



RESEARCH ARTICLE

DETERMINANTS OF BRAND EQUITY FOR FRESH FRUIT IN VIETNAM: BASED ON CUSTOMER APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at defining and measuring the impacts of brand equity Vietnamese fresh fruits on the overall brand equity and interactions between them. This paper used qualitative and quantitative research methods: (i) qualitative research conducted through direct interviews with 10 experts and focus group discussions with 10 consumers, and (ii) quantitative research conducted through direct interviews with 520 consumers. The results show that (i) brand equity of Vietnamese fresh fruit is influenced directly by five factors, including brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and perceived safety; of which, perceived quality and perceived safety have more significant effects on the overall brand equity; and (ii) there are interactions among the factors.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Vietnam's fresh fruit products have been mainly consumed domestically, and it is still difficult to export foreign market. Although the output of fresh fruit has increased steadily, the export turnover is still unstable over the years. Some of main reasons are fragmented production, lack of post-harvest technology, fresh fruit preservation; domestic producers have not applied many scientific and technological advances to take competitive advantages in foreign markets, especially in assessing the impacts of brand equity of Vietnam's fresh fruits. In addition, government has conducted some incentives to promote fresh fruit ineffectively with a lack of strategic vision for these products. Therefore, the brand of Vietnam fresh fruits have still not made a definite impression on foreign consumer's demand. As the result, the value of Vietnam fresh fruit is still unremarkable. Therefore, it is time to pay attention to the bigger problem which is to build and develop a brand for fresh fruit products in order to increase its brand value on the basis of being more intensive, professional. We have to develop the domestic market and at the same time penetrate deeply into the world market. According to Keller & Lehmann (2006), it is difficult to understand the role of brand value and components, and in order to apply for building and

developing a brand effectively, also the methods to measure them for Vietnam fresh fruit.

Literature review

Brand equity can be defined as the value addition brought in by brand name (Aaker, 1991, 1996); Brand equity such as customer's brand knowledge, (Keller, 1993), added benefits (Simon & Sullivan, 1993); brand equity to the customers (Erdem & Swait, 1998); added value to a product from brand name (Srivastava & Shocker, 1991; Wood, 2000); the different customer perceptions between brand and un-branded products of similar attribute (Yoo et al., 2000). In short, studies imply that brand equity shows rational and emotional selection from customers for a brand among many other competing brands on the market (Davis & Doughlass, 1995). This is the focal point for explaining the brand equity as the result of marketing efforts from companies in order to create positive customer awareness and behaviors. It also explains the intangible values that affect customer preference for one brand over the other.

Brand equity measurements

Brand equity can be understood from 02 different approaches (Lassar et al., 1995; Wood, 2000): (i) financial approach and (ii) consumer approach. Financial approach: brand equity can

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be regarded as assets of enterprise and the result of the cash flow made from the revenue of products with said brand name (Shocker & Weitz, 1988; Simon & Sullivan, 1993). Consumer approach: brand equity can be regarded as a combination of gains and loss factors related to a brand (name and symbol) which increase or decrease the value of a product/ service of a company or its customer (Aaker, 1991, 1996).

A conceptual framework for measuring customer-based brand equity

Brand equity is measured under different settings, definitions and measurements with different components (Keller, 1993). For example: brand equity is the added value of a brand (Aaker, 1991, 1996) and is composed of 4 components: (i) brand awareness, (ii) perceived quality, (iii) brand association and (iv) brand loyalty; or brand equity is the customer knowledge of a brand and its marketing activities (Keller, 1993) and this knowledge includes 2 elements: (i) brand awareness, and (ii) brand meaning. In this study, the author used Aaker's (1991, 1996) model of brand equity due to this model has the most commonly cited (Atilgan *et al.*, 2005) and is suitable for experimental study on brand equity under consumer approach (Quan, 2006). However, the qualitative result from interviewing experts and focus group showed that: brand equity of fresh fruit includes 05 components: brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty and 01 new component that is perceived safety.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is the ability of a potential consumer to recognize and recall one brand as an integral part of a certain product (Aaker, 1991); as the amount of thought a consumer spends on a brand when a product of said brand is mentioned (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004); or as the consumer's ability to identify or recognize a brand (Rossiter & Percy, 1987). In short, brand awareness shows the ability of the consumer to identify and recall one of the brands on the market. Therefore, hypothesis H_1 can be as follow:

H₁: Increasing or decreasing consumer's level of awareness to a brand will increase or decrease brand equity respectively (expectation +)

Brand Associations

Brand associations can be understood as anything in customer's memory that associate a brand to a certain meaning (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) by the product's attributes (Yoo *et al.*, 2000), and by price related matter (Aaker, 1996); or understood as anything, directly or indirectly, that connect the customer's memory to a brand (Tregear & Gorton, 2005). In short, brand association can be anything that customer retain in their mind regarding the brand related to their needs (Woods, 1998). Therefore, hypothesis H_2 can be as follow:

H₂: Increasing or decreasing consumer's level of brand association will increase or decrease brand equity respectively (expectation +).

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality is the subjective feeling of consumers to the quality of a product (Zeithaml, 1988; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2004); it is the consumer's subjective feeling about the qualities that a

brand can bring to them (Tho *et al.*, 2011). Perceived quality brings value to consumer and it is reason they purchase this brand rather than others (Yoo *et al.*, 2000). High perceived quality means consumers can recognize the difference and the superiority of the brand due to plentiful amount of experiences related to that brand (Yoo *et al.*, 2000). As the result, if a particular brand is perceived to have higher quality by consumers, they will express fondness to it due to the attributes which are more appealing to them and will want to possess this brand more than others (Tho *et al.*, 2011). Consumers will also have a preference of this brand over other competing brands (Zeithaml, 1988; Yoo *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, hypothesis H_3 can be as follow:

H₃: Increasing or decreasing consumer's perceived quality will increase or decrease the brand equity respectively (expectation +).

Brand loyalty

Consumer's loyalty to a particular brand can be understood as the consumer's attachment to the brand (Aaker, 1991); or as a level of companionship that consumer feel they are sharing with a brand (Keller, 1998). Brand loyalty of the consumer can be inspected from 02 approaches (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 20001): (i) Consumer behavior approach: This approach considers consumer's brand loyalty based on their repetitive purchase and regular usage of a particular brand/product; (ii) Consumer attitudes approach: This approach emphasizes the intention of consumer when using products. In this study, the author examined brand loyalty from consumer attitudes approach. Therefore, hypothesis H_4 can be as follow:

H₄: Increasing and decreasing consumer brand loyalty will increase or decrease brand equity respectively (expectation +).

Perceived Safety

Perceived safety of a product can be examined from multiple approaches: (i) narrow approach: concentrate on product attributes that affect consumer's health; (ii) wider approach: include all product attributes that affect consumer perceived safety of that product (Roosen, 2003). In this study, the author analyzes from a wide approach, to examine the consumer's subjective feeling regarding the product safety and its effect on consumer's health (Kim, 2012). Apart from quality, product safety to consumer's health is another factor that they want went consuming agriculture products (Grunert, 2005). The consumer will be more excited when consuming product which has a guarantee of safety and quality from the producer (Kim, 2012). It is the consumer's concern for clean and safe products has create a demand for manufacturer and distributor to provide better product (Preston & McQuirk, 1990); this helps them to maintain their competitive advantage and develop brand value (Manning, 2007). The consumer is increasingly interested in product safety information and its production process before making purchasing decision (Caswell, 1998) and they are ready to pay to be able to consume safe product (Roosen, 2003). Therefore, hypothesis H_5 can be as follow:

H₅: Increasing or decreasing consumer perceived safety will increase or decrease brand equity respectively (expectation +)

The relationship between components of fresh fruit brand equity

In order to be loyal to a particular brand, the consumers first need to have knowledge about it (Saleem *et al.*, 2015). Brand

characteristics must be established inside the minds of consumers (Tho *et al.*, 2011) and brand association is the basis for consumers to decide to purchase the products and give their loyalty to that brand (Aaker, 1991; Atilgan *et al.*, 2005). In addition, should consumers feel that the product has higher quality than its peers on the market, they tend to purchase/ re-purchase that product (Tho *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, consumers will be willing to spend money to consume fresh, clean and tend to return to products they feel that are safe for their health (Boccaletti & Nardella, 2000; Roosen, 2003; Kim, 2012) as consumer's demand for these products is influenced by attribute related to product safety (Preston & McGuirk, 1990). Therefore, the hypotheses H₆, H₇, H₈ and H₉ can be as follow:

H₆: Increasing and decreasing consumer's brand awareness will make increase or decrease their brand loyalty respectively (expectation +)

H₇: Increasing and decreasing consumer's brand association will make increase or decrease their brand loyalty respectively (expectation +)

H₈: Increasing and decreasing consumer's perceived quality will make increase or decrease their brand loyalty respectively (expectation +)

H₉: Increasing and decreasing consumer's perceived safety will make increase or decrease their brand loyalty respectively (expectation +)

Methodology

This study combines qualitative research and quantitative research methods. Qualitative research method was conducted by interviewing 10 experts and 01 focus group discussion with 10 direct and regular consumers of 02 fresh fruit brands (HoaLoc mango and BinhThuan dragon fruit as this is 02 vietnamese fresh fruit brands protected by Vietnam Intellectual Property Department) in Ho Chi Minh City in February 2016. The research results shows that the equity of fresh fruit brand in Vietnam consists of 05 components: brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty and 01 new component as perceived safety. The results of the study also shows that 26 observed variables (Table 1) used to measure 06 research concepts. Quantitative research was conducted with 600 respondents (including 520 valid responses) in Ho Chi Minh City (in traditional markets, supermarkets, and fresh fruit shops) from May 2016 to July 2016 by convenient sampling method with detailed questionnaire.

Scale of study

The author applied scales from previous studies by Yoo *et al.*, (2000), Washburn & Plank (2002), Netemeyer *et al.*, (2004), Kim (2012) to measure research concepts. However, these scales are based on consumer products in developed countries. Therefore, it will not be suitable in developing country like

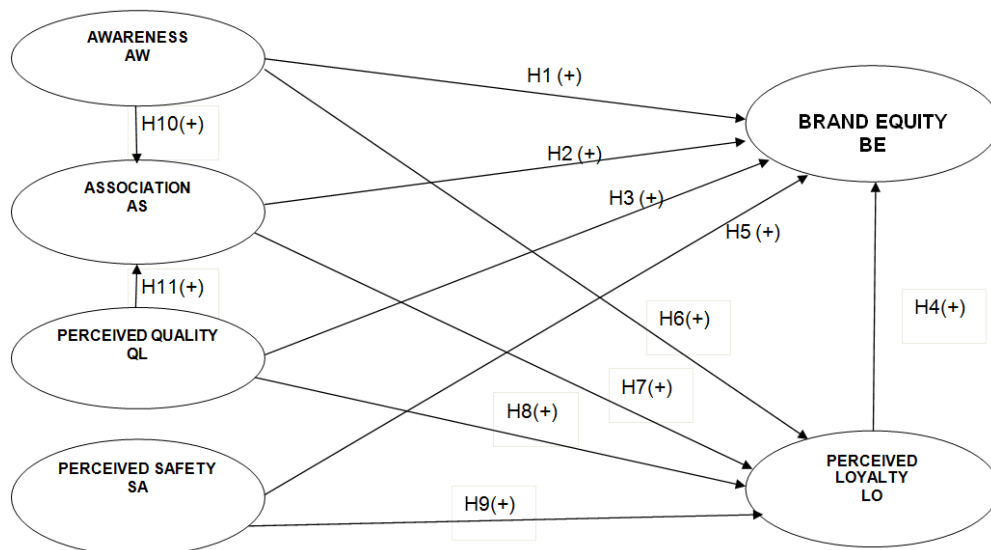


Figure 1. Models and hypotheses of proposed study by the authors

Additionally, brand association is the result of good brand awareness (Yoo *et al.*, 2000), that means for consumers to associate the brand, first they need to recognize it among other competing brands on the market. Brand association expresses the brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) and customers will easily associate the brand when they have more consuming experience (Yoo *et al.*, 2000). They can evaluate the brand quality and brand safety of the products having brand in the market. Thus, hypothesis H₁₀ and H₁₁ can be as follow:

H₁₀: Increasing or decreasing consumer's awareness level will make their association with that brand increase or decrease respectively (expectation +).

