

BRAND PERSONALITY DIMENSIONS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN KUALA LUMPUR HOTELS

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ABSTRACT

Sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness are the dimensions of brand personality. It is the aim of this study to apply the same dimensions on hotel brands as to test whether the dimensions would reflect the hotel's personality and eventually affect customers' satisfaction. Using a quantitative approach, data gathered through surveys on the guests of five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis were used in this study. From the five dimensions, sincerity had higher scores, and it is believed that brand personality is adaptable to hotel brands. From this study, the hospitality industry will be benefited with the essential understanding of the brand personality impact on customers' satisfaction.

Keywords: *brand personality, customer satisfaction, five-star hotels*

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in Malaysia, especially the lodging industry, is expanding rapidly because of the increasing number of tourist arrivals in Malaysia. As the numbers of hotels in Kuala Lumpur are increasing, this encourages the competition among existing hotels and basically the competition is in term of market share amongst the hotels. Matovic (2002) supported that the competition among the hotels will bring benefit to the hotels such as improving the hotels' market share and the hotels' brands.

Kotler & Armstrong (2001) defined brand as "a seller's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services consistent to the buyers". Hotel brand will make it easier for customers to choose their preferred hotel and due to branding; hotel guests can easily differentiate one hotel to another. Thus, branding is crucial to the hotel industry. Biel (1993) mentioned "a unique brand personality in consumer minds can lead to an emotional bond to the brand". Therefore, a hotel with a unique brand personality will gain positive perception from their guests and this will lead to customer satisfaction and create loyalty towards the hotel itself.

However, Ambroise, Ferrandi, Jolivot, Merunka, Valette-Florence and ZineDanguir (2003) argued that brand personality dimensions' structural and validity is questioned, especially in the contexts of different culture. Many studies on brand personality dimensions conducted in Western countries and limited studies were conducted in Asian countries. In addition, Aaker (1997) mentioned that even though ruggedness revealed as one of the human personalities, it cannot be applied to Brand Personality because the result may vary due to the different locations and cultures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Personality

The definition of brand personality by Aaker (1997) is "the set of human characteristics associated with the brand." Whereby, Keller (1993) cited that the brand personality will serve a "symbolic or self-expressive function." From the perspective of customers, when they feel that the brand of a hotel is relevant to them, and they decide to stay loyal is because they feel that it is a right personality for them (Donahay & Rosenberger, 2007). The dimensions of brand personality, namely sincerity, excitement, competence and sophistication are not only reflects the human personality, but the characteristics are also applicable to the hotel industry.

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between the hotel's brand personality and customer satisfaction.

Brand Personality Dimensions

The first dimension of brand personality is sincerity which according to Aaker (1997) are domestic, honest, genuine and cheerful. However, Lee and Back (2010) mentioned that the items of sincerity are wholesome, down-to-earth, honest and cheerful. These components resemble the attitude of the employees. As an example, McDonalds was rated high on sincerity based on the employees' attitude towards the customers.

Hypothesis 1a: Sincerity has a significant effect towards the customer's satisfaction.

The second dimension of brand personality is excitement and Aaker (1997) mentioned that this component consists of characteristics such as daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date. This will be most suitable to the hotel's environment. Aaker, Bennet-Martinez and Garolera (2001) argued that excitement is the dimension that creates the hotel's theme.

Hypothesis 1b: Excitement has a significant effect towards the customer's satisfaction.

The third dimension is competence. Aaker (1997) mentioned that this dimension has characteristics that include reliable, responsible, dependable and efficient. This shall apply to the systems and technology being used in the hotel. Lee, Back and Kim (2009) justified that in competence dimension, there are items such as corporate, successful, technical, hard working and also confident. There are all applicable to the hotels' employees including the superior employees.

Hypothesis 1c: Competence has a significant effect towards the customer's satisfaction.

Next dimension would be sophistication, and the elements is glamorous, pretentious, charming and romantic, (Aaker, 1997). These characteristics associated with the customers that would like to have a prestigious moment when staying at the hotel.

Hypothesis 1d: Sophistication has a significant effect towards the customer's satisfaction.

Ruggedness is the last dimension in brand personality. This dimension resembles strong, masculine and western and reflected by the restaurant, cafe or even the facilities of the hotel itself (Aaker, 1997). The facilities that resemble ruggedness would give satisfaction to the guests that seek for something that is different from what they have or even something similar to their hometown as was mentioned by Norman (1963).

Hypothesis 1e: Ruggedness has a significant effect towards the customer's satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction was used to measure the post-purchase behavior of the customers. Jones, Mothersbaugh and Beatty (2000) defined satisfaction is defined as "an overall evaluation of performance based on all prior experiences with a firm." In addition, customer satisfaction can also be defined as a post-purchase evaluation and judgment

(Homburt & Giering, 2001). In this study, customers' satisfaction is based on their experience of staying in the hotels in Kuala Lumpur. Their level of satisfaction rated not only based on the hotels' services but also on the product attributes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Instrument

The scale used to describe the hotels' brand personality was a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all descriptive) to 5 (extremely descriptive) and for customer satisfaction, it was described by using a five-point Likert scale ranging from one to five, denoting very dissatisfied to very satisfied. Similar with most rating scales, the Likert-type scale often measures attitude and opinion on a five or seven categories (Preston & Colman, 2000), thus indicating that a five-point scale is widely used.

