REVIEWARTICLE

CULTURAL DETERMINANTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUCCESSFUL LIFESTYLE BRANDS

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ABSTRACT

Lifestyle brands are created, built and established based on cultural values, attitudes and living arrangements of a specific group of target audience. As branding activities are aimed at generating awareness and communicating information that ultimately relates to the overall purpose of marketing, the creation of lifestyle brands is to enable target audiences or target market sectors to identify and associate with the elements of the specific lifestyle contexts they practice, prefer, and aspire to. Lifestyle branding adds value to consumers from its powerful enabling role as an interactive mechanism, being the name and symbolic associations for products and services which not only serves functional benefits, but communicates the symbolisms behind consumer choices with factors that are culturally inherent or meaningful. More than promotional tactics and marketing, lifestyle branding strategies shape the interaction habits and activities that the consumer may seek, prefer or engage in daily. The embrace of digital media, web-based and mobile technologies, and a tandem growth of interest in the urban shopping culture have become important catalysts in the development and management of successful lifestyle brands. This paper provides a set of possible cultural determinants of Malaysia's urban consumer segments, while proposing ways in which brand marketers and designers can respond innovatively to their needs by aligning brands with consumer perceived measures of brand equity. Using scales of measurement on the brand equity model to analyse the underlying determinant conditions, four case studies of food and beverage brands in the Malaysian service industries will be provided to gather insights on brand equity, and these will be discussed in-depth to understand what consumers seek in brand experiences. The research will conclude by factoring in the designer's role in the marketing of lifestyle brands that are relevant, recognised and respected.

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INTRODUCTION

In Michael E. Porter (1996) acclaimed article on competitive forces, one of the critical differentiations for businesses is dependent on its ability to anticipate economic, technological and industrial development and to relate these to the competitive business environment and practices. It is necessary to understand how branding strategies fit into and complement these arguments, as competitive forces shape the management of strategic branding activities and initiatives undertaken in marketing and advertising or competing for consumer segments. In the process of branding or image marketing, businesses must seek to identify *why* and *how* differentiation in branding represents its sustainable competitive advantage, in increasing recognition of products or services and creating the emotional factor that improves purchase intention and customer loyalty.

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Malaysia's businesses are increasingly pressured to adapt to fast-changing cultural and socioeconomic circumstances, technological innovations and building competitive advantages in localised market conditions, beyond fulfilling operational effectiveness and sales profitability. Coming from a design research perspective, this paper examines the pervasive ways in which brands helps shape customer experiences through enhancing functionality and to discuss how marketing innovation and design elements directly affect brand loyalty within the specific cultural atmosphere.

Literature review

Brands are, to take the simplest manner of definition by Morris and Goldsworthy (2012), "the recognisable and distinctive identity for products or companies, that which distinguishes it from the competition" (p.333). In its origins, branding strategies and activities were functional and purposeful,

assisting the development of rational, social and psychological rationales for why, how and which goods sold or traded in consumer markets had the ability to be noticed, to be prominent, to excite recall, incite positive judgments or buyer behaviour (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2004).

Lifestyle Branding: A Progressive View

While perspectives differ depending on the industry and market, brands are a visible component of the emotive and experiential connections that organisations offer their stakeholders and consumers, and as such, it is increasingly acknowledged among the business communities that brands reflect powerfully upon a company and its stated mission and vision. Affluence in Western nations may create ceaseless opportunities for brands to supply 'the stuff of dreams and desires' through marketing designer labels, but different cultural, social and economic conditions guard the branding core practices among businesses which serve Asian markets. As Abdul Razak and Kamaruddin (2009) notes, the universal preference for mass-marketed consumer goods are always cautiously considered in Muslim-majority populace such as Malaysia, for the fact that cultural beliefs and value orientations are linked to decision making for ethnic groups, albeit Malay, Chinese, Indian and etc. In spite of brand imageries' characteristic presence and importance in determining long term consumer relationships, brand activist Joseph Baladi (2011) concludes, "to Asian companies, the enormous power of iconic brands have yet to be harnessed" (p.67). In analysing the contextual basis of consumption culture, questions have been raised by researchers related to the communication of organisational brand imagery and symbols, and these are directly associated with consumption aspects such as purchases behaviour, involvement and loyalty (Aaker, 1996; Belch and Belch, 2003).

For instance, how does the marketing of McDonalds' ambassador, the cheery clown-faced icon Ronald McDonald, represent the American corporation's global image, while denoting consumer trustworthiness or consistency in the quality of food and services at its restaurants?

