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Restaurant branding matters: A quantitative report on how brand image can moderate relationship

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Abstract. This paper investigates the moderating effect of brand image on relationship quality in the chain restaurant industry. The sample of this study was attained from a single local chain restaurant in Peninsular Malaysia. Survey questionnaires were disseminated to respondents using a stratified random sampling method in 16 selected *kopitiam* outlets. Findings from the 316 customers were examined using the SPSS statistics application and a partial least square technique. The findings provide strong evidence of the moderating effect of brand image on the relationship between patron dining experience (PDE) and relationship quality, where relationship quality in turn affects customer loyalty. Never the less, the findings highlighted the importance for service firms, specifically within the chain restaurant industry to look into ways to increase the brand image of the restaurants in order to foster the relationship building approaches with the customers. This study expanded the study on relationship quality by providing empirical evidence on the moderating effect of brand image towards the formation of relationship quality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The customer-oriented marketing approach has been gradually replacing the old product-oriented marketing approach in businesses. This is because meeting customers' satisfaction alone is insufficient to build customer loyalty. Instead, there should be a relational bond between the customers and service providers where this relationship is measured as relationship quality. However, looking at the chain restaurant industry, the understanding of the factors influencing the foundation of relationship quality is rather weak.

In response, this thesis developed a relationship quality model to examine the moderating effect of brand image on relationship quality in the chain restaurant industry. Hyun (2010) had earlier highlighted that in the chain restaurant industry, there is no prior theoretical support on the importance brand equity in the study of relationship quality. According to him, the relationship quality model ought to be extended with the brand equity construct. In fact, the impact of brand equity on chain restaurant performance has been empirically verified by previous researchers (Hyun & Kim, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2005). They have identified that the brand equity of chain restaurant consists of brand image, brand loyalty. Perceived quality and brand awareness dimension. Regrettably, no marketing studies have related the brand equity's impact on relationship quality itself. Hsieh and Li (2008) however, have found in their research that the relationship between customer's perception and loyalty is moderated by brand equity. Therefore, it is believed that the relationship between relationship quality and its antecedents will be moderated by brand equity too, as customer's perception influences the strength of relationship quality (Wong & Sohal, 2002).

This paper plans to examine the moderating effect of brand image which is one of the dimension of brand equity, on the relationship between relationship quality and its antecedent, the patron dining experience (PDE). Consumers tend to evaluate products depending on the extend on how the products resemble their self-image, according to the self-congruence theory (Belk, 1988). Thus, the consumers' behavior and attitude are much likely to be influenced if there is a high congruence between their self-image with a product's image. This will eventually lead to their brand preference, satisfaction, purchase decisions and finally repurchasing intentions as well (Prayag, 2017; Wibowo, Sari, & Saidani, 2017).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Relationship Quality

A relationship's strength can be measured as relationship quality (Smith, 1998). As such, the extent of the parties' needs and expectations can be measured by the relationship quality they had. The relationship can be measured based on previous encounters or events (Wong & Sohal, 2002). The customers' desire to maintain the relationship, satisfaction towards the service provider's past performance and their trusts on the service provider's future performance can be indicated though a strong relationship quality measure (Rajaobelina, 2017; Radovic et al., 2017; Brun, Rajaokelira & Licard, 2014). In general, the relationship quality construct is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of three main dimensions of satisfaction, trust and commitment (Lo et. al. 2018; Olavarria-Jarabaa et. al., 2018).

The main element of the relationship between the customer and service provider is found to be satisfaction (Strielkowski, 2017; Olavarría-Jarabaa et. al., 2018; Aali et al., 2014). According to Payne and Holt (2001), researcher viewed satisfaction as the degree of which customers' expectation has been met by the service provider's performance. In return, the future action of the customers can be provoked naturally if their satisfaction with the service provider has been met. Consequently, it has been suggested that satisfaction will lead to a better buyer-seller relationship.

