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The consequence of Malaysian national culture values on hotel branding

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Abstract

Branding is prevalent within the hotel industry. Yet most branding constructs were developed in western cultural context. This study attempts to address the relationship between branding and culture. The study outlines the elements that are critical in designing hotel brand experience through a series of in-depth personal interviews with the hotel managers. The results reveal how a great brand experience could be built on the concept national culture values as proposed by Hofstede. A work-in-progress importance of national culture values in hotel branding is offered. This is an initial step towards a framework of culturally relevant hotel branding.

1. Introduction

Over the last fifty years, tens of thousands of studies on brands have been published (Berthon et al., 2011). However, the concept of branding still continues to demonstrate a strong positive presence to be discussed anywhere. Brand exists across all industries, ranging from product branding to services branding. The development of branding over the past three decades is characterized by layers of added value built around the core functionality of the product to create and maintain its characteristic (Knox & Bickerton, 2003). There are also studies that rationalize the influence of culture in business and marketing. However, there is no study on the influence of culture on branding as a construct. Hence, this study attempted to explore the role of culture in branding construct.

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All cultures carry with them different cultural norms and accepted patterns of behavior. This paper adopted the perspectives of Geert Hofstede (1993) to explore culture. Hofstede defines culture as "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1993, p.89) and presents the core element in culture as values. While Hofstede's model is considered the dominant national culture value model, the criticism suggests that his conceptual model is debatable when addressing questions revolving around national culture values. Regardless of the critics to the theory, his concept is the most widely utilized dimensions to measure culture (Reisinger, 2009). Hofstede's Model is adopted in this study for its simplicity and its ability to guide in the understanding of the Malaysian culture, which later, will be linked to the influence, whether as individuals or as a group, to the behavior and the decision which would affect hotel branding.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hofstede's national culture values

Culture manifests itself in several ways and Hofstede (2007) presents the core element in culture as values. Hofstede uses a broad approach by defining values as "a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 5). This concurs with Rokeach's definition – "to say that a person has a value is to say that he/she has an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally and socially preferable to alternative modes of conduct or end states of existence" (Rokeach 1968, p. 550). Values describe a tendency of the individual to respond to stimuli within the cultural field in an expected manner given by a particular value profile. Unlike attitudes, values are understood to be enduring beliefs that rise above specific objects and situations. Values are distinctive and they are the standard used to inform one's actions. Values provide guidance to the appropriateness of one's attitudes. Values justify one's behavior, helping to morally judge and provide a benchmark of comparison with others (Rokeach, 1968).

Hofstede (1984) uses four dimensions to classify national culture values. The first dimension is individualism versus collectivism which shows whether the interests of an individual or a group are more important. This dimension describes the relationships individuals have in each culture. In individualistic societies, individuals look after themselves and their immediate family only, whereas in collectivistic cultures, individuals belong to groups that look after them in exchange for loyalty. This dimension has deep consequences for the kind of management that is appropriate within a culture. The concept of management is developed in countries with high individualism. Consequently, the theories portray their individualist roots. They are based on assumptions about the behavior of detached individuals. Therefore, Hofstede (2007) claims that he was unaware of the existence of theories that deals with the role of family or ethnic loyalties in management and organization. The second dimension is power distance – it measures to what extend power or hierarchical relationship is deemed significant. This dimension reflects the consequences of power inequality and authority relations in society. It influences hierarchy and dependence relationships in the family and organizational contexts. The third dimension is masculinity versus femininity which refers to what extend masculine values (such as achievement orientation or competition) are dominant to feminine values (such as discretion and modesty). The fourth dimension is uncertainty avoidance which explains to what extent uncertainties or differences are tolerated. This dimension deals with the need for well-defined rules for prescribed behaviors. Hofstede (2001) proposes that technology (defending oneself against uncertainty caused by nature), law (defending oneself against uncertainty in the behavior of others), and religion (to accept uncertainty one cannot defend oneself against) are the techniques used by humans to cope with uncertainty.