The discussion among other marketers today focuses on whether advertising and branding tactics are justified in cases when undetermined or low credibility of product weakens its brand message (Belch and Belch, 2003). Segments that do not have the tools to discern quality behind recognising and identifying labels also provide product researchers with food for thought on how to educate consumers to discern questionable or inferior goods from authentic products experiences and service value (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012).

Lifestyle brand is a way of life or style of living based on the activities, interests and opinions that reflects the values, attitudes and personality of a person or group, and these are often effective criteria in determining consumer psychographic segments (Belch and Belch, 2003). Lifestyle brands are presented in guises both familiar and idiosyncratic, and related to aspirational characteristics of cultural groups.When habitually utilised and selectively involved, brands become part of the identity of specific segments; for Gen-Y, the rising

trends behind shopping, urban wellbeing and Internet cultures exist today as a predominant lifestyle features.

Mainstream or popular culture have spread exponentially in the 21st-century, deriving largely from media's unstoppable permeation through social diffusion of corporate and public views, as communities arrange and determine their own values, attitudes and lifestyle adoption. Through information shared and provided about products, services or innovation, consumers participate in daily communication activities, works, leisure and commerce bolstered by the choices found within cultural markets (Schiller, 1989).Where once audiences for traditional media channels - magazines, newspapers, radio, television - were determined based on demographical differentiators (age, ethnic, gender, occupation, economic status), the switch to an integrated form of marketing communication and branding has been prompted by the palpable switch among cyber communities to digital-based platforms such as interactive TV, e-commerce, social networking, and etc. (Belch and Belch, 2003).

Media research forms a key component for social science field research since innovation and creativity demonstrated by consumption culture are benchmarks that help explain the presence of forces leading to success or failure in society to achieve economic progress. As such, education, affluence, social status, individuals' values, attitudes, motivations and access to media must be "re-learned" as these segmentation factors would necessarily shift in portraying consumers with diverse consumption habits, lifestyles and preferences (Belch and Belch, 2003).Effective execution of lifestyle branding strategies starts naturally with understanding and recognising specific cultural attributes and nuances of the target markets' psychographics: as habitual, learned processes influence their values, attitudes and lifestyles, including purchase motivations, social living arrangements and loyalty (Belch and Belch, 2003; Hanzaee*et al.,* 2011). Literature shows that distinct patterns of selected inputs, whether rational, emotional or psychological, has to align with audiences' ability to relate to the product concept, based on consumers' self-image, personality or benefits sought (Aaker, 1992).

Apple, Inc., for instance raises consumers' perception of brand value and image of electronic communication products by successfully publicising the beneficial attributes of a 'networked culture': easy use, unparalleled design, and the perceived exclusivity (at least in the earlier decade) associated with a conscious unique movement of elite preference and desires (Malik *et al.,* 2012). The recognition for a brand is complemented with effortful advertising and marketing strategies which resonate with the targeted consumer group and society at large.

Apple demonstrates its willingness to earn market share by leading the field in marketing promotion spend, as well as registering its retail stores as intellectual property, with distinguishing design, layout and spatial features such as good lighting, allowing customers instant brand touch points via in-store experiences (Dezeen, 2013; Stevis, 2014). Touchscreen functionality being significant to the Apple consumer, store branding for Apple products is devised to create high brand

engagement value by giving customers time to consider various attributes from product design to packaging, promotion, price and quality of service support (Belch and Belch, 2003: p.10). Voted No. 1 in Forbes' 'World's Most Powerful Brands' in 2012 with a Brand Valuation at $104.3bil (Forbes, 2013), the company is a prime testimony of consumer sentiment that attaches to its entrepreneurial ability to "set the pace, redefine [product] categories and [address] our needs even before we realize we have them" (Badenhausen, 2012).

Measuring Successful Malaysian Lifestyle Brands

David Aaker (1996) in *Managing Brand Equity* attempted to measure brand equity by developing a system to underpin the competitive strengths of brands that would complement the asset-based measures (p.103). HermawanKartajaya (2005), eminent Asian branding and marketing author, notes that aside from shaping powerful brand image, certain branded lifestyle goods introduced into the consumer markets in developing countries in Asia should also consider how to associate brand image into brands that offer the highest value among the younger local customers.

The *Brand Equity Ten* – the ten dimensions to measure brand equity - was developed by Aaker (1996), whereby consumers, in evaluating salience (importance) and strength of information factor their measures against those of another competitor brand. The scale then guides their perceptions of relationship with, and acceptance of, products or goods based on measures such as *Loyalty, Leadership, Differentiation, Awareness* and *Market Behaviour*.

Essentially, research into branding and marketing management practices suggests that companies operating with a long term view to sustain market share must prioritise strategies for improving brand loyalty and retaining customers. This not only requires clear directives to minimise failures for new product launches, but to expand their leverage on brand equity and to innovate in creative ways (Hanzaee*et al.,* 2011; Palumbo and Herbig, 2000) – a part of which, as the following section shows – depends on understanding lifestyle trends, social as well as technological influences operant within specific psychographics of target segments.

