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Restaurant Brand Image Attributions, Customer Preferences and Purchase Decision: Evidence from Malaysia

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Abstract

Brand image is one of the ways in identifying and distinguishing one product to another and used as marketing tools for survival and growth by many established industries and companies. Branding image is even critical in the hotel and restaurant industry as it involves human performance in delivering the quality food, services and other to the customers. Owing different customer attitudes and needs, creating a uniform branding image through it attributions is crucial in maintaining and increasing customers' level of patronization and assure their loyalty and increase their trust in invisible purchase. This study assessing restaurant brand image attributions, customer preferences and the extent its influence customer purchase decision. Customers view restaurant brand image with several attributions. The attributions listed ranged from products and services related attributions (food quality, service and menu variety) to price, location, convenience and employee's related attributions. Brand image attributions in fact to be the pulling factors which make customers choose to dine. Results of this study significantly contribute insights and impact not only to the existing casual dining restaurant operators but also to those individuals or company who are intend to venture into this business.

Keywords: *Brand image, Casual dining restaurant, Customers, Preferences, Purchase decision.*

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Introduction

In today's business environment, brand image takes it far beyond a business or brand logo or tagline or advertising message but viewed as a set of expectations and associations evoked from experience with company products. It is all about how customers belief, think and feel about what the business or products actually delivers across the board [1]. In other words, if expectations, associations, and experiences are positive, the likely results are positive perceptions about the brand and measurable bottom like contribution in terms of market share and profitability are obtained [2]. "Brand image" relate the established and well-recognized value of the products by the company and customers. It is all those associations with positive, negative and neutral that combines to create the brand's image [3]. Many believe that brand image is one of the ways to identify and distinguish one product to another even in the identical types and same class of product categories and it has long been used as marketing tools for survival and growth by many established industries and companies [4].

Developing and achieving strong brand equity or brand image is the key successes for a company and organization [5]. Coca-Cola for instance survived over a century by focusing on quality, consistency and remains as an

authentic American soft drink. Their good brand image has enabled them to sell its product slightly higher over the competing brands such as Pepsi, Dr. Pepper, 7 Up, Crush, and A&W Root Beer. This resulted to long-term profitability for the Coca-Cola Company, whose brand value is approximately worth $69.6 billion [6]. Similarly, Rolex's brand image embedded the extra value in its name as it is associated with prestige, luxury and status image among the consumers, by their long-established history in watch-making and using superior quality materials such as diamond, gold, and titanium. There are lot of other companies or products that have successfully maintained their brand image such as Nike, IBM, Kodak, Colgate and Kellogg's. In short, organizations have used vast strategies in developing brand image for the company [7]. These include manufacturing, retailing, and banking, airlines with no exception of hospitality, foodservice and restaurant industry.

Researchers argued that branding image is even critical in the hotel and restaurant industry because of its intangible, inseparable, heterogeneous and perishable service characteristics [7-11]. This industry deals with complex labor-intensive compared to other industries as it involves human performance in delivering the quality of services to the customers that have different needs. Hotel and restaurant customers are evaluating the quality food and services even before and after their purchase decisions [12]. Owing different customer attitudes and needs towards hospitality and restaurant services, branding a service by creating a uniform level of service is used by many hotels and restaurants to assure the customers' loyalty and increase their trust in invisible purchase. Brands image would be a quick way for hotel organizations to differentiate themselves in the minds of customers [13]. This would enable them to better visualize and understand the tangible factors, in other words, "tangibilizing the intangible". Brand image embraces all tangible and intangible attributes that the business stands for [13,14]. It provides a series of benefits to a hotel and restaurant organization including greater customer loyalty, higher profit margins, more favorable customer response to price change, brand licensing opportunities and market leadership [3,17].