Hofstede (1993) argues that there are no universal management theories because management is very much about humans, and humans (including their thought and behavior) very much reflect their culture. Thus, the relationships between people in a society are affected by those values. Values differ among societies, but within a society they are remarkably stable over time. Because management is subject to the values of the actors, Hofstede (1993) claims that management, differs among societies, but within societies is stable over time. He even insists that values are resilient against technology. He observes that technology affects culture in general and management in particular on the more superficial level of practices but not on the basic level of values. Practices change according to the needs of the current situation and to the available resources. However, practices do not necessarily affect the underlying values (Hofstede, 2007). However, observing the intense interaction between people across culture nowadays (compared to

what it was used to be) through various social media and education, it is important to reassess whether those values have been altered. Because a management practice that seems appropriate in one culture is not necessarily appropriate in another, it is relevant to ask whether management theories need to be developed within a particular cultural value context. But, what is specific for Asian management? Hofstede (2007) cautions that one needs to be careful in categorizing because Asia is not at all a homogeneous entity. Vadi and Meri (2005) support this by pointing out that many researchers have established that organizational operations depend on the values of the host culture. However, the level of influence that the national culture values have on an organization needs to be measured by doing analysis on how cultural dimensions are manifested in specific environment. Therefore, it is interesting to observe the influence of national culture values on hotel brand management specifically in Malaysia.

2.2. Malaysia and its national culture values

Malaysia is a very unique environment which has advanced from a basically an agrarian society into a globalized industrial society in less than 40 years. Each generation of Malaysians are exposed to a new set of values due to the change in the pace of life (Abdullah & Pedersen, 2003). Therefore, many of those who are in a position of power and authority to lead or make decisions, tend to be older and somewhat more conservative. The values of respect for elders, group and religious orientation, loyalty, face saving and many other family-based values are taught by parents. On the other hand, the nuclear family system influence from Western culture is now common in many typical, urban Malaysian families. Youth wants to be more assertive and independent. However, in general, people in Asia, including Malaysia, believe that it is important to live in harmony with nature and co-exist with it.

The score obtained by Malaysia on each dimension of Hofstede's national culture values is discussed in this paragraph (The Hofstede Centre, n.d.). Malaysia scores very high on the power distance dimension (score of 104 out of 120), which means that the society accepts a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and it needs no further justification. A hierarchy within an organization means that subordinates expect to be told what to do, and the ideal boss is a kind autocrat. Challenges to leadership are not well-received. Malaysia, with a score of 26 out of 120 is a collectivistic society. This is manifested in a close long-term commitment to the group (i.e. family, extended family, or extended relationships). Loyalty in a collectivist culture is vital and overrides most other societal rules and regulations. Such a society fosters strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group. Although with a score of 50 out of 120, Malaysia still can be considered a masculine society which is highly success-oriented and driven. In masculine countries, people 'live in order to work', managers are expected to be decisive, and the emphasis is on equity, competition and performance. Conflicts are resolved by fighting them out. Malaysia scores 36 out of 120 in uncertainty avoidance dimension and thus, has a low preference for avoiding uncertainty. Low uncertainty avoidance index societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles and deviance from the norm is more easily tolerated. In societies exhibiting low uncertainty avoidance index, people believe there should be no more rules than are necessary and if they are ambiguous or do not work, they should be abolished or changed. Schedules are flexible; hard work is undertaken when necessary but not for its own sake. Precision and punctuality do not come naturally, and innovation is not seen as threatening. Abdullah and Pedersen (2003) support the findings above. From their study, they find that Malaysians tend to be more relationship- than task-oriented, more group than individual, more hierarchical than equal, more shame-driven than guilt-driven, more tolerant in time orientation and also more religious than secular. Furthermore, in a collectivistic society, there is possibility that people are grouped together within sub-groups. Henri Tajfel's greatest contribution to psychology is in the social identity theory (as cited in McLeod, 2008). Social identity is a person's sense of who he/she is based on his/her group membership(s). Tajfel proposes that the groups (e.g. social class, family, football team, etc.) which people belong to are an important source of pride and self-esteem. Groups give a person a sense of social identity – a sense of belonging to the social world. Therefore, the world is divided into "them" and "us" based on a process of social categorization (i.e. people put others into social groups). Therefore, this is an area of interest explored further in this study.

