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**Broad vs. Narrow brand positioning: Effects on competitive brand performance.**

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## **Broad vs. Narrow brand positioning: Effects on competitive brand performance**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Brand managers can choose among two fundamentally different brand positioning strategies. One is a broad brand strategy, focusing on many favorable brand associations. The other is a narrow brand strategy, focusing on just a few and thus more mentally accessible associations. Building on associative memory theory, the current article examines which of these brand positioning strategies performs better under dynamic market conditions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Three experiments test the effect of brand positioning strategy on memory accessibility and competitive brand performance. Study 1 tests how brand strategy (broad vs. narrow) affects defensive brand performance. Study 2 tests how broad vs. narrow brands perform differently in a brand extension scenario (offensive brand performance). Study 3 uses real brands and situation-based attributes as stimuli in a defensive scenario.

**Findings** – The results show that a narrow brand positioning strategy leads to a competitive advantage. Narrow brands with fewer and more accessible associations resist new competitors more easily and have higher brand extension acceptance than do broad brands.

**Research implications** – The article shows how to use accessibility as evidence of associative strength and test how accessibility influences competitive brand performance in a controlled experimental context.

**Practical implications** – Brand managers would benefit from a narrow brand positioning strategy in accordance with the USP school of thought used by many marketing practitioners.

**Originality** – The paper demonstrates that narrow brand positioning performs better than broad brand positioning in dynamic markets, and to our knowledge is the first to do so.

**Key words** – brand positioning, associative memory, competitive performance

## **Broad vs. Narrow brand positioning: Effects on competitive brand performance**

### **1. Introduction**

Markets are dynamic. Established brands must defend themselves against new challengers in their current categories. They grow by extending into new product categories, and thus also challenge other brands in new markets. An important task of brand managers is to position the brand in preparation for these challenges (Jewell and Saenger, 2014). They must decide whether to opt for a narrow positioning with a core benefit or choose a broader positioning of several benefits. In this research, we address this strategic choice considering a dynamic environment, where the focal brand is facing new entrants in the category (defense) or struggles for expanding in new categories (offense).

The classic approach to brand positioning has been the USP school of thought (unique selling proposition) pioneered by Rosser Reeves (1961). According to USP, brand managers should position their brands on one or a few unique benefits that enable the brand to stand out from competitors' brands (Frazer *et al.*, 2002; Niu and Wang, 2016), and address the most valuable consumers according to how these benefits match their needs (Haley, 1968). The goal is to establish a few favorable brand associations in consumers' memory (Roedder John *et al.*, 2006), and work to increase the strength of those associations. Instead of broadening the set of favorable benefits, brand managers focus on repeating a limited set of benefits in their positioning efforts. These few benefits must be relevant for consumers and preferably not shared by other brands (Keller *et al.*, 2002). The communication of a clear USP is considered critical in advertising to differentiate a brand in the marketplace (Dens and De Pelsmacker, 2010). Or as Haley (1968, p. 34) puts it: "New and old products alike should be designed to fit exactly the need of some segment of the market [...] Yet, many products attempt to aim at two or more segments simultaneously. As a result, they are not able to

maximize their appeal to any segment of the market, and they run the risk of ending up with a dangerously fuzzy brand image.”

However, previous literature has also shown that broad brand positioning, simultaneously conveying several benefits, makes brands salient in consumers’ memories across consumption situations, and therefore has a positive relationship with brand choice. For example, Alba and Marmorstein (1987) found that in low-involvement situations, consumers prefer a fictitious car brand with nine features to a car brand with three features. More recently, research has found that the more benefits a brand is associated with, the greater the likelihood that consumers would consider a brand for purchase, that having more benefits associated with a brand influences brand loyalty, and that consumers more likely buy brand extensions from brands with many benefits (Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995; Romaniuk, 2003; Romaniuk and Sharp, 2003; Romaniuk and Nenycz-Thiel, 2013). Heckler *et al.* (2014, p. 176) argue in the same direction: “Proper product positioning often requires communicating multiple brand benefits.” And last, Parker *et al.* (2018) argue that there is a major trend in branding of having fewer brands that through a series of category extensions have broadened their benefit propositions across disparate product categories.

Apparently then, brand managers can choose between two distinct brand positioning strategies, each with its own support in the academic marketing field, either a narrow brand positioning, using the classic USP approach, or a broad brand positioning, using multiple benefits, as advocated by more recent research. This choice of strategies creates a dilemma for brand managers. The narrow/USP strategy represents the established practice for many brand managers and advertising agencies (Frazer *et al.*, 2002). However, the benefits of this strategy have never been explained theoretically. Broad brand positioning, on the other hand, has been shown to provide many benefits (e.g., Romaniuk, 2003; Romaniuk and Sharp, 2003) in more static market conditions, in which the target brands did not face any specific

competitive challenges. However, this strategy contradicts common marketing and advertising practice and has yet to be tested in more dynamic market conditions.

The purpose of the current article is to test which of these brand positioning strategies, broad vs. narrow brand positioning, performs better under dynamic market conditions, in which new brands often are introduced into the market, thereby making the market supply fluctuate. Our purpose is not to discuss consumer brand choice in a static market with a stable set of brands. We aim to investigate how brand positioning strategies affect competitive brand performance when established brands are being attacked by a new brand in their current category (defensive brand performance), or when they are the attacker and extend the brand into a new category (offensive brand performance). This is a subtle, but important strategic difference. The current literature and theories in brand management do not offer any guidance for when and why to choose between narrow or broad brand positioning in these scenarios (e.g., Keller, 2012).

