



Building Brand Equity through Customer Service: A Study on Restaurant Industry in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper was designed to examine the effect of customer service on brand equity of restaurant industry in Malaysian market. Past literature reveals that there are limited researches on this topic, particularly in Asian context. Therefore, the data in this study were collected from a sample of 293 customers of international fast food restaurants in East Coast region of Malaysia using convenience sampling technique. Data collection was done during different times of the day through personal administration of a designed questionnaire to the targeted respondents. The collected data were analysed using structural equation modelling on AMOS 18. The findings indicated that customer service has a significant positive effect on overall brand equity. The findings of this study also revealed that customer service has a significant positive effect on all of the dimensions of brand equity, namely brand loyalty, brand image, brand preference, and brand leadership. These results build upon the importance of customer service in strengthening brand equity of restaurant industry and should enable the management to make better decisions to enhance their competitiveness.

Keywords: Brand Equity; Customer Service; Restaurant Industry.

1. Introduction

Building a successful brand in highly competitive markets is undoubtedly the foremost important goal for any organisation. The benefits of acquiring strong brand equity appear in providing an organization with various competitive advantages such as: the ability to charge premium prices (Firth, 1993), higher market share (Park & Srinivasan, 1994), better response to advertising and marketing promotions (Keller, 1998), facilitated market development (Robertson, 1993) and higher efficiency of product line extensions (Keller & Aaker 1992). Previous literature also indicated that strong brand equity grant the organization with further competitive advantages; for instance: product supreme price, enhancing the effectiveness of marketing strategies, growing profit margin and cash flow, increasing in the demand among customers with higher satisfaction, ease of future brand expansions, low risk-taking as compared to rivals (Amini, Darani, Afshani, & Amini, 2012), high entry-barriers, better customer retention with minimized customers' gaining costs, and greater value for organizational shareholders (Laboy, 2005).

Brand equity is considered as a key valuable intangible asset for several organizations in global marketplace environment. This is because brand equity creates an added value for an organization's products that foster its long term strengths and competencies (Hanaysha & Hilman, 2015). In fact, building a strong brand is regarded as one of the strategic priorities for a number of organizations due to the common beliefs that powerful and well-known brands represent the main platform for sustainable competitive advantage in a particular target markets. As stated by Amini (2012), brand equity provides useful values for both customer and the firm. From the point view of customers, brand equity creates value by increasing the efficiency of information processing, confidence in decision-making, increasing the volume of purchases, and better trust. On the other hand, brand equity creates value to the firm by enhancing customer loyalty to the brand, growing profit margin, gaining influence on retailers, and stronger competitive advantage.

Previous studies reported that brand equity can be reinforced by superior customer service. According to Dagar and Khanna (2011), providing special customer service is vital for developing long-term relationships with customers and obtaining favourable brand image. The authors added that the personnel who deliver customer service are important in strengthening customer relationship, and such relationships will lead to sustainable brand loyalty. However, despite the importance of customer service in influencing consumers' perceptions and overall evaluations toward a brand, there are limited studies that examined its effect on brand equity elements such as brand preference and brand leadership. Therefore, this study is designed to examine the role of customer service in affecting brand equity in international fast food restaurant industry in Malaysia. The next section starts with the literature review on the concepts, then methodology and analysis of results follow. Finally, this paper ends with the conclusion and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Equity

Brand equity is one of the most important concepts in marketing and it has received significant attention in academic research. As stated above, strong brand equity allows an organization to gain competitive market power (Shafi & Madhavaiah, 2013) and various benefits such as: successful product and brand extensions, strong acceptance of promotional programs, and high entry barriers to competitors (Farquhar, 1989). Other advantages of having strong brand equity include higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty. In other words, brand equity is the value added by a brand to its products or services (Hanaysha, Hilman, & Abdul-Ghani, 2014; Leone, Rao, Keller, Luo, McAlister, & Srivastava, 2006). Firms can build strong brand equity for their products or services by making them easy to remember, highly recognized, and superior in terms of quality and reliability. Moreover, brand equity can be reinforced by responding to market needs on a continuous basis and making significant evaluations about the offerings by competitors from time to time to be able to initiate changes when necessary.

