

Service Brand Equity: Cross-Sectional Analysis of Four Service Schemes in Malaysia

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Abstract—It has been noted in the literature, service brand is considered to be one of the most discussed in the service industry. Because service is dominated by experience and credence attributes; therefore an extrinsic cue like brand may help to reduce customers' purchase risk and optimize their cognitive processing abilities towards the service. One of the emerging service brand concepts that used extensively by marketing researchers is service brand equity. However, there is limited interest looking at the broader application of service brand equity concept across different service categories. This is important to provide service marketers with useful and broader managerial insights in order to establish greater brand managerial sophistication in marketing the services. Hence, the aim of this research is to determine the dimensions of a successful branding strategy of services, to note each specific service sectors requirement, and its differences. The survey method is used in this study. The findings showed that different service category such as health service, retail, hotel and banking in Malaysia posited different dimension of service brand equity. This tends to suggest that, although service brand equity concept provides a significant description of how to brand a service; different services require different approach of branding process. Thus, this may help brand managers to prioritize and allocate which brand equity dimensions is suitable for their service. The principal contribution of the study is that it provides evidence for the validity of service brand equity used in various service contexts.

Index Terms—Service brand equity, hotel, health service, retail, banking.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are many countries including Malaysia, has taken several steps to liberalize its services sector as the principal engine for their future economic growth. However, liberalization of the service sector is not an easy task due to the issue of credence qualities and intangibility of the service consumption [1]. Thus, the introduction of extrinsic cues such as branding provides creative solution to reduce customers' purchase risk, "tangibilizing the intangible" and optimize their cognitive processing abilities towards service [2]-[4]. One of the emerging service brand concepts that used extensively by marketing researchers is service brand equity. Reference [5] and [6] asserted that service brand equity is important in a service industry. In addition, due to its intangible nature, a service firm that appropriately manages brand equity is more likely to sustain their

competitive advantage [7]. Moreover, brand equity allows the top management of service firms to evaluate their brand's positioning relative to their competitors, keep track of the firm's brand equity value and build corrective strategies when necessary [8].

However, one of the various issues faced by today's brand managers is there are limited attention given to investigate the broader application of service brand equity concept across few service categories in the same study [7], [9]. If this is not dealt with, it may have adverse impacts on the branding as well as marketing of the services [10]. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the application of service brand equity across a few service categories in Malaysia as an effort to provide service marketers with useful managerial insights in order to establish greater brand managerial sophistication in marketing services.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The specific service brand equity concept is based on the cultivation of customer's brand awareness and brand meaning toward a service [4]. The creation of brand awareness is the first step in building brand equity [11], which represents the customers' ability to identify a brand from memory and increase the likelihood of the brand name coming to mind with or without outside aids [12], [13]. On the other hand, brand awareness refers to a customer's knowledge of a brand name and understanding the service category in which the brand competes [14]. Despite its importance, brand awareness is inadequate to build service brand equity. In most situations, customers will consider other aspects such as brand meaning in their brand evaluation process. As the second component of Berry's service brand equity concept, brand meaning is best defined as the customer's perception about a brand that is held in the mind with ideally strong and unique brand associations [4], [15]. Basically, the perception depends on a customer's search attribute information that occurs prior to a purchase and after consumption of the brand [12].

However, the main critique of the service brand equity concepts pertains to the issue of its generalisations. Most studies have described and validated service brand equity using specific service type rather than conduct a comparison study into the various service types. The diversity in the service sector has rendered it difficult to find managerially useful generalizations such as branding to relate to marketing practice [16]. In addition, previous service brand equity model is viewed as more effective in enhancing positive customer hedonics outcomes rather than behavioural changes because the concept explicitly rely on the emotional motives of the consumer buying process [17].

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Therefore, investigating the application of brand equity model in various contexts is crucial in legitimising the service brand equity in service marketing. Such effort is able to provide a new insight of brand equity discussion and implication in the context of service.

Services categories are generally distinct from product categories and are more complex. For instance, Shostack [18] has put together a continuum which ranges from tangible dominant to intangible dominant, while Zeithmal [19] has placed more value on the simplicity of how a service can be evaluated and produced a continuum ranging from easy to difficult to evaluate. Recently, Lovelock [20] has proposed a more process focused in order to bring together several previous suggested classification schemes into a cohesive framework (Table I). The formulation of multiple dimensions of service process as the basis of the classification scheme provides a superior approaches to understanding the differences between service organizations [21]-[23]. This also aligned with Bowen [24], where he claim that the multiple dimensional approach permits analysis of a greater number of characteristics which may differ from one service organization to another.

