A Study on the Conceptualization of Apparel Brand

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Abstract

For this study, we clarify apparel brand conceptualization from the consumer perspective. Using the brand concept map (BCM) method, the complex associations in the perception of apparel brand are explicated in a graphical network structure. This includes associations related to the elements of channel, promotional activities, price, design, place of origin, and consumer impression, and the interconnections of these elements that are influenced by cultural factors. We propose that the network of associations in consumers' memory, consisting of various elements, constitutes relevant consumer values. We contribute to the understanding of apparel brand structure on associations, network, and cultural levels. The methodology advanced in this study considers the network structure of consumer associations. We also identify the framework of relevant associations, elements, and values, which might be leveraged in marketing strategy.

Key Words: Brand, Marketing, Apparel brand, Brand culture, Brand concept Map.

Introduction

Branding is becoming more critical as businesses face an increasingly global and competitive marketplace. One of the toughest challenges for the clothing industry is to stand out amid competitors. The ubiquitous media has complicated marketing efforts, making it imperative for businesses to seek more effective methods to increase their influence in the marketplace, where branding may be an essential tool (Bouhlel, Mzoughi, Hadiji, & Slimane, 2009). On a global economic level, industries that have traditionally relied on export and original equipment manufacturing (OEM) as their primary business model, such as clothing industries, are increasingly affected by global low-cost competitors. These industries have been forced to change by developing their own brand to protect themselves from low profit margins, an unpredictable market, and legal issues, in an effort to add value to their business, such as extracting a premium price, attracting capital, and facilitating relations (Arvidsson, 2006).

However, brand resides within the hearts and minds of consumers and prospects. To out-brand competitors successfully, the brand propositions must be more compelling, attractive, and unique than those of competitors. Brand differentiates products and represents a promise of value, incites beliefs, evokes emotions, and prompts behaviors (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Brand encompasses the sum total of their experiences and perceptions.

People form brand cognitive structures in memory when they acquire new brand information, and information structure affects what information is retrieved, used, perceived, and stored (Cowley & Mitchell, 2003; Christensen & Olson, 2002). John et al. indicated that customer perception is structured in a network of associations and is related to a person's experience. These cognitive structures represent the interpreted meanings of brands and have crucial implications for numerous consumer behavior issues such as brand extension evaluation and brand personality (Keller, 2003). Businesses should be able to measure the network of associations where brand equity can be leveraged.

This complexity of prospect and customer associations has rendered the brand concept map (BCM) of John, Barbara, Kim, & Monga (2006) a suitable method, where these associations that include attributes, personality traits, and emotions are presented in a network structure. The BCM method probes directly by building graphs and makes the links explicit between concept pairs (Ruiz-Primo & Shavelson, 1996). This method is thus able to describe the interconnectedness of the involved associations or concepts to provide an alternative to considering these associations separately. The method also provides graphical representation, flexibility in using data from previous studies, and an easy aggregation procedure, which is attractive for managerial usage.

We therefore explore and clarify the brand's conceptual structure and the associations of consumers and prospects on apparel to identify the structural and strategic elements of brand for leveraging. Previous studies have treated these influencing associations as discrete factors and have seldom considered them from a network approach, but have taken the manufacturer perspective instead of the customers' in understanding branding. We use the apparel brand as our study object because of the growing global competition in the industry. The WTO statistics show that the global export of apparel from 2000 to 2008 averaged 9.2% growth yearly. Thus, investigating these critical elements is crucial to propose a more effective brand strategy.

Literature Review

Brand and Brand Equity

Because product features can be easily copied, brands are a marketer's primary tool for creating product differentiation. Kotler and Gertner (2002) indicated that differentiation is not based on product characteristics alone, but with combined brand name and brand significance, which has become a core competitive asset in an ever-growing number of contexts. Brands differentiate products and represent a promise of value, which further incites beliefs, evokes emotions, and prompts behaviors. Marketers frequently extend successful brand names to new products, providing existing associations to them to accelerate consumer information processing and learning.

Kotler and Gertner (2002) asserted that brands have social and emotional value to users. They have personality and speak for the user. They enhance perceived use and product desirability, providing equity for both customers and investors. Brand equity translates into customer preference, loyalty, and financial gains and consists of various dimensions such as performance, social image, value, trustworthiness, and identification (Lassr, Miittal, & Sharma, 1995). Arvidsson (2006) extended the implication of brand equity to represent its capacity to generate a future value stream, either to extract a premium price from consumers, to attract capital, or to facilitate relations with interested parties, such as between distributors and producers.