Brand equity was conceptualized in the previous literature and it is evident that most of the studies have mainly focused on customer's point of view which posits that brand power resides in their minds (Leone et al., 2006). Brand equity can also be evaluated from the financial perspective according to the monetary or financial value of a brand of an organization (Simon & Sullivan, 1993). The most cited definition of brand equity was proposed by Aaker (1991, p.15) who referred it to "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and to/or to that firm's customers". Moreover, Keller (1993) made a significant contribution to brand equity and described it as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumers' responses to the marketing activities of the brand". By looking at previous literature, it can be observed that most of the definitions of brand equity include the element of added value or benefit in which a brand provides to customers through its products and services.

A number of scholars used different dimensions to measure brand equity. However, it is observed that the majority of past studies focused on the four dimensions which were proposed by Aaker (1991), and this includes brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality. Other scholars used other dimensions to conceptualize and measure brand equity. This study aims to contribute to brand equity theory by incorporating four unique dimensions to measure it in the restaurant industry. The dimensions are brand image, brand loyalty, brand preference, and brand leadership. Brand image refers to customers' overall perceptions toward a brand; whereas brand loyalty reflects the willingness of customers to repurchase the products or services provided by a brand. Further, brand preference refers to the loyalty of a customer towards choosing a particular brand in the presence of its competitors. Finally, brand leadership refers to the capability of a brand to introduce unique products and services that are hard for competitors to copy or imitate, and by which such offerings enable the brand to become very popular and widely accepted by customers in various markets.

2.2 Customer Service

Providing high quality customer service that actually satisfies the needs of customers and results in higher degree of satisfaction is one of the biggest concerns for businesses today. Ako-Nai (2011) defined customer service as "a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction – that is, the feeling that a product or service has met the customer expectation". To deliver good customer service, employee should express their willingness to help customers using their personal and interpersonal skills, such as strong communication skills, listening to customers' queries, language, and the ability to talk on telephone clearly (Ako-Nai, 2011). Canny (2014) reported that employee's professional behavior such as knowledge and skills in showing helpful and friendly attitude while delivering the service are considered very crucial elements of superior customer service. According to Lucas (2005), customer service is reflected through the abilities, knowledge, capabilities, and enthusiastic behaviour of employees in delivering products and services to customers and satisfying their needs. Sokefun (2013) demonstrated that nurturing customer service begins with the commitment to identify customers' needs and wants, and then develop actions and plans to implement customer service in a friendly manner.

In the case of restaurant industry, emphasizing on only food is not enough, but also the delivery of customer service by employees is important (Canny, 2014). As such, customers set expectations that they should be treated well in a friendly manner with kindness and respect. By answering their requests and having sufficient knowledge about a product or service, customers would feel that they received good service (Ako-Nai, 2011). For example, if the service provider of a restaurant delivers food or service to customers as promised and help them with any issues that they could face, and the customers are eventually pleased with that experience, this indicates that they receive good service. Moreover, a good customer service is established when an organization trains its employee to ensure that customers receive the appropriate product or service without keeping them waiting for a long time. In other words, the speed of delivering customer service influences customers' evaluation toward a brand. According to Ako-Nai (2011), a customer who gets an experience of a negative service perception is more likely to communicate it with others than if he experienced a positive customer service.

