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The effectiveness of Face-to-Face interaction in establishment of SME Brand personality

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine on the effectiveness of face to face interaction in establishment of SME brand personality. It helps to extend the understanding on effectiveness of face to face interaction, and important element in establishment of SME brand personality. To date, there have been minimal studies conducted on brand personality of SME restaurant either brand personality has been acknowledged by several service marketing researchers to have a great influence on consumer behaviors in various aspects such as consumer favorite and usage. Therefore from the data presented in this study, it can be expected that the findings can benefit both the industrial community and the academia by giving a new source of ideas and information. This study also adopted the variables that were used in web interaction by Bernard Jaworski and Jeffry F. Rayport (2001) to implement it to the face to face interaction. Future research should focus on the similar study of effectiveness of face to face interaction in fast food industry and others service sectors.

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Introduction

During the two last decades, both academia and marketing practitioners have shown an increasing interest in brand management. According to Narumon Kimpakorn and Gerard Tocquer (2010), branding can generate value both for producer and consumers, and now widely recognized branding as a powerful tool for companies to use their advantage in achieving competitive strength in the market. In addition, understanding the issue through the development of a variety of concepts such as brand image, brand identity and brand personality can inspire the strategic power of brands that generate a surplus of studies in the field with the aim of exploring branding from various perspectives (Gillie Gabay, Howard R. Moskowitz, Jacqueline Beckley & Hollis Ashman, 2009). In this research, the researcher focuses on brand personality. An extensive review of literature (e.g., Jones, Hiller, Shears and Clarke-Hill 2002; Murase and Bojanic 2004) indicates that brand personality has become a key aspect of strength and increase of a fast-food restaurant. Traditionally, a fast-food restaurant normally used a pricing approach to participate in the market (Mohammad, Barker and Kandampully 2005). Distinct a price reduction strategy, brand personality has been acknowledged by several service marketing researchers to have a great influence on consumer behaviors in various aspects such as consumer favorite and usage (Sirgy 1982; Batra, Lehmann and Singh 1993; Simoes and Dibb 2001). Consequently, creating a strong and favorable brand personality is likely to be a improved way for a fast-food restaurant to differentiate itself from the competitors in the long run.

For that reason this study used the concept developed by Jeffrey F. Rayport and Bernard J. Jaworski (2001) to managing personal communication that propose the effective sites feature of seven design elements they call it 7C's. The 7C's are context, content, community, customization, community, communication, connection and commerce. However, only three

key design elements of an effective web will be used to see whether these elements can be effective ways to improve the efficiency of SMEs Restaurant. The elements are content, context and communication. This study is conducted to address the issue because SMEs Restaurant in Malaysia has of an increased in competitive pressures from international fast food restaurant in Malaysia towards local SMEs restaurant. This happens because of changes in lifestyle of the society encourages the development of SMEs Restaurant. For that reason, Malaysian SMEs have to be able to work efficiently in order to compete with other fast food restaurant in Malaysia.

This study will look into three key elements in face to face interaction such as content, context and communication whether it can solve the problem of consumer confusion on brand personality of Small and Medium Enterprise (SMEs) restaurant.

Brand Personality

During the two last decades, both academia and marketing practitioners have shown an increasing interest in brand management. Branding is now widely acknowledged as a potent tool for companies to use their advantage in achieving competitive strength in the market, as it generates value both for the producer and consumers (Keller, 2003).

The strategic power of brands has triggered a plethora of studies in the field, with the aim of exploring branding from various perspectives, enriching understanding of the issue through the development of a variety of concepts such as brand image, brand identity and brand personality (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Carpenter et. al., 1994; Kapferer, 1992; Upshaw, 1995).

Intensified research into such specific concepts has widened our horizons in comprehending how brands operate and how they have developed into the most strategic marketing tool of the new economy. In this research, the researcher focuses on brand personality. The notion of brand personality appears to have been a highly debated topic for marketing scholars in recent

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years (Aaker, 1996, 1997; Aaker and Fournier, 1995; Batra et. al., 1993).

Distinct brand personality plays a key role in the success of a brand. It leads customer to perceive the brand personality and develop a strong connection to the brand (Doyle, 1990). A brand personality should be shaped to be long-lasting and consistent. Besides it should be different from other brands and meet consumer's demands (Kumar et. al., 2006). In addition, brand personality has become a widely discussed issue in recent years. It has been emphasized in many brands and products, including durable goods consumables goods, entertainment and luxury goods, and so on (Kumar et. al., 2006; Govers and Schoormans, 2005; Mengxis, 2007). However, only a few SMEs Restaurant brands are used as the marketing researcher's target of brand personality. Thus, try to cover the gap of the literature is the first priority of this study. Consumers may have their own preference for the brand and product in compliance with their brand personality and personality traits or their own concepts (Govers and Schoormans, 2005).

