brands in these clusters elicits differential consumer behaviour outcomes. This notion is supported by related research which investigates for instance negatively-valenced brand engagement (Leventhal,

Hollebeek, & Chen, 2014) or brand aversion, as the negative valence of consumer-brand engagement (Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013). Further research, in line with the argumentation of Fournier and Alvarez (2012), should investigate a broader, not predefined (in terms of cluster belonging) set of brands, to truly exploit all aspects of the BIAF.

Additional avenues worth investigating are the underlying constructs of social perception, and the resulting inferences for brand perceptions. A more in-depth analysis of how perceptions are formed and how they are influenced, especially in the context of relating to people rather than abstract brand constructs could alter the way brands plan to interact with their customers. As suggested from analysing brand associations it could be helpful to review what brand-specific aspects are considered when forming perceptions about the brand.

Due to the profound importance of emotions in consumer-brand relationships, further research could explore the role they play. As they are found to impact perceptions, it is conceivable that they influence consumer behaviour outcomes. Positive emotions could accelerate outcomes, while negative ones could heavily impede them. Arguably a mediating role of emotions could be tested.

Further testing and validation of the BIAF could also be helpful to broaden the understanding of contextual factors. To further explore the underlying assumption that people perceive brands in a humanistic way, it would be interesting to compare consumers' perception of the brand and of the people behind the brand. This could be done in a qualitative way, by freely asking for associations but also quantitative, where dimensions are predefined and the fit between the two measures is compared. To further investigate the ability of the BIAF to evaluate brand perceptions, a comparison of the explanatory power with common brand evaluation scales could contribute to the acceptance and relevance of the model.

6.4 Conclusion

This research undermines the importance of consumer-brand perceptions by demonstrating positive influences on consumer behaviour outcomes. The original BIAF is complemented in various ways, which paints a more holistic picture of the social view on brands. Insights on Warmth demonstrate the importance of the measure in strongly predicting consumer outcome variables. The importance of Competence is demonstrated in consumer associations, where multiple and company- specific facets of Competence are expressed. Overall the research expands the understanding of consumer-brand interactions, underlying social mechanisms and outcomes. Especially managers can benefit from the suggestion to develop personal consumer approaches, to increase the connectivity between consumers and brands and eventually positively influence behavioural outcomes. As the consumer is increasingly empowered, an empathetic relational approach to brand management and consumer experience is and will be of great importance to successful consumer-brand relationships.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Conversion of SCM items to fit brand context

Items Fiske et al. 2002

Items Ridderbos 2015

Question

As viewed by society, how . . . are members of this group?

To what extent is (has) Brand ...?

Warmth

Friendly	Friendly
Trustworthy	Trustworthy
Well-intentioned	Responsive
Warm	Honest
Good-natured	Good Service
Sincere	

Competence

Competent	Competent
Efficient	Efficient
Intelligent	Intelligent
Confident	Expertise
Capable	Good Quality
Skillful	

Appendix B: Scale items

Construct	Items
Consumer Brand Engagement	Cognitive Processing
	(1) Using IKEA products gets me to think about IKEA. (2) I think about IKEA a lot when I'm using IKEA products. (3) Using IKEA products stimulates my interest to learn more about IKEA.
	Affection
	(1) I feel very positive when I use IKEA products. (2) Using IKEA products makes me happy. (3) I feel good when I use IKEA products. (4) I'm proud to use IKEA products.
	Activation
	(1) I spend a lot of time using IKEA products, compared to other furniture, home accessories and appliances brands. (2) Whenever I'm using furniture, home accessories and appliances, I usually use IKEA products. (3) IKEA is one of the brands I usually use when I use furniture, home accessories and appliances.
Ability	(1) Has the ability to implement its intentions. (2) Is skilled and effective at achieving its goals.
Intentions	(1) Has good intentions toward ordinary people. (2) Consistently acts with the public's best interests in mind.
Emotions	Admiration, Pity, Envy, Contempt
Brand Warmth	Trustworthy, Friendly, Responsive, Honest, Good Service
Brand Competence	Competence, Expertise, Efficient, Intelligent, Good Quality
Relationship Satisfaction	(1) As a regular customer, I have a high quality relationship with IKEA. (2) I am happy with the efforts IKEA is making towards customers like me. (3) I am satisfied with the relationship I have with IKEA.
Positive Word of Mouth	(1) I would recommend IKEA to someone who seeks my advice. (2) I say positive things about IKEA to other people. (3) I would recommend IKEA to others.
Net Promoter Score	How likely is it that you would recommend IKEA to a friend or colleague?
Purchase Intention	(1) It is very likely that I will buy at IKEA. (2) I will purchase an IKEA item the next time I need a home appliance or furniture product. (3) I will definitely try IKEA products.