Trust is the second dimension used in this thesis to measure relationship quality. The buyer-seller long-term relationship based on the concept of trust has been extensively discussed in the literature (Akrouf & Nagy, 2018; Ndubisi et al., 2011; Lazányi et al., 2017; Ners, 2017). Trust is generally agreed by researchers as one of the significant components influencing relationships of buyers with the providers. Overall, the customer is less likely to risk uncertainty in building a new relationship but to continue a trusting relationship with the current provider.

Commitment is the third dimension where most authors believe as an essential dimension of relationship quality (Olavarría-Jarabaa et. al., 2018; Brun, Rajaobelira, & Licard, 2014). They stated that mutual commitment is the foundation of every relationship and it is a crucial variable in measuring the long-term relationship between buyer and seller. The strength of relationship can be indicated through a customer's level of commitment to an organisation (Robert et al., 2003; Bilan, 2013).

2.2. Patron Dining Experience (PDE)

The restaurant patrons' behavior is influenced by complex attributes. Different researchers have suggested that the patrons' behavior are influenced by how they evaluate those attributes. In order to explain patrons' behavior, various attributes were proposed by different researchers. However, out of those attributes, only five are commonly accepted in the literature. The attributes are price, food, service, location and environment (Lo et. al., 2018; Haghighi et al., 2012).

The first important criterion in restaurant marketing is price (Haghighi et al., 2012; Hyun, 2010). It is safe to say that patrons' behavior is influenced by price. In the event that the price is perceived to be high, customers tend to expect higher-quality (Haghighi et al., 2012; Hyun, 2010). Moving on, food quality has been explained as a concept on the way food are viewed by customers and can provide insights on how to rejuvenate food (Murphy, Pritchard, & Smith, 2000). The quality of food in terms of taste, presentation, temperature is seen to have great influence over the patrons' behavior (Ma, Qu & Eliwa, 2014; Hyun, 2010). The third attribute is the service quality. The interaction between restaurant operators and patrons establishes an extend of personal ties or linkages which can be measured as service quality. A large number of studies have postulated that service quality influences patrons' behavior. Service quality is also found to be the antecedent for both satisfaction and trust constructs of relationship quality (Ladhari, Brun & Morales, 2008; Gounaris & Venetis, 2002). Another attribute will be the location of a restaurant (Hyun, 2010). When dining out, restaurant patrons expect a convenient location according to Soriano (2002) and Sun (1995). This is supported by Hyun (2010) who has found a positive effect of location towards chain restaurant patrons' satisfaction. Lastly, looking at the environment which is the last attribute of patron dining experience (PDE), it has also been suggested the patrons' behavior is greatly influenced by the environment. Environment is viewed as a form of communication between a service provider with its customers (Bitner, 1990) where Namkung and Jang (2008) suggested that music, lighting, and ample space play great role in a good dining environment.

2.3. Brand Image

Keller (1993) defined brand image as the perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in the consumer memory. According to him, it is crucial to understand the consumers' tendency to relate a brand to other entities such as a person, thing brand or place. In this paper, brand image is linked to the formation of relationship quality between patrons and chain restaurant providers. In this paper, brand image is linked to the formation of relationship quality between patrons and chain restaurant providers. It is also explained by the self-congruence theory on how consumers evaluate products eventually match their self-image (Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Accordingly, the consumers' positive behavior towards a product's brand preference, purchase decisions, satisfaction, and repurchasing intentions are influenced by a higher degree of congruence between their self-image with that particular product image (Prayag et. al., 2017; Raharjo, 2017). Contrarily, if the consumers' self-image with the product image is incongruence, it will transmit negative intrinsic messages about themselves and consumers could refuse or avoid purchasing products and services (Hogg & Banister, 2001).

Cognitive psychologists believe that the strength of association decays very slowly once an information becomes stored in memory due to the durability of the memory. As a result, our memory has the ability to lead towards integration of new information when consumers have committed a favorable brand image to memory. In other words, positive influence over other messages associated to the brand will arise when it has a favorable brand image. The research of Raharjo (2017) and Wibowo, Sari, & Saidani (2017) have both found significant influence of brand image on customer loyalty and purchase decision. As for Jalilvand and Samiei (2012), they found that if customers received positive information about the provider, they will perceive the provider to have a good brand image and are likely to purchase. Consistent with this paper, when the brand image is favorable, attributes of patron dining behavior (PDE) perceived by customers will be more congruent with the relationship with the chain restaurants. As a result, favorable brand image can enhance the PDE while boosting a quality relationship with the chain restaurants.

