

Exploring the Mediating Effect of Brand Relationship Quality in the Service Brand Equity and Brand Resonance Linkage

(Meninjau Kesan Kualiti Hubungan Jenama sebagai Pengantara dalam Kaitan antara Ekuiti Jenama Perkhidmatan dengan Kecenderungan Jenama)

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore the mediating role of brand relationship quality in predicting the effects of service brand equity towards brand resonance in Malaysia's mobile communication service. The reliability test on all these constructs produce satisfactory reliability coefficients. Correlation analysis is conducted and the results indicate that there are positive and significant relationships among the constructs. Then, Sobel's test is used to investigate the occurrence of mediation in the study. The result shows service brand equity and brand resonance is significantly related through the mediating effect of brand relationship quality. This is in line with the assumption of social exchange theory that anticipates the central discipline of human behaviour is about the quality of the relationship that emerges in the exchange process. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings and discussion will contribute to the theory of consumer behavior, branding and relationship marketing, as well as to offer insightful knowledge for practical consideration.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk melihat peranan kualiti hubungan jenama sebagai faktor penghubung antara ekuiti jenama perkhidmatan dengan kecenderungan jenama dalam konteks perkhidmatan telekomunikasi mudah alih di Malaysia. Tahap kesahihan ujian mencatatkan keputusan yang memuaskan terhadap kesemua konstruk yang diuji. Keputusan ujian korelasi menunjukkan wujud hubungan yang positif antara konstruk. Seterusnya, ujian Sobel telah digunakan untuk memeriksa kewujudan faktor penghubung dalam model yang diuji. Keputusan mengesahkan bahawa hubungan antara ekuiti jenama perkhidmatan dengan kecenderungan jenama dipengaruhi oleh kualiti hubungan jenama. Keputusan ini adalah seiring dengan andaian teori pertukaran sosial yang menyatakan bahawa gelagat manusia terhadap sesebuah jenama adalah berpaksikan kepada kualiti hubungan yang terbentuk dalam proses jual beli. Diharapkan hasil dan perbincangan kajian ini dapat menyumbang kepada teori gelagat pengguna, penjenamaan dan pemasaran perhubungan; dan seterusnya menawarkan pengetahuan yang berguna untuk dipraktikkan.

Keywords: Brand Relationship Quality; Brand Resonance; Service Brand Equity; Social Exchange Theory; Mobile Communication Services

INTRODUCTION

Economic activities have gone through a tremendous transformation from agricultural activities to industrial activities, and economies are now moving towards predominantly service-based activities that focus on intangible resources, value co-creation and relationships. However, the options for adding value in the services are not easy due to customer reliance on experience and credence qualities during the purchase decision (Gabbott & Hogg 1994; Zeithaml & Bitner 2000). Thus, the introduction of extrinsic cues, such as branding, has provided an alternative solution to overcome the issue of complexity for adding value in services because brands embody different sets of meanings that generate specific associations or emotions for every consumer (Kapferer 1992). This is well supported by the claims made by Berry

(2000), Levitt (1981) and Onkvisit and Shaw (1988). According to these authors, the key to success in services marketing is "tangibilizing the intangible" by using extrinsic cues that could help reduce customers' purchase risk and optimize their cognitive processing abilities towards service selection. Therefore, as conjectured by other studies (e.g., De Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn 2003; Lim & O'Cass 2001), the execution of a service brand strategy needs more consideration. This is because the implicit association with the brand becomes an integral part in customer decision making where it is seen as valuable assets and sources of differentiation for the services.

In an attempt to describe the relationship between customers and brands, few brand relationship scholars have introduced a brand relationship quality construct. Moreover, in a similar vein with the debatable satisfaction

construct, brand relationship quality, which is renowned as the psychological strength description, has become the central focus or treated as a mediator in predicting the consumers' response to the brand. Several brand relationship scholars have supported this argument and highlighted the importance of a brand relationship quality in strengthening the brand relationship to the extent that it can convert indifferent customers into loyal ones (Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998; Garbarino & Johnson 1999; Hennig-Thurau & Klee 1997; Kumar, Scheer & Steenkamp 1995; Morgan & Hunt 1994).