H₁₁: Increasing or decreasing consumer's perceived quality will make their association with the brand increase or decrease respectively (expectation +).

Vietnam market. That is the reason why the authors perform qualitative research to adjust the scale to suit experimental research in Vietnam market.

Data processing techniques:

Collected data was evaluated by means of Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis, EFA analysis, CFA analysis, and SEM structure to test and verify suggested models and hypotheses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Description of research sample

Among 520 respondents, there are 307 (59%) females, 213 (41%) males among 520 respondents; and 32 respondents

earning less than 3 million per month (6.2%), 179 respondents earning from 3 to less than 5 million per month (34.4%), 170 respondents earning from 5 to below VND 8 million per month (32.7%), 139 respondents earning over VND 8 million per month (26.7%).

Results analysis of scales' reliability

The results presented in Table 1 show that the observed variables used to measure the study concepts has satisfied the standards in the reliability analysis of the scale with

Table 1. Results of the reliability analysis of research concepts

Concepts and Observed Variables	Results of Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Awareness AW	
AW1: I am aware of X	
AW2: I know what X looks like	0.867
AW3: I can recognize X among other competing brands	
AW4: I am aware of symbol or logo of X	
AW5: Briefly, when referring to X, I can easily conceive of it	
Brand Associations AS	
AS1: When mentioning X, it is easy for me to recognize their shape and color	
AS2: When mentioning X, I think of its taste	0.858
AS3: When mentioning of X, I can quickly think of their symbol or logo	
AS4: When mentioning to X, I think of the fruit with high nutrients	
Perceived Quality QL	
QL1: X has beautiful shape and color	
QL2: Taste of X is very good	
QL3: X has high nutrients	0.846
QL4: Compared to other brands of X, X is of better quality	
QL5: I think X is the best brand compared with other products	
Brand loyalty LO	
LO1: X would be my first choice	
LO2: I will not buy other brands if X is available at the store	0.833
LO3: I consider myself to be loyal to X.	
LO4: I will introduce X to other consumers	
Perceived Safety SA	
SA1: I think X is safer for my health	
SA2: I think X is produced with high standards of residues of pesticides and pesticides	
SA3: I think X is pre-processed and well packed	0.799
SA4: I think X has a standard of cold storage process and no contamination before selling to the consumer.	
Brand Equity BE	
BE1: It makes sense to buy X instead of any other brand, even if they are the same.	
BE2: Even if another brand has same features as X, I would prefer to buy X.	
BE3: If there is another brand as good as X, I prefer to buy X	
BE4: If another brand is not different from X in any way, it seems smarter to purchase X.	0.877

(Source: author's survey data, 2016)

Table 2. EFA results of brand equity components

Observed variables	Factors				
	1	2	3	4	5
AW3	0.786				
AW2	0.782				
AW1	0.739				
AW5	0.725				
AW4	0.714				
QL4		0.759			
QL3		0.758			
QL2		0.751			
QL1		0.722			
QL5		0.706			
AS1			0.784		
AS4			0.764		
AS2			0.760		
AS3			0.750		
LO3				0.747	
LO2				0.743	
LO1				0.723	
LO4				0.677	
SA3					0.749
SA2					0.747
SA4					0.695
SA1					0.670
Eigenvalue	3.328	3.200	2.805	2.559	2.499
% of variance	15.126	14.544	12.751	11.630	11.360
Cumulative %	15.126	29.670	42.421	54.051	65.412
KMO			0.938		
Bartlett's Test	Chi square		5294.923		
	df		231		
	Sig.		0.000		

(Source: author's survey data, 2016)

Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient > 0.6 and total correlation > 0.3, Nunnally & Burnstein, 1994).

Results of EFA analysis

The results of the EFA analysis presented in Table 2 and Table 3 show that suggested scales satisfied the standard. EFA brand equity components are respectively extracted into 05 elements corresponding to observed variables from 05 concepts with a total extracted variances of 65.412% at the Eigenvalue of 2.499. The brand equity EFA was extracted into 01 factor with extracted variance of 73,056% at the Eigenvalue of 2.922. EFA results are analysed by Varimax rotation method.