In contrast, the way consumers perceive attributes of patron dining behavior (PDE) can conflict with the relationship with the chain restaurants when they commit an unfavorable brand image to memory. According to Leuthesser et al. (1995), consumers will develop a psychological tendency of balanced differences when there are inconsistencies in the cognitive system which lead to their nervousness. This phenomenon causes consumers to attempt to identify a reasonable explanation and these inferences may, in turn, affect their evaluations of the offer a service provider provides (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Consistent with this study, customers may use this aspect to differentiate their patron dining behavior (PDE) if the brand image is unfavorable resulting in weak relationship quality.

2.4. Loyalty

Loyal as defined by Oliver (1999) refers to repeat patronage in which loyal customers demand less time and attention but at the same time produce huge amounts of revenue. For many years in the marketing research, the relationship between relationship quality and loyalty is widely discussed (Rahman & Kamarulzaman, 2015; Sheth & Parvatiyar). Loyal customers are what contribute to the success of many businesses, mainly those in the hospitality setting (Pullman & Gross, 2004). When customers are loyal to the company, they have the tendency to avoid locating, searching and evaluating other purchase alternatives. As such, loyal customers are less likely to go through processes that consume the time and effort to be accustomed to any new providers (Yang & Peterson, 2004). More specifically, Hyun (2010) has further stressed the significance of the existence of customer loyalty as an essential condition for the future survival of chain restaurants. Therefore, the concluding dependent variable in this study is customer

loyalty.

3. RESEARCH MODEL

The model of this study was developed based on the earlier literature review in the relationship marketing context. The model aims to test three main hypotheses as shown in Figure 1. The first hypothesis, H1 is formulated to identify the impact of patrons dining experience (PDE) on relationship quality. Hypothesis H2 is formulated to examine the moderating effect of brand image on relationship quality. Lastly, hypothesis H3 is proposed to identify the linkage between relationship quality and loyalty.

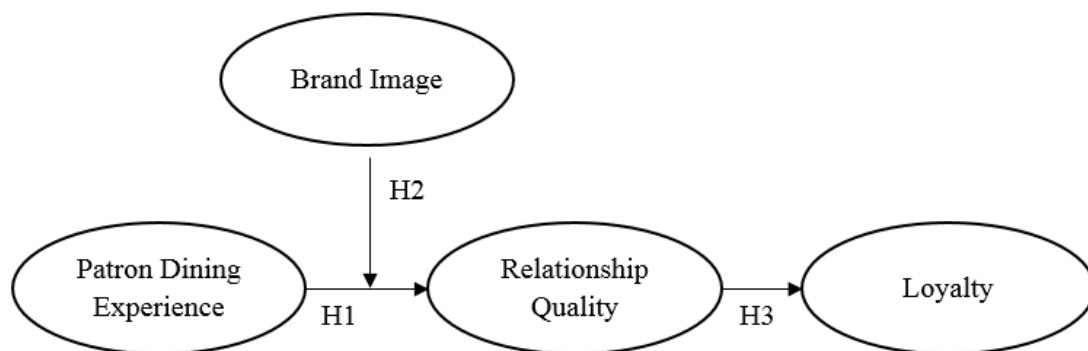


Figure 1. Research Model

3.1. Patron Dining Experience (PDE) and Relationship Quality

This study aims to determine whether patron dining experience (PDE) affects relationship quality, which in turn affects loyalty. If we view the attributes of PDE as discussed in the literature review, they consist of price, food quality, service quality, location, and environment. Hyun (2010) has already provided empirical evidence to support that these attributes will influence the patron's behavior as well as relationship quality. Hence, the below hypothesis is formulated:

H1: PDE will positively affect relationship quality.