In this article we make the following contributions. First, we show that a narrow brand strategy is a better strategic alternative for both defensive and offensive brand performance. We show that a narrowly positioned brand outperforms a broad positioned brand both in defending itself against a new entrant, and in extending to a new product category in which its core association is relevant. Our second contribution is to show that these findings indicate the associative strength (French and Smith, 2013) advantage of a narrow strategy, making a target benefit more accessible in long term memory and thus influencing attitudes in both defensive and offensive strategic scenarios. This contrasts with previous findings, obtained under static market conditions, where brands with multiple benefits are preferred (Alba and Marmorstein, 1987; Romaniuk 2003).

We organize the remainder of this article as follows. First, we ground our proposition in associative memory theory, and show how competitive brand strategy, both defensive and

offensive, benefits from the accessibility of brand associations. Next, we explain why narrow and broad strategies differ in the resulting accessibility of brand associations. This is the basis for our proposition that a narrow brand strategy results in more accessible brand associations (H1) and allows the brand to perform better when it is being attacked (H2) or when it is trying to expand (H3). Then, we report the results of three studies. Study 1 shows how brand strategy (broad vs. narrow) affects both brand associate accessibility and defensive brand performance. Study 2 shows how broad vs. narrow brands perform differently in a brand extension scenario (offensive brand performance). Study 3 is a test in a real-world setting, using real brands and situation-based attributes as stimuli in a defensive scenario. We discuss limitations and future research in the final section of the article.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### *2.1. Associative networks and the fan effect*

The brand management literature frequently utilizes the associative network model of human memory as a conceptual foundation (see Keller, 2012; Roedder John *et al.*, 2006). The model postulates that consumers use brand names as retrieval cues about product attributes and benefits stored in memory, and they use attributes and benefits as cues to retrieve brands (Van Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001). Information about the brand is stored in semantic memory as a network of concept nodes (Roedder John *et al.*, 2006) connected by associative links varying in accessibility – or the ease and speed with which an association comes to mind while processing an input (Bohner and Wänke, 2002, Higgins, 1996).

A consumer may have a lot of information about the brand stored in the associative network, but it is not necessarily always accessible. Furthermore, consumers access some associations from memory faster than others (Fazio *et al.*, 1982). The more a consumer thinks about an association in relation to a brand, the more accessible the association will be when

one encounters the brand (Smith and Queller, 2001). Association accessibility is an important determinant of evaluative responses. If the most accessible brand association seems relevant for the judgment, the consumer may stop further memory processing (Lynch *et al.*, 1988), and base their evaluation on the accessed information. Consequently, accessible associations disproportionately influence consumer judgments and subsequently brand performance (Keller 2012).

Furthermore, we suggest that size of the associative network around a brand is an important determinant of the accessibility of any of its associations, and hence of brand performance. Sohn, Anderson *et al.* (2004) named the negative relationship between number of associations and their accessibility *the fan effect*. The term *fan* refers to the number of facts, or linked nodes, that “fan out” of a specific memory node. Research on the fan effect has shown that as the number of linked nodes increases, the time to activate a particular memory node also increases (see Sohn *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, we expect that broader brands have more fans (more associations) than do narrow brands. Thus, when the brand pursues a broad brand strategy it requires more time to activate any association of a brand than when it pursues a narrow brand strategy. Consequently, we predict that brands with narrow and broad associative structures will have marked differences in brand association strength, and that this difference in strength influences competitive brand performance.

Theoretically, associative strength refers to how closely brand associations are related to the brand name in consumers’ memories. Empirically, strength is observed as accessibility – the speed at which an association becomes activated from memory (Higgins, 1996; Zdravkovic and Till, 2012). For example, Pullig *et al.* (2006) use the term “aspect accessibility” to describe the likelihood that a given brand association comes to mind when the brand name is activated. By increasing this likelihood, the speed at which people access and recognize brand associations, relevant associations are strengthened. We formalize our



first hypothesis as:

H1: Brand associations formed as part of a narrow positioning strategy will be more accessible from memory than brand associations formed as part of a broad strategy, as evidenced by shorter reaction times to verify the truth of brand-benefit claims.

In the next section we outline how the differential effect of broad and narrow positioning strategies on the brand associative network drives defensive and offensive brand performance.

## *2.2. Competitive brand performance relies on brand association strength*

In dynamic strategic scenarios, brand managers are generally concerned with either defensive performance, which is the brand's ability to protect profit margins, market shares, and existing customer bases against competitive entry, or offensive performance, which is the brand's ability to grow the firm's business by entering markets – e.g., brand extensions (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003). We argue that because of the resulting greater accessibility of a target association, the narrow positioning strategy will outperform a broad strategy on both defensive and offensive performance.

### *2.2.1. Narrow positioning facilitates defensive brand performance*

Defensive performance is associated with reducing customer exit and brand switching (Keller, 2012). An important requirement for defensive performance is that consumers can access relevant brand associations from memory (Lynch, 2006; Lynch *et al.*, 1988). In other words, defensive performance is the brand's ability to defend its brand positioning in consumers' memories. When presented with a new competitor, brand B, consumers will compare the new information with the established brand A's corresponding brand

associations. If relevant associations are accessible, the memory search for more brand associations is terminated and consumers will most likely evaluate brand A more favorably than brand B.

Broad brand positioning focuses on increasing the size of consumers' associative networks by adding favorable and relevant brand benefits (Heckler *et al.*, 2014). One example is the clothing-retail brand H&M, which has positioned itself on multiple benefits: fashion, reasonable price, modern/trends, models, etc. (Böger *et al.*, 2017). Narrow brand positioning focuses on brand concept consistency (Park *et al.*, 1986). Brand managers work to increase the strength of a few especially relevant brand associations, and instead of adding new favorable benefits focus on repeating a limited set of benefits in their positioning efforts. A typical example could be Volvo, which for many consumers is strongly associated with "safety." When a new brand with a strong safety message enters the market, the corresponding association of Volvo is easily activated by members of the target group (e.g., families with babies/toddlers), helping the Volvo brand to fight off the attack. If Volvo would be broadly positioned on multiple benefits (e.g. safety, comfort, and sleek design), the safety association would be less easily activated, leaving the incumbent brand more vulnerable to targeted attack.

