ABSTRACT

Objective
Customer-based brand equity is seen as particularly important and scholars propose that the concept incorporates several different dimensions. Included among these dimensions are the various associations that consumers attribute to a brand. Such associations can be intentional or unintentional and serve to generate brand image and meaning for consumers. Managers are able to position and differentiate the brand using these associations, which may also provide a logical basis for brand extensions. It is therefore accepted that management of brand equity demands associations that need to be carefully selected, created and maintained in order to positive influence consumer attitudes and purchase intention. Extant literature acknowledges the existence of “associative networks”. However, analysts have not yet been able to devise techniques that allow marketers to compare a brand with others through the mapping of their respective associations. Achieving such an aim is consequently the main purpose of the current study.

Rationale:
Brand managers focus on strategically positioning their brands and influencing the brands’ associative networks in consumers’ memory. Among different alternatives, brand managers can at least choose from two fundamentally different alternatives in building their brands: A. Focus on many favorable associations, pursuing a broad brand strategy or B. Focus on strengthening some few diagnostic associations, pursuing a narrow brand strategy. The current literature in brand management offers no guidance on which of these alternatives will most likely influence brand performance. The primary purpose of this paper is to illustrate a methodology for gaining actionable, strategic insight into a brand’s associations and its competitive uniqueness against its competitors. The authors integrate free association protocols and response latency techniques to draw the associative brand maps for the five product brand of HUL, to develop a overview of the brand’s associations and to depict brand’s strategic meaning in a visual representation across the six major brand functions.

Methodology:
The present techniques used in this research paper effectively uncover associations that the consumers have for the brand and how strong, unique, relevant and favorable those associations can be for the practicing managers. The strategic brand association maps demonstrate an
excellent and a clear consumer-driven strategic view of the associations that the brand has in the minds of the consumers, thus providing the organizations actionable insights for understating the grey areas with respect to the positioning of the brand in the minds of the consumers.

**Findings:**

The present study has shown that how perceptual maps are very instrumental in shaping the brand perception as visual representation of results is especially valuable to practitioners when it is “informative, intuitive and strategic”. The typical design is to produce a “constellation of associations” for each brand, which is positioned in the center. An association is included on the map providing at least 75 percent of subjects’ link it to the brand in question, although certain projects may demand an adjustment of this percentage. Line thickness, circle color, circle size and distance are the graphical techniques used by the authors to respectively represent association strength, favorability, relevance and uniqueness. By inspecting the map created for each brand, managers are able to make simple comparisons.

**Originality:**

This strategic brand map process provides strategic insight into how a brand is viewed in the marketplace and how that brand is (or is not) differentiated from key competitors through the associations the brand has developed. This work can serve to reinforce the strategic direction of a brand, or help point the way to a change in strategy that will enhance the brand’s attractiveness to its target audience. Strategic brand association maps can also serve as a diagnostic tool for brands that may be struggling or otherwise be underperforming vis-a`-vis management expectations.

**KEY WORDS:** Brand concept maps, Brand Association, Perceptual Mapping, Brand Equity and Product Differentiation.