3.2. Brand Image as Moderator

Brand image will be functioning as a moderating variable in the relationship of patron dining experience (PDE) with relationship quality. Strong support for the hypothesised relationship of brand image on chain restaurant performance has been provided by previous research (Hyun & Kim, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2005). However, they have not been empirically tested yet.

It is theoretically explained that ways consumers appraise products eventually match their self-image. The self-congruence theory states that the consumers' positive behavior towards a product is influenced by the degree of congruence between their self-image with that particular product image (Prayag et. al., 2017; Raharjo, 2017; Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982).

This study focuses on how the patrons' perception of the chain restaurant influences their behavior and the relationship building with the restaurants. When the brand image is favorable, attributes of patron dining experience (PDE) perceived by customers will be more congruent with the relationship with the

chain restaurants. As discussed in the literature review, the statement is supported by previous work of Beckwith and Lehmann (1976). They stated that general impression of the overall object can influence the evaluation of its particular attribute. Hence, the moderating effects of brand image on the relationship between patron dining experience (PDE) and relationship quality should not be ignored and following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Brand image moderates the relationship between PDE and relationship quality.

3.3. Relationship Quality and Loyalty

The linkage between relationship quality and loyalty has been supported with strong evidence from previous research in the hospitality context. Most of the previous research measured relationship quality as a single construct comprising of satisfaction, trust and commitment dimensions. Aali et al. (2014) in their research found positive relationship when they investigated the link between relationship quality as a single construct with loyalty in the service industry. Nevertheless, the linkages between each of the individual construct of trust, satisfaction and commitment in relationship quality with loyalty have also been supported in the literature. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed with the support from previous literature:

H3: Relationship quality has positive influence on customer loyalty.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, ANALYSIS AND RESULT

4.1. Construct Measurement

Questionnaires were used to collect data on the underlying constructs proposed in the research model and how they interact with each another. It is through review of the relevant literature, the scales used in this study were developed. The items were adopted from the most relevant business-to-customer market literatures where consumers' perceptions in the buyer-seller relationship were studied.

Table 1

Constructs and Items

Construct	Dimension	Items	Source
Relationship Quality (RQ)	Commitment (CO)	I like being associated with them I plan to maintain a long-term relationship I am giving priority to this restaurant chain I am committed to my relationship with this restaurant chain	From Shammout (2007)
	Trust (TR)	Employees are honest Employees are sincere Employees are truthful Employees are reliable	From Hyun (2010)
	Satisfaction (SA)	I am happy with their performance I am content with their performance I am pleased with their performance I am delighted with their performance	From Hyun (2010)
Patron Dining Experience (PDE)	Environment (EN)	Have nice decorations The environment is clean Have sufficient amenities	From Hyun (2010)

		Provides comfortable environment	
	Location (LC)	The restaurant is easy to find The restaurant is nearly located The restaurant has branches in most places The restaurants is located in favorable location	
	Service Quality (SQ)	Employees are accurate with the orders The meal is served at the promised time Employees have the knowledge to answer Employees are always willing to help me	
	Food Quality (FQ)	Serves tasty food Food is served at the right portion Food presentation is attractive Food is served at the appropriate temperature	
	Price(PR)	The price is affordable The food and services are value for money The price is not expensive The price is more preferable than other restaurants	
Brand Image (BI)	Brand Image (BI)	Brand is well-recognized Brand can be dependable Brand has favorable image Brand gives pleasurable feeling	From Park, Jaworski and MacInnis (1986)
Loyalty (LO)	Loyalty (LO)	Visit the chain restaurant more often Say positive things about the chain restaurant to other people Recommend the chain restaurant to someone who seek your advice Encourage friends and relatives to dine at the chain restaurant	From Hyun (2010) and Shammout (2007)

Furthermore, a pilot study was carried out to refine the measurement scales. A sample of 20 respondents consisting of *kopitiam*'s customers and marketing experts were used for the pilot study. All the items which have Cronbach's coefficients alpha registered values of 0.70 or more from the reliability analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) are accepted for further analysis. Table 1 show the choice of scale items which are accepted and used in this study.