Research aims, model and limitations

The objective of this study is to map the positioning of current Malaysian lifestyle brands to four corresponding brand equity measurement scales conceptualised by David Aaker (1996), namely *awareness, associations (differentiation), perceived quality* and *loyalty.*

The key question: *What cultural factors determine Malaysian consumers' adoption and engagement with lifestyle brands that improves brand equity*? Underscore the process of searching for answers.

This research aims to provide discussion points for future studies on developing a set of probable factors which indicate brand equity variables, while factoring the two leading roles of

digital culture and shopping culture as the frameworks behind marketing communication strategies to lifestyle segments.

A brand audit of Malaysian case studies (Starbucks, Pizza Hut, McDonalds and Snowflakes Taiwan Dessert House) will analyse the comparative elements of loyalty, perceived quality, differentiation and awareness, and how each element shape consumer experiences that are salient in the measurement of brand equity. At the same time, inevitable constraints of case study research methodology is also acknowledged, with "lifestyle" is being defined here as a cultural concept for the system of social and living arrangement within metropolis contexts.

While it was not a conscious decision to detach the implication of "lifestyle" from rural (e.g. small town) consumers who are geographically removed from market centres, the findings of this paper is bound to urban, economic centres as these sites establish and produce intense entrepreneurial competition among businesses offering similar goods, and commodities are viewed as packaged wants rather than needs. The next section explores one of the situational capabilities behind commercial consumer market growth in Malaysia: digital media and technology.

Analysis and discussion of the findings

Electronic commerce and online-based information retrieval have become a preferred option for both private consumers and business sectors. The appeals of instant connectivity, cross-boundary communities, informal mutual collaborations, resource wealth, convenience and efficiency have resulted in the migration of more and more transactional, entertainment, consumption and social activities online, in tandem with economic and social changes that the Internet explosion created (Schiller, 1989).

Among adolescent consumers, for instance, researchers Grant and O'Donohoe (2007) found quick adopters and firm loyalty towards brands. Adolescents encounter 'external evaluation by others', i.e. being concerned with how others perceive them in the process of forming values, attitudes and aspirations, hence peer acceptance, recognition and association with social groups becomes important (Tsu Wee, 1999). Adolescents are naturally, constantly and deeply engaged in the consumption of products such as electronic and communication gadgets, lifestyle brands and fashion products – the various aspects closely tied to their individualistic, outward expression of identity and personality (Mishra, 2010; Keillor*et al*., 1996).

Alongside these contributory factors for retail sector growth is the increasing awareness about the functions of retail experience and retail design development as an element of strong brand identification and attitudes towards corporate image. Seock and Norton (2007), for instance, reported various empirical studies where positive relationships have been affirmed between online shoppers' favourable attitudes towards Internet retailers and the ability of the retailers to retain customers who form judgments on reliability based on transactional security and information processing speed (p.574).

Development in social trends has shifted marketing's emphasis into one that caters to young consumers, and children and teenagers in Malaysia are fortunate to have opportunities to absorb the digital culture readily.

Digital and Internet Culture in Malaysia

Digital entertainment devices birthed the Internet culture among the Millennial Generation (Gen-Y, born between the 1990s and early 2000s) and Gen-Z (born after 2000), but as with every trend, influences from external sources outside the family are bound to create further issues. Faced with social alienation and growing crime and personal safety issues, a lesser interest to explore the world has resulted, in lieu of working, interacting and communicating on computers.This is a chief reason why teenagers and young adults in Malaysia have so quickly adopted digital communication mediums and the Internet culture, substantial factors that shape the cultural future of Gen-Y in their personal, economic and social roles.

Social behavioural trends such as shopping online for a range of consumable and non-consumables (Marketing Magazine, 2014) and the presentation of self-identity are two such instances of technologies that can both enable (former) or hamper (latter) social media experiences for individuals. Through surfing and online gaming, Internet and web users interact more with predominantly Western and other Asian (e.g. South Korean) cultures from their active, daily, unfettered participation in global communication and social networks.

As shown in Diagram 1, in 2011, about 70% or 12 million of the Malaysian population were found to be Facebook users (Grey Review, 2011), spending a reasonable span of time every day on updating and communicating via social media. For its low-budget appeal, many companies use Facebook to advertise their products, giving participation opportunities to digital natives in lifestyle consumption through interactive promotional tactics, a factor that distinguishes social media's value in comparison to other mediums as TV commercials, outdoor billboards and mobile ads.