Hilton, Marriot, Hyatt, Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts, Wendy's, Burger King and McDonald's are among the hotels and restaurants that successfully developed brand image strategy globally including in Malaysia [13-16]. KFC and McDonald's almost achieved 100 per cent brand awareness among the Malaysian customers. KFC for instance has the largest brand share or consumer market share in Malaysia for five consecutive years from the year 2002 to 2007 representing around 4.8 to 5.0 percent each year followed by McDonald's with 1.9 to 2.5 percent [18]. Following KFC and McDonald's, other foreign-owned brands have also been flooding into Malaysia as a way to diversify their operations including café and bistro, ice cream place, family, theme, and casual dining restaurants such as Starbucks, Baskin Robbins, Dunkin' Donuts, Hard Rock Café, Planet Hollywood, Domino's, Pizza Hut, Nando's and Kenny Roger's.

Besides internationally recognized restaurants, the local owned casual dining restaurants together with lower scales (gerai, pushcarts), medium (ethnic, coffee shops, fast foods, cafés) and upper scale (family, themes) are also mushrooming in great numbers in this country [18]. Chic unconventional casual dining restaurants appears all over the places such as strategic corners of shop lots, housing estates, heritage bungalows, near popular nightspots, even in disused buildings [19]. The old typical types of restaurant in hot and humid shop lots with wet mosaic tiled floors, cheap plastic tables and chairs is no longer existent.

Casual restaurants such as Kluang Station, Old Town White Coffee, and Secret Recipe Cakes and Café which offer great blend of foods, services, ambience, design and range of cuisines can clearly be seen. Changes in customers' tastes and eating out habits probably have contributed to this growth. This development intensifies the great competition

among and between the local and multinational brands restaurants in the market and restaurant operators are using various strategies to attract the customers. Their strategies include developing a signature dish, offering relatively low price of their menu items, as well as non-food attributes such as large television screen for avid football fans, air-conditioning and Wi-Fi to satisfy customers' for repeat patronization. In line with this notion, this study aims to;

(1) Identify the attributions that make up the restaurant brand image from Malaysian customer views;

(2) Compare customers' preferences on the brand image attributions between international and local owned casual dining restaurants and

(3) Examine to what extent brand image attributions influence customer purchase decision.

Literature Review

The issue of brand image in the hotel and restaurant industry has started to receive attention among the researchers and practitioners however it is still far behind the than other industries [16, 20-23]. It is crucial to build and manage image in the restaurant through the attributes like décor and interior design, food quality, menu variety, professional appearance of staff, price and cleanliness [24]. These variables can directly portray the overall image of the restaurant, influence customer value, satisfaction, and behavioral intention [25-27]. Price, speed of service, location, cleanliness, menu variety, food quality and good atmosphere closely associated with customer return attention while facilities, convenience, employee courtesy, employee appearance, employee knowledge, colors, logos, and the advertisement contributed to their dining mood [28]. Despite this, employee-related brand associations also play a significant role in customers brand preference in the fine dining while price is a significant determinant of brand preference in quick service restaurant. Studies found that brand image contribute to customer loyalty and marketers have increasingly aware of it strategic importance [29]. Brand loyalty as "the attachment that a customer has to a brand" and is a function of both behavior and attitudes [5,29]. High brands image are likely to be associated with preferred brands than non-preferred brands name [7]. It was believed that high brand name provides a firm with a broader comparative advantage and suggested that marketers should coordinate the brand elements like name, logo, symbol, slogans and jingles with different elements of the marketing mix such as product, price, distribution, advertising, and promotion in order to create brand association [30]. Intermix of brand elements and marketing mix creates a distinctive image or a product or services that differentiate them from competitors. The relationship between multi-restaurant image measures and multi-restaurant loyalty measures (proportions of patronage) toward seven competing casual dinner house restaurant chain was determined and found that measures of image had significant impact on loyalty measures [2]. A study suggested that to increase brand-loyal customers, restaurants could offer added value features and consistently provide high quality service, segmenting customers by their buying trait or develop their own frequent diner program [29]. Perceived quality is also a primary facet across customer-based brand image framework. It provides value to customers and a reason to buy or differentiating the brand from the competing ones. Perceived quality was defined as the customer's perception of the overall quality or superior of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives and there is a positive relationship between perceived service quality and repurchase intention, recommendation and resistance to better alternatives [31,32]. The first step towards loyalty begins when customer's becoming aware of the product and the more they aware of it the greater possibility of purchase decision [5]. Many scholars in fact contemplated the importance of brand awareness as high levels of awareness and positive brand image increase the

probability of brand choice, as well as produce greater customer loyalty and decrease vulnerability to competitive marketing actions [14,24,27].