Previous studies indicated that customer service had positive effect on brand equity and its dimensions (Abad & Hossein, 2013; Hirut, 2015; Jahanzeb, Fatima, & Butt, 2013). According to Paul, Gary, and Hsiao (2010), customer service plays an important role in building brand image. Certain scholars also found that customer service had significant relationship with customers' re-purchase intention and willingness to recommend the brand to others (Boulding & Kirmani, 1993; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Ming et al. (2012) also found that customer service had significant positive effect on brand loyalty and brand image. Further support was reported by Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) who illustrated that service providers who emphasize on delivering good customer services are likely to gain higher degree of loyalty from their customers. The influence of customer service on brand preference was also supported in the literature (Ebrahimi et al., 2015). Moreover, organizations that focus on delivering good customer service are likely to secure leadership positions in global markets and obtain competitive advantages. Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are presented:

H1: Customer service has positive effect on brand image.

H2: Customer service has positive effect on brand loyalty.

H3: Customer service has positive effect on brand preference.

H4: Customer service has positive effect on brand leadership.

H5: Customer service has positive effect on overall brand equity.

3. Methodology

This study is designed to test the effect of customer service on brand equity in international fast food restaurant industry. To accomplish this objective, quantitative research approach is best suited for this study. The data was collected using convenience sampling methodology from 293 customers of international fast food restaurant brands in East Coast region of Malaysia. To avoid response bias, the questionnaires were distributed on the respondents during different times of the day at various spots. However, to measure the constructs of this study, the scales were taken from previous researches. For example, customer service was measured using five items being adapted from Canny (2014), Leung, Li, and Au (1998). Similarly, brand equity was measured using four dimensions, namely brand image, brand loyalty, brand preference, and brand leadership. Brand image was measured using four items adapted from Jin et al. (2012), and Park (2009). Moreover, brand loyalty was measured using four items being taken from Hameed (2013); Gil, Andrés, and Salinas (2007). Four items were also adapted from the work of Sirgy et al. (1997) to measure brand preference. Finally, brand leadership was measured using five items adapted from Aaker (1996); Hanaysha and Hilman (2015). All of the items were measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The collected data were analysed through structural equation modelling (SEM) using the software of AMOS 18.

4. Analysis of Results

This study was designed to test the direct effect of customer service on brand equity from customers' perspective. Out of 384 questionnaires being distributed on the respondents, only 293 were returned back. The demographic analysis of respondents indicated that 97 (33.1%) of the respondents are male, whereas 196 (66.9%) are female. Approximately, 19.4% of the participants are aged between 16 and 25 years, and 53.2% fall in the age group of 26 to 35 years. Those whose ages ranged between 36 and 45 years represented 20.5% of total response, whereas those who ages are 46 years or above accounted for 6.9%. On qualification background, 79 (26.9%) of the respondents have high school certificate, 69 (23.6%) possess diploma certificate, 111 (37.9%) acquire undergraduate certificate, and only 34 (11.6%) have postgraduate degree. Most of the participants (55.7%) receive a monthly income of more than RM3000, while 16.3% get a monthly income of less than RM500. Those whose monthly income ranges between RM500 and RM1000 accounted for 6.8% of total response, but 21.2% had monthly income between RM1001 and RM3000.

To ensure the reliability of the measures, Cronbach's alpha was calculated using SPSS19. The findings indicated that the Cronbach's alpha values of all constructs ranged from 0.682 to 0.891. For instance, customer service was reported at a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.682. The dimensions of brand equity also yielded high reliability Cronbach's alpha values; brand image (0.826), brand loyalty (0.852), brand preference (0.891), and brand leadership (0.780). In a similar vein, the composite reliability was conducted on all constructs and the findings revealed all values exceeded the cut-off point of 0.7. Hence, it can be said that reliability assumptions on all constructs are confirmed and met the minimum required value of 0.60 as reported by Pallant (2007).

This study also conducted factor analysis using SPSS in order to ensure that each set of items that are supposed to measure a construct are in fact measuring it without mixing with the items of other constructs. Factor analysis was also executed to ensure that convergent validity exists among all constructs. The findings in general indicated that EFA analysis is acceptable whereby each set of items that are supposed to measure certain construct are in fact measuring it. To further ensure robust factor analysis, this study relied on AMOS 18 to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Specifically, the measurement model was drawn using AMOS and included all items together. The results concluded that all items achieved acceptable factor loading values ranging from 0.511 to 0.893. From these results, it can be concluded that all the loadings exceeded the minimum recommended value of 0.5 according to the suggestions of Hair et al. (2006).

