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Customer Decision Making Vis-à-Vis *Halal* Branding

by

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the preference of Muslim youth for *halal* (religiously permissible) certified products in their search for branded items was the underlying motive behind this research. Since sportswear brand owners usually target youth market segments, Muslim youth in the Malaysian market were selected as the main respondents for this study. The collective perceptions of quality, brand awareness, brand association and consumer loyalty constitute brand equity and this study focused on brand equity research in the Malaysian marketing environment.

Empirical research was conducted to determine the “on the ground” reality of the market, with a view to suggesting marketing policy directions to brand managers in the Malaysian sportswear industry. In the Malaysian context, the findings of the research do not completely support all the dimensions of Aaker’s (1991) brand equity model.

This paper recommends that brand managers use *halal* certification of sportswear products to penetrate the Malay youth sub-segment of the Malaysian sportswear market. *Halal* certification will not have a negative effect on penetration of the other market sub-segments consisting of youth from other races in Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has one of the fastest growing populations of youth in the ASEAN market.

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The local market comprises Chinese, Indian and other races, including mainstream Malay Muslim youth; it offers great potential to marketers of sportswear products. In spite of the growing importance of the Malaysian sportswear products market, the topic of how a sportswear firm builds brand equity appears to be under-researched. This study aims to empirically test the components of brand equity and how they interact within the context of sportswear brands competing in the Malaysian Muslim youth market. The results of this research lead to a deeper understanding of the brand equity concept as applied to sportswear, as well as the implications of consumer-decision making for brand practitioners working in the sportswear industry. Moreover, this paper discusses the importance of halal certification to brand equity in the Malaysian Muslim youth sportswear market.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this study are:

- To study the market perceptions and selection of sportswear brands by Muslim consumers in Malaysia.
- To see the significance of brand awareness, brand association and loyalty to sportswear brand equity and buying decisions among Muslim consumers in the Malaysian market.
- To understand the significance of *halal* branding in determining sportswear brand equity in the Malaysian market

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand equity refers to a product's added value. Researchers tend to consider brand equity differently from marketers, defining the concept in terms of both the relationship between customer and brand, and as something that accrues to the brand owner (Wood, 2000). Brand equity represents a condition in which the consumer is familiar with the brand and recalls some favourable, strong and unique brand associations (Keller, 1993). According to Sloot, Verhoef, and Franses (2005), consumers generally prefer high-equity brands and are willing to exercise more effort to obtain their favourite ones. Moreover, high-equity brands tend to have a greater distribution level than low-equity brands, which often consist of private labels, regional brands, and price brands.

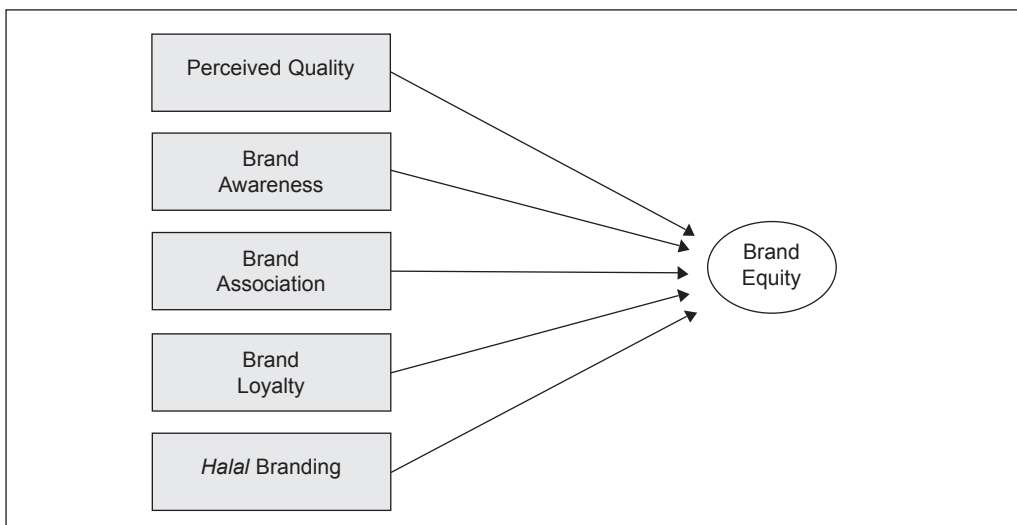
Keller (2002) stated that there are two types of brand equity: high brand equity and low brand equity. High brand equity is reflected by a product that has achieved favourable reactions which have created high demand among a large number of consumers. Alternatively, low brand equity is a measure of poor reactions in the form of product demand from a smaller number of consumers. According to Anselmsson, Johansson, and Persson (2007), the concept of brand equity provides additional measures that help to explain how price premium is driven for consumer products. They also mentioned