Consistent to this, brand awareness in the fast food restaurants was studied specifically focusing on process of how customers make the decision to choose one brand over another [33]. Customers have the most favorable attitudes and highest purchase intentions towards the brands they were familiar with. In comparing brand familiarity between low and high familiarity group of restaurants, it was revealed that customers have higher level of satisfaction and behavioral intentions for high familiarity group of restaurants [12]. The role of expectations in satisfaction evaluation seems to diminish with experience, and perceptions of performance appeared to dominate among high familiarity customers. In addition, a high level of familiarity is desirable as it facilitates the purchase decision process and increases confidence in the purchase. This finding, inline with another study [34], that familiarity may have a positive effect on evaluations of a service. An individual develops stronger associations to a stimulus as exposure increases. If previous encounters were positive, the next encounter is likely to produce increased in liking. On the other hand, if previous encounters were negative, the next encounter it is likely to produce increased disliking [35].

All four brand equity elements (brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand image) claimed to be important and having a positive effect on QSR chains' performance [14]. Brand awareness and perceived quality however are the most significant construct for brand equity in chain restaurants and as it is relate to the ability for a buyer to recognize or recall a brand as a member of a certain product category. It is represented either as brand recognition or brand recall. Therefore, restaurant could increase its brand awareness through various promotional and communication strategies via multiple mass media like television commercials, magazine advertising and public events. [36] developed and tested a model of customer equity in chain restaurant brand and revealed that to maximize customer equity, chain restaurants should improve brand image and brand awareness and value equity like food quality, service quality, environment and price is important in customer equity construct [37,38].

Methods

The suitability of the method used in this study is dictated by the research objectives which require a descriptive answer in qualitative form. As the intention is to understand the phenomenon of brand image from a consumer perspective, rather than attempting to control or predict what it is, or to explicate its meaning to the consumer [28], an open ended was hosen as a means of information gathering as it encourage a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own knowledge and/or feelings**.** With that the populations were among customers who have experience patronizing the casual dining restaurants. Besides one of the fastest growing type of restaurant in Malaysia casual dining restaurants were chosen due to the fact they are found to have developed their brand image compared to other types of restaurants in this country [18]. In tapping the antecedents, a convenience sampling approach was opted by selecting customers at random at one of popular shopping complex located at three major cities in the Klang Valley namely Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya and Shah Alam. In other words, three different shopping complexes are involved in data gathering process whereby some of the popular local and international casual dining restaurants are in operation. Potential respondents were initially approached and asked if they had experienced of dining in those restaurants? If the customers reported having had such experience they were invited to take part in the study.

The instrument is divided into two sections. Section A focuses on the demographic profile with the questions involve gender, age, ethnicity and level of education of the respondents with another four open ended

Table 1: Items used in section B of the instrument

No.	*Items*
1.	To your understanding what attributions that make up the restaurant brand image?
2.	When you choose a restaurant, does brand image matter? Why?
3.	What is your degree of preferences on the brand image between international and locally owned casual dining restaurant? Why?
4.	To what extent brand image attributions influence your purchase decision?

questions asking respondents to write a short answer about their feelings were created in the second section. These questions are expected to provide greater insight about customer view on restaurant brand image attributions, preferences and the extent to which brand image influence their purchase decision. The questions used in section B is set out in Table 1.

Survey was conducted in four weekends at the selected shopping complexes by researchers and two other assistants. Potential respondents were intercepted before entering the shopping complexes. There were several incidents whereby some respondents were reluctant to participate in the survey as they claimed to have no time and were rushed for shopping. Despite this difficulty, a total of 240 sets of instrument were able to be distributed.