Online businesses in Malaysia, in spite of several active successes, has still to prove its ability and influence to successfully develop lifestyle brands although operational costs may be lower compared to retailing. Malaysians do not really believe in virtual products shown on screens, as the process of examining actual products is still the preferred mode of understanding and building pre-purchase confidence (Rahmat, 2014).

Just as importantly, the product or service categories which involve higher emotional element behind consumers' purchase intention must be considered. Certain products sold online, such as nutritional and supplementation products - must integrate strategic marketing communication activities, as their success is highly dependent on consumers' trust in the brand, a confidence borne from testimonials of other users or health expertise, recognised quality assurance standards, self-researched information or other perceived reliable secondary sources such as celebrities (Yeh and Lin, 2010; Ohanian, 1990). Attitudes towards information channels providing web-based shopping information have been variously examined (see, for example, Dawson and Kim, 2009; Seock and Norton, 2007; Workman and Paper, 2010); these studies suggest that many consumers would participate in online buying only with strong motivation behind their intent, rather than make impulse purchases.

Shopping Culture: Insights on Malaysia's Experience

The growth of shopping culture in Malaysia has transformed the performance of "buying" into a spectacle, and a site of customer engagement in the short and long terms – the very movement and human activity once cautioned about by Guy Debord (1967) as "commodity fetishism", of accumulating goods with attributes both perceptible and imperceptible – but which may hence become an advantage for large-scale businesses that would scale only with heavy capital investments.
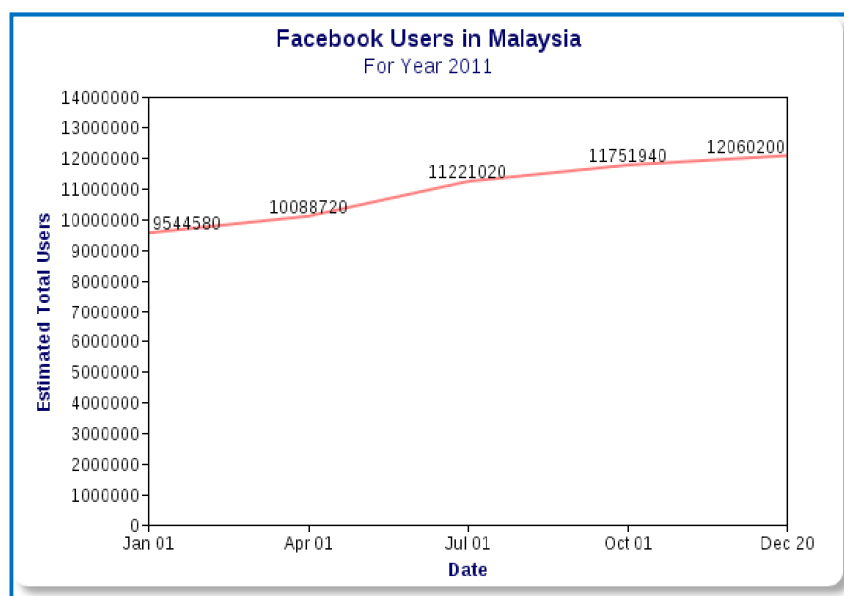

Diagram 1. Facebook users in Malaysia in 2011, (Grey Review, 2011)

Herbert Schiller in 1989 moved the argument forward more practically, urging corporations to consider protecting the social and market frameworks that would allow for strong entrance into new markets in order for businesses to gain acceptance as forms of cultural representations and therefore, influence or dominance in social discourse for the present and future (Schiller, p.113). Shopping and the conspicuous consumption of lifestyle products and services has today become no less a form of acceptable cultural currency, boosted by new technologies.

Malaysia shops' and restaurants' operate long business hours compared to Western countries, giving consumers the convenience to buy anytime. Along with Asian counterparts in Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, India and Vietnam, shopping is a weekend activity for many Malaysians due to the popularity of shopping malls with wide selections of attractive entertainment hubs and services like cinemas, Internet-connected restaurants and cafes, bowling alleys, salons, food courts, and etc., providing choices for the working sector to spend a certain portion of their disposable incomes (*Bernama*, 2006; Patton, 2006).

Another reason behind shopping culture's unceasing popularity in Malaysia is a humid, tropical weather, which along with the observable rituals among locals to get stuck in weekend traffic jams, provide impetus for heading to shopping malls and their willingness to linger within comfortable, well-designed, air-conditioned store environments in order to get away from stifling daytime heat, while enjoying reasonably-priced meals, shopping, browsing and relaxing.