However, little attention has been paid to investigating the mediating effects of brand relationship quality in predicting the relational behavior of the customers with a brand, particularly in service industries. In addition, no research has been found which examines the antecedent of brand relationship quality such as Berry's (2000) service brand equity and the consequences construct such as brand resonance by Keller (2003). According to Berry (2000) and Keller (2006), such constructs are more consistent with the relationship and branding theories. Furthermore, the integrative characteristics of the antecedent, mediator and consequences in the customer brand relationship constructs have been highlighted by Aggarwal (2004) and Fournier (1998) as a future aspect of broader relationship marketing theory development in the customer context. Therefore, the objective of the study is to explore the effects of brand relationship quality in predicting the linkage between service brand equity and brand resonance in the context of service.

LITERATURE REVIEW

BRAND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

Previous marketing scholars, such as Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2002) and Oliver (1999), have suggested that satisfying consumers might not be sufficient for continuing success in the market because satisfaction is conceptualized as a cognitive judgment and transaction-specific outcome, but lacks focus on affective and strength. For example, according to a study on Malaysian retail banking services by Che-Ha and Hashim (2007), satisfaction has only a marginal effect on customer loyalty. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Hess and Story (2005) argue that this could be because satisfaction covers a lower level of the psychological aspect, where the focus is on how customers respond to competitive offers, product availability, price competition, or even product failure. Satisfaction, however, does not include the extent of the psychological strength that is capable of retaining the customers. Therefore, the introduction of a construct that captures broader psychological forces in consumers' relationships with brands may help to explain and predict the variation in desirable post-consumption behaviors among consumers and their preferred brand (Fournier 1998).

The most extensively discussed emerging concept in customer psychological forces toward the brand is brand relationship quality (Thomson, MacInnes & Park 2005). Brand relationship quality provides an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship (Garbarino & Johnson 1999) which cannot be easily duplicated by competitors (Wong, Hung & Chow 2007). The most cited definition of brand relationship quality is by Fournier (1998: 363), who defines it as the entire range of interpersonal variables in the relationship that attempt to capture the strength of the connection formed between the customer and the brand toward a prediction of relationship stability over time.

Shimp and Madden (1988) have initiated the transformation of relationship quality concept into the consumption context, introducing a "consumer-object love" model based on Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love to conceptualize the structure of customer brand relationship quality. In addition, Shimp and Madden (1988) suggest that the nature of a consumer's relationship quality with an object or brand is similar to the notion of extreme product enthusiasm, an approach which was later expanded upon by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Consistent with that argument, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) and Whang et al. (2004) find that there is a significant attachment to some "love objects", especially emotional aspects which have fundamental similarities between interpersonal loves in human psychological contexts. The three main components of brand relationship quality can be briefly described as follows:

1. Intimacy is the emotional basis of love relations and defined as "the feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness" (Stenberg 1997: 315). Likewise, in the context of consumer-brand relationship, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Fournier (1998) have find that consumers often have feelings of closeness and connectedness with consumption objects or brand.
2. Passion is the motivational basis of love relations and defined as "the drive that leads to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships." Similarly, in relation to consumption, passion appears in the form of "self-esteem, nurturance, affiliation, dominance, submission and self-actualization" (Stenberg 1997: 315).
3. Commitment is the cognitive aspect of love relation and defined as "the short term and long term decision/intention to maintain that relationship" (Stenberg 1997: 315). Additionally, in to the context of consumption, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Robert and Albert (2010) describe consumer's short term decisions as based on the attributes/benefits that are compatible with the consumers' want. On the other hand, in long term decision/intention, consumers become committed to brands as a matter of loyalty, inertia, or other factors leading to repeat purchase behavior.

Acker and Davis (1992), Ahuvia (2005), and Robert and Albert (2010) find that the three components of Sternberg's theory of love are analogues to consumer-object relations. The reason is that the corresponding consumer-object components are connected to human psychological processes, such as cognition, emotion, and motivation. Therefore, brand relationship quality may offer marketers an alternative measurement and paradigm that may challenge recent ideas concerning the importance of developing strong emotional relationships with consumers (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Reichheld 2003; Roberts 2004).