Analysis and Results

Characteristics of the Sample

56.7 percent (*n*= 136) of respondents are males as opposed 43.3 percent (*n*= 104) females. This is probably due to the willingness of males to participate in the study compared to their female counterparts. 41.6 percent (*n*=100) of them were Malays compared to 31.2 percent (*n*=75) Chinese, 16.7 percent (*n*=40) Indians and 10.4 percent (*n*=25) were others. This ethnic proportion is in line population ratio in these three cities (Shah Alam and Subang Jaya) whereby Malays represented the largest population. The majority of respondent also belongs to the younger age group with 37.5 percent (*n*= 104) were under 25 years old, followed by 28.7 percent (*n* = 69) who were between 26 to 35 years of age as opposed 18.8% (*n*= 45) were between 36-45 years and 15.0 percent (*n*=36) were above 46 years old. This indicates that casual-dining restaurants are popular among the younger patrons. This result corresponds well with the level of education whereby 82.5 percent (*n*=198) possess at least a college education as compared to 17.5 (*n*= 42) with secondary school certificate. In the period of three months 46.7 % (n= 112) had dined around 2 3 times, followed by 25 percent (n= 60) for once, 18.8 percent (n= 45) at least 3- 4 times and 9.5 percent (n=23) dined more than 5 times (Table 2).

Customer View on Restaurant Brand Image

The first question asked the respondent of ' what attributions that make up the restaurant brand image? Through the aggregation of the data gathered, 33.3 percent (*n*= 80) respondents associate brand with quality of food provided, 16.7 percent (n= 40) relate it with variety of menu offer while 14.5 percent (n= 35) denote it with price or value for money. In actual fact this is not surprising as customers generally patronize restaurants with the intention of having the best food of high quality and obtaining value for their money spent. This is in fact normal to the nature of being human whereby they are prudent with what they spend. In addition, some respondent listed name and reputation of the restaurant (7.9 percent, n= 19), décor/design/layout (4.2 percent, n=10), atmosphere/ambiance (4.2 percent, n=10), location (3.8 percent, n= 9) and cleanliness (3.0 percent, n= 7) also asbrand attributions. These results, in line with other reports [39,40], that emphasized the significance of reputations, environment / atmospherics in consumer behavior and response (Table 3).

Quoted are some remarks given by the respondents:

Table 2: Distribution of respondents' demography profiles

Demographic	*Variables*	*Frequency (n)*	*Percentage (%)*
Gender	Male	136	56.7
	Female	104	43.3
Age group	25 and below	90	37.5
	26-35	69	28.7
	36-45	45	18.8
	46 and above	36	15.0
Ethnicity	Malay	100	41.6
	Chinese	75	31.3
	Indian	40	16.7
	Others	25	10.4
Level of education	SPM	42	17.5
	Diploma	66	27.5
	Bachelor Degree	100	41.6
	Master and above	32	13.4
Frequency of dining in the past three months	Once	60	25.0
	2-3 times	112	46.7
	3-4 times	45	18.8
	More than 5 times	23	9.5

- Brand image of a restaurant represents the quality of food provided that satisfying customers.
- Brand image cannot be achieved without varieties of food offers. It is meaningful a promise to the customers
- Restaurant that is standing on its name, reputation and nobody can duplicate it. Customer aware about it
- Brand image is something new and exciting on the menu and the quantities are reasonable.
- Brand is something to do with price and value of money spent
- Fast service is one of the important element that make the restaurant brand image
- Efficiency is part of restaurant brand image through use of every contact point with the customer including employee appearance and employee behavior and presentation.
- Ambience creating a restaurant brand image. Example, a lot of space between tables and chairs
- Brand image is uniqueness and creative way of reaching its clientele.