The relationship between strong and accessible brand associations and defensive performance has been shown in previous research. For example, brands with stronger associations have been shown to better withstand competitive advertising (Kent and Allen, 1994), and consumers with stronger brand connections are more likely to reject negative information about the brand (Lei *et al.*, 2008). We predict that the narrow strategy, because it results in a tighter and more easily activated brand-association link, will also activate the relevant associations of the incumbent brand quickly when it is challenged by a new entrant.

We formalize our second hypothesis as:

H2: A narrow positioning strategy will lead to a higher ability to withstand a targeted attack using the same benefit by a new entrant in the category than a broad strategy which incorporates the benefit.

### *2.2.2. Narrow brand positioning facilitates offensive brand performance*

Brands are generally viewed as vehicles of growth (Dimitriu *et al.*, 2017; Roberts, 2005; Samuelsen and Olsen, 2012). Growth includes acquiring new customers or increasing the revenues obtained from established customers. In general, offensive performance is the brand's ability to increase firms' revenues. One much researched offensive capability of brands is brand extension into new product categories (Parker *et al.*, 2018; Palmeira *et al.*, 2019). Research on brand extensions has shown that associative fit between the brand and the new product category is an important determinant for offensive performance (i.e., acceptance of brand extensions; Aaker and Keller, 1990; Michel and Donthu, 2014; Hem *et al.*, 2014; Völckner and Sattler, 2006). Hence, when consumers are exposed to a brand extension, an important requirement for evaluating fit between the extension and the brand is access to relevant brand associations in memory (Miniard *et al.*, 2020). More accessible fit associations will increase consumers' attention levels on the information contained in the brand associations and will benefit the extensions evaluations when compared to an incumbent brand in the new category. Consequently, consumers who can more quickly activate a fit association will tend to evaluate the brand extension more favorably, and the brand will thus achieve higher levels of offensive performance. We formalize our third hypothesis as:

H3: A narrow positioning strategy will lead to a higher ability to extend the brand into a

different category where the same benefit is relevant than a broad strategy incorporating this benefit.

Figure 1 shows our research model.

- Figure 1 about here

### **3. Empirical studies**

We test our hypotheses in three studies. We test H1 in all three studies. H2, stating that a narrow brand should perform better than a broad brand in the face of attack from a new entrant (defensive performance), is tested in Study 1 and Study 3. Study 2 tests H3 that a narrow brand would perform better than a broad brand does in an extension context (offensive performance). To maximize internal validity, Study 1 and 2 are conducted with fictitious brands, and carefully pretested brand associations. Study 3 extends the ecological validity of our findings by using real brands and their situation-based associations (Romaniuk 2003), in a different product category.

#### *3.1. Study 1*

If our assumptions hold, we expect that narrow brand positioning will be associated with stronger and more accessible brand associations, and consequently, higher levels of defensive performance than broad brand positioning is. Specifically, Study 1 tests the defensive performance of a brand that is pursuing either a narrow or a broad brand positioning strategy when under attack from a new entrant.

##### *3.1.1. Pretest*

We chose to use the shampoo category in studies 1 and 2. The shampoo market is a dynamic market characterized by many products and brands coming and going each year. In addition, we chose the sun lotion category as the extension category in study 2.

In a pretest we tested the relevance of benefit association to use in the manipulations. We recruited 32 undergraduate business students (65.6% females; median age 21) from the same population that we would use in study 1. They rated a range of benefits used in the shampoo category (presented as statements) one by one on a 7-point semantic differential scale with scale anchors “unimportant” (1) and “very important” (7). We selected the three middle benefits (the rated mean benefit, plus one above and one below the mean:  $M = 3.94$ ,  $Std. Dev. = 1.69$ ) as stimuli. These benefits<sup>1</sup> were: *Has good PH values* ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $Std. Dev. = 1.93$ ), *More washes with less shampoo* ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $Std. Dev. = 1.69$ ), and *Protects against dangerous UV rays* ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $Std. Dev. = 1.66$ ).

### 3.1.2. Participants, procedures, and measurements

In study 1, sixty-three undergraduate business students served as participants (55.6% males; median age 23). We recruited them in the school library, and they participated in groups of up to ten persons in a computer lab. The students participated voluntarily and received a gift certificate upon completion of the test session. First, after they read a short introductory text, we exposed participants to the manipulation: an informative text about the new shampoo brand ZELL in one of two versions. In the narrow condition, we listed only one benefit: *Has good PH values*. In the broad condition, we listed three benefits: 1. *Has good PH values*; 2. *Protects against dangerous UV rays*; and 3. *More washes with less shampoo*.

We instructed participants to read the information carefully, to make them cognitively process and learn the information provided about ZELL. Second, we told participants that a series of statements would appear, one by one, on the screen (e.g., *Copenhagen is the capital of Denmark*), and that they should press one of two keys to indicate whether the statement was true or false. This filler task had two purposes. First, a

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<sup>1</sup> These benefits have been translated into English from the native language used in the original data collection.

temporary delay to clear out working memory was important to reduce hypothesis guessing and to control for differences in mere retrieval of ZELL's benefits (see Nayakankuppam and Mishra, 2005). Second, the response times measured in this filler task served to measure the individual participant's natural latencies. We followed general principles for collection latency data (see Fazio, 1990), and instructed participants to work as quickly as possible without sacrificing accuracy.