Content

According to Jaworski (2001), content is about digital subject matter on a website. This includes audio, video and graphic as well as the message of the digital subject matter on the customer interface and when applying this concept in SMEs Restaurant content the researcher place music and scents as the criteria of face-to-face interaction with customer.

Atmospherics quality

The role of physical environment, or "atmospherics" on customer perceptions of quality and subsequent responses have been expressed interest by scholars for decades (Young Namkung & SooCheong (Shawn) Jang, 2008). The feeling of excitement, pleasure, or relaxation will be produced by physical environment. In addition Young Namkung and SooCheong (Shawn) Jang, (2008), to access the quality of service provided various aspects of atmospherics may be used by customers as tangible cues. The various atmospheric elements within a service setting include visual and auditory cues such as function and scents, smell, and music. In addition, Ching (1996) a sense of security and confidence can be convey by spatial perception and help consumers judged of specific service environments or any emotional response form a mental picture (Lin, 2004).

Music

According to Greg Broekemier, Ray Marquardt, and James W. Gentry (2008), music is a positive audio cue for inspiring emotions and behaviors in service settings. Meanwhile, John McDonnell (2007) stated music can acts on limbic system, it is the seat of emotions in the brain. Furthermore, a relationship between the use of music and the perception of time has been demonstrated in previous research. In addition to unfamiliar music has created a perception that time is slowing down John McDonnell (2007). It is suggested by the present research that music, which is familiar to most customers and is fast, appears to be a suitable choice for research on waiting (Greg Broekemier, Ray Marquardt, & James W. Gentry, 2008). Of course what is considered to be familiar music depends on the demographic. One factor may be relevant but has not been tested, or even discussed, in the literature on waiting for service.

Scents

The next item is on scents, scent is a relatively unexplored atmospheric facet. According to Greg Broekemier et. al., (2008), there were little studies in the marketing environment, especially regarding environment scent or ambient, as opposed to the scent

attached to a particular object, but a great deal has been published on the effect of the sense of smell on behaviors and evaluations. Studies by John McDonnell (2007) found even in fairly low concentrations can affect peoples' mood in a certain scents. Furthermore they also state that there are weak on concentrations and below the entrance of awareness still affect peoples' moods subconsciously. Then, Morrin and Ratneshwar (2000, p. 67) describe as a component of ambience "Scent that is not originate from a particular object but is present in the environment". Scent is a well-known marketing tool, from a practical point of view. Heide and Grønhaug (2006) note in gastronomic products scent is probably the most widely used. Moreover, the evaluation of the store and those customers perceived that they were in the store for a lesser period than actual when a store was scented is the pleasant aromas or scents in a retail environment improve the perception of customers (John McDonnell, 2007).

Context

According to Jaworski (2001), context is focus on interesting graphics, layout and design features, and color of the website and when the researcher wants to implement context in face-to-face interaction the researcher place layout or environment of the restaurant, design and lighting as the important criteria.

Design

According to Young Namkung and SooCheong (Shawn) Jang (2008) one could describe design in terms of relationship to the physical surroundings. We can perceive design through our senses similar to ambience. As such, within empirical marketing they both belong to the same construct (Jing Bill Xu & Andrew Chan, 2010). Moreover, ". . . the conscious design of space to create certain effect in buyers" are emphasizes the importance of physical design, defining atmosphere (Kotler, 1973, p. 50). Accordingly, one can label design as an attention-creating medium. It is well known that physical design is able to attract customers' attention.

The importance of design has been indicating in some studies. Design also can encourage people to remain in the environment or leave it (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Nevertheless, previous research points out that physical design is able to evoke people's feelings. In addition, customers' emotions have been influenced by different restaurant layouts and interior design (Wasserman et. al., 2000). Meanwhile, how long customers stay in the restaurant can be influenced by the interior design of a restaurant (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996), and service satisfaction get the impact from environmental design (Young Namkung & SooCheong (Shawn) Jang, 2008). Customer attention and stimulates emotional responses can be influence by color in strong visual component (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992).

Lighting

Lighting is another important atmospheric factor. Intensity, color, type, and placement of lighting, among other qualities, are important for developing a desirable atmosphere. Proper lighting can add texture, charm, and beauty to a building or a landscape. Effective lighting attracts attention and creates an impression of the atmosphere inside. According to Heide and Grønhaug (2006), in a previous study dim light increases the sense of relaxation, while bright light will promote an atmosphere of liveliness and sociability. Furthermore, higher quality environment is usually associated with soft bright lighting (Sharma & Stafford, 2000). The right atmosphere relaxes guests

and creates an atmosphere in the service setting that contributes to a positive experience. The intensity and style of light are, therefore, closely linked to customers' experiences.