SERVICE BRAND EQUITY

Similar to the concepts of brand and added value, brand equity has been expounded in multiple frameworks based upon financial and marketing perspectives (Wood 2000). This corresponds with Feldwick (1996) who identifies three different approaches of brand equity; the brand financial description approach (Leuthesser 1988; Winters 1991), brand strength (Keller 1993, 2003; Lassar, Mittal & Sharma 1995; Srivastava & Shocker 1991), and brand value (Aaker 1991; Farquhar 1989; Kapferer 1992; Winters 1991). According to Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995), however, most of the studies have focused on the marketing view (brand strength and brand value) instead of the financial view in defining brand equity. While there are several definitions of brand equity, one of the most generally accepted definitions is provided by Aaker (1991:15), defining brand equity as "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/or to that firm's customers".

However, the main criticism of the brand equity concept arises in relation to generalizability of the concept in different contexts, particularly in the service context. The brand equity concept is often treated as indirectly related to service setting because it is often implied that the concept has more relevance for marketing of customer goods (Berry 2000; Blattberg, Getz & Thomas 2001; Krishnan & Hartline 2001; Lassar et al. 1995; Rust, Zeithaml & Lemon 2004; Vargo & Lusch 2004). Berry (2000) conceptualizes brand equity in the context of services as an value added construct that deals with the issue of the intangibility and credence attributes of the service. As such, Berry (2000) highlights two main components of service brand equity: brand awareness and brand meaning.

Brand awareness, as defined by Berry (2000: 129), is the initial knowledge of brand in memory that customers use to set their expectation towards the service brand. Meanwhile, brand meaning is defined as the perception about a certain brand held by a customer and which is thought to be ideal, strong and unique brand associations. This concept has been tested in various service contexts (Blain, Levy & Ritchie 2005; Bolton, Lemon & Verhoef 2004; Che-Ha & Hashim 2007; Grace & O'Cass 2002;

Kim & Kim 2004; Krishnan & Hartline 2001; O'Cass & Grace 2003). However, both components have a different degree of contribution to the service brand equity construct (Keller 1993). According to Berry (2000), brand awareness has a secondary impact while brand meaning has a primary impact towards the formation of service brand equity. However, the synergy of both components is important for the customer's perception of the brand. Boyd and Helms (2005) posit that customers cognitively group the entire brand's portfolio together as a result of their brand awareness and meaning, expecting uniformity and consistency in the overall brand experience. The synergy between the two components in influencing customer perception is crucial as it provides customers with the means to make choices, judgment and quicker decisions (Scrull & Wyer 1989).

BRAND RESONANCE

Loyalty is acknowledged as the construct describing the consequences of the social economic exchange (Aaker 1991; Burnham, Frels & Mahajan 2003; Gil & Artz 2007; McMullan & Gilmore 2003; Yoo, Donthu & Lee 2000). However, the term 'loyalty' does not have a universally accepted definition and has become problematic when included in constructs associated with relational exchange domain. Fournier (1998), Keller (2003), and Wallendorf and Belk (1989) have suggested that researchers need to move away from measuring a brand loyalty strictly as a metric assessment based on repeat purchases, but rather on a low relative attitude (spurious loyal customer) and as a talismanic form of consumption. Furthermore, according to Dick and Basu (1994) and Craig (2000), the existence of high patronage among spurious loyal customers is basically due to habitual buying, financial incentives, convenience, risk avoidance, high switching barriers and lack of alternatives. Moreover, Reinartz, Thomas and Kumar (2005) have discovered little or no evidence to suggest a relationship exists between loyalty and profitability.

Despite these arguments, there is still a lack of effort that extends the behavioral and attitudinal aspects of the loyalty construct into a more creative description of the brand consequences construct that is suitable for application in a service context. Assuming that service brand loyalty implies more than just the intention for future consumption with a service provider, it is reasonable for a service organization to expect social bonds and intensity dimensions, such as an active engagement to a brand (Keller 1993, 2003). the present study argues that brand resonance, as depicted by Keller (2003), aligns with the past loyalty construct, as depicted by Oliver (1999), and, therefore, a sense of community and active engagement are valuable tools in understanding the broader customer behavior construct in service. The brand resonance components, as depicted by Keller (1993, 2003), can briefly be described as follows:

1. Behavioral measurements are comprised of actual brand purchasing, repeat purchase and switching behavior (Jacoby & Chestnut 1978; Pritchard, Havitz & Howard 1999).
2. Attitudinal measurements are concerned with the sense of loyalty, engagement and allegiance that help customers maintain their preference and choice of brand over its alternatives (Beatty & Kahle 1988; Crosby & Taylor 1983; Tepeci 1999).
3. Sense of community is defined as specialized, non-geographically bound communities of admirers of a brand whose social relations are centered on the branded goods or services (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002: 39).
4. Active engagement is defined as the customer's willingness to invest time, energy, money and other resources in the brand beyond those expended during purchase of the brand (Keller 2003: 93).