that quality, awareness, association, and loyalty need to be considered when a business wants to influence the willingness of consumers to pay more for certain brands.

4. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF BRAND EQUITY

The significance of brand equity, in terms of consumer-based brand equity, is found in the five dimensions of brand equity shown in Figure 1. The four main variables of brand equity, conceptualized by Aaker (1991), Keller (2003) and others, were originally used by marketing practitioners. Halal branding was not one of the main dimensions in previous work but was added by the author for the purpose of generating the revised and adapted framework this study. This adapted framework is discussed below.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of brand equity



Source: Adapted from Aaker (1991), Keller (2003) and others e.g., Tong and Halwey (2009)

Perceived Quality

Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived quality as the consumer's judgment regarding the overall excellence or superiority of a product/service, which is different from the objective of quality. The objective of quality refers to the measurable, technical and verifiable nature of product/service processes that control the quality of products/services (Anselmsson et al., 2007). Perceived quality only explains a considerable portion of the variance in the price premium that influences a consumer's willingness to pay for a brand (Sethuraman & Cole, 1997).

According to Aaker (1996), perceived quality provides a surrogate variable for other more specific elements of brand equity. Perceived quality also has the important attribute of being applicable across product classes, and can be measured with scales such as the following:

- In comparison to alternative brands, this brand has high quality (versus average or inferior quality).
- In comparison to alternative brands, this brand is the best (versus one of the best, one of the worst, or the worst).
- In comparison to alternative brands, this brand has consistent quality (versus inconsistent quality).

Moreover, the perception of high quality by potential customers adds value to a brand in several ways. First, a perception of high quality gives consumers more confidence and a good reason to buy the brand. Secondly, it allows the brand to differentiate itself from its competitors. A high quality brand justifies a premium price (Aaker, 1991).

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is an important element of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). It refers to the strength of a brand's presence in consumers' minds. Rossiter and Percy (1987) defined brand awareness as the consumer's ability to identify or recognize the brand. According to Burmann, Benz, and Riley (2009), brand awareness falls into the class of knowledge-oriented measures. As such, brand awareness forms a basis for measuring external brand strength. The concept reflects the ability of the buyer to identify and correctly classify a brand to a product category. In addition, from an internal perspective, brand awareness is highly relevant to establishing brand strength. A high level of brand awareness may have a positive impact on a consumer's commitment to a brand, as a well-known brand is likely to be perceived more positively than an unknown brand. Nevertheless, brand awareness itself is not sufficient to create internal or external brand strength. Rather, brand awareness represents a necessary condition for brand strength since the positive or negative quality of brand strength is determined by the other dimensions. Based on the above explanation, and the suggested relationship between brand awareness and brand equity in the literature, it is equally important to empirically test this dimension of brand awareness.