Yeung and Ramasamy (2007) indicated that brand equity is often considered an intangible corporate asset, which is substantially related to market value, shareholder value, and corporate success and performance. However, brand equity can be defined in numerous ways. From the consumer perspective, brand equity is the set of consumer associations or attitudes toward the brand that contribute to its value. This is because consumers make purchase decisions based on factors they deem critical and on which brands have more

equity than other brands (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). The various definitions rely either implicitly or explicitly on brand knowledge structures in the minds of consumers as the source or foundation of brand equity.

Arvidsson (2006) suggested that trademark law protects from "dilution" as the property over a specific set of consumer attitudes and associations and over a specific mindset. He indicated that, from the sociological perspective, consumption can be understood as a collective rather than an individual practice. Therefore, brand value does not exist only in people's minds, but also in the common framework of action in which social life transpires. Most goods in a consumer society derive their use value from their ability to construct and reinforce social relations and shared meanings and experiences, wherein the common framework is collectively produced.

Brand Knowledge

Keller (2003) defined consumer brand knowledge as all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information, which is an individualized inference regarding a brand, stored in consumer memory. A widely adopted conceptualization of brand knowledge involves the associative network memory model (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003), in which a brand establishes a node in memory that may be associated with various other nodes. All types of brand nodes may be linked to the brand to make up its brand associations in memory. Numerous dimensions may also characterize these different types of associations. For example, brand associations may vary according to content and whether they are related to the product. Non-product associations may relate to user or usage imagery and brand personality. Brand associations may also vary in their level of abstraction, ranging from concrete and specific (e.g., product attributes) to more abstract and general (e.g., overall brand attitudes). Brand associations can vary in how strongly they are linked to the brand and its other associations, how unique or common they are, and how favorably consumers regard them.

Ng and Houston (2009) suggested that brand cognitive structures are the mental representations of brands in the minds of consumers (Christensen & Olson, 2002). They are the manner in which brand knowledge is represented and organized in memory (Ratneswhar & Shocker, 1991), resulting from prior information processing, and determine how a person processes information in the future (Wyer & Srull, 1989). Information can only be processed if the perceiver has a certain type of internal knowledge structure to receive and organize it (Lawson, 2002; Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Subsequent retrieval reflects how information is organized in memory (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Mandler, 1985). Thus, gaining a greater understanding of the factors that affect the characteristics of cognitive structures is crucial.

The Concept Map

Most cognitive theories assume that concept interrelatedness is an essential property of knowledge and frequently use two major sets of techniques in understanding knowledge structures. Certain theories probe people's perception of inter-related concepts indirectly through eliciting their word associations, their judgments of similarity, and their categorizations of concepts. Concept maps probe more directly by building graphs and make explicit the characteristics of links between concept pairs (Ruiz-Primo & Shavelson, 1996). The concept map assumes that knowledge within a content domain is organized around central concepts. These structures in memory influence a wide range of information-processing activities, including valuations, judgments, and inferences (Markus & Zajonc, 1985).

Brand associations are the perceptions, preferences, and choices in memory that are linked to a brand (Henderson, Iacobucci, & Calder, 1998). Keller (1993) defined brand associations as the information nodes linked to a brand node in memory, which contain the brand meaning for consumers. Consumers might associate a brand with a particular attribute or feature, usage situation, product spokesperson, or logo. A network representation of brand associations therefore can help provide a clearer understanding of consumer perceptions that marketing practitioners can establish and reinforce (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994).

The BCM method was used to identify brand associations and how they are connected to the brand and to one another. Although most existing work on concept maps does not offer procedures for aggregating individual maps into consensus maps, the BCM method has incorporated structure into the elicitation, mapping, and aggregation stages, providing a technique that is easier to administer and analyze. The advantage of BCM is that the interviewers require minimal training, and respondents can complete the procedure in a relatively shorter time, making it suitable for larger samples and a data collection setting. The method is relatively flexible, using data from prior research in the elicitation stage, enabling researchers to proceed without further time and expense. The method also includes more standardized aggregation procedures, enabling firms to collect brand maps for various market segments or geographic areas (John et al., 2006).

Research Method

We used the BCM to study apparel brands. We chose two specific brands with different origins. The first was "Uniqlo," a Japanese brand, and the second was "Lativ," a Taiwan local brand. The two apparel brands share similar characteristics. Both focus on casual clothing and appeal to the medium and low-priced market. Both Uniqlo and Lativ are newly developed brands. We developed two conceptual maps with specific brands from the obtained data.