In order to test the hypotheses which were presented in the literature review section, this study relied on structural model which was formulated using AMOS 18. The main objective of structural model is to provide strong support for the goodness of model fit through a number of criterion values (GFI, AGFI, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA) to be able to test the hypotheses. Overall, the findings indicated that the structural model achieved an adequate fit for the data. For instance, the Chi-square value is equal to 567.450, and other fit indices (df = 127, GFI = 0.846, AGFI = 0.820, TLI = 0.913, CFI = 0.917, and RMSEA = 0.078) also achieved the minimum requirements based on the suggestion of Hair et al. (2010). Based on these findings, this study concludes that the structural model fits the data well.

To verify the hypotheses which were presented earlier, the regression table which was generated from the output of structural model was utilized. As shown in Table 1, all of the above hypotheses are accepted. Specifically, the findings revealed that customer service has significant positive effect on brand image ($\beta = 0.893$, $t\text{-value} = 3.488$, $p < 0.05$), therefore, H1 is supported. The effect of customer service on brand loyalty is also positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.869$, $t\text{-value} = 3.521$, $p < 0.05$), thus, H2 is confirmed. Furthermore, the results indicated that customer service has a significant positive effect on brand preference ($\beta = 0.805$, $t\text{-value} = 3.669$, $p < 0.05$), consequently, H3 is supported. In addition to that, this study found that customer service has a significant positive effect on brand leadership ($\beta = 0.744$, $t\text{-value} = 3.488$, $p < 0.05$), thus, H4 is accepted. Finally, the findings indicated that customer service has significant positive effect on overall brand equity ($\beta = 0.529$, $t\text{-value} = 5.540$, $p < 0.05$), thus, H5 is supported. Overall, this study reveals that customer service explains 46% of total variance in brand equity.

Table 1: Research Findings

	Hypothesized Effect	Std. Beta	S.E.	C.R.	P	Support
H1:	Customer service has positive effect on brand image.	0.893	0.363	3.488	***	Yes
H2:	Customer service has positive effect on brand loyalty.	0.869	0.637	3.521	***	Yes
H3:	Customer service has positive effect on brand preference.	0.805	0.688	3.669	***	Yes
H4:	Customer service has positive effect on brand leadership.	0.744	0.458	3.488	***	Yes
H5:	Customer service has positive effect on overall brand equity.	0.529	0.133	5.540	***	Yes

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The rationale of this study was to examine the effect of customer service on brand equity and its dimensions (brand image, brand loyalty, brand preference, brand leadership) in international fast food restaurant industry in Malaysian market. The findings showed that customer service has significant positive effect on brand image. Greater support was reported in previous studies which also found that customer service was one of the key factors for building brand image (Hamid, Ibrahim, Seesy, & Hasaballah, 2015; Malik, Naeem, & Nasir, 2011; Wu, Yeh, & Hsiao,

2011). Therefore, this study confirms that customer service is an important factor that consumers are likely to evaluate when they intend to visit a restaurant. The managerial implication from this result suggests that in order to succeed, it is very important to deliver good customer service that matches the expectations of customers. Moreover, customers tend to evaluate service quality in terms of waiting time or delivery time and the professional behaviour of the service provider.