Communication

According to Jaworski, communication is about dialogues that give details of between the website and its user. This communication can take three forms: firm-to-user (email notification), user-to-firm (customer service request), or user-to-user (instant messaging). When the researcher want to applying this concept to face-to-face interaction the communication will focus more on staff behavior towards their customers.

Staff Behavior

It has been argued that the key to competitive advantage is development of the company's human resources. In recent years, many challenges have faced managers in effectively utilizing human resources and managing behavior of individuals within organizations. The increase in international competition and global management has put increasing pressure on managers to deal with a multicultural workforce. The increasing of competitiveness has required organization to increase their staff creativity, productivity, and service quality. These all require recruiting, selecting, training, motivating and retaining the best people the organization can find.

As the delivery of service is highly variable, managers are dependent on employees to try to maintain consistency in their provision of a quality service. Branded service operations especially may face difficulties in ensuring uniform quality of service across their outlets. To counter these problems some service work has stripped out labor and replaced with technology – as automated calling and interactive voice recognition system illustrate in call centre operations. However, there are other ways in which these issues are addressed. One way is to try to systematize the service encounters with tight rules and regulations. For example, call centers and fast-food outlets commonly script employees' verbal interactions with customers (Leidner, 1993; Ritzer, 2000). Emphasis is also increasingly put on shaping and, if necessary, changing the attitudes of existing employees. This attitudinal restructuring focuses on managing employees' feelings while they are at work, which often gives rise to the need for front-line employees to engage in emotional labor, involving the suppression or engendering of certain types of emotions (Guerrier and Adib, 2003; Hoshschild, 1983).

In sum, the personal attributes of service providers are a key aspect in the provision of quality service. This point about the importance of service personnel is recognized in the seminal work of Ute Walter, Bo Edvardsson, and Asa O'stro'm (2010). Their SERVQUAL model, based on customer's perceptions of the service encounter, identifies emotional labor, expressed in the model as desirable attributes such as responsiveness, courtesy and understanding the customer, as an important feature. A further dimension of the model is "tangibles" and among other things this refers to appearance, which takes into account both the physicality of the environment and also the personnel. Thus, it is recognized that the demeanor and appearance of front-line workers is crucial and customers see well-presented, courteous, helpful and empathetic staff as playing a key role in quality service.

Consumer Confusion

According to Vincent-Wayne Mitchell and Vassilios Papavassiliou (1999), Consumer confusion is becoming more of a problem as consumers are provided with ever increasing

amounts of decision-relevant information in their purchasing environments. Moreover, consumer organizations frequently advise consumers to "shop around", "search for the best deal" and "be informed"; turning information search into more of an obligation than an option. In Western cultures such as United Kingdom (Turnbull et al., 2000), Netherlands (e.g. Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989), France (e.g. Kapferer, 1995a, b) and the USA (e.g. Foxman et al., 1990) much of research into consumer confusion has been carried out. However, research on confusion in the mobile phone market in Thailand have been carried out by Leek and Chansaakit (2006) and found that the same aspects of the industry (i.e. handsets, service and tariffs) caused confusion as in the UK. It was found that Thai consumer rely on friends and family to a greater extent to reduce confusion, in term of confusion reduction, which would be expected in a collectivist culture. To provide further understanding and validate the existing findings, further research on confusion in collectivist, Eastern cultures is necessary (Lee and Green, 1991).

The definition and causes of consumer confusion

It is becoming more accepted that consumer confusion is derived from three main sources:

1. Overchoice of products;
2. Similarity of products; and/or
3. Ambiguous, misleading or inadequate information conveyed through marketing communications (i.e. unclarity confusion).

Similarity confusion

According to Michell et. al. (2004); the potential alteration of a consumer's choice or an incorrect brand evaluation caused by the perceived similarity of products or services can be defined as similarity confusion. Meanwhile, Kholi and Thakor (1997) stated that consumers may mislead into buying an imitator brand rather than original brand because of the similarity of the products in term of the color and style of the packaging, lettering or name. In addition, at a subconscious level similarity confusion is said to occur. (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989).

Information overload

According to Mitchell et al., (2004) said that the quantity of decision relevant information and the choice of brands is the caused of overchoice confusion. It has been argued by Jacoby (1984) that consumers only examine small portions of the available information, but they do not overload themselves with information. However, it is possible that consumers may fail to attend to a vital piece of information, which may result in confusion (Mitchell et al., 2004).