Conspicuous consumption of branded goods and the retail therapy phenomenon have consequentially produced a rise of two related social classes in Malaysia, not necessarily related to demographic differences and educational background: firstly, a visibly young, upwardly-mobile and value-conscious working class; and second, the image-conscious segment of leisure class that may shop compulsively and obsessively. Chan (2011) cites a market research brief prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers which traces the shopping mall culture and "shoppingtainment" trend among Malaysians. The availability of shopping centres and malls that cater to these lifestyle criteria are believed to be crucial for the development of potential among lifestyle brands in stages of market introduction, awareness, development and maturity.

The next section presents a case study to discuss how Starbucks Malaysia grew its success story as an American lifestyle brand export.

Starbucks, an Icon of Global Lifestyle Brand

Starbucks' global popularity was established for over 25years prior to the franchise being introduced to Malaysia by Berjaya Group Bhd (franchise owner) in 1998 (Starbucks *About Us*, n.d.). Pre-working day morning rituals, the trend for refreshment in the form of icy blended coffee beverages, and afternoon breaks in between shopping have enabled Starbucks to enjoy a stream of regulars filling its warm, cushion-strewn spaces, utilising the Wi-Fi for surfing, entertainment or

conducting their business, looking for comfort in a safe public space while imbibing creamy hot or cold concoctions - another identical characteristic of Starbucks' coffee.

Marketing the coffee culture appears to leverage on the emotional appeal, a level of connection that must precede the formation of habits, and loyalty that comes from satisfying experiences. While emotional experiences creates desire for goods, companies must begin the virtuous cycle of customer engagement by looking hard into the society's cultural experiences and social landscapes, and to evaluate the pace and capacity of technological up-scaling and social trends development that would enable sustainability and return on brand value investments in tangible and intangible aspects.

Figure 1 shows a Starbucks outlet interior was designed with classical European café concept: sturdy wooden chairs, informal bar or lounge stools, single settees, and polished dark wood counters that draw customers to watch baristas at work. Dim lighting tempers mood and ambience, and announcement or menu boards at the entrance or order counter are another touch of classic whimsy: chalk writing on blackboard that exudes the charm and warmth associated with informal, casual meeting places.

Figure 1. Starbucks Café located in Sunway Pyramid Malaysia (5 Elements of My Life, 2008)

As mentioned earlier, Gen-Y in Malaysia tends to observe and absorb cultural notions of consumption due to overwhelming information via the Internet. Enjoying coffee in Starbucks is a dream comes true for local consumers. Setting high price premiums for its beverages, besides creating the satisfaction of belonging to a brand-conscious social class, also triggers perceived quality and brand leadership. A plethora of competitive coffee retailers has not deterred Starbucks from building and design creative tactics in its mission to improve its brand image: the store's social setting and personable atmosphere, baristas' ineffably warm service, have all resulted in strong differentiation in consumer perceptions regarding the relationship with the brand as the salient differentiator in experience. Awareness comes chiefly from technology-enabled experience sharing: For example Starbucks Selfie, shows Starbucks' consistency in projecting a brand identity based on

the drink's logo and packaging design. Awareness is formed from customers' consideration of the meaning of the brand through their recognition, recall and salience in their lives (Aaker, 1996).

In addition, truly successful lifestyle brands would move beyond identity and market share, and position themselves instead on the selling of "constructed dreams" (Laskowski, 2010). Concomitantly, designers have a crucial role as agents of change, and in understanding particular aspects of commercial branding where consumers have become judges and reviewers of a brand's social value. Designers may learn the habits and motivations of consumers in striving to apply practical principles of psychology in developing unique user-friendly experiences - a core strategy in improving brand engagement and consumer loyalty. Suzanne Roff, mulling about the inherent social and psychological roles played by Starbucks stores, states: "The value added to a cup of Starbucks coffee is the safe, unhurried comfortable environment that is not home or the workplace. This has become its brand identification" (cited in Walton, 2012). Hence, product functionality, service, packaging design and store environment are ways of supporting a business' brand identity, and these derive from a range of integrated marketing communication activities designated to reach key stakeholders.

Branding and marketing activities, fuelled primarily by social networking and online behaviours, are targeted to loyal customers, local media and brand evangelists, usually tertiary students and Gen-Y working adults. As the first café with Wi-Fi facility in Malaysia, Internet accessibility ties naturally with ongoing marketing strategies where coffee fans are made aware of its campaigns and promotions via its position as popular hotspots for working out of office and online shopping browsing.Young Malaysians' uptake for the "selfie" (self-posed photo-taking using smartphones) trend, where pictures with their iconic drink are posted and shared on social media through smartphones, becomes a form of free advertising for Starbucks. Photos of consumers taking selfies with Starbucks drinks help to persuade other social networking users through peripheral attitude formation, a motivation to belong to the same social class ("Starbucks must become part of *my* lifestyle").