2.3. Culture in marketing studies

De Mooij and Hofstede (2010) highlight that an understanding of culture is viewed as increasingly important. Stauss and Mang (1999) acknowledge that customers from different cultures could have different perceptions. But, little is understood on how it differs. Thompson (2004) thus, suggests that "culture primarily enters into the theoretical equation of brand management literature through the construct of brand image" (p.98) through symbolic meaning, communal brand and popular culture.

Geert Hofstede's dimensional model of national culture values (2001, 2007) has been applied to various areas of global branding and advertising, and the underlying theories of consumer behavior. The model is used to explain the differences of the concepts of self, personality and identity, which in turn explain variations in branding strategy and communications. Although Hofstede used a work-related context and originally applied his framework to human resources management (i.e. corporate culture), Hofstede's dimensions (2001, 2007) are also used to compare cultures, to support hypothesis and as a theoretical framework for comparing cultures in business and marketing studies, i.e. in the area of innovation (Haapaniemi & Mäkinen, 2009; Hsu, Hsu & Yeh, 2010; Lynn & Gelb, 1996; Roehrich, 2004; Steenkamp, Hofstede & Wedel, 1999), service performance (Birgelen, Ruyter, Jong, & Wetzels, 2002), service quality (Imrie, Cadogan & McNaughton, 2002), service dimension (Cunningham, Young, Lee & Ulaga, 2006), consumer buying behavior (Aykaz, 2012), market segmentation (Bruning, Hu, & Hao, 2009), brand quality (Agrawal, Grimm, Kamath, & Foscht, 2011), information exchange behavior (Dawar, Parker & Price, 1996), gender role on decision processes (Kim, Di Benedetto & Lancioni, 2011), and advertising appeals (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996). Nevertheless, most the works in this area put consumers at the center of the studies and have not taken the perspective of the company as the service provider. Additionally, in response to the rapid globalization of international trade, there has been a call from researchers to examine the usefulness of the known branding construct within a non-western cultural context (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006; Cayla & Arnould, 2008; Sheth, 2011; Thirkettle & Korstanje, 2013). Similarly, the increasing amount of study in industry-specific and culture-specific themes indicates the importance of understanding culture in marketing.

The earlier review of the theoretical background to this study raised a number of issues brought to the attention of the researchers. The aim of this study is to investigate the cultural influence upon critical success factors for hotel branding. The research question is: How do Malaysian national culture values influence branding construct in the hotel industry?

3. Methodology

This study was mainly qualitative in nature. The term 'qualitative' is used to "describe research method and techniques which use, and give rise to, qualitative rather than quantitative information" (Veal, 2006, p.193). In general, this approach tends to collect richer data from relatively few cases rather than just collect limited information from larger number of cases. Malaysia is selected due to both its accessibility and cohesiveness as a cultural unit. Case selection in this study can therefore be categorized as a non-probability convenience sampling technique (Patton, 2002). This case represents an opportunity to investigate hotel branding framework within a Malaysian sociological context. This is not to state that Malaysia is in any way an extreme case, but rather as an opportunity to theoretically model hotel branding construct in this cultural context. Malaysia is a relatively heterogeneous ethnic society with majority of the population being the Malay (54.6%), the Chinese (24.6%), and the Indian (7.3%) which made up most of emerging nations in the world (The 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia). The case boundary is therefore considered naturally occurring and simply defined as Malaysia.