Whereas Uniqlo started in retailing, it is now involved in designing and manufacturing, in addition to retailing. Lativ is a typical OEM that has adopted a self-branding strategy. However, the two brands assume different strategies. Uniqlo has adopted the "specialty-store/retailer of private-label apparel" (SPA) strategy, producing its own clothing and selling it exclusively. The company operates in China, Hong Kong, South Korea, the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Singapore, Taiwan, Russia, and Malaysia. Uniqlo has also begun outsourcing their clothing manufacturing to factories in China where labor is cheaper, and has consolidated as a subsidiary of Fast Retailing Co. Ltd., listed on the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange. Lativ uses an e-store as their main channel, with a lower cost margin. They introduced the "product responsible tag," that traces products back to the person in charge as a measure of their quality assurance. Lativ recently relocated part of their manufacturing to Vietnam. According to WebsiteTrafficSpy.com, Lativ's e-store draws 3,331,386 visitors per month (109,525 per day) and 300,125 users per month (9,868 users per day).

We used the two brands for comparison and cross verification at the structural and individual association level. The aforementioned sample tests the complex concept of salient associations in branded apparel and association elicitation, including attributes, personality traits, and emotions. We compared common features of the two brands to identify the apparel's brand. We explain the procedures for both parts of the research in developing the BCM as follows:

Elicitation Stage

We first selected a set of salient brand associations for apparel purchasing by conducting a survey focused on responses to the open-ended question, "What comes to your mind when you think of buying branded casual clothing?" We developed a frequency count and selected those that were at least 10% of the respondents. We sampled 100 participants by conveniently selecting among university students.

Mapping Stage

We conducted one-on-one interviews, and told respondents that they were participating in a study on casual clothing brand. Participants were asked to consider the following question: "What comes to mind when thinking about "brand X" (with the specific brand name)?" To assist them with this task, respondents were shown printed cards with different associations for the branded clothing, and were told that they could use any of the cards or could add their own. The following step involved explaining the purpose of the BCM by

showing the participants a previous BCM. In the third step, participants developed their map for a particular brand and were given a blank whiteboard with the Uniqlo or "Lativ brand name in the center. They were instructed to use the cards they had selected and to draw lines (single, double, or triple) to connect the cards on the whiteboard. Lastly, participants were asked to indicate their feelings about buying the product brand using a number between 1 ("extremely negative") and 5 ("extremely positive"), which was then marked on the brand map. Participants completed several questions regarding prior experience and familiarity with the particular brand and basic demographics. For each brand, 100 participants were asked to participate in the research because of the accessibility to both brands. The participants were conveniently sampled among university students.

Aggregation Stage

Information from each respondent map was coded according to the presence of associations, the type of line (single, double, or triple), the level at which each association was placed on the map, and which brand associations were linked above and below each association on the map. We then aggregated the data as shown in Table 1. Previous studies have typically viewed interconnectivity as indicative of how "central" an element is within an overall belief system, referred to as "core" associations (John et al., 2006). Three measures indicate the core associations that should be included on the consensus map and linked directly to the brand: "frequency of first-order mentions," "ratio of first-order mentions," and the "type of interconnections," which is the frequency of an association placed super-ordinate or subordinate across maps. Associations with more super-ordinate than subordinate connections are strong candidates for direct connection to the brand.

Developing a Consensus Map

We identified the core brand associations to include on the map. Associations that were at least 50% of the maps mentioned as core brand associations were included, consistent with the study by John et al. (2006). Associations with borderline frequencies (45%-49%) if the number of interconnections was equal to or higher than that of other core brand associations were included, consistent with the notion that high interconnectivity signals the centrality of associations or beliefs.

Which core brand associations should be linked directly to the brand were identified using the three measures of frequency of first-order mentions, ratios of first-order mentions to total mentions (at least 50%), with more super-ordinate and first-order associations. The remaining core-brand associations on the map were included and a frequency count was conducted between specific associations, including links between the associations if they reached at least 50% of the total frequency of specific associations present in the same map.

Crucial links were added between core and non-core associations (dotted lines). The non-core associations were unqualified as core associations, but had frequent links above the target to specific core associations. Finally, single, double, or triple (represented with different boldness) lines were placed on the map to signify the connection intensity between associations. The mean number of lines respondents used were computed, rounded up or down to the nearest integer to determine how many lines to use on the consensus brand map.

Reliability and Validity Analyses

Split-half reliability was assessed to determine how consistent the obtained consensus brand maps would be across multiple administrations of the technique and examined nomological validity by comparing consensus brand maps from known groups (expert versus novice) to determine whether the maps reflect expected expert-novice differences. We also assessed convergent validity by comparing the consensus map that the respondents produced in the BCM with the rating-scales data obtained in the survey. We randomly

chose an additional 100 participants to undergo the battery of attribute-rating scales to add to the confidence that the BCM measures what it purports to measure.