In total, eighteen statements appeared on the screen (nine true and nine false statements) in randomized order. We repeated this block once, so that each participant provided answers on thirty-six true-false statements. Third, we informed participants that a series of statements regarding ZELL would appear on the screen, and that they should indicate as quickly and accurately as possible, by pressing an assigned key, whether the statement was true or false (Jewell and Unnava, 2003). In essence, this procedure was similar to the filler task procedure. In total, eighteen statements appeared in randomized order, and we repeated this procedure once, so that each participant provided answers on thirty-six statements. Fourth, participants evaluated the target brand ZELL. Fifth, participants evaluated another brand entering the shampoo market – SHIKA – “*well known for its good PH values*”. Finally, participants stated their age and gender and were thanked, debriefed, paid, and dismissed.

We predicted that responses to benefits that are more accessible in memory (stronger) will be faster than responses to benefits that are less accessible (weaker) in memory (Zdravkovic and Till, 2012). Thus, we measured accessibility using response-time latencies. To deal with the shortcomings of response-time data, we conducted a three-step procedure, recommended by Fazio (1990). First, we recoded all responses shorter than 300 milliseconds and longer than 3000 milliseconds into 300 milliseconds and 3000 milliseconds, respectively. Second, we averaged and subjected the response-time latencies (RTs) to a logarithmic

transformation to meet the normality assumption for each benefit. Third, in a procedure advocated by Priester *et al.* (2004), we calculated the logarithm of the average RTs for all the statements in the filler task for each individual participant – called the *baseline response-time latency* (see also Jewell and Unnava, 2003). This measurement serves as the individual participant’s chronic and natural RT. Then, we subtracted the baseline log-RT from the logarithm of the average of each brand association to construct an *adjusted response-time latency index* for each association. Consequently, this procedure yields an index of the average RT for each benefit on a participant-by-participant basis.

We assessed the defensive performance of the incumbent brand ZELL by measuring the acceptance of the attacker, using an established brand equity measure. We used the four item Overall Brand Equity (OBE) scale developed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) to measure the evaluation of the new entrant SHIKA. The OBE score for SHIKA was measured for each participant by averaging the agreement-disagreement responses on the four 7-point OBE items: “It makes sense to buy SHIKA instead of any other brand, even if they are the same”, “Even if another brand has the same features as SHIKA, I would prefer to buy SHIKA”, “If there is another brand as good as SHIKA, I prefer to buy SHIKA”, and “If another brand is not different from SHIKA in any way, it seems smarter to purchase SHIKA”

Study 1’s design utilized two fictitious brands – ZELL and SHIKA. Therefore, it is not likely that any of the participants have attitudes towards the fictitious brands, prior to exposure, that could influence the results. Essentially, the brands appear to be almost similar – both focusing on PH values. However, ZELL in the broad condition has three associations whereas SHIKA has only one association. This difference in the amount of information could potentially influence the participants’ attitudes towards both ZELL and SHIKA. For example, in the ELM literature (Elaboration Likelihood Model) it has been shown that the number of arguments could influence attitudes in low-effort processing contexts (i.e., peripheral route to

persuasion – see Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). A second potential problem is what Pandelaere *et al.* (2009) called the “first exposure effect”. Although, ZELL and SHIKA are both fictitious brands, the order of presentation could influence attitudes. More specifically, Pandelaere *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that first encountered stimuli may be more liked than later encountered stimuli. In other words, “the first exposure effect” could favorably benefit ZELL. These findings build on works concerning the pioneering advantage of brands that enter markets first (Carpenter and Nakamoto, 1989).

Therefore, we used pre-attitudes toward ZELL (i.e., attitudes measured before presenting the new competitor SHIKA) as covariates in the analysis. We measured brand attitudes using three 7-point scales with instructions and scale anchors: “To what extent did you find the brand... *bad – good, negative – positive, unfavorable – favorable*” (see Haugtvedt *et al.*, 1992). Pre-attitudes towards ZELL showed no significant differences between conditions ( $F(1, 61) = 3.38, p = .07, \eta^2 = .054$ ).

### 3.1.3. Results

A one-way MANOVA showed that the target benefit – *Has good PH values* – was significantly more accessible by participants exposed to the narrow condition than by those exposed to the broad condition ( $M_N = 1479$  ms vs.  $M_B = 1741$  ms,  $F(1, 61) = 7.30, p < .05$ ) (see Table I). Furthermore, as expected, the two benefits provided only in the broad condition were significantly more accessible by participants exposed to the broad condition than by participants exposed to the narrow condition – *Protects against dangerous UV rays* ( $M_N = 1786$  ms vs.  $M_B = 1461$  ms,  $F(1, 61) = 5.60, p < .05$ ) and *More washes with less shampoo* ( $M_N = 1747$  ms vs.  $M_B = 1328$  ms,  $F(1, 61) = 9.50, p < .05$ ).

Recall that we hypothesized that an attacker brand would receive more favorable evaluation when attacking a broad brand than when attacking a narrow brand. ZELL’s brand attitude index was constructed as the average scale of three highly interrelated attitude items



(Cronbach's alpha = .964). The OBE scale was constructed by forming an averaged index from the four highly interrelated scale items (Cronbach's alpha = .946). The OBE index served as the dependent variable in a between-subjects ANCOVA. Details of the ANCOVA analysis are presented in Table I.

The analysis showed that the new entrant SHIKA received a lower OBE score in the narrow condition than in the broad condition ( $M_N = 2.51$  vs.  $M_B = 3.16$ ,  $F(1, 60) = 4.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .056$ ,) (see Table I). In other words, ZELL's single benefit in the narrow condition was more accessible in memory when we presented participants with SHIKA. Hence, ZELL resisted attack from SHIKA better in the narrow condition than in the broad condition with less accessible benefits.