Brand Association

According to Kotler and Keller (2006), brand association refers to all brand-related thoughts of consumers, including feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. Compared to Aaker's other three dimensions of brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived quality, brand association is construed by other authors as possessing the core assets needed to build strong brand equity (Chen, 2001). Chen argued that brand awareness is a necessary asset but is not sufficient for building strong brand equity, and that other brand equity dimensions enhance brand loyalty. Perceived quality, association, and a well-known name can provide reasons to buy and may affect user satisfaction, resulting in brand loyalty. Nevertheless, brand loyalty is sometimes excluded from the conceptualization of brand equity because consumers may be in the habit of buying a particular brand without really thinking much about why. Chen also mentioned that perceived quality is one kind of brand association. Therefore, brand

associations are believed to contain “the meaning of the brand for consumers” (Keller, 1993).

According to Chen (2001), brand associations can be categorized into product associations and organizational associations. Product associations consist of functional attribute associations and non-functional attribute associations. Functional attribute associations are related to the tangible features of a product, such as product design and packaging. Non-functional attribute associations are related to the intangible features of products that meet consumers’ needs for social approval, personal expression or self-esteem (Keller, 1993; Chieng & Lee, 2011). On the other hand, organizational associations include corporate ability associations, which are related to the company’s expertise for producing and delivering its outputs to consumers (Chen, 2001).

Brand associations also create value for the firm and its customers by helping to process/retrieve information, differentiate the brand, create positive attitudes or feelings that provide a reason to buy, and provide a basis for (brand) extension (Aaker, 1991). As a result, consumer-based brand equity occurs when consumers have a high level of awareness and hold some strong, favourable, and unique brand associations in their memories (Tong & Halwey, 2009).

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is the key dimension of brand equity (Chieng & Lee, 2011). Oliver (1997) defined brand loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to repurchase a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having potential to cause switching behavior.” Oliver’s definition emphasizes the behavioural dimension of brand loyalty, whereas Rossiter and Percy (1987) argued that brand loyalty is often characterized by a favourable attitude towards a brand and repeated purchases of the same brand over time. Brand loyalty is also conceptualized based on an attitudinal perspective.

In addition to the above, brand loyalty is reflected in repeat purchases. Repeat purchases clearly point out that this behaviour is a function of psychological processes. Brand loyalty is considered tantamount to repeat purchasing. Jensen and Hansen (2006) stated that loyal customers are likely to be resistant to the machinations of competitors, and are likely to tell family, friends and colleagues about the wonders that their products perform. When they need what is on offer, they are very likely to come back and buy the product again. According to Aaker (1991), brand loyalty adds considerable value to a brand and/or its firm because it provides a source of habitual buyers for a long period of time. In addition, brand loyalty develops when the brand fits the personality or self-image of the consumer, or when the brand offers gratifying and unique benefits that the consumer seeks (Quester & Lim, 2003).

5. THE HALAL ELEMENT IN BRANDING

Aaker’s 1991 model was not tested in a Muslim market. Hence, this author introduced

the *halal* element and further improved the brand equity model to make it suitable for the Malaysian sportswear market. *Halal* is an Arabic word which means “permissible” or “allowed”. The opposite is *haram*, which means “not allowed” or “prohibited”. The differentiation between *halal* and non-*halal* exists within both the product and service industries. While *halal* certification may constitute one of a brand’s equity attributes, the question arises as to whether *halalness* can be successfully exploited for commercial purposes, branding, or a combination of both. Although a company or organization may be treated as a producer of a *halal* brand, it is unlikely that it could adopt *halal* naming of its product(s) outright since it is matter of obtaining permission from the competent authorities that have a religious duty to assure Muslims of the integrity and independence of the *halal* determination and certification processes. What remains, then, is positioning a product as a *halal* brand, with *halal* designation or certification almost assuming the role of a co-brand (Wilson & Liu, 2010). Apart from these issues, Hanzae and Ramezani (2011, p. 1) defined *halal* branding as:

“*Halal* products are those that are *Shariah* compliant, i.e. do not involve the use of *haram* (prohibited) ingredients, exploitation of labour or environment, and are not harmful or intended for harmful use. The realm of *halal* may extend to all consumables such as toiletries, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and services including finance. *Halal* is a typical credence process attribute, i.e. a quality characteristic that can hardly be evaluated or ascertained by the individual consumer, even upon or after consuming the food.”