Results

From the survey of the elicitation stage, after removing those responses that were overlapped, repeated, or low frequency, and finalizing the exact wording, 27 remaining associations were identified: 16 for Uniqlo, and 11 for Lativ (Table 1). The associations elicited from participant cognition of the Uniqlo brand were as follows: long queue and crazy (Queuing); relatively more expensive in Taiwan than in Japan (EIT); simple and comfortable (Simple/Comfortable); a national brand that is popular and affordable (popular); related to Hankyu department stores (Hankyu); pro-Japanese product (Pro-Japanese); a Japanese brand (MIJ); uses various advertisements (Ads);many designs and colors (Design/Color); considered cheap (Cheap); a quality product (Quality); compared with the Hang Ten brand (Hang Ten); an international brand (International); a bricks-and-mortar shop (Shop); manufactured in China (MIC); and fashionable (Fashion). We then used these associations in the mapping procedure.

The associations elicited for the Lativ brand are as follows: known for its T-shirts and polo shirts (T/Polo), considered cheap (Cheap), introduced through the internet (Internet); numerous advertisements in Yahoo Kimo (Yahoo); simple design (Simple); a national brand that is popular and affordable (Popular); made in Taiwan (MIT); considered comfortable and easy to wear (Comfortable); good quality (Quality); for adults and children (Adults/Children); and uses discounts as a sales promotion (Discount). We also used these associations in the mapping procedure.

For the aggregation stage, information was coded from the individual respondent map (Uniqlo = 183; Lativ = 122) as follows: the frequency of the 27 brand associations; the type of line (single, double, or triple); the level at which each association was placed on the map, and which brand associations were linked above and below each association on the map. The brand associations participants added during the mapping procedure were also considered to determine whether any occurred frequently enough to be added to the original set. However, all the added associations reached the required frequency and were thus excluded from analysis (Appendix: Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of the brand associations from participants

UNQLO				LATIV			
Association	Freq.	Inter.	1st order	Association	Freq.	Inter.	1st order
Queuing	124	21	249	Cheap	66	23	117
EIT	123	21	252	Internet	65	22	135
Simple/Comfortable	116	8	215	YAHOO	64	23	110
Popular	113	15	208	Simple	63	6	91
Hankyu	106	22	230	Popular	61	7	74
Pro Japanese	103	21	171	T/Polo	61	4	57
Ads	102	3	198	MIT	45	20	N/A
Design/Color	100	7	180	Discount	43	20	N/A
Cheap	93	22	144	Comfortable	33	3	N/A
Shop	86	21	N/A	Quality	30	3	N/A
Quality	73	6	N/A	Adults/Children	20	6	N/A
Hang Ten	72	10	N/A				
International	69	8	N/A				
MIJ	59	30	N/A				
MIC	58	3	N/A				
FASHION	55	5	N/A				

A five-step process was used in developing the consensus brand maps for Uniqlo and Lativ. The consensus map included 11 associations for Uniqlo, nine of which were core associations such as Queuing, EIT, Simple/Comfortable, Popular, Hankyu, Pro-Japanese, Ads, Design/Color, and Cheap. The associations of MIJ and Shop were non-core associations (Appendix: Fig. 1). We identified six associations for the Lativ consensus map: T/Polo, Cheap, Popular, Yahoo, Internet, and Simple, which were included as core associations, whereas we included the two associations MIT and Discount, as non-core associations (Appendix: Fig. 2).