Table 1: Development of questionnaire

Study Variables	Sources of scale	Number of items	Type of scale
Brand Personality	Asperin (2007); Lee & Back (2010)	4 to 5 items for each dimension	Five-point scale ranging from 5 denoting (extremely descriptive) to 1 denoting (not at all descriptive)
Customer Satisfaction	Skogland&Siguaw (2004); Choi, OK, & Hyun (2010) Asperin (2007)	14 items 5 items 4 items	Five-point scale ranging from 5 denoting (very satisfied) to 1 denoting (very dissatisfied)

Data Collection

Convenience sampling been used by selecting the people who experienced staying in one of the hotels of upscale hotels in Kuala Lumpur. The questionnaires that been distributed were 566 whereby the respondents that have answered the questionnaires altogether were 283 respondents that generate 50% of response rate. Table 2 shows the highest number of respondents of each variable in the demographic profile section.

Table 2: Respondents' Demographic Profile

Variables	Indicator	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	106	37.5
	Female	177	62.5
Residency	Malaysia	268	95.0
	International	15	5.0
Age	26-35	111	39.2
Education Level	College or University	244	86.2

Employment Status	Professional	139	49.1
Income Level	RM3,003-RM9,000	139	49.1
Hotel	Equatorial Hotel	70	12.0

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assessments of internal reliability using the Cronbach's Alpha method were undertaken for brand personality dimensions' and customer satisfaction's instrument. According to Pallant (2005), the reliability test of Cronbach Alpha should be above 0.70. Based on the result of the reliability test, for brand personality variable, The highest Cronbach Alpha value is for sincerity at 0.874 for six items and whereby, ruggedness was at 0.750 for five items.

Table 3: Results of Reliability Test (N=283)

Items	Cronbach's Alpha	No of items
<u>Brand Personality</u>		
Sincerity	0.874	6
Excitement	0.858	4
Competence	0.742	5
Sophistication	0.770	5
Ruggedness	0.750	5
<u>Customer Satisfaction</u>		
Satisfaction and Personal Opinion	0.884	14

Based on the Pearson Correlation analysis, the result shows that sincerity with the score of ($r=0.54^{**}$; $p<.001$) has a strong correlation towards customer satisfaction. The lowest score and weak correlation are between ruggedness dimension and customer satisfaction which is ($r=.08$; $p=0.19$). Even though there was an insignificant correlation between ruggedness dimension and customer satisfaction, ruggedness did have correlation towards customer satisfaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are positive relationship between the hotel's brand personality and customer satisfaction. In order to answer the hypothesis 1a to 1e and also to satisfy research objective 2, a Regression Analysis was undertaken.

From Table 4, the result shows that out of the five dimensions, sincerity impacted the most to customer's satisfaction with the score of ($\beta=0.54$; $p<.001$). Then, followed by excitement ($\beta=0.47$; $p<.001$), sophistication with the score of ($\beta=0.45$; $p<.001$) and also competence ($\beta=0.44$; $p<.001$). As for ruggedness, it does not significantly contribute to the satisfaction of the hotel guests and the score is ($\beta=.08$; $p>.05$). Therefore, the analyses supported hypothesis 1 (1a to 1d). However, hypothesis 1e is not supported due to the insignificant result of ruggedness dimension to customer satisfaction.

Table 4: Results of regression of Brand Personality on Customer Satisfaction

Predictors	Model 1/Std. β
Step 1: Model Variables	
<u>Brand Personality Attributes:</u>	
Sincerity	0.54***
Excitement	0.47***
Competence	0.44***
Sophistication	0.45***
Ruggedness	.08
R^2	0.32
Adj. R^2	0.32
R^2 Change	0.32
F-Change	133.950***

IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

As was supported by the research results, it is strongly agreed that brand personality is one of the marketing approaches to enhance the satisfaction of the hotel guests. Brand personality and its dimensions do contribute to customer satisfaction. The study findings clearly showed that sincerity contributed the most to customer satisfaction. It is crucial for the hotels train their employees to practice the best sincere attitude in front of their guests. A brand personality resembles to what the hotel truly is and the hotel will serve their guests according to what the hotel's personality is. Based on the hotel's personality, the hotel guests may easily describe the products and services of the hotels and even its employees as the brand personality of the hotels. As for ruggedness, the result showed that it is not significantly effect on customer satisfaction. Thus, this dimension did not have any positive or negative influence on the feeling of satisfaction of the hotel guests. However, the ruggedness is more suitable to reflect the theme hotels for example, Hard Rock Hotel.

For future research, it is recommended an investigation between the brand personality and the post-purchase behavior such as repeat purchase intention, loyalty or the intention to recommend that will provide a wide array of knowledge on the brand personality for the lodging industry. As a conclusion, based on the discussion above, it is strongly supported that brand personality is not only crucial to the clothing or the automotive industry, it is also crucial to the hospitality industry namely the lodging industry. The hotels acknowledge the importance of guests experience and brand personality dimensions, which will create a great influence in the development of favorable attitude and behavioral brand-related outcomes.

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