The results of this study also indicated that customer service has significant positive effect on brand loyalty and it was supported by a number of previous studies (Ming, et al., 2012; So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2013; Wu et al., 2011). According to Aaker (1996); Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner, (1998), service providers who deliver superior service quality to their customers are likely to gain better customer loyalty and satisfaction. Al-Tit (2015) also found that customer service quality plays an important role in building customer retention and leads to positive purchase behaviour. This means that providing good service to customers and treating them in a friendly and helpful manner will influence their loyalty toward the brand and can lead to positive repurchase intentions. Such gains can also be achieved by providing good values on the delivered products or services and offering variety of choices to customers to satisfy their needs and wants. Therefore, restaurant managers are advised to emphasize on customer service through introducing some loyalty programs and frequent promotions in order to maintain their customers on the long term.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that customer service has significant positive effect on brand preference, brand leadership and overall brand equity. The finding was supported by Kashanizadeh and Esfidani (2014) who indicated that service value had significant positive effect on brand preference. Similarly, Moghaddam (2014) examined the effect of customer service on brand preference and found that the causal relationship between both variables is positive and statistically significant. In particular, brands with leadership positions are likely to put high emphasis on customer service, because they assume that customers are the main assets for them. Previous researches also confirmed that customer service had significant positive effect on brand equity (Caniago, Suharyono, Arifin, & Kumadji, 2014; He & Li, 2010; Jahanzeb et al., 2013). The findings of this study suggest that restaurant managers should focus on customer services and satisfy their customers in the best possible ways. For example, good customer service may include quick delivery of the food or service and providing positive customer support. By enhancing customer service, it will improve the emotional values in consumers' minds and this may affect the perceived value and brand equity from their point of view.

There are some limitations in this study that should be addressed in future researches. First, this study examined only one antecedent of brand equity that is customer service. Therefore, future studies are recommended to test the effect of other factors such as physical environment, restaurant location, and food quality. Second, this study relied on primary data through the distribution of survey instrument. Future researches may use other methodologies such as in-depth interviews with customer to gain more insights about the key factors that they tend to consider for selecting a restaurant brand over another. Third, the scope of this study was limited to East Coast region of Malaysia; thus, future studies may re-examine the variables in different contextual regions. Fourth, the interrelationships between brand equity dimensions in the restaurant industry should be examined in future researches. Finally, convenience sampling technique was used in data collection, and therefore, it is suggested for future researches to rely on other sampling methods to increase the possibility of results generalizability.

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Appendix A: Measurement Scales of Constructs		
Code	Construct/ Items	Factor loadings
Customer Service (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.682)		
CS1	The employees of the restaurant always serve my food exactly as I order it.	0.653
CS2	The employees of the restaurant are always willing to help me.	0.872
CS3	The employees of this restaurant are professional when they deal with me.	0.741
CS4	The employees of this restaurant always appear neat and well dressed.	0.722
CS5	The employees of this restaurant allow me to replace food items if needed.	0.794
Brand Equity Dimensions:		
a. Brand Image (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.826)		
BI1	The brand of this restaurant has a fashionable and trendy image.	0.654
BI2	The brand of this restaurant has a reputation for quality.	0.776
BI3	The brand of this restaurant has unique features.	0.613
BI4	The brand of this restaurant provided me a better lifestyle.	0.697
BI5	The brand of this restaurant provides good value to its customers.	0.766
b. Brand Loyalty (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.852)		
BL1	I consider myself to be loyal to the brand of this restaurant.	0.686
BL2	I would continue to visit this restaurant even if its prices increase somewhat.	0.755
BL3	I say positive things about this restaurant to other people.	0.835
BL4	I recommended this restaurant to others.	0.813
c. Brand Preference (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.891)		
BP1	I like to go to this restaurant more than others.	0.893
BP2	I would buy from this restaurant frequently.	0.727
BP3	This restaurant is my preferred choice over others.	0.883
BP4	I would be inclined to buy from this restaurant brand over other brands.	0.808
d. Brand Leadership (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.780)		
BLe1	This restaurant brand is one of the leading brands in its category.	0.778
BLe2	This restaurant brand is growing in popularity.	0.809
BLe3	This restaurant provides good care to its customers.	0.533
BLe4	This restaurant brand is one of the most widespread brands and can be found in different places.	0.648
BLe5	The brand of this restaurant has many visitors every day.	0.511