Table 3. EFA results of brand equity

Variable	Factors	
	1	
BE3		0.865
BE1		0.862
BE4		0.851
BE2		0.841
Eigenvalue		2.922
% of variance		73.056
KMO		0.834
Bartlett's Test	Chi square	1040.679
	df	6
	Sig.	0.000

(Source: author's survey data, 2016)

Results of CFA analysis

The CFA results presented in Table 4 show that all scales meet the requirements for reliability, average variance extracted, convergence validity, discriminant validity and unidimensionality.

Results of testing model and research hypothesis

Results of testing model

The testing results in Figure 2 and Table 5 show that the testing model with Chi squared value as 616244, d.f at 288, Cmin/d.f at 2,140 with p-value at 0.000 (<0.05) is not satisfied as expected as the sample size but other testing measures of the model are suitable such as: TLI at 0.945; CFI at 0.951 and RMSEA at 0.047. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the research model is suitable with the data collected from respondents.

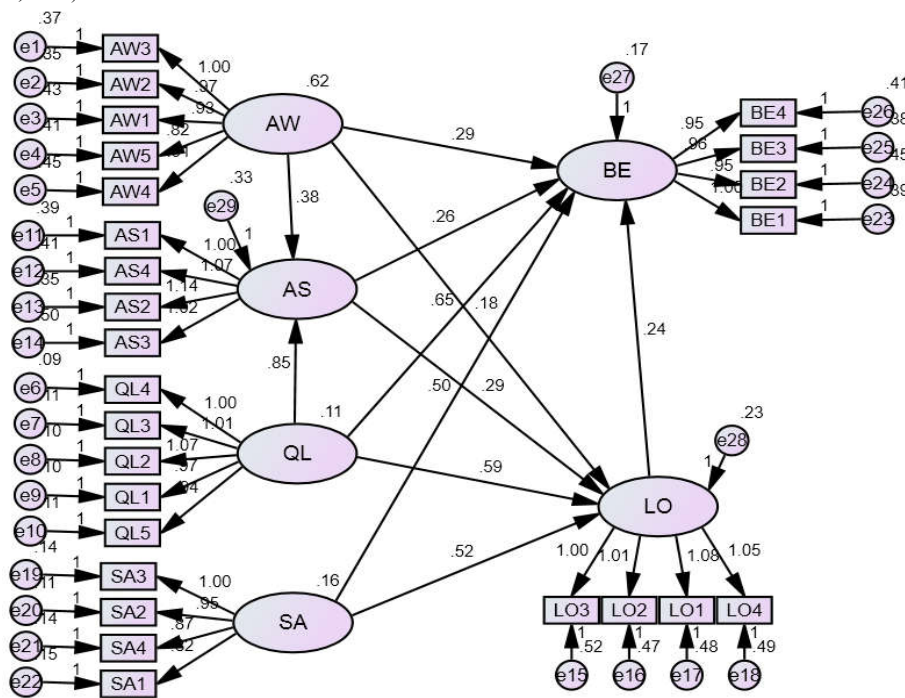
The results of the test hypotheses

The results of the test hypotheses presented in Table 5 that all hypotheses are acceptable at significance (alpha) level of 0.05, the corresponding confidence level of 95% as following.

Table 4. CFA results of factors

Concept	Observed variables	Reliability	Average variance extracted %	Convergence validity, discriminant validity and unidimensionality
Brand Awareness AW	5	0.868	0.568	Acceptable
Perceived Quality QL	5	0.846	0.525	
Perceived Safety SA	4	0.800	0.500	
Brand Association AS	4	0.859	0.603	
Brand Loyalty LO	4	0.833	0.555	
Brand Name BE	4	0.877	0.641	

(Source: author's survey data, 2016)



Chi-square=616.241;df=288;CMIN/df=2.140;p=.000;
TLI=.945;CFI=.951; RMSEA=.047;

(Source: author's survey data, 2016)

Note. Coefficients measure figures is χ^2 / d.f. ratio < 5 (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004), TLI > 0.90 (Hair et. al, 2006), CFI > 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), RMSEA < 0.07 (Hair et. al, 2006), p - value > 0.05 (Hair et al, 2006).