The associations Queuing, EIT, Simple/Comfortable, Popular, Hankyu, Pro-Japanese, Ads, Design/Color, and Cheap were directly connected to the concept of Uniqlo, which represents their close connections with the brand Uniqlo in brand conceptualization. The associations of MIJ and Shop were indirectly connected to the brand Uniqlo, through associations such as Popular, Cheap, and Pro-Japanese.
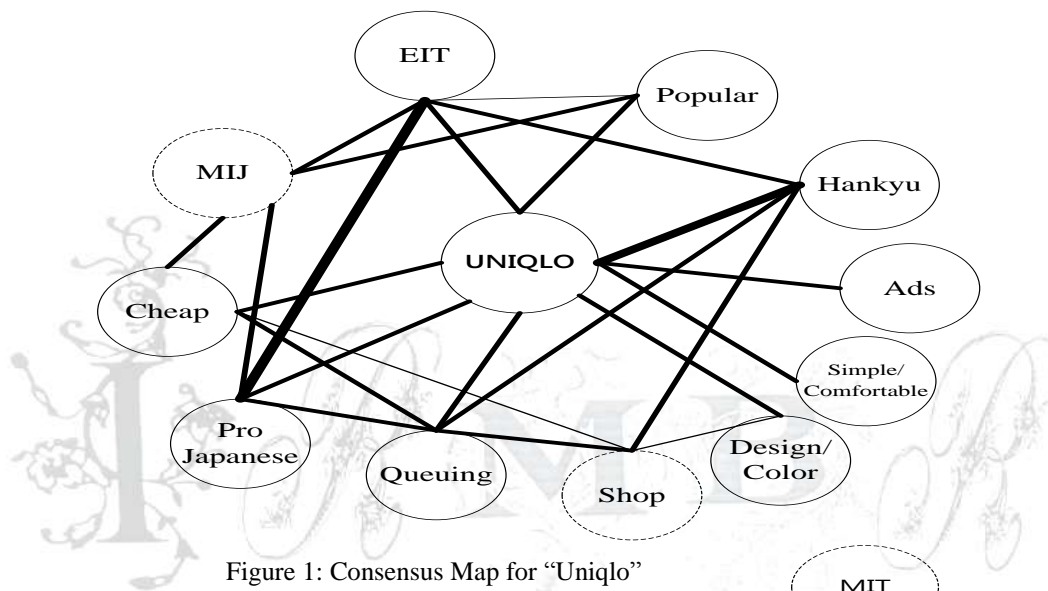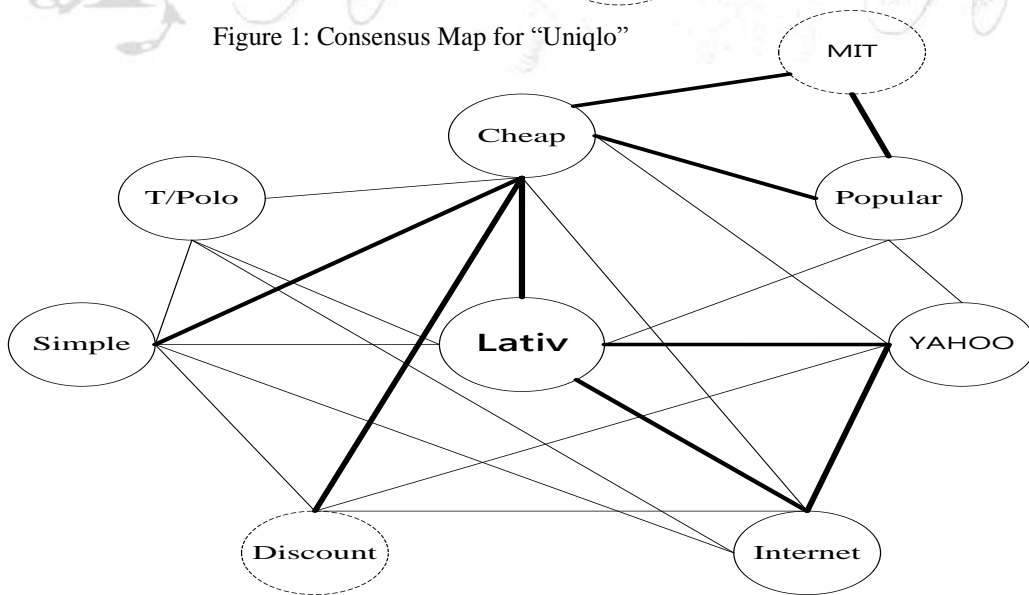

Figure 1: Consensus Map for "Uniqlo"

Figure 2: Consensus Map for "Lativ"

Associations such as T/Polo, Cheap, Popular, Yahoo, Internet, and Simple, were directly connected to the brand Lativ. The associations MIT and Discount were indirectly connected to the brand Lativ, through associations such as Popular, Cheap, Yahoo, and Simple. The associations Cheap, Popular, and the place of origin, MIJ or MIT, were present in the two consensus maps, indicating the centrality of these associations. Associations such as Hankyu, EIT, Queuing, Simple/Comfortable, and Pro-Japanese were critical associations either because of the frequency, first order connections, interconnectivity, or strength of interconnectivity. The associations for Uniqlo were Pro-Japanese, EIT, Queuing, Popular, and Cheap, whereas those for Lativ were Cheap, Popular, Yahoo, Internet, and "T/Polo, which had close interconnections with the other associations.

A comparison of these two consensus maps shows that certain associations were more specifically related to the product channel and promotional activities, such as Hankyu, Internet, Yahoo, Ads, and Discount. These associations were related to how people acquired the actual product or obtained product information. The findings were consistent with the characteristics of the two brands, where Uniqlo is famous for its bricks-and-mortar shops, and Lativ for its relation to the Internet. Certain associations were directly related to the products, such as Simple/Comfortable, Design/Color, Cheap, MIJ/MIT, and T/Polo, whereas others were more related to consumer perception of the products, such as Pro-Japanese, Queuing, and Popular. Compared to the first and second groups of associations, the final group involved more subjective impressions rather than the objective features of the product and the channel.