Marketing of the Starbucks' brand is supported by a series of exclusive merchandise sold in-store (Figure 2). Merchandises related to coffee such as coffee beans, cups, blenders, tumblers, gift cards, loyalty cards, and etc. are imprinted with Malaysian motifs, making them desirable and unique collectors' items. Further, Starbucks outlets are designed to be social spaces, mingled with the element of popular music. Big Waves (Malaysia Starbucks Coffee Company, 2009) acts as a live radio station, with classic rock music piped in-store to enhance the brand identity as one with classy retro ambience. Consumers' willing adoption of the networked, digitally-connected culture concept and environment has been advantageous in promoting Starbucks as a global lifestyle brand in Malaysia, and this continues to mould what the brand stands for, and customers' positive experiences motivate repeat sales and visits (Belch and Belch, 2003). Market behaviour, according to Aaker (1996), is equally important as a brand

equity driver; for Starbucks, a large part of this factor derives from its leading share of market segment in the coffee specialty restaurant sector. For the purpose of this study, however, market behaviour scale is not utilised.

Figure 2. Merchandise sold at Starbucks Malaysia (Starbucks Malaysia, 2014)

To sum, where once the key stratagems of using appropriate media channels and to segment target markets by geographical ranges, psychographics and demographic differences, today's interactive lifestyles has been designed to take advantage of a host of communication conveniences, from Wi-Fi, online commerce, digital out-of-home media, mobile marketing through smartphone, as well as ordering or buying products and seeking information using applications (apps). An endless array of social tools of networking in this era has conjointly allowed Starbucks to leverage on multiple media touch points, in aiming to be a renowned key player among lifestyle brands.

Not Every Brand is a Lifestyle Brand

The study of Starbucks Malaysia shows that effort to relate to consumers is a critical means of lifestyle identification for consumers. Palumbo and Herbig (2000) cautioned brand owners to prevent negative perceptions as this may dilute their brand equity (p.117). Failure in lifestyle branding is not as openly discussed or documented, however, as conservative Asian business communities frequently view lifestyle branding as secondary to profit from product promotion and sales (Baladi, 2011).

While defining brand failures seem an obvious task, each brand achieves its stated mission by leveraging its identity in different market segments; hence, poor response among targeted audience or initial market research tests can produce stronger outcomes when another viable demographic is chosen, and a new set of psychographic factors replaces the ineffectual circumstances.

An example is Pizza Hut, the pizza restaurant franchise owned by QSR Brands, a venture division of *Kulim (Malaysia) Berhad*. The chain's international expansion strategy leverages on innovations through the introduction of "higher quality and unconventional combination of millennial-friendly flavours" (Morrison, 2014), supported by tactical branding initiatives. For Malaysian tastes, the pizza chain's attempt to attract and satisfy loyal customers translates into an innovative range of

gourmet dine-in meals and pizza creations at over 220 stores (Kulim, 2013; Pizza Hut, n.d.). Where once Pizza Hut was a singularly dominant brand in pizza restaurants, the mushrooming of competitors such as Canadian 2 for 1, Dominos, Papa John's and Sarpino's Pizza offering takeaway and delivery has forced Pizza Hut to alter tactics, emphasising its restaurants as ideal sit-down dinners suited for families seeking treats for special occasions e.g. birthdays, as well as delivery services for urban areas (Pizza Hut, n.d.).

Uncertainty Avoidance: A Cultural Perspective of McDonald's in Malaysia

Designing and tagging a logo on packaging is the easy part, but nothing can be more damaging that carelessly using that logo or symbol to push a lifestyle brand. Why are fast food restaurants not perceived as good examples of lifestyle brands?Belch and Belch (2003) delineates the study of lifestyle marketing as part of the marketing process to identify consumer market segment; yet, it could be argued that usage of products in specific cultural settings does not connote loyalty towards particular brands. In both early and recent consumer research, instances of cultural and familial values permeation show how decisions are made that shape consumption behavioural patterns and decisions (Nelson, 1979). For McDonald's in Malaysia, understanding lifestyles seem an important investment behind its market penetration and business growth. Yet, it is arguable that provision of services to align with lifestyles would necessarily factor into consumer purchase decision. For decades, the brand has not directly associated its name and identity with the images of an "adult brand" among local consumers; neither do adults consume it daily since preference is both subjective and determined by other considerations such as health and convenience.

Instead, the quick-service restaurant regularly co-brands with movie franchises and media channels to advertise and market toy collections. However, the merchandise does not have a specific lifestyle brand identity since they are part of marketing campaigns for child markets. To reposition its brand as a lifestyle choice, the McCafé concept thus was introduced in a select range of Malaysian McDonald's franchises since 2012, with coffee as the highlight of breakfast experience, focusing on the core target of working urban professionals (The Star, 2013).