Nowadays, *halal* branding is becoming an important issue in fast growing markets, especially in Muslim countries. It is rapidly becoming a new market force in the mainstream sportswear market. In addition to being a religious issue, it is in the realm of goods and services in global business and in the lifestyle choices facing Muslim youth (Hanzae & Ramezani, 2011). Therefore, Muslims are seeking *halal* certified products and services to ensure they are not using contaminated (*haram*) materials.

According to Muhamad and Mizerski (2010), the behaviour of Muslim consumers is affected by Islamic rules and regulations that are based on Islamic affiliation, knowledge, orientation and commitment. These rules and regulations are laid down in the *Quran* and in the *Sunnah* (deeds and words of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) and must be followed by all Muslims. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said:

“All actions are judged by intention and whoever commits an act, or introduces a matter into our religion (Islam), which is not part of it, will have it rejected.” (Hadith related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

As a result, Muslim consumers are making decisions to buy *halal* certified products in order to avoid *haram* (prohibited) items. *Halal* certified products contain the benefit of assurance that encourages Muslim consumers to buy the brand without prejudice. Once consumers have a high perception of product quality based on brand awareness, the product’s “*halalness*” then increases brand equity.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research instrument developed for this study comprised seven sections. The first section collected respondents' demographic information, such as gender, age, religion, highest level of education, occupation, and preferred sportswear brand. The second section dealt with the perceived quality of sportswear brands, and consisted of six items. The third section of the questionnaire asked about brand awareness, and consisted of five items. The fourth section consisted of six items dealing with brand associations. The fifth section covered brand loyalty, and consisted of six items. The sixth section dealt with halal branding and consisted of four items. The final section asked for feedback on overall brand equity, and consisted of three items. From section two to section seven, respondents were asked to evaluate all items based on a five-point Likert scale. Measurement of items was adapted from Aaker (1991), Pappu, Quester, and Cooksey (2006), Tong and Halway (2009), and Lee, Lee, & Wu (2011). Questionnaire data were subject to reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) and regression analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software, version 17.0, to find the relationship(s) between dependent and independent variables.

Sampling and Data Collection

In this research, only Muslim consumers in Kuala Lumpur were surveyed. A total of 516 self-administered research questionnaires were distributed by hand, email, fax, and mail to respondents who had past experience with sportswear brands in Malaysia. Out of 516 responses, 371 responses (approximately 72 percent) were considered useable.

Data Analysis

The data underwent a four-part analysis. The first part consisted of a descriptive analysis of the demographic information supplied by the respondents. The second part was a reliability analysis to determine whether the research instrument was reliable and consistent. The third part of the analysis consisted of a Pearson correlation analysis, while the last part involved a comparison analysis of Muslim consumers' perceptions of brand equity through independent sample t-tests and ANOVA tests.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 illustrates that men comprised 45.3 percent of respondents while women comprised 54.7 percent. The highest percentage of respondents (45.8 percent) came from the 21-30 age group, followed by those in the 31-34 age group (36.4 percent), and the 41-50 age group (17.8 percent). In this study, 70.1 percent of respondents were Muslim, while 29.9 percent were non-Muslim. In terms of educational background, 46.6 percent of respondents possessed a bachelor degree, while 15.1 percent had a postgraduate degree. Study responses also showed that 37.7 percent of respondents liked to buy Nike sportswear brand products, the highest percentage among the sportswear brands identified by the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	168	45.3
Female	203	54.7
Age		
21 - 30 years	170	45.8
31 - 40 years	135	36.4
41 - 50 years	66	17.8
Religion		
Muslim	260	70.1
Non-Muslim	111	29.9
Educational Background		
Diploma	105	28.3
Bachelor degree	173	46.6
Postgraduate degree	56	15.1
Others	37	10.0
Occupation		
Professional	20	5.4
Manager/Executive	45	12.1
Clerical staff	38	10.2
Technical staff	94	25.3
Full time student	174	46.9
Sportswear Brand		
Nike	140	37.7
Power	89	24.0
Adidas	41	11.1
New Balance	37	10.0
Puma	45	12.1
Others	19	5.1