To verify the aggregation procedures, individual brand maps were compared with consensus brand maps according to two methods. First, following the procedure of John et al. (2006), which was also in line with the procedure of ZMET (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995), the number of randomly selected individual maps necessary to capture at least 70% of all core-brand association links observed in the consensus maps was determined. It was assumed that a small number of individual maps should be able to reproduce the association links in the consensus map if the aggregation procedure was successful. In this research, nine Uniqlo maps (5%) and eight Lativ maps (4%) were required to reproduce at least 70% of the core-brand association links observed in the consensus maps. Second, individual maps were compared with the consensus maps to determine how effectively the consensus maps captured the core associations observed in the individual maps. If an individual map included 10 brand associations, it was determined how many of these were core-brand associations on the consensus map. It was observed that 64.66% (Lativ) to 66.75% (Uniqlo) of the associations shown on the individual maps were included as core associations on the consensus map.

Reliability and Validity Analyses

Split-half reliability was assessed to determine how consistent the obtained consensus brand maps would be across multiple administrations of the technique, and examined the nomological validity by comparing the consensus brand maps from known groups (expert vs. novice) to determine whether the maps reflected expected expert-novice differences. Convergent validity was also observed by comparing the consensus map that the respondents produced in the BCM exercise with the rating-scales data obtained in the survey. The results add to the confidence that the BCM measures what it purports to measure.

Split-half Reliability

Using the quantitative measures of split-half reliability, each split-half map was coded for the presence or absence of (a) each of the associations as a core association, (b) each of the associations as a first-order association, and (c) each of the possible links among the associations. The presence of a brand association or association link was coded as one, and zero otherwise. The correlations across split-half maps were computed and are shown in Table 2. The split-half reliability levels were considered acceptable (Appendix: Table 2).

Table 2: Split-half Reliability

	UNQLO	LATIV
Core Associations	0.180*	0.670**
First-order	0.882**	0.639*
Total links	0.882**	0.693**

* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$

Nomological Validity

We viewed familiarity as a dimension of expertise, and experts typically possess more complex and integrated knowledge structures. Therefore, we compared the maps for two familiarity groups: the familiar and less familiar. The comparison showed that the maps for the familiar group had more first order associations, with stronger connections to the brands, with more and stronger interconnections between associations. Table 3 shows an analysis of the means and significant differences. The expected expert-novice differences were acceptable, confirming the nomological validity (Appendix: Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison of different Familiarity Groups

	UNQLO	LATIV
Number of association	5.3(6.75)**	5.17(5.80)*
Number of lines	11.57(14.76)*	11.43(11.47)*
Number of links	5.76(7.38)**	5.4(6.00)*

The numbers in parentheses are the average of less familiar groups, * $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$

Convergent Validity

To assess convergent validity, the brand maps that the respondents in the BCM exercise produced were compared with the rating-scale data obtained from the survey. The resulting frequency correlation indicated that the brand associations that BCM participants deemed to be most crucial in building their individual brand maps tended to be similar to those that the survey participants rated highly. We also considered the weighted frequencies of the associations by considering the factors of placement level and the number of lines, and correlations with the corresponding mean-scale rating. The results showed that the hierarchical placement and the selection of connecting lines of brand associations on the brand maps converged well with the ratings of the same brand associations from the survey data (Appendix: Table 4).

Table 4: Convergent Validity

	UNQLO	LATIV
Frequency	0.834**	0.657*
First-order	0.758**	0.657*
Lines	0.574*	0.553*

* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$

Discussion

Following the BCM method, we identified substantial individual associations and the relationship among the various associations, including at the network level. By comparing the conceptualizations of the two brands in the consensus maps, we identified a framework for clarifying the conceptual structure of the apparel brands. Although the associations varied across the consensus maps, the elements involved share a certain commonality.

Individual Associations Level

We broadly defined the 19 associations the participants included in the consensus maps into three major categories: the medium, the internal, and the external. Because these associations are closely related to either the channel or product promotion, they are related to the medium by which people engage with the brands and products. The associations that are directly related to the price, such as characteristic (design and colors) and the place of origin, are internal or core to the product, whereas associations that are more related to consumer perceptions of products are relatively external to the products. These are the subjective reactions or perceptions people hold toward brands.