THE RESEARCH MODEL

Elements of psychological strength, such as commitment, passion and intimacy, are considered to be dimensions of the brand relationship quality construct and have received substantial support in their role as the mediator in conceptualizing the relationship between a customer and a brand (e.g., Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Fournier 1998; Robert & Albert 2010; Shimp & Madden 1988). A recent study by Rajaobelina and Bergeron (2009) finds that relationship quality performs a mediating role in influencing the link between the antecedents and consequences of relationship marketing in financial services. The mediating role of relationship quality has also been validated in different types of services, including retail services (Chung and Shin 2010; Ou et al. 2011; Vesel & Zabkar 2010), dining services in luxury restaurants (Kim, Lee & Yoo 2006), and business-business services (Rauyruen & Miller 2007).

However, the findings from previous studies are still questionable because their connection with relationship and branding theories is limited. Therefore, this study proposes a research model considers relationship and branding theories by examining the mediating role of brand relationship quality in the service brand equity-brand resonance link. In addition, Preacher and Hayes (2004) suggest that there is a need to have a formal conceptual analysis, such as the direct effect among constructs, to validate the mediating role of brand relationship quality in the proposed model.

First, a number of studies have posited that service brand equity is an antecedent of brand relationship quality. Brand equity has become the most important construct to influence the customer's psychological forces (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Chandron, Wansink & Laurent 2000; Hirschman & Morris 1982). The justification is that customers are less motivated to continue the exchange relationship in the absence of customer awareness and

meaningful value. This leads us to our first research hypothesis:

H₁: Service brand equity has a positive effect on brand relationship quality

Empirical evidence has been presented that posits brand equity as having a direct effect on attaining positive relationship consequences such as brand resonance (Aaker 1991; Atilgan, Aksoy & Akinci 2005; Keller 2003). The definition of loyalty presented by Aaker (1991), as an element of brand resonance, implicitly explains the direct effects of brand equity on brand resonance as a situation which reflects how likely a customer will switch to another brand, especially when the brand changes its features or brand equity elements. Furthermore, Keller (1998) finds that one of the characteristics of brands possessing strong brand equity is strong brand loyalty. This position appears consistent with Aaker (1991), who argues that brand loyalty could be considered as an outcome of brand equity. This leads us to our next research hypothesis:

H₂: Service brand equity has a positive effect on brand resonance

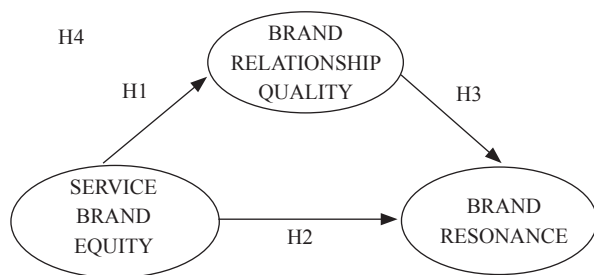
The next concern of the present study is to propose a model that links brand relationship quality and brand resonance. Empirical evidences put forth by Numerous studies have demonstrated the direct impact of brand relationship quality on the brand relationship consequences construct, such as brand resonance (Chung & Shin 2010; Finn 2005; Kim, Ko & James 2011; Macintosh 2007; Ou, Shih, Chen & Wang 2011; Rajaobelina & Bergeron 2009; Vesel & Zabkar 2010; Walker 2001; Wong et al. 2007; Wu 2011). This corresponds with the motivation theory that posits that in securing the causal structure of individual behavior, an exchange cannot merely occur without the existence of an individual's psychological influence (Araujo & Easton 1996; Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Gouldner 1960; Zafirovski 2005). This leads us to our next research hypothesis:

H₃: Brand relationship quality has positive effect on brand resonance.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the path analysis, as described in H1, H2 and H3, will demonstrate that brand relationship quality is a partial mediator in the overall model. This finding is also supported by Cropanzano et al. (2001), Fullerton (2005) and Wong et al. (2007), whose findings have shown that a brand relationship quality has a partial mediating role in influencing customer loyalty. One possible explanation for the partial mediating effect of brand relationship quality is that it results from habitual buying, financial incentives, convenience, risk avoidance, high switching barriers and lack of alternatives (Craig 2000; Dick & Basu, 1994; Lassar et al. 1995; Taylor, Celuch & Goodwin 2004). This provides the basis for our final research hypothesis:

H₄: Brand relationship quality partially mediates the linkage between service brand equity and brand resonance

The contribution of the study is that it integrates and expands upon previous constructs in Figure 1 as the key factors in understanding the development of customer brand relationship in a service context. Moreover, such integration is aligned with the underpinning theory of relationship in the consumption context. The Social Exchange Theory has highlighted that in order to secure a causal structure of individual behavior an exchange sometimes cannot merely occur without the existence of an individual's psychological influence (Araujo & Easton 1996; Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005; Gouldner 1960; Hinde 1979,1995; Zafirovski 2005).



Source: Adapted from Berry (2000), Shimp and Madden (1988) and Keller (1993, 2003)

FIGURE 1. Illustration of partial mediation role of brand relationship quality in the service brand equity and brand resonance linkage

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses upon the mobile communication services industry in Malaysia, whose total subscription reached 35,263,000 as of 31 March 2011 (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission 2011). The mobile communication service operators identified are Celcom, Digi and Maxis. The decision in selecting mobile communication services over other services is due to the fact that this sector has recorded the highest branding expenses in Malaysia (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission 2009: 11). Therefore, this sector is expected to provide insight into how customers develop their relationship with brands in the service domain.

A convenience sampling method is used in this study, limiting the sample frame to 350 respondents. As outlined by Sekaran (2003), the sample strategy is appropriate for exploratory research. As a strategy to overcome the potential bias in a convenience sampling, respondents are selected based on their willingness to be a subject of the survey. These respondents must currently subscribe to any of the three mobile communication operators. Data collection takes place at shopping malls around Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur, regarded to be urban geographical locations that fit the general profile of mobile communication users in Malaysia.

Pertaining to the instrument used in the study, previous studies have provided considerable assistance in the operationalization of the service brand equity, brand relationship quality and brand resonance construct. However, because the construct is context specific, a refined instrument is developed based upon the theoretical and empirical discussion in the literature (see Table A1 in the Appendix for the instrument loading analysis and reliability summary). All questions are modified in order to adequately capture the service brand equity, brand relationship quality and brand resonance constructs in a consumer-service brand context. A 5-point Likert's scale is used, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). By applying the refinement measurement process, outlined by Churchill and Iacobuoci (2002), the reliability of the pilot study (n = 30) is alpha = 0.95. Some initial measures do not fit the loading and are discarded prior to the final questionnaire.

RESULTS

After three weeks of survey, a total of 317 out of 350 responses (90% response rate) are used for data analysis. An analysis of respondents' demographics reveals that 51 percent are male. The highest age group distribution of the respondents falls in the 21 to 30 years old age group (49.8%), followed by 35.3 percent in the 31 to 40 years old age group, and 11.7 percent under the 41 to 50 years old age group (see Table A2 in the Appendix for respondent demographic summary). Table 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents' preference in mobile communication providers. In general, 54.3 percent of the total respondents subscribe to Celcom followed by Maxis (25.5%) and Digi (20%). This rating exercise has taken into consideration the respondents' duration of subscription. A majority of the respondents have subscribed for 6-10 years with their current mobile communication service provider.