Reliability Analysis

The research instrument was tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha value. According to Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010), Cronbach's alpha refers to the consistency and reliability of research instruments, with a higher Cronbach's alpha value meaning that the research instruments (more specifically, the research items within the instruments) possess greater reliability and consistency. In this study, the values for the dimensions (the research items) ranged from 0.68 to 0.86 (see Table 2), with all values except for *halal* branding exceeding the minimum requirement of 0.70 for Cronbach's alpha. With a value of 0.68, *halal* branding was very close to the requirement so the research items and the overall instrument were considered highly reliable.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Variable	No. of item	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived quality	6	0.74
Brand awareness	5	0.76
Brand associations	6	0.79
Brand loyalty	6	0.86
Halal branding	4	0.68
Brand equity	3	0.78

Pearson Correlation Analysis

In this study, Pearson correlations were calculated to identify the correlations between the variables. According to Cohen (1988), there are three strengths of coefficient correlation: small or weak, medium, and large or strong. Cohen (1988) also mentioned that Pearson correlation values (r) ranging from 0.10 to 0.29 or from -0.10 to -0.29 are considered as small or weak relations, values from 0.30 to 0.49 or -0.30 to -0.49 are considered as medium relations and values from 0.50 to 1.0 or -0.50 to -1.0 are considered as large or strong relations. However, Field (2005) suggested that the correlation coefficient value should not be above 0.8 in order to avoid multi-collinearity. Based on the Pearson correlation test, the highest correlation coefficient value was 0.772, which is less than 0.8. Thus, there is no multi-collinearity problem in this research (see Table 3). However, correlation coefficient results shows that brand associations, brand loyalty, *halal* branding, and perceived quality all have a weak relationship with brand awareness. The majority of the correlations are significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Brand Equity	Perceived Qualit	Brand Awareness	Brand Associations	Brand Loyalty	Halal Branding
Brand Equity	3.8877	.74875	1					
Perceived Quality	4.0921	.45617	.248**	1				
Brand Awareness	3.9418	.53912	.375**	.115*	1			
Brand Associations	3.8661	.55782	.269**	.540**	.109*	1		
Brand Loyalty	3.7731	.73274	.273**	.455**	.049	.772**	1	
Halal Branding	3.6590	.72479	.383**	.369**	-.016	.496**	.522**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Results of ANOVA Testing

This research used a one-way ANOVA test to determine the significant differences among three different categories (age, education, and sportswear brand) in relation to perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, *halal* branding and overall brand equity (see Table 4).

Based on the results of the one-way ANOVA test, the age groups of the respondents

have significant differences on brand equity ($p = 0.03$). Tukey's test indicated that there were significant differences with respect to brand equity ($p = 0.05$) between respondents in the 21-30 and 31-40 age groups. The results of the one-way ANOVA test also show that different educational levels ($p = 0.003$) and sportswear brand preferences ($p = 0.021$) have significant differences on perceived quality.

However, the one-way ANOVA test could not find any significant differences in brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, and *halal* branding between the different categories of respondents based on age, education, and sportswear brand.