While the outer boundary has been defined, there remains the matter of selecting participants for inclusion within the first primary data collection stage. A full population of potential participants able to report upon the focus phenomena is larger than the researchers could reasonably handle. The researchers considered random probability sampling; however, cost, time, and accessibility issues prohibit this mode of sampling (Babbie, 2005; Patton, 2002). However, a better result could be accomplished through engaging in a combination of convenience and non-probability purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 2002). The researchers exercise judgment and determine that the perspectives of the case could be obtained through probing the perspectives of individual who has these characteristics: (a) Malaysian nationality (b) is working in management position in a 4 or 5-star hotel in Malaysia (c)

is exposed to branding management and/ application within the hotel industry. Vadi and Meri (2005) state that hotel is one of the interesting contexts to conduct culture study since the representatives of the communication sphere have the experience to solve in their everyday activity the situations where cultural differences play an important role.

To answer the research objectives, in-depth interview with practitioners with long experience in the hotel industry would assist in answering the objectives of the study. These experienced people are called "the experts" and it is upon their views, the primary data for first stage of the study is established. They were the best available to help the researchers to understand the problem and the research question. Several people from several hotels have been purposely identified, selected, and contacted verbally for this study. No gatekeeper was present during this process. However, only few of them responded positively. The main reason for them to decline the invitation was due to time constraint factor. This was also the reason why this research strategy was employed. Qualitative method was ideal because the available sample were relatively small. After a careful consideration, the researchers decided to approach prospect participants from the same hotel group. This study is conducted on a 5-star hotel of a local brand in Malaysia. This hotel is situation in Klang Valley. To date, the brand has more than five properties in Malaysia. Hotel business is one of the business unit owned by the group. This particular hotel property has more than 1,000 employees and is very popular in both local and international market.

The identified participants who responded positively to the invitation were approached to arrange the interview. The participants of this study were in the middle and top management in the hotel. The participants were from Human Resources Department, Front Office Department, and Sales and Marketing Department. The selected departments represented both back-of-the-house and front-of-the house of the hotel operation. Additionally, they were requested to recommend someone who fit into the selected characteristics mentioned in the previous section. This study utilized face-to-face, one-on-one in-depth interview which is "characterized by its length, depth and structure" (Veal, 2006, p.197). Rather than formal questionnaire, the interviews were guided by a checklist of topics to be raised. The items that were included on the checklist were based on the theoretical framework from the literature. Therefore, the questions were mainly semi-structured with the interview protocol as the guideline. The interview protocol also made available in the form of flipchart to provide visual for the participants, thus aided the interview process. Six interviews were conducted between July 2012 and December 2012. The process took long time because of some re-scheduling. Each interview began after the participants were briefed on the objectives of the study and their confidentiality issue. They signed a consent form as an acknowledgement. Each appointment last at least ninety minutes. The duration of the recorded interviews were between forty to seventy minutes. The interviews were terminated after six interviews because convergence had been achieved in the data and. In effect there was no gain from conducting more interviews as interviewees were providing consistently the same information.

Tape-recording was used to assist in data collection and the production of complete verbatim transcripts of the interviews (Veal, 2005). Additionally, notes were also taken during the interview or immediately afterward. The notes assisted the researchers to chronicle the thinking throughout the research process, especially during the subsequent interview sessions, the transcription, and the analysis phase. In the data analysis phase, confidentiality is an important issue. Therefore, the recording and the transcripts are handled personally by the researchers. The data from the interviews were analyzed by drawing the codes or the themes from the transcripts which were done both manually and also with the help of NVivo. The transcripts were analyzed to search the emerging themes. This process materialized in two stages. First-level coding is combination of identifying meaning units, fitting them into categories, and assigning codes to the categories. First level coding is mostly concrete and involves identifying properties of the data which have clear evidences in the transcript. Grinnell and Unrau (2010) propose that a good first-level coding should demonstrate that all categories are mutually exclusive with no overlap and supported by at least three quotes. The second stage involves identifying the relationship between themes or categories both horizontally and vertically. Second level coding is more abstract and it involves interpreting the meaning underlying the more apparent ideas portrayed in the data. The themes were then identified and coded into clusters or dimensions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, number and percentage are also used in the analysis. While numbers are typically associated with quantitative studies, it is also conventional to use numbers in qualitative studies to