TABLE 1. Preferred mobile communication brand name and no. of years use

Preferred Brand	No of years use					Total
	<2	2-5	6-10	11-15	16>	
Celcom	16	8	72	47	29	172
Maxis	5	1	33	28	14	81
Digi	6	5	33	10	10	64
Total	27	14	138	85	53	317

The reliability coefficient, or Cronbach α , for the overall constructs (44 items) is $\alpha = 0.959$. Meanwhile, the KMO's measure of sampling adequacy for the sample data are 0.895 (service brand equity), 0.941 (brand relationship quality) and 0.907 (brand resonance); where all values are greater than 0.7 for a satisfactory level for factor analysis (Sureshchandar, Rajendran & Anantharaman 2001). In addition, no items are omitted in the final study because

the reliability results of the three main constructs range from 0.885 to 0.961 (0.70 or higher are acceptable) (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994) (see Table A1 for the instrument loading analysis and reliability summary). Then, for further analysis, the constructs are formed by taking the average of the individual items (see Table A3 for the descriptive summary). Such a composite procedure is recommended by Hair et al. (2010). The final set includes a total of 44 items representing the constructs for service brand equity, brand relationship quality and brand resonance; and is found to be reliable and adequate for further analysis.

The next stage of the research involves testing for a series of causal relationships among the constructs (H1, H2 and H3). These series or steps are in line with the suggestions put forth by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Preacher and Hayes (2004), who find a need to have a formal heuristic analysis among constructs to detect the mediation effects in the overall model. The steps are as follows:

Step 1: Investigate the relationship between independent variable (service brand equity) and the dependent variable (brand resonance) or H1;

Step 2: Investigate the relationship between independent variable (service brand equity) and the mediator (brand relationship quality) or H2; and

Step 3: Investigate the relationship between the mediator (brand relationship quality) and the dependent variable (brand resonance) or H3.

According to Pallant (2001) and Tabachnick and Fidell (1996), the acceptance value for the statistical significance assessment is when the causal relationship between constructs explain at least 30 percent of the variances (R^2) and null hypothesis tests in the population is equal to 0.00 which reaches statistical significance $p < .0005$. Therefore, referring to Table 2, all the three steps have shown a satisfactory level of relationship between the constructs. Therefore, the study accepts H1, H2 and H3 alternative hypotheses and concludes that there are relationships between service brand equity, brand relationship quality and brand resonance.

Aside from providing additional support for earlier findings, the major contribution of this study stems from findings that determine that brand relationship quality performs a mediating role in the service brand equity and

TABLE 2. Regression results for service brand equity, brand relationship quality and brand resonance

Analysis	Adj R ²	F	Variables	Unstand.		Stand.	T	Sig.
				B	SE	B		
(1) Brand Resonance	0.311	143.61	(Constant)	1.147	0.18		6.37	0.00
			Service brand equity	0.746	0.062	0.56	11.98	0.00
(2) Brand Relationship Quality	0.300	136.42	(Constant)	1.05	0.195		5.38	0.00
			Service brand equity	0.788	0.067	0.55	11.68	0.00
(3) Brand Resonance	0.616	506.90	(Constant)	0.866	0.11		7.89	0.00
			Brand relationship quality	0.731	0.032	0.785	22.51	0.00

Notes: All F-statistics are statistically significant at $p < .0005$

brand resonance linkage. The results in Table 2 implicitly describe brand relationship quality as performing a partial mediating role in the overall model (Baron & Kenny 1986). However, Baron and Kenny (1986) suggest that in the final steps in detecting the mediation effects in the overall model, there is a need to further statistically test the hypothesis. The step is as follows:

Step 4: Investigate if the brand relationship quality partially mediates the service brand equity-brand resonance linkage or H4

In statistics, the more common and highly recommended but conservative test of mediating effect is the test proposed by Sobel (1982). This is consistent with the findings of Baron and Kenny (1986), MacKinnon, Warsi and Dwyer (1995) and Preacher and Hayes (2004), who conclude that the procedure developed by Sobel (1982) is statistically more rigorous and provides a more direct test of a simple mediation condition or partial mediation. Thus, the equation proposed by Sobel (1982) to test the partial mediation, that is, $z\text{-value} = a*b/\text{SQRT}(b^2*s_a^2$

$+ a^2*s_b^2)$ is employed. The significance level is satisfied when the z value is greater than 1.96 (Preacher & Hayes 2004).

In order to conduct the Sobel's test, the regression coefficients and standard errors from the regressions on the relationships between service brand equity and brand relationship quality; and between brand relationship quality and brand resonance are used (extracted from Table 2). These values are then processed using the SPSS macro (syntax file) for estimating the partial mediation effects as suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004: 725-728). Table 3 reports that the Sobel's statistics is 10.457, with an associated p-value of 0.00 and z value greater than 1.96 (Preacher & Hayes 2004). Specifically, the observed p-value falls below the established alpha level of 0.05 and accordingly provides full support for the study's major hypothesis. Based on this result, this study concludes that there is significant evidence that brand relationship quality partially mediates the linkage between service brand equity and brand resonance in the context of Malaysia's mobile communication service.