Respondents were also asked if brand attributes matter to them when choosingrestaurant. There were vast distinctions between respondents who reported "yes" and those who noted "no". 73.3 percent (n=176) stated that branding image is important to them when selecting a restaurant compared to 26.7 percent (n= 64) who opposed the statement. Result of this analysis revealed that food related attribute (food quality, variety of menu, quality of service, price together with name, reputation, restaurant décor, ambience, location and cleanliness) explicitly received a greater concern among customer and associate that attributions make up the restaurant brand image. This is strongly support by [41,42] that the restaurant operators and marketer has an important challenge of getting over the poor image by building these attributes. In addition, the use of every contact point with the customer; and employee appearance and employee behavior and presentation are important aspects in attracting customers.

Customers' Preferences towards Brand Image Attributions

In the third question, customers were asked their level of preferences on the brand image attributions between international and locally owned casual dining restaurant? From the patterns of answers gathered, there were no distinct difference in customer preferences with 52.5 % (n=126) prefer the brand image

attributes portrayed by international owned casual dining restaurants as opposed to 47.5 % (n= 114) who are favor towards local owned casual dining restaurants (Table 4). When asking why, the various answers received were:

- International owned restaurant are preferred as they provides better décor and ambience than the local ones
- Local owned restaurant slightly offer better menu prices than the international casual dining restaurants.
- Both restaurant provides similar kind of menu composition
- Prefer international brand restaurants as it having an established name , reputation and good promotion compared to the local owned restaurants
- No vast different in term of quality of food offer in both restaurant
- The international owned restaurant employees always look so neat and tidy
- The employees at international owned restaurant are cool (attentiveness)

Together this point revealed that both local and internationally owned casual dining restaurants are preferred by the customers as they are perceived of having a similar menu composition, quality of food and quality of service. However, slightly differ in term of décor, ambience, employee outfit and established name, reputation, promotion and international owned casual dining restaurant outweigh the local brand on these attributes. This in actual fact is could hold true as most of the international brand restaurant is initially strategizing themselves before venturing into the international arena. Despite that, the local owned casual dining restaurants are perceived by customers of offering slightly higher menu prices and that indirectly make them more competitive in attracting customers.

Customer Purchase Decision

The last open ended question asking the extent to which brand image attributes influence customer purchase decision. It is apparent that a highly significant proportion of customers expressed their opinions that food and the quality of service were favored with 31.2% (n= 75) given to the former and 22.9% (n=22.9) rating the latter attribute. These answers correspond and fit well with the other previous studies that customers were mostly decide to go to a restaurant that provides a combination of delicious food and excellent service. It is also notable that customer purchase decisions is also directly rely on variety of menu (12.5%, n=30), price or value for money (8.8%, n=21) and ambience (7.1%, n=17) as brand image attributions. Another important element that needs to be given attention is related to name and reputation (5.4%, n= 13) and décor/design/layout (3.8%, n= 9). In this open ended question, customers also expressed that entertainment (3.3%, n= 8), location (2.9%, n=7) and cleanliness (2.1%, n= 5) slightly contribute to their decision to dine at a casual dining restaurant (Table 5).

Table 3: What attributions that makes up the restaurant brand image?

Items	*Frequency (n)*	*Percentage (%)*
Quality of food	80	33.3
Variety of Menu	40	16.7
Price/Value for money	35	14.5
Quality of Service	30	12.5
Name and reputation	19	7.9
Décor/Design/Layout	10	4.2
Atmosphere/Ambiance	10	4.2
Location	9	3.8
Cleanliness	7	3.0
Total	**240**	**100**

Table 4: Degree of preferences on the brand image between international and locally owned casual dining restaurant

Variable	*Casual Dining Restaurants*	*Frequency (n)*	*Percentage (%)*
Degree of preferences	International	126	52.5
	Local	114	47.5
	Total	240	100

Among the verbatim comments were;

- Quality of food including taste is far more important in influencing purchase decision
- Best food of high quality strongly influenced customers patronization

- Food and service and value for money are equally important and influence customer decision to dine at particular restaurant
- Customers' inclination to go to the restaurants not only very much depends on the taste of food, service but is also directly related to the variety and availability of food.
- If the restaurant has good and delicious food, I will definitely dine there.
- I always go to a restaurant that has good food and the best service
- The concept and layout of the restaurants, pleasant ambience and conducive dining environments as well as entertainment also creating mood for dining
- Cleanliness and restaurant location have also increased the propensity to dine.