TABLE I: THE NATURE OF SERVICE ACT

People Processing	-People (customers) as the integral part of the service process where they have to physically enter the service system such as health care service. Customers must be prepared to spend time interacting and cooperating actively with the service providers.
Possession Processing	-Limited to the treatment of the items; problems or enhancement of the items that belong to the customer such as retail service. It can refer to the customer dropping off the items or the service providers go to the customer's item that needs the treatment.
Mental Stimulus	-Service that interacts with customer's minds that has power to shape the attitudes and behaviour such as hospitality service. Receiving these service requires an investment of time and do not necessarily have to be physical present in a service factory.
Information Processing	-Service that is highly dependent on effective collection and processing of information such as financial service. The customer involvement in information processing is determined by face-to-face approach for complex service nature or interactive technology approach for standard service nature.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In an effort to broaden the application of brand equity in the service marketing, this study will incorporate Lovelock's service category scheme [20] and Berry's service brand equity [4]. Broadening the service brand dimensions across service boundaries will have a positive impact on the brand legitimise in services marketing and; also provide a greater knowledge to the industry of the appropriate brand development strategy in various service typologies.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to adequately capture the description of service brand equity construct in Malaysia, the measurement is developed on the outline by Churchill and Iacobuoci [25].

The summary of instrument scale items used is listed in Table II uses a 5-point Likert scale (agreed to disagree). The instrument is based on a pre-test of 40 respondents with alpha = 0.74. Convenience sampling is best used to efficiently acquire some basic information in the exploratory phase [26]. The questionnaire was distributed to 400 respondents across 5 regions in Malaysia in four service categories such as banking, retail, hotel and health services. The decision for selecting these services is in line with example given by Lovelock [20] in Table I. Then, respondents in one service category were excluded in the survey for other services to ensure the independence of the individual observation [27].

TABLE II: SERVICE BRAND EQUITY INSTRUMENT SUMMARY

Dimension	Definition	Instrument
Advertisement (BA1)	-The symbolism and imagery around the services which will result in a relationship between the service brand and the customer [29], [30].	4 items [31]*
Brand Name (BA2)	-A symbolic meaning which assists in both the recognition of the service and the decision-making process [32].	5 items [15]*
Country-of-origin (BA3)	-The country where corporate headquarters of the company marketing the product or service brand is located [33], [34].	4 items [15]*
Word of Mouth (BA4)	-The extent to which a customer informs friends, relatives and colleagues about an event that has created a certain level of satisfaction [35].	4 items [15]*
Public Relation (BA5)	-Reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behaviour towards the brand name [36].	4 items [37]*
Service Performance (BM1)	-The ways in which the service attempts to meet customers' more functional needs [14].	4 items [15]*
Employees (BM2)	-Customer's functional and emotional values of the brand's staff or representative [38].	5 items [15]*
Service Ambience (BM3)	-Facility aesthetics, layout accessibility, cleanliness, seating comfort, electronic equipment and display [39].	5 items [39]*
Service Features (BM4)	-Other functional values such as convenience and distances functions [40].	3 items [31]**
Perceived Fees Value (BM5)	-A perceived balance between the price of a service and all its utilities [41], [42].	4 items [43]**
Self-brand image (BM6)	-The images and symbols that relate to, and indeed, exploit, the needs, values and life-styles of customers in such a way that the meanings involved give added values, and differentiate the brand from other brands [44].	4 items [15]*
Brand feelings (BM7)	-Customer's emotional responses and reactions with respect to the brand [14].	4 items [15]*
Brand personality (BM8)	-The set of human characteristics associated with a brand [11].	4 items [15]*

* Adapted

**Adopted

In order to elicit the responses necessary to establish mere identification of the service brand equity construct, service brand name stated by the respondents would be used as the brand stimuli with minimal interference. For the analysis, the service brand equity measure used in this study is

formed by summing (composite) the individual item of sub dimensions of brand awareness and meaning as the average score of the variables [28].

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 1542 out of 1600 responses (96.3% response rate) were obtained from this survey. The remaining responses were deleted due to incomplete information. The composition of respondents for the 4 services categories is almost equal (range 384 to 388 samples). The sample size exceeded the minimum of 384 samples which appropriate to represent the population and to ensure a good decision model [26], [45]. The analysis of the respondents' demographics revealed that 54 per cent are female while the highest age group distributed falls under the age group of 26 to 30 years old. The educational level is divided into five main groups and the majority of the respondents possess a university degree. In addition, the survey's region composition is made up of approximately 35% from the central region of Malaysia which consists of Kuala Lumpur and Klang. It is worth noting that such composition does reflect the actual overall proposition of the population by region in Malaysia (Appendix 1).