- Table I about here

#### *3.1.4. Discussion*

The purpose of study 1 was to test whether a narrow brand positioning strategy improves defensive brand performance. The results support this prediction. First, we found that having fewer benefits increases the accessibility of a strategic target benefit. Participants in the narrow strategy condition had significantly shorter RTs than did those in the broad strategy condition. Furthermore, we found evidence a narrow positioning of the incumbent brand also reduced the success of the attacker, hence showing a more effective defensive performance. However, defensive brand performance is only one dimension of competitive brand performance. Study 2 therefore focused on the second of these performance dimensions – offensive performance.

### 3.2. Study 2

Brands can pursue growth in many ways. Among several alternatives, one important growth strategy for brands is to extend the brand into new product categories and attack established brands in these categories (Hem *et al.*, 2014; Parker *et al.*, 2018). Meyvis and Janiszewski (2004) argue that the more accessible a relevant brand association  $x$  is, the more likely it is that consumers evaluate the extension favorably. The association  $x$  might be present in both the narrow and broad brand's associative network, but due to the fan effect association  $x$  is likely to be more accessible for the narrow than for the broad brand. Therefore, we hypothesize that if a brand association is more accessible in consumers' memories, it is more likely that an extension having this specific association will be favorably evaluated, and thus, that a brand pursuing a narrow brand positioning strategy will show better offensive performance than does a broad brand.

If our assumptions hold, we expect that a narrow brand positioning strategy will be associated with higher levels of offensive performance than a broad brand positioning is. Specifically, study 2 tests the offensive performance of brand A, pursuing either a narrow or a broad brand positioning strategy, when extending the brand into a new product category.

#### 3.2.1. Methodology

We recruited sixty-nine undergraduate business students (49.3% males; median age 22) from the same population as we used for the pretest and study 1. The first part of the experiment was similar in all respects to the first part of the experiment in study 1. Then, however, we told participants that ZELL had plans to extend the brand into a new product category. Specifically, we exposed participants to information about the new ZELL sun lotion – having optimal PH values. Hence, ZELL sun lotion based its fit with the original category, shampoo, on the same benefit (i.e., PH values) in both conditions (see Aaker and Keller,

1990). Immediately after exposure, participants filled out the OBE scale for the extension, stated their age and gender, and were thanked, debriefed, paid, and dismissed.

### 3.2.2. Results

We constructed RT indices following the same procedure as in study 1. A one-way MANOVA on the adjusted RT index showed that the target association – *Has good PH values* – was significantly more accessible by participants exposed to the narrow condition than by those exposed to the broad condition ( $M_N = 1526$  ms vs.  $M_B = 1716$  ms,  $F(1, 67) = 5.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see Table II). These results replicated the results in study 1.

ZELL's brand attitude index was constructed as the average scale of three highly interrelated attitude items (Cronbach's alpha = .897) and was used as a covariate in the analysis. The dependent variable, OBE scale, was constructed by forming an averaged index from the four highly interrelated scale items (Cronbach's alpha = .871). This index served as the dependent variable in a between-subjects ANCOVA.

The analysis showed that the brand extension (ZELL sun lotion) received a higher OBE score in the narrow condition than in the broad condition ( $M_N = 3.97$  vs.  $M_B = 3.22$ ,  $F(1, 66) = 6.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .070$ ; see Table II). In other words, participants in the narrow condition were more positive to the extension than were participants in the broad condition.

-Table II about here-

### 3.2.3. Discussion

The underlying rationale behind Study 2's prediction was that stronger associations are more accessible in memory. The analysis showed that in the narrow strategy condition, the target benefit was more accessible than in the broad strategy condition. Furthermore, in the narrow condition, the brand extension from shampoo to sun lotion, using the same target

association, received a higher brand equity score. These findings supported the prediction that brands pursuing narrow brand positioning strategies enjoy higher levels of offensive performance than do brands pursuing broad brand positioning strategies. Consequently, brand extensions from narrow brands are more easily accepted.

### 3.3. Study 3

Romaniuk (2003) builds on Holden (1993) and identifies three specific benefit categories: (1) product category benefits, (2) benefit attributes, and (3) situation-based attributes. We obtained the results in both study 1 and study 2 in an experimental lab, using fictitious brands and benefit attributes as types of associations. In the current research, we do not differentiate between different categories of benefits. Instead we argue that the goal of brand positioning is to influence consumers' associative memories (Keller, 1993; Roedder John *et al.*, 2006), in which the speed of associative recall processes is influenced by brand managers' positioning strategies (Koll and von Wallpach, 2014). A logical extension of studies 1 and 2 is therefore to test their predictions on real brands, and in addition use another type of benefit – situation-based attributes – to further generalize the contribution of this article. This is the purpose of study 3.

An important question is: Does a strong context match influence competitive brand performance? Specifically, if an established brand has pursued a narrow brand positioning strategy with a specific consumption situation strongly linked in its associative network, how will consumers respond to a new entrant targeting the same consumption situation? A new entrant would not have the same level of associative accessibility in the consumption situation as the narrow brand would. Consequently, *situational* associative accessibility may differ across brands in the same category, influencing defensive performance differently and the likelihood of success for the new entrant.