Conclusively, what can be said from these findings is that most of the customers have a great concern about the food, service and variety of menu to dine or patronize particular restaurants. In addition, despite not being as important as food and service other brand image attributes such as price, a good restaurant environment, name and reputation slightly attracting customers purchase decision. This is not surprising as most of the restaurants nowadays are found to have placed emphasis on the interior, such as well designed ambience with air conditioning and a well ventilated system. Besides a conducive dining area, the easy access and location of restaurants and the availability of the parking area slightly moderate customers to go to the restaurant.

Table 5: Customer purchase decision

Items	*Frequency (n)*	*Percentage (%)*
Quality of food	75	31.2
Quality of Service	55	22.9
Variety of Menu	30	12.5
Price/Value for money	21	8.8
Ambience	17	7.1
Name and reputation	13	5.4
Décor/Design/Layout	9	3.8
Entertainment	8	3.3
Location	7	2.9
Cleanliness	5	2.1
Total	**240**	**100**

Discussion and Conclusion

Results of this study demonstrate that customers view or relate restaurant brand image with several attributions. The attributions listed ranged from products and services related attributes (food quality, service and menu variety) to price, location, convenience and employee's related attributions. Some of the brand image attributions in fact to be the pulling factors which make customers choose to dine. These findings affirmed and support the previous similar studies that service providers such as hotels and restaurants used those brand image attributions to capture their customers. In addition, majority of restaurant customers positively perceived both local and internationally owned casual dining restaurants of having a similar products related brand image attributes. The results of this study thus give a significant impact not only to the existing casual dining restaurant operators but also to those individuals or companies who are intend to venture into this business and this merit further discussion.

Findings indicate that the casual dining restaurant operators either local or internationally owned to some extent on the right track of using those revealed attributions in building their brand image. However, they should not feel satisfied but could further maintain and even go beyond that in heightening or upgrading the brand image attributions that they have established. Result also found that most casual dining restaurants in this study have successfully attracted the younger age group customers. Besides maintaining and increasingly attracting this market group the operators should have some kind of strategy of capturing a larger market particularly among the middle age group. This can be done by manipulating some of the brand image elements or providing more appealing elements which can catch the attention of the middle age group segments.

Despite these, there is evidence that the service, décor, ambience, employee attentiveness/ outfits, name, reputation and

promotion except menu prices as part of brand image associations were better met in intentionally owned casual dining restaurant compared to local ones. The local casual dining restaurant operators therefore should not take this matter lightly but to be more responsive and sensitive on these brand image attributes particularly on the service and employees attentiveness which does not substantially involved financial resources. Strengthening these elements indirectly make them be more competitive as customers in this study slightly in favor with menu prices offer by the local casual-dining restaurants.

On the general part of this study, individuals who intend to venture into this business should first understand the role of brand image. They must clearly understand and incorporate the concept of brand image attributions when opening a new restaurant. Worth to mentioned and based on previous restaurant related studies by researchers, Malaysian customers are no longer frequenting restaurants to cram themselves with food. Instead, current generation of customers treats restaurants especially casual dining restaurants also as places for social interaction. They expect beyond the old style of eating out and believe the new trend of eating out involves dining out for leisure and experience. Customers are using their opinions to evaluate various aspects of brand image attributes like food quality, service quality, ambience, interior design, value and familiarity to drive their repeat purchase decision. For example, what customers believe about a restaurant and how they view a restaurant have the strongest impact on what they will expect. If the customers believe that a particular restaurant is able to meet their needs, their expectations concerning that restaurant will be heightened. Owing to this, their probability of repeat patronization will be increased since presumably there is a direct correlation between expectation and customer dining intention. Because of this impact, managing the brand image attributions will create positive feelings in the customers toward the restaurant and each restaurant operator must equip themselves with brand image attributions knowledge as it is not only maintaining the existing customers but attracting new one as well as ensuring sustainability of the business operation.

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