Table 4: One-way ANOVA test for age, education and sportswear brand

Variables	Groups	F-value	p-value
Perceived Quality	Age	0.634	0.531
	Education	4.816	0.003**
	Sportswear Brand	2.702	0.021*
Brand Awareness	Age	1.223	0.295
	Education	1.308	0.271
	Sportswear Brand	0.832	0.527
Brand Associations	Age	0.881	0.415
	Education	2.560	0.055
	Sportswear Brand	1.303	0.262
Brand Loyalty	Age	0.271	0.763
	Education	0.578	0.630
	Sportswear Brand	0.704	0.621
<i>Halal</i> Branding	Age	0.376	0.687
	Education	0.436	0.727
	Sportswear Brand	0.484	0.788
Brand Equity	Age	3.529	0.030*
	Education	0.465	0.707
	Sportswear Brand	0.714	0.613

Note: * variable is significant at the 0.05 level and ** variable is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

7. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research, perceived quality, brand awareness and brand associations have a significant influence on Muslim consumers in relation to sportswear brand equity in Malaysia. The reasons for this could be that Malaysian Muslim consumers are satisfied with the quality of the sportswear brands and have sufficient knowledge of the sportswear brands available in the market. Having sufficient knowledge of sportswear includes being familiar with sportswear brand attributes, intangible benefits, brand positioning, relative price and other customer benefits. Surprisingly, this research result also shows that brand loyalty and *halal* attributes of branding have a negative impact on sportswear brand equity in the Malaysian market. This may be because Malaysian culture is based on pluralism that encompasses others who may have less concern with ensuring that they buy *halal*. Hence, the finding is

different from the experiences of other countries. Perhaps Malaysian Muslim consumers have different expectations regarding price, brand design, store environment and service quality in the sportswear shops they frequent in the country.

Even though the research findings do not completely support all dimensions of Aaker's brand equity model in the Malaysian context, perceived quality, brand awareness and brand associations were found to have a significant impact on brand equity. These results were different from those found in the Chinese market by Tong and Hawley (2009): their results showed that brand association and brand loyalty had significant relationships with brand equity, but perceived quality and brand awareness had an insignificant relationship.

To improve brand equity among Muslim consumers, brand managers should concentrate their efforts on brand loyalty and *halal* branding. These have high importance in the construct of brand equity within the group of Muslim consumers. In the highly competitive sportswear industry, companies seeking to penetrate the Malay youth sub-segment of the sportswear market need to first create a unique, favourable, and strong brand image to provide Muslim consumers with a reason to buy the brand. This will work to keep the loyalty of Muslim consumers and gain their repeat business.

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Clammer, J., 2000. *Values and Development in Southeast Asia*. Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications.

Cooney, T.M., Atherton, A. and Richardson, P., 2001. *Is our understanding of entrepreneurship contingent upon the context in which it occurs?* [online]. Available at: <http://www.babson.edu/entrep/fer/Babson2001/III/IIIE/IIIE.htm> [Accessed 4 October 2004].

Donabedian, A., 1989. Institutional and professional responsibilities in quality assurance. *Quality Assurance in Health Care*, 1 (1), pp. 3-11. In Reeve, J., 1994. Sisters' and charge nurses attitudes to quality. *International Journal of Healthcare Quality Assurance*, 10 (1), pp. 42-8.

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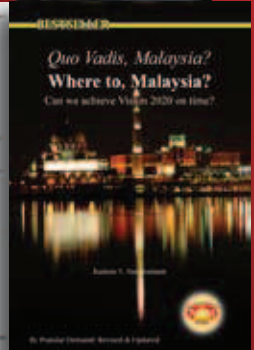
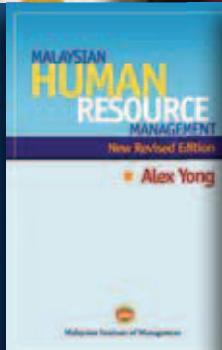
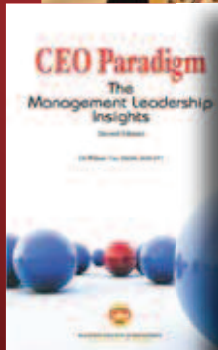
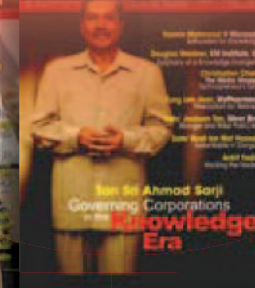
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