Brand differentiates between products and service and represents a promise of value, which incites beliefs, evokes emotions, and prompts behaviors (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). Extending the means-ends model perspective (Khalifa, 2004) based on the assumption that consumers acquire and use products or services to accomplish favorable ends, Woodruff (1997) suggested that value is the consumer-perceived preference for and evaluation of product attributes, attribute performances, and consequences arising from use (in this case, the associations) that either facilitate or prevent obtaining consumer goals and purposes. The perspective links product attributes, consequences produced through consumption, and the personal values of consumers, which underlie the decision-making processes (Huber, Beutter, Montoya, & Huber, 2001).

Sheth, Bruce, and Barbara (1991) similarly proposed five values related to consumption, which may influence purchase and choice behaviors, including functional, epistemic, emotional, societal, and conditional values. Functional value is based on the rationale of the economic person and assumes the economic usage theory. Use and purchase decisions are based on the characteristics or attributes of the consumable item. Epistemic value refers to the benefits derived through product or service capability to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, or satisfy a desire for knowledge. Emotional value involves the benefits obtained from the capability of a product or service to arouse feelings or affective states and is also the belief that aesthetic considerations, such as beauty, add emotional value to a product. Social value is the benefits derived from the consumer association with certain social groups. Finally, conditional value corresponds to the benefits obtained that reflect the fit between the consumer and the specific situation. Khalifa (2004) proposed that a brand that satisfies consumer practical needs delivers functional value, whereas a brand that satisfies consumer self-expression delivers symbolic value. Therefore, we propose that symbolic value should be considered in apparel branding. Our proposed apparel brand framework is organized as follows:

Table5: Framework of Apparel's Brand

Categories	Elements	Associations	Values
Medium	Channel	Shop, Internet, Hankyu, YAHOO	Conditional, Functional Epistemic
	Promotion	Ads, Discount	
Internal	Price	Cheap, EIT	Functional Symbolic, Emotional
	Design	Design/Color,Simple/Comfortable , T/Polo, Simple	
	Origin	MIT, MIJ	
External	Impression	Queuing, Popular, Pro Japanese	Social, Symbolic, Emotional

The differentiation of the medium and internal categories, which consists of the elements of channel and promotion; price, design, and place of origin, is consistent with the place, promotion, product, and price elements (4 P's) of the marketing mix theory, which is crucial to segmentation and marketing communication. The external category is also related to the notion of "physical evidence" advocated by Booms and Bitner (1981). The external category is consistent with the physical evidence because the product aspects provide the proof of quality. This aspect is crucial because consumers often use external

clues to assess the quality of a product or service (Sapre & Nagpal, 2009; Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995). The abstraction on the categorical, elemental, and value levels is consistent with the findings of Arvidsson (2006). Brand value does not merely reside in "individual" minds, but in the common framework of action in which social life transpires. Therefore, instead of focusing on individual consumer associations, marketers should also focus on the common framework of a brand. However, these findings differ from the concept of the marketing mix theory because they derive from the consumer perspective rather than the provider perspective. The impression, channel, and promotion elements are also involved in brand conceptualization, not merely the price and product aspects.

Network Level

A comparison of the consensus maps reveals that the Uniqlo map is typically more complex compared with the Lativ map, both in the number of associations and the interconnections. This is consistent with the understanding that the number of associations, connections, and interconnection may reflect the brand familiarity, where Uniqlo is a more established brand. However, although the connections between various associations differ between the consensus maps, similar patterns exist on the elemental level.

We observed two primary channel and price elements in this study. The channel and promotion elements, such as the associations of Internet, Yahoo, Hankyu, Shop, and Discount are connected to the price elements such as Cheap and EIT. Between the channel and impression elements, the associations Hankyu, Yahoo, and Shop are connected to associations such as Queuing and Popular. Similarly, between the channel and design elements, the associations Internet and Shop are connected to the associations T/Polo, Simple, and Design/Color. The elements of price, such as the associations of Cheap and EIT are connected to the associations of Popular, Pro-Japanese, MIT, and MIJ of the impression and origin elements. The elements of origin and impression are also interconnected. The associations of MIT and MIJ are connected to associations of Popular and Pro-Japanese.

On a more complex level, the elements between origin-price-impression and the combination between channel-price-impression are present across the consensus maps. We identified the interconnection between MIT/J, Internet, Yahoo, Shop, Cheap, and Popular in the maps. This indicates that the conceptualization of apparel brand may often relate to the place of brand origin, to the brand price, and to the impression of the brand. However, the combination of channel-price-impression may indicate that the conceptualization of apparel brand may involve the medium through which people come to know or obtain the product and form an impression of the product with a certain price. These element interconnections may be a useful combination for marketing use, facilitating apparel-brand marketers to understand how consumers perceive their brand, and a crucial reference for drafting a strategic marketing mix.