TABLE III: SUMMARY OF RELIABILITY, MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION

Dimension		Health	Retail	Hotel	Banking
BA1	Mean	2.91	3.85	3.52	3.60
	Std Dvt	0.49	0.42	0.43	0.41
BA2	Mean	3.72	3.22	3.57	3.38
	Std Dvt	0.46	0.70	0.43	0.72
BA3	Mean	3.10	3.00	3.05	3.13
	Std Dvt	0.79	0.89	0.75	0.75
BA4	Mean	3.86	4.00	3.71	3.71
	Std Dvt	0.43	0.42	0.44	0.42
BA5	Mean	3.13	3.47	3.55	3.45
	Std Dvt	0.62	0.63	0.43	0.56
BM1	Mean	4.00	4.08	3.77	3.91
	Std Dvt	0.45	0.41	0.44	0.41
BM2	Mean	4.09	3.84	4.00	3.88
	Std Dvt	0.41	0.37	0.34	0.33
BM3	Mean	4.29	4.17	3.95	3.85
	Std Dvt	0.55	0.57	0.37	0.42
BM4	Mean	3.69	4.14	3.68	4.21
	Std Dvt	0.39	0.36	0.47	0.44
BM5	Mean	3.97	3.88	4.18	4.20
	Std Dvt	0.44	0.52	0.46	0.50
BM6	Mean	3.60	3.66	3.82	3.84
	Std Dvt	0.57	0.48	0.44	0.45
BM7	Mean	3.57	3.44	3.64	3.68
	Std Dvt	0.52	0.39	0.45	0.44
BM8	Mean	3.64	3.71	3.67	3.59
	Std Dvt	0.44	0.42	0.39	0.45
Alpha		0.82	0.77	0.84	0.81

The reliability coefficient (α) for the sample data is illustrated in Table III; an overall construct that is greater than 0.7 is high, reliable and valid [46]-[48], [28]. In short, the final set representing 13 construct of service brand equity for four service category is reliable and adequate for further analysis. In addition, Table III shows the mean for the service brand dimensions that respondents perceived as an important brand dimensions for service organisations in Malaysia. The service brand dimensions such as employees, environment and fees exhibited the strongest mean for all four service categories. On the other hand, service brand dimensions for country of origin shows the lowest mean.

In order to achieve the objective, factor analysis is used because it allows condensing a large set of variables and summarizing the underlying patterns of the variables group's correlation. A principle components extraction of 13 brand equity dimensions is used to estimate the number of factors with Eigen value of more than one. In addition, only variable with minimum factor loading of 0.35 is considered in the analysis. This is aligned with the suggestion of 0.35 as the minimum factor loading value for sample size above 250 respondents [28].

TABLE IV: FACTOR ANALYSIS (HEALTH & RETAIL)

	Health			Retail		
	Load	Comm	Alpha	Load	Comm	Alpha
BA1	0.585	0.514	0.568	0.963	0.935	0.611
BA2	0.61	0.575	0.769	*	*	*
BA3	0.871	0.777	0.808	*	*	*
BA4	0.815	0.704	0.735	0.722	0.587	0.721
BA5	0.843	0.742	0.795	*	*	*
BM1	0.817	0.711	0.693	0.764	0.635	0.665
BM2	0.829	0.745	0.795	*	*	*
BM3	0.798	0.815	0.854	0.815	0.708	0.842
BM4	0.603	0.567	0.6	0.647	0.489	0.707
BM5	0.547	0.399	0.616	0.559	0.407	0.647
BM6	0.77	0.659	0.795	0.775	0.611	0.751
BM7	0.85	0.728	0.726	0.686	0.479	0.734
BM8	0.611	0.53	0.735	0.807	0.671	0.715
Eigen values		8.467			5.523	
% of Variance		65.13			61.367	
KMO		0.836			0.771	
Sphericity		1928.396			576.155	
Sig.		0.000			0.000	

TABLE V: FACTOR ANALYSIS (HOTEL & BANKING)

	Hotel			Banking		
	Load	Comm	Alpha	Load	Comm	Alpha
BA1	0.66	0.465	0.616	0.919	0.867	0.662
BA2	*	*	*	*	*	*
BA3	*	*	*	0.792	0.832	0.719
BA4	0.728	0.532	0.689	*	*	*
BA5	0.754	0.569	0.652	*	*	*
BM1	0.77	0.594	0.726	0.636	0.694	0.729
BM2	0.776	0.607	0.764	0.633	0.566	0.706
BM3	0.62	0.485	0.673	0.803	0.693	0.723
BM4	0.553	0.48	0.779	0.884	0.805	0.749
BM5	*	*	*	0.8	0.766	0.666
BM6	0.72	0.666	0.729	0.866	0.774	0.814
BM7	0.714	0.651	0.603	0.798	0.646	0.735
BM8	0.756	0.59	0.684	0.748	0.724	0.722
Eigen values		5.641			7.365	
% of Variance		56.400			73.640	
KMO		0.843			0.812	
Sphericity		1187.163			1520.097	
Sig.		0.000			0.000	