The data collection of this study took place between the month of April until December 2015. The questionnaires were disseminated to the respondents in 16 *kopitiam* outlets in Peninsular Malaysia. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to Malaysian adult patrons regardless whether it is before or after their service encounter with restaurants. Some respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaires before they made their orders and some were asked after they have ordered. A number of 316 questionnaires were collected on the spot. More than half of the total respondents are male (71.8 percent). As for the age groups, most of the respondents (36.1%) are in the age group of 26 to 35. Very few senior citizens (0.6 percent) older than 55 years old took part in the survey.

4.2. Measurement Model

The assessment of the research model was done using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) path modeling. The correlations of each latent variables (LV) with their construct were examined. The measurement

model is first examined in terms of its item loadings and reliability coefficients. All the 40 items of this study were examined and found to have a loading of > 0.5 which is accepted for further analysis (Nunnally, 1994).

This is followed by the assessment of convergent validity of all the multi-item scales. The composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to assess the convergent validity. There is good evidence of convergent validity in this study as all the CR and AVE values of constructs are more than 0.7 and 0.5 respectively (Nunnally, 1994). The values are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Convergent Validity

Construct	CR	AVE
CO	0.850	0.667
TR	0.837	0.570
SA	0.938	0.791
EN	0.859	0.607
LC	0.950	0.863
SQ	0.875	0.636
FQ	0.936	0.829
PR	0.874	0.636
BI	0.972	0.895
LO	0.869	0.625

Next is the assessment of discriminant validity which is the extent in which a particular construct varies from other constructs in the study. Discriminant validity is examined by comparing each construct's square root of all average variance extracted values (AVE). The value of the construct itself should exceed all the inter-factor correlations between each other constructs. The results of this study show that all square roots of AVE values are greater than the corresponding correlation estimates. This indicates that all the constructs are indeed measured by the scales developed. Table 3 presents the discriminant validity results for the constructs of this study.

Table 3

Discriminant Validity

	CO	TR	SA	EN	LC	SQ	FQ	PR	BI	LO
CO	0.817									
TR	0.441	0.755								
SA	0.242	0.622	0.889							
EN	-0.074	0.220	0.272	0.779						
LC	0.288	0.441	0.413	0.228	0.929					
SQ	0.226	0.418	0.342	0.215	0.769	0.797				
FQ	0.256	0.394	0.321	0.115	0.562	0.746	0.910			
PR	-0.015	0.207	0.217	0.302	0.274	0.324	0.206	0.797		
BI	-0.414	-0.289	-0.226	0.217	-0.339	-0.203	-0.299	0.116	0.946	
LO	0.116	0.024	0.087	0.049	-0.035	-0.091	-0.041	0.119	0.073	0.765

Notes: Diagonals are the square roots of AVE.

4.3. Structural Model

The empirical structural model was developed once the constructs in the measurement model were checked for convergence and discriminant validity. First the structural model was assessed by estimating

the R² values, path coefficients and t-values which are used to conduct the hypothesis testing. Meanwhile, the t-values were obtained by estimating the PLS algorithm using the bootstrap re-sampling procedure. 500 re-samples or replication of bootstrapping was done using 316 cases per sample.

The results from the structural model found that all paths exert a substantial impact in the model with path coefficients (β -values) exceeding 0.20. All the paths are also found significant with t-value > 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. Patron dining experience (PDE) demonstrated a positive influence ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.05$) on relationship quality (RQ). Relationship quality also demonstrated a positive influence ($\beta = .638$, $p < 0.05$) on loyalty (LO). The direct influence of PDE accounted for approximately 63.8 percent of the variance ($R^2 = .638$) in RQ, whereas approximately 56.3 percent of the variance ($R^2 = .563$) in LO is accounted by RQ. The results show that hypotheses H1 and H3 are supported as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of Structural Model

Hypothesis	Relationship	t – value	β -value	Decision
H1	PDE -> RQ	2.938	0.211	Supported
H3	RQ -> LO	5.109	0.638	Supported