TABLE 3. Indirect effect and significance using normal distribution

Input from regressions	Std. Error	Sobel's Test	Sign.
<i>A</i>	0.788	0.055	0.00*
<i>B</i>	0.731	0.055	0.00*
s_a	0.067	0.055	0.00*
s_b	0.032	10.457	0.00*
t_a	11.680		0.00*
t_b	22.514		0.00*

Notes: *significant at $p < .0005$ and $z > 1.96$. Abbreviations *a* and *b* are the coefficients of the respective constructs, s_a and s_b are their respective standard errors and t_a and t_b are their respective t-values

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that service brand equity is positively linked to brand relationship quality and brand resonance. It is noted that established brand value constructs, such as a service brand equity, have a significant impact on the formation of brand relationship quality and influences customer's behavior toward the brand. Onkvisit and Shaw (1989) posit that a strong service brand with a clear set of values is essential for the psychological bonding process and also influences the behavior of the customers. Thus, all values that constitute the individual understanding and evaluation of the brand equity concept, such as the synergy of brand awareness and brand meaning, are important factors in the decision of the customer to develop a relationship with a particular service brand. This proposition is supported by Kahneman, Wakker and Sarin (1997), who find that individuals are motivated by what they want and express their 'preferences' over available alternatives as a result of their awareness and meaning towards their preferred brand. This poses challenges the service organizations to strategize smartly and integrate the value process from brand image development (brand awareness) to performance consistency associated with the service brand (brand meaning). This is because an appropriate integration and synergy of such as values have the capability to influence customers' psychological strength and encourage positive behavioral intentions with the brand (Grace & O'Cass 2002; Herbig & Milewicz 1993).

Although previous research indicates that psychological ties or brand relationship quality is positively related to customer's brand response, this is the first study to provide empirical evidence that psychological ties play a role in the service brand equity-brand resonance link model. The result specifically indicates that a customer who perceives service brand equity positively is more likely to have higher levels of psychological forces of the brand (brand relationship quality), which in turn will have a positive impact on their resonance with the service brand. In addition to supporting earlier findings, this study provides empirical evidence that supports the principal assumption of the social exchange theory. The theory depicts the mediating role of individual psychological

forces in relation to the prediction variation in desirable post-brand consumption behavior of the customer.

Furthermore, the findings provide insight into practical considerations. The development of the brand strategy should focus on the underlying state of customers' psychological ties with the brand. This is an important aspect because strong customer psychological ties have significant impacts on a company's competitive advantage, which cannot be easily duplicated by competitors (Wong et al. 2007). Moreover, strong commitment, passion and preference towards the brand can lead to positive customer behavior such as word-of-mouth and loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006).

Consequently, brand managers should consider creative ways to measure brand performance and broaden existing constructs, rather than continuing to focus on the traditional loyalty construct. From the findings, elements of brand resonance, such as loyalty, are able to manifest as a broader consequences construct of service brand equity and brand relationship quality. In addition, brand resonance is also more suitable as a construct for application in relational exchange and service domain (Keller 2003).

While the findings of this study provide a number of theoretical and practical implications, it is also important to acknowledge the possible limitations associated with the findings. First, as this is exploratory research, the customer-brand relationship variables used in the survey instrument limited the research solely to mobile communication services and did not include other services in Malaysia. Furthermore, the analysis is tested based on a simple mediation model as depicted in Figure 1, whereby the effects of the sub dimensions of the mediating constructs are not tested. Therefore, the sub dimensions of the brand relationship quality constructs should be further explored and compared across different service categories. In addition, the study can be validated further by using more powerful statistical approaches, such as structural equation modeling, for assessing a complicated mediation model because it offers a reasonable way to measure latent variables with multiple measured indicators.