* 0.35 as the minimum factor loading value for sample size above 250 respondents [28]

APPENDIX I: SUMMARY OF RESPONDENT/SERVICE SECTOR BY REGION

Region	SECTOR					%
	Banking	Hotel	Health	Retail	Total	
Central	135	138	133	135	541	35.29
North	65	66	66	65	262	16.99
South	76	75	76	76	303	19.61
East	57	57	56	57	227	14.71
Borneo	52	52	53	52	209	13.4
Total	385	388	384	385	1542	

Table IV and Table V represent the findings for the factor analysis across four service categories. The result indicates that all factor analysis appear to fit the data well as each KMO and Alpha exceeds 0.70 in each of the service category [28], [48], [49]. The finding supports Berry's service brand equity components (brand awareness and brand meaning) in describing a brand with regards to service. In addition, the lowest total variance explained for service brand equity concept is 56.4% for hotel, and the highest is 73.64% (banking).

In addition, the cultivation of brand awareness and brand meaning play an important role in explaining the service brand equity concept across the different service categories. However, in this study, different service categories require different set and cultivation of brand awareness and brand meaning toward describing service brand equity. For example, in the Health service all 13 dimensions to describe service brand equity rest in the People Processing. On the other hand, Banking posits 10 dimensions, while Retail and Hotel include 9 dimensions. This is echoed by Zeithaml and Bitner [50] as well as Clemes, Mollenkopf, and Burn [10], in which different classifications of services cause problem in brand concept generalisation. Therefore, this study concludes that although service brand equity has significant application in services; the cultivation of service brand awareness and brand meaning is different across services type. Service providers need to use different brand strategy or customize for different type of services.

In the bid to raise service brand awareness advertisement has becomes one of the most significant tactic used in Malaysia, because it regarded as a major factor in leveraging brand equity [29], [30]. Furthermore, according to Meenaghan [51] and Hsieh, Pan, and Setiono [52], the function of advertising is to create the symbolism and imagery around the services which will result in a relationship between the service brand and the customers. Another important communication source of brand awareness in service is word of mouth. The reason is pertaining to the intangibility and inseparability of service; customers find it very difficult to evaluate alternatives and customers rely heavily on personal sources of information. For instance, previous research on hotel service by Knowles and Howley [53] has concluded that word of mouth is the most frequent dimension mentioned by the respondents. Therefore, in an attempt to tangibilise the services, service organisation need to develop good advertisement strategy and good 'word of mouth' management [54].

In addition, the finding also shows that almost all dimensions of brand meaning have significant contribution in the service brands equity model. Interestingly, service

ambience exerts the strongest influence on customers' brand meaning variable (recorded the highest loading for all service categories). This finding is parallel with other studies, where posited services ambience such as facility aesthetics, layout accessibility, cleanliness, seating comfort, electronic equipment and display provide valuable tangible brand clues and later can affect customers' emotional, cognitive, and physiological responses toward the service [40], [55]-[57].

In retail service, surprisingly, employees do not exert significantly to customers' brand awareness. However, it is found that an employees' service experience can make a customer feels less important. This alignes with Ton [58] and Ittner and Larcker [59] finding where they posited that there is no significant effect of store's staff on store brand and profitability. On the other hand, perceived fees value in hotel service is of less significance. This is a result of recent competitive structure in Malaysia's hotel industry. As one of the most promising industries in Malaysia, various approaches are used to describe hotel operators in Malaysia. One of the approaches used is star rating to allow hotel guests to evaluate the fees for value structure. With a strong governing body in monitoring the Malaysian hotel industry, the star rating can reassure consumers that the business is reliable and trustworthy [60]. This is one of the possible reasons why perceived fees value is not significant in hotel due to the effectiveness of star rating in building the customers' expectation of the hotel.

As a conclusion, brand awareness is not enough to influence the behaviour of the service customers. Hence, factor such as brand meaning is needed to support the development of brand equity in the service industries in Malaysia. Hence, service brand awareness and brand meaning of a service brand need to be improved on in order to gain positive views by the target audience. However, different service organisations need different personalized approaches to service brand equity possibilities. This study gives service industry managers a structured approach to formulate their branding strategies. Its straightforward approach illustrates how different service categories contribute to branding strategies effectiveness. As managers often have limited resources to implement branding strategies, this framework helps them to prioritize and allocate resources across brand equity components. Therefore, allowing organizations to focus on the unique nature of their service that significantly provide an edge with their competitors.

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