In another innovation strategy, McDonald's Malaysia response to settle late night hunger among working adults and students was to introduce the 24-hour delivery service (Figure 3). The practice of Malaysians staying up late nights for work or study began as an urban trend, and in spite of launching such a practical strategy to tap the market, McDonalds' has yet to see return on its investment into the 24-hour food delivery business. Steep charges for delivery – complicit with the presence of *mamak* stalls with cheap, hot meals featuring Asian staple rice and Malaysians' favourite beverage, *tehtarik* – have not assured McDonald's of turning the all-day, all-night dining concept into a viable long term strategy.Cultural researcher Geert Hofstede, in studies on cultural influences, discusses uncertainty avoidance, one of the four dimensions to understand cultural behaviours, as a measurable factor to

account for the relative unwillingness of individuals in society to take risks if they feel unsure, doubtful or threatened (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). In order for Malaysian consumers, who ranked 36 in Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance Index of 50 countries (Clearly Cultural, n.d.), to develop strong perceptions towards and acceptance of innovative products, there must be intrinsic value for brands to be recognised as relevant to their social and economic reasons for consumption.

Figure 3. McDonald's 24-hour Delivery

Since recognition and relevance of brand touch points is critical in creating and maintaining lifestyle brand equity, striking a chord in people's daily lives means carefully shaping its brand promise into tangible aspirational fulfilment. Here a question is posed: Is it possible, as a geographically-diffused brand, for McDonald's Malaysia to create loyal customers from merely selling a generic concept?

Restaurant concept branding is a challenging market to tap with relative long term views of risk management, and lifestyle branding must take into account environmental conditions as well as cultural norms and perceptions, as many competitors are able to provide similar or different offerings of products and services with attractions of pricing and assurances of quality that affects decision-making among, for instance, urban families with children who dine out often (Foxman and Tansuhaj, 1988). This factor shifts in accordance to the brand manager's sensitivity towards cultural values, lifestyle norms and faith practices of particular demographics, including the predominantly Muslim consumer segment of Malaysia that are required by religious laws to meet *Halal* requirements (Dhillon, 2013; Abdul Razak and Kamarulzaman, 2009).

Granted the food franchising business involves substantial standardisation of proprietary assets such as trademarks and service marks décor, seating, signs and related equipment, designing the McDonald's brand image must move beyond the

use of generic and standardised touch points for store branding, promotions and packaging, as these denote a corporate focus oncatering to mass consumer preferences and its associated economic returns, and nothing more. Loyalty being a test of consumer willingness to buy into competitive differentiation through positive experiences, McDonald's in Malaysia adapts to evolving continuous improvement best practices by emphasising stringent adherence to *Halal* requirements, quality standards leadership, supply chain specifications and safety compliance in the storage, handling and preparation of products (McDonald's Malaysia, n.d.).

Lifestyle: Taiwan Desserts Target Female Tastebuds

The co-existing relationships between lifestyle marketing strategies, cultural behaviour and target group segmentation are now explained in the case of Snowflake, a Taiwanese cold dessert brand. In its foray into the Malaysian quick-serve restaurant concept, it must negotiate an understanding of how its brand touch points and brand personality could work to create differentiation and loyalty among local consumers by accounting for the collectivist dimension of its target sector: the single, working female. Taiwan has influenced a wide range of adoptive behaviour among Malaysians over the past decades, especially socially-conscious trend followers in the teenage and young adult segment between 17 to 25 years of age.

Along with the tide of South Korean global pop marketing and the rise of Japanese anime culture, the rush to promote Taiwan as an exciting, healthful yet sparkling destination for Asian food vacationing mounted with the global success of Taiwan Tourism Bureau's national branding and advertising campaigns (Gillan, 2014).Snowflake's foray into the dessert restaurant concept owes its popularity to the hot weather in Malaysia. Its tagline, "100% Natural Goodness" is designed to reflect the authentic, traditional line of sweet desserts of Taiwan featuring organically-produced ingredients such as taro, soya, and beans (Snowflake Philosophy, n.d.). Its marketing strategy in 2012, the *Dessert Lover Club Card* (Figure 4), attracted the attention of its key female segment. The loyalty card's offer of one free dessert with the purchase of ten bowls entices this segment (Snowflake Taiwanese Dessert Secrets, 2012).