In short, the execution of service brand strategies needs further consideration due to the unique and complex characteristics of these services. Services cannot be seen, felt, tasted or touched (experienced) in the same manner in which goods can be sensed and poses a challenge to service providers. Service brand providers should develop more creative ways in assessing the degree of customer brand dependence and response without neglected the psychological strength of the customers. This is certainly important because customer responses depend on the extent of consistent and positive perceptions that lead to the strong psychological bond. This study has attempted to explore in the context of customers and service brands development. Finally, the practical implications from the results are that communication service providers might be able to utilize their brand strategies more efficiently to achieve the best results with appropriate investments.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1. Instrument loading analysis and reliability summary

Source(s)	Dimension	Instrument Use	Loading	MSA	TVE	Alpha	Sign.		
Reynolds & Gutman Turley & Moorec (1995), Aaker (1996)	Brand Awareness	Know what the brand stand for	.859	0.798					
		Know the symbol looks like	.795	0.936					
		Know the color	.871	0.847					
		Know the attributes	.604	0.847					
		Service is favorable	.824	0.897					
		Service meet expectation	.844	0.91					
		Employees competency	.841	0.941					
		Employees courteously	.800	0.966					
		Pleasing counter ambient	.804	0.919					
	Cronin & Taylor (1992); Bitner (1992); Lee & Cunningham (2001);Winsted (2000);O'cass & Grace (2004); O'Loughlin & Szmigin (2004); Fullerton (2005)	Brand Meaning	Informative signage	.762	0.944				
			Equipment is well functioning	.743	0.967				
			Charge worth value for money	.813	0.935				
			Deceptive charge (-)	.637	0.936				
			Competent Image	.776	0.91				
			Exciting Image	.833	0.861				
			Happy	.895	0.781				
			Confident	.874	0.815				
			Impress	.892	0.813				
			Feel safe	.835	0.884				
Service Brand Equity		Believe the information	.668	0.802					
		Care what people say	.741	0.814					
		Info. influence my attitude	.751	0.829					
		Total		0.876	68.61	0.866	0.00		
		Brand Relationship Quality	Commitment	Very focused on the brand	.835	0.913			
				Committed to the brand	.857	0.890			
				My first choice	.827	0.935			
			Carroll & Ahuvia (2006); Albert (2010)	Intimacy	Very attached to the brand	.767	0.959		
					Intimacy	.856	0.952		
					Wonderful brand	.867	0.969		
				Passion	Passionate	.900	0.952		
					Captivating brand	.890	0.945		
					Enthusiastic about the brand	.898	0.944		
					Addicted to brand	.868	0.948		
		Behavioral	Magical relationship	.784	0.943				
			Total		0.941	72.395	0.961	0.00	
			Continue use	.762	0.917				
			Purchase other service	.795	0.915				
			Willing to pay more	.756	0.934				
Brand Resonance	Attitudinal	Say positive about the brand	.858	0.921					
		Recommend to others	.840	0.916					
		Used by people similar to me	.623	0.943					
	Community	Feel belongs to a group	.692	0.927					
		Proud others to know me	.862	0.924					
		Always interested to learn	.808	0.888					
		Willing to spend time	.829	0.861					
	Active engagement	Willing to spend money	.742	0.863					
		Total		0.907	57.043	.929	0.00		

TABLE A2. Respondent demographic profiles

Demographic		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	164	51.7
	Female	153	48.3
Age	<20	2	.6
	21-30	158	49.8
	31-40	112	35.3
	41-50	45	14.2
	51-60	13	4.1
Malay	154	48.6	
	Chinese	94	29.7
Ethnic	Indian	44	13.9
	Others	25	7.9
Education	SPM	56	17.7
	STPM	19	6.0
	Diploma/Professional Certificate	71	22.4
	Degree	158	49.8
Occupational	Master	13	4.1
	Professional	66	20.8
	Executive	89	28.1
	Academician	27	8.5
	Clerk	42	13.2
	Student	72	22.7
	Manager	7	2.2
	Self-Employed	9	2.8
	Not Working	5	1.6
	Monthly Income	< 500	62
500-1500		19	6.0
1501-2500		78	24.6
2501-3500		53	16.7
3501-4500		49	15.5
4501-5500		23	7.3
> 5500		33	10.4

TABLE A3. Descriptive statistics

Construct	Mean	Std Dev.
Service Brand Equity	3.3654	0.47802
Brand Relationship Quality	3.2911	0.76230
Brand Resonance	3.2713	0.70956