document how many of the participants conveyed a particular theme. At the final stage, member checking technique was used. The researchers contacted the participants and interested participants gave their feedback on the analysis.

4. Findings and discussion

An examination of the internal consistency and reliability of participants' comments within the sample is important to be established. The table below (Table 1) summarizes the participants' demographic information. Demographic information is important because of its likelihood to influence the opinions of the participants; especially the division where they belong to and the years of experience in the service sector (i.e. hotel industry). For the purpose of the study, the samples are categorized in two groups according to which division they belonged: front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house. In this study, the sample for front-of-the-house includes the Front Office Department and the Sales and Marketing Department. There are other departments that could be categorized under this division, however, only two were selected based on their direct influence to external branding (Davies & Chun, 2002; Foley & Kendrick, 2006; Schultz & Hatch, 2003). Back-of-the-house sampling only includes Human Resources Departments due to its direct influence on internal branding (De Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn, 2003; Hatch & Schultz, 2008).

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

	Division	Age Group	Years of Experience
B1	Back of House	31-40 years old	6 – 10 years
B2	Back of House	51 years old or above	Over 15 years
B3	Back of House	51 years old or above	Over 15 years
F1	Front of House	31-40 years old	6 – 10 years
F2	Front of House	51 years old or above	Over 15 years
F3	Front of House	41-50 years old	11 – 15 years

The participants' years of experience are also recorded to assist in gauging how well the participants understood the nature of the selected industry (i.e. hotel). All participants were in managerial positions in the selected hotel and had been working in the hotel industry (not necessary always in the selected hotel used as the case study) for more than five years. This demographic information is important to support the reliability and relevance of their valuable insights to this study. In addition to that, there was a balance on the age group distribution to avoid potential biases in the data. Other demographic information such as gender could potentially affect their comments (i.e. female participants might express more thought on the emotional part of branding while male participants might express more on the process). There were four females and two males participants in this study.

When asked about the definition of branding to them, participants suggested the notions of identity, positioning, image, a symbol of status, and lifestyle. However, when asked specifically about the definition of service branding (in the context of hotel industry) to them, they added the notions of experience as the most important determinant. Therefore it can be concluded that a service brand is a brand that focuses heavily on providing experience to its stakeholders because it is how a brand makes people feel.

4.1. Malaysian national culture values

The understanding of culture is important in building lifestyle brand because brands that represent specific lifestyle demographic can encourage emotional connections between a consumer and his or her desire to affiliate him or herself with the represented demographic (Orth, McDaniel, Shellhammer & Lopetcharat, 2004; Pearson, 1999). Noting the importance of culture, before discussing further on the Malaysian national culture values influence the branding construct in the hotel industry, it is important to explore what is Malaysian culture to Malaysians.

Masculinity. A participant commented that *"As Malaysian, we tend to be more conservative, we are not that outspoken. I don't think we are in that stage where we fight for what we believe or we want changes, we would try to avoid confrontation. Our culture teaches us to be more conservative because confrontation will make you appear to*

be rude. We want to be polite. Even if we saw something wrong, we would not speak up. We will keep it to ourselves. We have concept of minding your own business" (F1). The statement reflects the characteristics of a feminism society. Therefore, it contrasts with Hofstede's study that categorized Malaysia as a masculine society. There are two possibilities to explain this contrast. First, it is because the score was in the middle range of the scale. Therefore, Malaysians are also embracing some of the traits that can be found in feminine society such as focusing on long term reliable and pleasant relationship (i.e. by avoiding confrontation). Second, the participants of this study were hoteliers. Therefore, they might have been conditioned to hospitality behaviors. Most of the participants defined Malaysian culture as being kind, peaceful (avoiding confrontation), displaying humility and being people oriented. *"I would say that we are very welcoming. That's number one. Number two, we normally do not go against people, we are very forgiving, I would say. And we basically are well mannered people" (F3)*.