Unclarity confusion

Mitchell et al. (2004) define unclarity confusion as a lack of understanding during which consumers are forced to re-evaluate their current beliefs about a product. This is a broad category which may arise from a number of factors:

Ambiguous information/dubious product claims – despite the fact that various laws and consumer bodies have been established to protect consumers, there are companies who will present their product information in an ambiguous manner or make claims about their products which may be misleading.

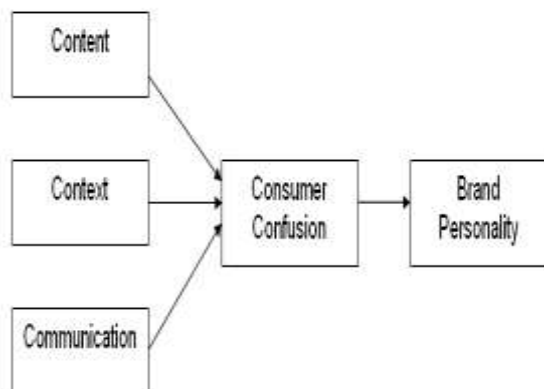
Conflicting information – consumers may be subjected to conflicting information, i.e. they may assimilate information from varying sources which is contradictory.

Incorrect interpretation – if one or more of the factors above occur, then consumers may make incorrect interpretations. However, even if product information is presented clearly there is still the possibility that the consumer may interpret it

incorrectly (Jacoby and Hoyer, 1989), which would again result in unclarity confusion.

From the review of literature, Figure 1 depicted the proposed theoretical framework of the study:

Figure 1 : Proposed Theoretical Framework



Hypothesis Development

Given the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1=Face to face interaction positively and significantly influencing brand personality

H2=Face to face interaction positively and significantly influencing consumer confusion

H3=Consumer confusion positively and significantly influencing brand personality

H4=Consumer confusion mediate the relationship between face-to-face interaction and brand personality

Research Design

Overview

A survey research was conducted to examine the relationships among independent variables (content, context and communication), mediate factor (consumer confusion) and dependent variables (brand personality). After reliabilities of the measures being used were ascertained, a series of regression analyses were conducted to address the research questions.

Samples

Data will be collect from undergraduate students from IPTS in the northern region such as Kedah, Perlis, and Penang. According to data that were collected from Malaysian of Higher Education (MOHE, 2008), total undergraduate students studies IPTS in Malaysia were 131, 940 students and 14% or 18, 472 students are from northern region. So, the researcher will distribute the questionnaire to 1% or 185 students in northern region for this research. The respondent will be selected through university-intercept and college-intercept.

The use of student sample has been widely criticized by many researchers (cf., Sweeny, Soutar and Johnson 1999) for not being the representative of the population; as they are not the typical consumers in the natural settings (Wells 1993). Despite the criticism, provided by several consumer behavior researchers, there have been a growing number of tourism researchers deliberately employing students in their studies in order to seek a better understanding of the student segment (Gallarza and Saura 2006). This group of researchers argues that students are a very important market segment, especially in a fast-food industry (Knutson 2000). One reason is that college students are recognized to be one of biggest revenue generators due to the size of the population and the number of times they patronize the fast-food establishment (Knutson 2000). This is why the use of students as the respondents has become very

common for the researchers in this context (Witkowski, Ma and Zheng 2003; Knutson 2000; Murase and Bojanic 2004).

In this study, the respondents were asked to fill out the survey through university-intercept. Subjects were first informed of the study description, and then asked to complete the question. Finally, the respondents provided personal data at the end.

Measures

All original scales in English were translated to Malaysia using a back-translation procedure (Brislin 1980). Brand personality was measured with Aaker's (1997) 42-item Brand Personality Scale.

The psychometric property of this scale with Malaysia consumers has been supported (Polyorat et al., 2008). The respondents were instructed to think of SMEs restaurant as if it were a person and to rate on a five-point scale (1 = not at all descriptive, 5 = extremely descriptive) the extent to which each of the 42 brand personality traits describes the brand. "Sincere," "exciting," "reliable," "glamorous and "rugged" are examples of items used to assess the brand personality dimensions of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness, respectively.

Second is to measure content. Using five-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the six items. "I can recognize the scents of SMEs restaurant" and "Some characteristics of SMEs restaurant come to my mind quickly" were examples of this scale.

Third is to measure context also using five-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. "Layout of SMEs restaurant is attractive" and "design in SMEs restaurant is encouraging" were examples of this scale.

Fourth is to measure communication. As well using five-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. "SMEs restaurant staff very helpful" and "SMEs restaurant staff is well-present" were examples of this scale.

Lastly is to measure consumer confusion. By using five-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. "All SMEs restaurant have produce similarity product" and "The information about SMEs restaurant is not same with their quality" were examples of this scale.

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