Table 5. Test hypothesis test results

Regression Weights: (Consumers - Default model)							
	Relation		Estimated Value	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
AS	<---	AW	0.382	0.044	8.589	***	H ₁₀ acceptable
AS	<---	QL	0.854	0.107	8.003	***	H ₁₁ acceptable
LO	<---	AW	0.177	0.044	4.022	***	H ₆ acceptable
LO	<---	QL	0.586	0.108	5.438	***	H ₈ acceptable
LO	<---	AS	0.288	0.057	5.064	***	H ₇ acceptable
LO	<---	SA	0.520	0.081	6.398	***	H ₉ acceptable
BE	<---	AW	0.288	0.044	6.589	***	H ₁ acceptable
BE	<---	QL	0.650	0.108	6.019	***	H ₃ acceptable
BE	<---	AS	0.264	0.055	4.755	***	H ₂ acceptable
BE	<---	LO	0.236	0.067	3.515	***	H ₄ acceptable
BE	<---	SA	0.505	0.083	6.056	***	H ₅ acceptable

(Source: author's survey data, 2016)

DISCUSSION

Firstly, the fresh fruit brand equity is directly affected by 05 components: (i) brand awareness, (ii) brand association, (iii) perceived quality, (iv) brand loyalty, and (v) perceived safety at significance (alpha) level of 0.05, the corresponding confidence level of 95% (hypothesis H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 are acceptable). This means that when they are able to recognize, easily associate the characteristics of the fresh fruits, assume that they have higher quality and safer than other types of fruits available and remain loyal to a fresh fruits product, the consumer's affection for this brand of fresh fruit and their tendency to choose this product over others of same characteristics on the market will increase. Secondly, consumer's brand loyalty for fresh fruit brands is directly affected by brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and perceived safety at significance (alpha) level 0.05, the corresponding confidence level 95% (hypothesis H6, H7, H8 and H9 acceptable). This means that if consumers easily recognize the brand, associate the characteristics of Vietnam fresh fruits and believe they have higher quality and are safer than other types available in the market, the consumer's loyalty to these fresh fruit will increase. Finally, consumers' association of fresh fruit brand is directly affected by perceived branding, perceived quality and perceived safety at significance (alpha) level 0.05, the corresponding confidence level 95% (hypothesis H10, H11 acceptable). This means that when consumers are able to recognize the characteristics of these fresh fruits as well as believe them to have higher quality than other types available on the market, it is easy for them to associate these fresh fruit brands.

Conclusion

The study has identified and measured the impact of fresh fruit's elements of brand equity on brand value overall and the relationship of impacts among these elements. The result of study has also proved the brand equity model of Vietnam fresh fruit in a logical way with five elements: (i) brand awareness, (ii) brand association, (iii) perceived quality, (iv) brand loyalty, and (v) perceived safety. All these elements impact directly on brand equity at significance (alpha) level 0.05, the corresponding confidence level 95% (related hypothesis are acceptable). Thus, comparing with brand equity theory model of Aaker (1991, 1996), brand equity model in Vietnam has 01 more element that is perceived safety. The result of this research also shows that the perception quality and the perceived safety are 02 elements that have the most effect on the brand equity. Therefore, based on the research results, there are some suggestion for enhancing the perceived quality and the perceived safety of customers as followings:

Enhancing customer's perceived quality: (i) Production of fresh fruits with fair colors, shape and identical sizes, (ii) Longer preservation time, (iii) Quality control for fresh fruits production to final delivery. Enhancing customer's perceived safety: Maintain the process of pre-production, production, packing and preservation the fresh fruit to VietGap standard. In addition, a number of implications to increase consumer brand perception, such as (1) promoting the benefits of fresh fruits such as having good benefit to customer's health in order to stimulate consumer's tastes and increase market segment; (2) developing market's distribution systems, accessing wholesale markets and supermarkets to expand markets and sell products more effectively; (3) supporting capable domestic business through the trade promotion agencies of the provinces. However, there are some limitations in the study: (i) the study only focused on direct and regular consumers and not to the indirect consumers such as retailers and wholesalers who also have different effects on brand equity. Therefore, there is a need for a study of the combined brand equity from direct and indirect consumers. (ii) the study surveyed only 520 respondents in Ho Chi Minh City by convenient sample method which was not representative for the whole of research targets.

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