### *3.3.1. Methodology*

We conducted study 3 in two parts. First, we identified relevant brands, and found two suitable brands in the Norwegian chocolate market. The first brand, Kvikk Lunsj, was launched in 1938 and has for 80 years consistently been positioned as the best chocolate brand to consume during recreational skiing and hiking activities. Kvikk Lunsj is part of Norwegian heritage, and especially consumed during the Easter holiday. The second brand, M, a chocolate-covered peanut candy, has been positioned in Norway as the “film chocolate” since the 1980s. Many Norwegians associate M with film viewing, but most Norwegians still consume a variety of other chocolates, popcorn, and candies in this situation. In addition, activities like mountain hiking and skiing are much more specific and concrete consumption contexts than is the film context. Consumers can enjoy films in the cinema, in the living room, in airplanes, on electronic devices, etc., and therefore the film context is a much more heterogeneous consumption context than is the hiking context. Consequently, Kvikk Lunsj should have very accessible and strong associations connected to hiking. M, on the other hand, should certainly be associated with film viewing, but most likely be weaker linked to the film context than Kvikk Lunsj is to hiking. Hence, the first part of study 3 aimed to test the accessibility of these context associations.

Second, in part two of study 3, we tested the brands’ defensive brand performance. We introduced an attacker brand, a new fictitious chocolate brand, Bensdorp, in one of two versions. Half the participants were told about ‘the new film chocolate BENS DORP’ and half were told about ‘the new hiking chocolate Bensdorp. Then participants provided responses concerning their attitudes toward Bensdorp.

### 3.3.2. *Participants, procedures, and measurements*

Sixty-two undergraduate business students served as participants (46.8% males; median age 22). They were recruited through advertising (i.e., posters) in the business school; all participated voluntarily and received a gift certificate upon completing the test session. Upon their arrival, we told participants that the purpose of the experiment was to conduct a market survey on chocolate brands, hence disguising the experiment's true purpose.

First, after participants read a short introduction text, we exposed participants to the same true/false statements filler task used in studies 1 and 2 (Jewell and Unnava, 2003). Second, we told participants that a series of statements regarding chocolate brands would appear, one by one, on the screen, and that their task was to press one of two keys (true or false) to indicate whether they agreed with the statements. In total, we randomly presented them with fourteen statements. Four target statements (*Kvikk Lunsj (M) is great when hiking*; *M (Kvikk Lunsj) is great when viewing films*) were presented among the statements appearing on the screen. Specifically, these four statements tested the accessibility of M's and Kvikk Lunsj's associations with the two consumption situations. As in the previous studies, we used Fazio's (1990) three-step methodology to adjust each statement's RT to each individual's natural RT. Third, participants rated their attitudes toward a range of chocolate brands, including Kvikk Lunsj and M, on three 7-point semantic differential scales similarly as done in study 1 (Haugtvedt *et al.*, 1992). Fourth, we exposed participants to a new chocolate brand Bendsdorp in one of two versions, 1. *the new film chocolate* or 2. *the new hiking chocolate* and told them that this brand was about to enter the Norwegian chocolate market. We measured attitudes toward the new entrant using the same attitude scales used for the other chocolate brands. Finally, participants stated their age and gender, were thanked, debriefed, paid, and dismissed.

### 3.3.3. Results

Table III shows the results of the paired samples tests. Kvikklunsj had significantly shorter RTs in the hiking situation ( $M_{\text{Kvikklunsj\_hiking}} = 1591$  ms, Std. Dev. = 605 ms) than in the film situation ( $M_{\text{Kvikklunsj\_film}} = 1956$  ms, Std. Dev. = 703 m),  $t(61) = 5.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .31$ ). Furthermore, Kvikklunsj also had significantly shorter RTs in the hiking situation than M had in that situation ( $M_{\text{Kvikklunsj\_hiking}} = 1591$  ms, Std. Dev. = 605 ms vs.  $M_{\text{M\_hiking}} = 1785$  ms, Std. Dev. = 693 ms,  $t(61) = -2.645$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ ). These results support the prediction that Kvikklunsj is strongly associated with the hiking consumption situation.

M, on the other hand, did not appear to belong more strongly to the film than to the hiking situation ( $M_{\text{M\_hiking}} = 1785$  ms, Std. Dev. = 693 ms vs.  $M_{\text{M\_film}} = 1822$  ms, Std. Dev. = 595 ms,  $t(61) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .129$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). Furthermore, there was no significant difference in RTs between Kvikklunsj and M in the film situation ( $M_{\text{M\_film}} = 1822$  ms, Std. Dev. = 693 ms vs.  $M_{\text{Kvikklunsj\_film}} = 1956$  ms, Std. Dev. = 703 ms,  $t(61) = .24$ ,  $p = .814$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ ).

- Table III about here

The three brand attitude items (i.e., attitudes toward BENDSDORP) were all highly interrelated (Cronbach's alpha = .977) and collapsed into an average index serving as a dependent variable in a between-subjects ANOVA. The ANOVA produced the following results: BENDSDORP positioned as a film chocolate was significantly more favorably evaluated than was Bendsdorp positioned as a hiking chocolate ( $M_{\text{Bendsdorp\_film}} = 3.72$  vs.  $M_{\text{Bendsdorp\_hiking}} = 2.46$ ,  $F(1, 60) = 8.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ). Hence, Kvikklunsj was more able to protect itself from competition and performed better than M, and these results supported our predictions.

Differences in pre-attitudes toward Kvikk Lunsj and M are a potential alternative explanation for the evaluation of the new competitor. To test this possibility, we included attitudes toward Kvikk Lunsj and M as covariates in an ANCOVA ( $M_M = 4.33$ , Std. Dev. = 1.90;  $M_{KvikkL} = 5.31$ , Std. Dev. = 1.66). Two indexes were constructed as the average indexes of the three highly interrelated attitude items of, respectively, Kvikk Lunsj and M (Cronbach's alpha (Kvikk Lunsj) = .977; Cronbach's alpha (M) = .986). None of the covariates had significant effects on the dependent variable (Brand Attitude Index (Kvikk Lunsj),  $F(1, 58) = 1.30$ ,  $p = .258$ ; Brand Attitude Index (M),  $F(1, 58) = 1.01$ ,  $p = .32$ ), hereby strengthening our conclusion that the better defensive performance of Kvikk Lunch as compared to M, vis-à-vis the new entrant Bensdorp, is due to its narrow situational positioning.