Appendix C: Emotion items analysis

Effect	Direction (expected)	Sig.	t-value	Beta-coefficient	Variance explained
Warmth → Admiration	+	0.000	7.614	0.429	18.4%
Competence → Admiration	+	0.000	7.745	0.434	18.9%
Warmth → Pity	+	0.000	-4.240	-0.256	6.6%
Competence → Pity	-	0.001	-3.244	-0.198	3.9%
Warmth → Contempt	-	0.000	-5.980	-0.351	12.3%
Competence → Contempt	-	0.169	-1.378	-0.086	0.7%
Warmth → Envy	-	0.062	1.877	0.116	1.4%
Competence → Envy	+	0.029	2.196	0.135	1.8%

Appendix D: Exact wording consumer associations (in respective language)

	Warmth	Competence	Service	Company Culture
German	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ heimliche Atmosphäre ▪ IKEA Family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kreative Ideen ▪ Unkompliziert ▪ gute Sachen zu günstigen Preisen ▪ Stylish und Innovativ ▪ Grosse Auswahl ▪ Praktische und sinnvolle Möbel ▪ Schlechte Qualität 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Alptraum Aufbau ▪ Selbst-bedienungs-kasse ▪ Schrauben ▪ Schlange an der Kasse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leckeres Essen ▪ Schweden ▪ Hotdogs ▪ Köttbullar ▪ international orientiert
English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family ▪ Comfy ▪ Nice atmosphere ▪ Friendly ▪ New beginnings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good value ▪ Minimalistic design ▪ Organised & practical ▪ Cheap quality ▪ Affordable, modern furniture ▪ Garantie ▪ Cheap and convenient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-assembly ▪ Stressful shopping experience ▪ Do-it-yourself ▪ Showrooms ▪ Easy construction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Swedish ▪ Meatballs ▪ Blue and yellow
Dutch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gezellig ▪ Vriendelijk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Efficiënt design ▪ Goede prijs/kwaliteit verhouding ▪ Opgeruimd ▪ Hippe, leuke en kleurrijke meubelen ▪ Makkelijk ▪ Redelijke kwaliteit ▪ Betaalbare prijs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Zelf alles in elkaar zetten 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Zweden ▪ Zweedse balletjes ▪ Kleuren blauw en geel ▪ Ikea restaurant

Official Statement of Original Thesis

By signing this statement, I hereby acknowledge the submitted thesis, titled:

Social brand perceptions: Towards an understanding of human consumer-brand relationships

to be produced independently by me, without external help.

Wherever I paraphrase or cite literally, a reference to the original source (journal, book, report, internet, etc.) is given.

By signing this statement, I explicitly declare that I am aware of the fraud sanctions as stated in the Education and Examination Regulations (EERs) of the SBE.

Place: Wiesbaden, Germany

Date: 19.08.2015

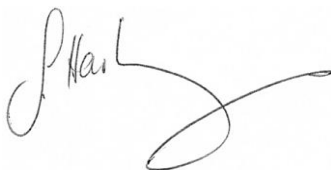
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Course/skill: EBS4016

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Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Hartung', with a large, stylized flourish extending to the right.