Collectivism. One participant pointed out that *"Malaysians generally like to do things with people, supposedly like to help people by being "kay poh", nosey or busybody in other people's business rather than actually completing the task" (B1)* which appeared as somewhat contradictory to the previous paragraph. The observation behind this statement could be because Malaysians tend to do activities in groups *"Malaysians are more group oriented, they want to voice their opinion as a group, compared to western culture where the people are braver to voice up individual opinion" (B1)*. This finding concurs with Hofstede (2001) when he described Malaysia as collectivistic society whereby the commitment to group and group's opinion was important. Besides, relationships prevailed over tasks as described by Abdullah and Pedersen (2003). Another comment suggested that the power exercised by an individual over another does not always come from his/her position but also through relationship *"People use a lot of affiliation rather than power. It is more about affiliation where you get things moving" (F1)*. This finding suggests that it is possible to influence one's behavior should you have a positive relationship with him/her. This behavior could be influenced by the nature of the society to be collectivist therefore he/she does not want to hurt the relationship by rejecting the requests. Another participant added that *"We are still very collective within our own race. If you go to any social club or higher education place or food court, rarely will you see different races of people sit together at the same table. It is about where they belong, where they share the same faith and the same principle" (F1)*. Therefore, it can be concluded that Malaysians are collectivists, especially in own group. This finding also concurs with Tajfel's social identity theory (as cited in McLeod, 2008), whereby the society divided the world into "them" and "us" based through a process of social categorization. This finding could help the marketer to explain why identifying Malaysian customers as a group, who share similarities, could be more effective than targeting customers as individuals in the branding related efforts. Conforming to similar values of the group they belong to is still relevant as they are avoiding confrontation.

High Power Distance. Another participant described the relationship between people *"Lower ranking people do not easily approach a person in a very high status, or at least find it more difficult to approach them. And the higher ranking people who are earning much more in the position in the organization whether by status or by their lifestyle, they also try to avoid people that is different. So I think it's a very clear distinct between people in people with power position and people who are not" (B1)*. That statement corresponds with the Power Distance dimension in Hofstede's model whereby status and rank are important in the society with high power distance. In the society where people perceive power differences as norm and less powerful accept power relations that are more autocratic and paternalistic, the leadership of the people from higher position is vital as suggested by a participant *"If that particular person is running the place has passion for service and already know what he wants to get out of the hotel or for that property, I think the hotel will do well and go very far" (F3)*. Hofstede also proposed that, society with high power distance also value image and status which similar to this comment *"As for branding, it got to do with their image and status [sic]. People want to be seen in those brand and they would not opt for anything lesser" (F2)*.

Weak Uncertainty Avoidance. The participants were not only remarking on the positive aspects of their culture. They also highlighted the downside of their culture. For instance, they agreed that tolerance in regards to lack of timelines is high *"This is something that we need to change. I think people are not on time, so it drives me crazy" (B2)* or *"They procrastinate a lot, means that whatever can be done today, they do not want to do it today, they do it tomorrow" (F3)* which normally could be found in the society with weak certainty avoidance. These statements concur with Abdullah and Pedersen (2003). Another downside is being content in the undesirable way. Malaysians have a mentality that "*It's okay*" and they just accept things as it is. *"The culture is they do not go forward to change*

things. They are not into changes. They are happy with what they have and what they do" (F3). In regards to Hofstede's national culture values, the participants' perspective of their own culture as being high on power distance, collectivist rather than individualist society, tend to be feminine but still could be considered a masculine society, and have weak uncertainty avoidance is parallel to Abdullah and Pedersen (2003) and Hofstede (2001). This finding could lead to an assumption that Malaysians are not very demanding or aggressive in their actions.