Table 5

Testing of Moderating Effect

Path	Relationship	t-value	β -value	Decision
a1	Brand Image -> Relationship Quality	2.267	0.262	Significant
b1	Patron Dining Experience -> Relationship Quality	3.753	0.452	Significant
c1	Patron Dining Experience x Brand Image -> Relationship Quality	2.453	0.386	Significant
Hypothesis H2	Brand image moderates the relationship between PDE and relationship quality			Supported

Moreover, the results of the analyses show that brand image moderates the relationship between patron dining experience and relationship quality. As shown in Table 5, the path coefficient for path c1 (β -value = 0.386) is significant with t-value = 2.453 at ($p < 0.05$). Moderation exist if the path c (interaction effect to criterion variable) is significant, regardless of the extend of path a (predictor variable to criterion variable) and path b (moderator variable to criterion variable) (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Consequently, hypothesis H2 is supported.

The results obtained both support and build on the existing literature. Hypothesis H1 and H3 were as predicted. Patron dining experience (PDE) will positively affect relationship quality which sequentially affect loyalty. It can be maintained that a more favorable customer's dining experience has positive effects on their relationship quality which affects their loyalty with the service provider. More importantly, there is a moderating effect of brand image on the relationship between PDE and relationship quality. The results are significant. The finding is consistent with the initial work of Beckwith and Lehmann (1976) where they stated that the evaluation of a particular attribute can be influenced by the general impression of the overall object. From a managerial viewpoint, this stresses the importance brand image as important

moderator in building relationship and loyalty. When the brand image is favourable, the attributes of PDE perceived by customers will be more congruent with the relationship with the chain restaurants.

5. CONCLUSION

It was found that the development of the relationship quality's conceptual foundations has not been fully investigated after reviewing the literature. There is no agreement between researchers on the key elements that best explain relationship quality. The elements are also varying from industry to industry. This paper proposed patron dining experience (PDE) as a set of relationship quality predictor where its formation is based on the common relationship quality attributes used by previous researches in the dining industry.

In addition, although many researchers have attempted to explain on how relationship marketing is developed, they have ignored the importance of brand equity in the context. Hyun (2010) highlighted that in the dining industry, the relationship quality study should be expanded by incorporating the brand equity construct. Specifically, the research done on the moderating effect of brand image on relationship quality is limited till date. Very few researchers have taken the initiative to investigate the moderating effect of brand image in chain restaurant industry, to the best of the author's knowledge. This is with the exception of the study by Hyun and Kim (2011) and Kim and Kim (2005) where they have empirically examined the influence of brand equity on chain restaurant performance but not on relationship quality itself.

This paper investigated the moderating effect of brand image, specifically on the relationship between relationship quality and its patron dining experience. It is empirically supported by the results of the study that favorable brand image strengthens the relationship between restaurant patrons with their service providers, the better the brand image, the more favorable the relationship. This paper aims to contribute to the brand equity's body of knowledge in the field of relationship marketing by providing additional empirical evidence on its moderating effect, specifically on relationship quality development between the service providers with their customers.

The results of this study have found significance relationship between patron dining experience (pde) and relationship quality which finally lead to loyalty, in addition to the evidence of the moderating effect of brand image on the relationship between pde and relationship quality.

6. IMPLICATION

The results obtained from this study offer important implications for managers in marketing practices as well. The importance for service providers to enhance relationship quality with their customers is highlighted in this study. It is found that enhanced relationship quality will increase customer loyalty. The findings obtained confirm that the patrons' perception of the chain restaurant influences their behavior and the relationship building with them. Furthermore, they are more likely to be loyal with the chain restaurant when the relationship quality is good. Subsequently, managers should be mindful of the need to employ strategies to improve the brand image of the restaurants to enhance the quality of relationship that customers have with them.

7. LIMITATION

This study is focused on one industry which is the chain restaurant industry, where the data were collected. Therefore, the level of generalisation of the research findings will be greatly reduced from such focused research. Naturally, the findings from this study are expected to be applicable only for similar industries with continuous purchasing activities between the customer and service provider. As such, future research can be done in other industries as well, starting from industries which are quite similar with the chain restaurant industry. The replications can help to enhance the generalisability of the findings and to draw a more solid conclusion.

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