#### *3.3.4. Discussion*

Study 3 conceptually replicates study 1 in a real-world context and generalizes the pattern of results shown in studies 1 and 2 with other types of benefits (i.e., situation-based attributes). However, the difference of associative accessibility between conditions in study 3 is not because of differences in manipulations of a newly formed associative network for a fictional brand, but rather because of actual differences in contextual associative strength between the real-life brands Kvikk Lunsj and M. A priori attitude differences between the two brands also do not explain the results.

## **4. General discussion**

We introduced this paper with a typical brand manager's dilemma. Should brand managers go for a broad or a narrow positioning of their brands and what is the role of market dynamics? Across three studies, we have investigated how different brand positioning strategies influence competitive brand performance. We have shown how brands pursuing a



narrow brand positioning strategy outperform broad brands in two important dynamic market situations: narrow brands are better protected against a new entrant (study 1 and study 3), and enjoy a higher likelihood of success with a brand extension (study 2). Furthermore, we suggested that these results can be explained by accessibility of relevant brand associations, and we indeed found that consumers access associations faster for narrow brands than for broad brands.

#### *4.1. Theoretical implications*

The branding literature (e.g., Böger *et al.*, 2017; French and Smith, 2013; Keller, 2012) has highlighted that the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of associations are important characteristics of a brand's associative network. Yet, few efforts have been made to test how increasing associative strength influences competitive brand performance. The first theoretical contribution of the present research is therefore to show the importance of association accessibility in more dynamic market conditions, where new brands are launched and attack the incumbent brands in the market. In these situations, consumers evaluate the favorability of the new entrant directly compared to an incumbent brand. Since narrow brand positioning strategies make specific strategic benefits more accessible, the competitive brand performance of such brands appears superior in these strategic scenarios.

The current results can be contrasted with previous research showing how having many benefits (broad brand positioning) makes a brand more salient for consumers in usage situations, and thus why such brands are more favorably evaluated or chosen (Alba and Marmorstein, 1987; Romaniuk, 2003; Romaniuk and Sharp, 2003). However, these results are obtained in static market conditions, that is, in conditions where the supply of brands is stable, and researchers measure consumer choices among existing alternatives in the market. The second major theoretical contribution is that we show how brand positioning strategies influence competitive brand performance when the market changes, when new brands attack

the current market alternatives, and when a brand extends to another product category. Acknowledging the difference in market conditions is essential to understanding why the results of the current research diverge from earlier findings. We argue that association accessibility is important in both static and dynamic market conditions, but that there are important differences in the characteristics of this general accessibility. In static markets it is important to have accessible brand associations jointly covering broad parts of the market, usage situations, and consumer needs. The brand must be broadly relevant (e.g., Romaniuk, 2003; Romaniuk and Sharp, 2003). In dynamic market conditions, however, a general level of high association accessibility is less important. Instead, high levels of accessibility of specific associations, that might be attacked by a new entrant or can be used as a basis of fit to extend the brand into new product categories, are important. As we have shown in the current research, narrow brand positioning is a better strategy to achieve this goal.

#### *4.2. Managerial implications*

Brand managers are concerned with brand positioning. Two alternative strategies are broad or narrow brand positioning strategies – focusing on few vs. many benefits – and thus correspondingly, brand associations in consumers’ memories. Across three studies, we have shown that managers concerned with protecting their brands against new competitors or focusing on competing with their brands in new categories would benefit from a narrow brand positioning strategy. In dynamic strategic scenarios, brands with few, but strong and accessible associations would display better competitive brand performance. Hence, an important contribution of the current article is that it provides evidence that associative accessibility influences competitive brand performance and evidence that, contrary to many well-founded assumptions and tendencies in business practice, it is better to focus on a narrow brand strategy and a few strong associations than on a broad brand strategy and a rich

associative network. In essence, the current article provides empirical evidence favoring the USP school of thought used by many marketing practitioners.

Another aspect of the current research that has managerial implications is that it demonstrates the use of response-time latency (RT) in brand management. The branding literature traditionally determines strength of brand associations by asking consumers to indicate the associations' subjective strength (see Roedder John *et al.*, 2006), by the order of mentioning (top-of-mind), or by the frequency of mentioning the associations (Böger *et al.*, 2017; Keller, 2012; Teichert and Schöntag, 2010). The RT measure, on the other hand, offers an alternative methodology, in which participants are unaware that associative strength is measured, and offers a procedure more consistent with the associative network model of human memory. Specifically, the measurement technique taps directly into the actual time it takes a consumer to connect the brand with a specific association in memory. As such, the RT measurement should be both a superior and a more practical measurement of associative accessibility. It can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of communication designed to establish or strengthen such connections.

#### *4.3 Future research*

The current research offers several possibilities for future research. First, we conducted the three studies in a controlled lab environment to maximize internal validity. In the real world, a whole range of variables might moderate the results and can be included in future research. One example of such a moderator is the diagnosticity or decision relevance of an association, or the extent to which the association allows to differentiate between choice options (Lynch *et al.*, 1988). In the current research, we showed the effects by increasing the accessibility of moderately diagnostic benefits, established by a pretest. We deliberately opted for a moderately diagnostic benefit to avoid ceiling or floor effects, but the implication is that we kept diagnosticity constant to focus on accessibility. To draw a more general

conclusion about the relative strengths of narrow positioning strategies future research should examine whether increasing or reducing the decision relevance of chosen benefits (Miniard *et al.*, 2020) would have moderated these findings. We would speculate that the advantage of the narrow positioning strategy increases monotonically with the diagnosticity of the attributes on which the target brand and its competitor are evaluated. On the other hand, one should also consider that in many situations the relevance and accessibility of a brand association will covary. Relevant associations are more often used and will therefore also tend to be more accessible. The current research does not address this issue.