Figure 4. Dessert Lover Club Card

However, the franchise has yet to prove its brand pride through the presentation of its interior design (Snowflake Locations, n.d.), nor has it developed its own unique packaging design, and even less in unique brand experiences relevant to all Malaysians.However, people associate Snowflake with cold desserts, and the local marketing of Taiwan as a tourism phenomenon may have helped bolster its brand as a preferred Asian dessert store, and in particular, among young Malaysian females seeking seasonal fruits and iced desserts making use of naturally-grown ingredients. Other than proving Malaysians love trends, and zealous followers of the Taiwan street food culture exist, the brand does not seem willing to invest further to ensure favourability and consistency is maintained in store design, product packaging and brand image presentation.

Analysis of Brand Equity

Based on Aaker (1996), the measurement of brand equity on loyalty, perceived quality, differentiation and awareness attributes is framed against several questions. The following questions are useful instruments to derive the critical attributes of lifestyle brands.

- **Loyalty**
- Are customers satisfied dissatisfied or delighted with purchasing or encounter?
- Would customers repeat or prefer that brand over other competing brands again?
- Would customers recommend the product or service to others?
- **Perceived Quality**
- Do customers find the product or service of high, average or inferior quality in comparison to other brands?
- Do customers find the product or service to bear quality consistency or inconsistency?
- **Differentiation**
- Do customers find brand dimensions e.g. value, personality and corporate identity different from competing brands?
- Do customers associate brand owner with reputation, innovation and credibility?
- **Awareness**
- Can customers effortlessly recognise, recall and share information with others about the brand and the products or services it stands for?

These measures will now be adapted in the following table to describe the ways that brand equity is created within the lifestyle branding contexts for the four case studies presented in the paper.

Analysing Malaysia's experience in building iconic, ubiquitous brand giants, brand gurus point to the fact that established retail sectors in Asia have mostly been dependent on advertising agencies for the role of brand-building, often through splashy but ill-planned advertising campaigns, or marketing on price-cutting tactics (Baladi, 2011) when in fact, consumers are keen to build favourable relationships with brands they trust and through goods they associate with perceptions of quality, safety, performance and reliability (Palumbo and Herbig, 2000).

	Loyalty Based on:	Perceived Quality Based on:	Differentiation Based on:	Awareness Based on:
Starbucks	Brand value of specific services, e.g. loyalty card marketing.	Leadership in innovative practices, e.g. store Wi-Fi and design.	Packaging of products and trained service delivery.	Branding of store design. Classy, comfortable, relaxed ambience.
Pizza Hut	Brand personality as an established family diner.	Service in dine-in restaurant setting.	Localisation of menu, non-traditional combination of flavours.	Social media marketing and promotion.
McDonald's	Brand awareness and general cultural and lifestyle identification.	Food safety and religious regulations compliance, e.g. Halal certification.	Operational efficiency, corporate responsibility and talent development initiatives.	Ubiquity of brand advertising and promotion in various media channels.
Snowflake	Brand personality as a healthful Asian cold dessert specialist.	Use of natural and organic ingredients.	Loyalty marketing tactics to attract repeat purchase and store visits.	Prominent outlet locations in urban malls; Taiwan tourism branding.

Researchers conclude that insufficient funding for brand communication processes and activities is akin to a company "starving" its brand, leading ultimately to disconnect with its customers and loss of market share to rivals (Keller, cited in Belch and Belch, 2003). The avoidance of complacence when the brand achieves its mission and wise use of trends, data to manage and improve brand equity are important in the long run.

Conclusion

The measure of success behind lifestyle brands is related to specific cultural dimensions of consumer segmentations, including their values, attitudes, self-identities, aspirations and opinions. Strong brand equity require advertisers and brands to provide crucial supporting elements, from consistent pricing measures to online systems utilisation for marketing and promotion, an involved retail environment, product quality assurance, and so on. Familiarity of a brand identity element for the local business or enterprise should not rest on a prominent logo or unique selling proposition; brand equity management in competitive consumer markets today must be attached to both emotional and rational aspects of branding.

Lifestyle provide a large array of consumption narratives and differentiations by which target consumer segment may define, perceive and view the salience of brands depending on their specific demographics and psychographic segmentation profiles, cultural attitudes and social outlooks. As David Aaker (1992; 1996) believes, common financial measures that drive efficiency and performance such as sales, profit margins versus operational costs, and market share may not always lead to improved brand perception. Lifestyle brands must be communicated consistently to the target group among businesses that aim to be preferred examples of consumer lifestyle habits, routines and customs. By developing a simple but valid brand equity measure, branding initiatives and marketing activities may be grounded on insightful cultural aspects of consumption. For the local service sectors, branding lifestyles will continue to be a key determinant in the construction of meaningful and balanced consumption experiences, so long as designers understand the different cultural scopes behind brand salience and brand personality, and take timely advantage of resourceful associations with brand marketing innovation practices.

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