4.2. The consequence of Malaysian national culture values

Although participants expressed their confidence that Malaysian culture plays an important part in the service environment, but it is not sufficient. For example, the participants explained that with the benevolence rooted in their culture (for instance by being humble and nice), it is easier and more natural for Malaysians to serve others, but, for a service brand to succeed, the people have to be trained. The subsequent sub-sections discuss the potential influence of Malaysian national culture values on hotel branding.

Masculinity. The participants suggested that Malaysian culture's influences in this area would be in products and physical environment which directly will showcase one's status in the society. Products, technology utilization, the grandeur of hotel lobby, and choice of location are seen as important factors to reaffirm the status of the hotel guests. The participants highlighted the importance of looking new and using the latest technology which is similar to the characteristic of a masculine society whereby the fundamental issue is about wanting to be the best. From the perspective of the employees, as a society with more masculine characteristic, working for (international) chain brand would be preferable. This tendency is influenced by its need for social-ego of work status. Therefore, international chain brand is perceived as having the ability to provide advancement in career and more exposure for learning. Other than that, in masculine society, material reward is appreciated. Therefore, a good incentive policy would help to boost the motivation to perform *"The old saying happy staff will produce happy customers. So, there should be more focus in taking care the internal customers. Well rewarded and appreciated staff can then extend the promises made by the company towards the external customers" (F1).*

Collectivism. Since the biggest portion of the guests were also Malaysian, it was easier to interact and make the guests feel home (i.e. the local language, local customs and so on). *"The goal of the team is to make the guests feel this is a home away from home. We would make them feel that we are part of the family, we would like to create that kind of bond with them that they will remember us and keep coming back to us and it is a long term relationship we have with them. Our goal is that to create perception that people come to us not because of the hotel name or the hotel bricks and mortar, but they come because they love being around us, they love the environment and the culture of the staff, the feel of being at home, being taken care of, very personalized kind of feeling, every emotional side that we are looking at" (P3).* The influence of culture an effective interaction (especially with local guests) is very important, knowing that local guests make up majority of hotel's revenue. In a collectivist culture, the element of caring (genuinely) is important.

High Power Distance. Being a society with high power distance, guests are expected to be placed at higher status compared to the hotel staff. Therefore, the management may value the hotel staff as less important compared to the guests. Moreover, Malaysia has high power distance thus status driven society might result in the consumption of products that considered as branded. Therefore, the hotel should create a brand; a name that has strong position in public's mind to be successful. Nevertheless, a participant commented that it is possible to use it (being local hotel chains) for branding by gaining reputation or awareness as providing a unique service *"Being local and also having less properties concentrated in Malaysia, to me is an advantage in terms of service delivery. The service will be consistent because it is in our culture and that's how we behave on daily basis. So, it would be an advantage" (B2).* However, she added that *"The question is whether they have the resources, whether they have the budget and mindset to wait that long."* The persistence and patience in nurturing the brand is important. Society with short term orientation may have lack of patience to wait for the result. As a society with high power distance, it is practically important to maintain respectful distance and for the service provider to accept the different in status. Some guests may prefer to deal with someone at least the same rank or regarded has sufficient authority. Therefore, a service staff should not take it personally when the guest ask to speak to a manager on duty rather than to a front office assistant. Personalized services such as special treatment and privileges for the people in power were considered normal. Therefore, in regards to loyalty program, giving preferential treatment (even only by remembering their names,

correct designation and favorite items while staying in the hotel) and exceptional favors are very useful to win guests at their deeper emotional level.