Second, the current research conceptualizes two types of competitive brand performance in terms of protection from new competitors and in terms of the ability to use the brand in growth strategies (e.g., brand extensions). Previous research outlines many other indicators of defensive and offensive performance (e.g., lower price elasticity, increased customer loyalty, higher market shares, effectiveness in marketing communication, etc. – see Keller (2012) for a list of potential indicators). Future research should investigate the effect of narrow and broad brand positioning on other forms of competitive brand performance.

Third, our studies only considered a few product categories, all in the FMCG domain. Further research should examine whether our conclusions are bounded by the properties of these specific categories and could look at products versus services and at nondurables versus durables. We did use a category that is relative homogeneous (shampoo) and one that is relatively more heterogeneous (candy bars), but future research could systematically look at category heterogeneity as a boundary condition. One speculation could be that in very heterogeneous product categories, the narrow brand positioning might have less of an advantage because the combination of more benefits creates a brand that is more easily differentiated from competitors. In product categories with more homogenous products (e.g., shampoos) a narrow strategy would be better because the stronger and more accessible

associations increase the likelihood that consumers identify the brand. Future research should therefore extend the current research and investigate boundaries on the superiority of narrow brand positioning.

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		<b>Narrow</b> <b>(one benefit)</b>	<b>Broad</b> <b>(three benefits)</b>
<b>OBE Index (SHIKA)</b>	N	32	31
	Mean	2.51 <sup>a</sup>	3.16 <sup>a</sup>
	Std. Error	.225	.228
<b>Response times in milliseconds (mean values)</b>	“Has good PH values”	1479 (M)	1741 (M)
		465.01 (SD)	546.41 (SD)
	“Protects against dangerous UV rays”	1786 (M)	1461 (M)
		566.81 (SD)	570.98 (SD)
	“More washes with less shampoo”	1747 (M)	1328 (M)
		583.64 (SD)	391.44 (SD)

- a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following value:  
Attitude Index (ZELL) = 4.1746.

**Table I**

**Study 1 – ANCOVA and descriptive statistics**

		<b>Narrow</b> <b>(one benefit)</b>	<b>Broad</b> <b>(three benefits)</b>
<b>OBE Index (Zell Extension)</b>	N	36	33
	Mean	3.97 <sup>a</sup>	3.22 <sup>a</sup>
	Std. Error	.204	.214
<b>Response times in milliseconds (mean values)</b>	“Has good PH values”	1526 (M) 526.39 (SD)	1716 525.20 (SD)
	“Protects against dangerous UV rays”	1933 (M) 631.00 (SD)	1578 (M) 433.84 (SD)
	“More washes with less shampoo”	1910 (M) 556.17 (SD)	1625 (M) 499.00 (SD)

- a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following value:  
Attitude Index (ZELL) = 4.2415.

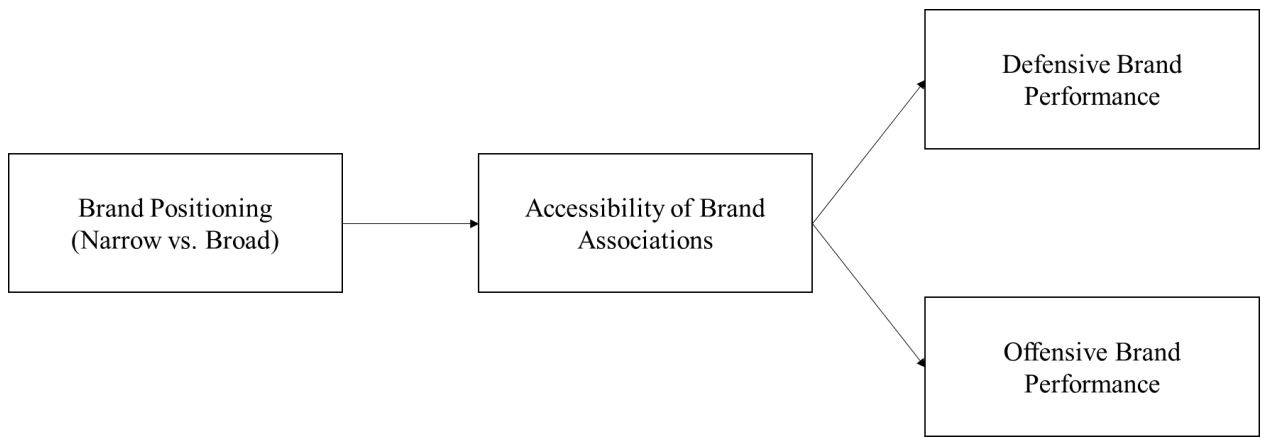
**Table II**

**Study 2 – ANCOVA and descriptive statistics**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Eta squared ( $\eta^2$ )
<b>Pair 1</b>						
Kvikkl_Hiking – M_Film	-.182	.372	-3.855	61	.000	.196
<b>Pair 2</b>						
Kvikkl_Hiking – M_Hiking	-.103	.306	-2.645	61	.010	.103
<b>Pair 3</b>						
Kvikkl_Hiking – Kvikkl_Film	.194	.289	5.282	61	.000	.314
<b>Pair 4</b>						
M_Hiking – Kvikkl_Film	.091	.247	2.909	61	.005	.122
<b>Pair 5</b>						
M_Hiking – M_Film	.080	.408	1.539	61	.129	.037
<b>Pair 6</b>						
M_Film – Kvikkl_Film	.012	.386	.237	61	.814	.001

**Table III**

**Study 3 – Results of the paired samples t-tests**



**Figure 1**  
**The research model**