If the number of interconnections is the degree of an element centrality within an overall belief and attitude system, a frequently mentioned association with many interconnections is a "core" association (John et al., 2006). From the consensus map, Cheap, Queuing, and Popular are examples of these core associations with strong interconnections. Marketers can use such an association as a connecting point in relating to other attributes and in communicating with consumers. The associations, Design/Color, Simple, MIJ/T, Pro-Japanese, Internet/Yahoo, and Discount are useful in consumer segmentation because of their centrality and interconnectivity in the brand conceptualization. These elements of channel, promotion, price, design, origin, and impression thus may be useful in consumer differentiation. Different combinations of these elements, which either directly or indirectly link to the brand, may be possible options for marketing-mix strategies.

Ward (2004) proposed that creativity in generating novel and useful ideas is highly related to the conceptual combinations that apply basic mental operations to existing knowledge structures. The combination of two previously separated concepts, (or in this case the association), may be merged into new units. Therefore, the study results provide possible candidates for these types of combinations, which

lead to creativity in communication and marketing appeals. Ward also suggested that, in addition to conceptual combination, analogical reasoning that applies or projects existing structured knowledge from a familiar domain to a novel or less familiar domain may be another possible element of creativity. The interconnections of associations shown in the BCMs provide possible paths or directions for this application.

Cultural Level

Brown, Robert, and John (2003) indicated that brands are meaningful to consumers not simply because they are strategically communicated by marketers, but because consumers incorporate them into their lives and add their own idiosyncratic stories to them. Brands are co-constituted through a dialectical process between the consumer culture and the companies' branding efforts (Holt, 2002).

The associations of the external category Pro-Japanese, Popular, and Queuing may reflect this particular point. First, these are consumer impressions of particular brands, which do not necessarily derive from marketers. Second, an impression such as Pro-Japanese is related more to a particular culture than to the local context of Taiwan, which is heavily influenced by Japanese trends. Queuing also reflects a particular culture or approach in perceiving and reacting toward a well-known brand or product in the Taiwanese context, which may in turn become a sign of acceptance intensity.

Lastly, the national brand that is popular and affordable, reflected by the association of Popular also has a cultural connotation. We present a unique understanding of "popular" that does not refer to acceptance, but to national identity and affordability, making a product obtainable for consumers. These associations are closely connected to origin and price elements.

Bengtsson and Firat (2006) indicated that brands can be cultural signs that supply people with individual and collective identities. Brands can also acquire cultural institution status, playing the role of signifying and communicating messages and images that are collectively read, contested, and navigated. The association of Pro- Japanese, Queuing, and Popular are consistent with this finding in various ways.

Contributions and Limitations

Our research contributes to the consumer perspective in understanding the conceptualization of an apparel brand. Second, associations, elements, and values useful to brand development were identified. These factors could be useful in detecting and developing prospective consumers and should be protected from dilution and erosion. Our findings may be helpful in identifying factors that are inconsistent with the consumer conceptualization and brand perception. Third, by introducing the BCM method, an advance of the methodology was attempted. Consumer conceptualization should be considered as a network of interconnected associations, which provides more comprehensive information in clarifying complex conceptual perceptions and suggests possible combinations of attributes in consumer segmentation and communication. Lastly, a workable framework was identified to connect the associations with the elements and perceived values to aid in developing strategic marketing plans.

However, several issues remain. Our careful study of apparel brand conceptualization is not exhaustive. Although these findings are based on in-depth studies of the common features of apparel brands, the ability to generalize these findings may require further empirical testing. The relevant associations and elements involved in the conceptualization of apparel branding and their influence on the brand may require further empirical testing. According to John et al. (2006), a procedure that assesses the characteristics of a relationship, whether the relationship between the associations or between the brand and associations is causal, correlational, or another type, is useful information for management to make more precise decisions that could be included in future research.

Conclusion

The development of strong brands is particularly crucial for Asian traditional clothing industries. Therefore, increasing awareness of the benefits of building strong brands, such as surviving adverse economic conditions, expanding sales beyond small domestic markets, increasing profits, understanding consumer brand perceptions, and planning effective marketing strategies are crucial for the industry to remain viable. Although the associations and interconnections related to a particular brand differ across consensus maps, certain structures are observable. These associations are closely related to and thus may be grouped under the elements of channel, promotion, price, design, origin, and impression. These are critical elements in the conceptualization of apparel brand and the associations may indicate different consumer values. We also identified various network patterns in this research, where cultural factors play an influential role. From the marketing perspective, such as in brand development and marketing communication, these associations on the individual and network level are valuable for developing effective strategies. The BCM method identifies critical associations and graphically represents interconnections that could be useful features for brand management to leverage, and on which to build and focus.

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