   Weak Uncertainty Avoidance. Being a society with weak uncertainty avoidance and high power instance index, innovation and modernity are seen as a means to enhance one's status *"The industry is so competitive ... Renovation is needed to update the appearance of the site. To keep up to date with the technology, we need to invest in the most hi-tech, hi-powered, fast broadband for internet" (F1)*. Society with weak uncertainty avoidance is willing to take risk and try new product or brand in the market. In terms of communication, Malaysia is regarded as society with weak uncertainty avoidance. Therefore, this could be a contributing factor why Malaysian companies are not very aggressive in intentionally communicating the brands as commented by a participant *"Our brand has been in the market for long time but the name is known more for construction, housing, development of malls and stuff like that. But they are not known as hotel. Yes, we have our hotel arm but unfortunately we are not pushing too hard to get notice as a hotel company" (B3)*. Malaysia has a low preference for avoiding uncertainty which means the Malaysians prefer to maintain a more relaxed attitude in which precision and punctuality did not come naturally. This could be harmful to the principle of consistency that plays a major role in establish both brand service standards (i.e. Standard Operating Procedure) and delivery of service quality. In the countries with weak uncertainty avoidance, high power distance, and collectivist such as Malaysia, there is a famous saying *"people respect what you inspect"* (Wursten, 2008, p.6) which imply that a strict control may need to be installed to ensure the quality is not compromised.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

   There are many aspect of branding that a hotel brand must deal with. The study confirmed that in hotel branding, visible factors (i.e. brand name, physical features, etc.) are equally important to invisible factors (i.e. the service itself). Particularly, in the service, the behavior of the hotel staff will define the brand. Hotel staff are expected to be formal and sincere yet warm and empathetic. In dealing with the staff, the managers should emphasize on training and people development.

   Although Malaysians characteristics are suitable for service sector, to leverage Malaysian culture to build a great brand, there is a need to develop a more structured service for hotels "About international hotel chains, the first thing that comes to my mind is they have advantage in a way that in terms of services, they are more structured. They already have proven best practices and because they have very good training and development for their staff, the staff are actually trained to have this kind of behavior that can deliver excellent service. So, whether or not the culture is there, the advantage is there, they have very good training and development program to ensure the staff deliver this set of behavior, the set of qualities required to deliver excellent service" (F1). This will be the area where people development plays an important role. The participants recommended that educating the internal customer is an effective way to build a great service culture, apart from developing brand service standard and excellent service quality. For example two participants (B2 and F3) talked about how the hotel finally came up with vision, mission and a set of standard operating procedures. As a society with high score in the power distance dimension, the people development programs should be planned differently. In such society, learning is more centered on the instructor where the relationship is similar to a teacher-student relationship. Therefore, it is expected that the students normally participate less in debate, avoid challenging the teacher and expect to be told of what to do. Development activities should be offered to all staff and the identified talents could be offered additional development programs. People development is important as a means of enforcing service culture in the company. In the collectivist society, the training program should focus on the connection between the extra effort to satisfy the guests and the success of the company as the extended family to the service staff. Helping the service staff to see the big picture of their contribution to the company will foster the commitment in service. In addition, empowerment was also suggested by a participant "Empowerment has to come to picture as well in order to get successful customer engagement or relationship with the customer" (F1). However, it may not work well because of both high power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance nature of the society. For empowerment to work, a list of issues that subordinates can handle should be available and subordinates must consult the superiors for issues not address in the list. In addition, with a collectivist society, the managers are expected to behave like parents and taking care of the

team. The managers are expected to lead by example by publicly and consistently display the commitment to service.

While the previous section illustrated several areas where this study makes a contribution to the body of knowledge, there are limitations within the research paradigm and the associated methodology. The research is further limited by the decisions within research design, data collection, and analysis process. Case research methodology, by its nature, cannot be generalized outside the boundaries of its sample. The researchers, however, affirms that some findings may be applicable to similarly profiled cultures. Additionally, this study focuses on the point-of-view of management due to their ability to predict the needs of their guests based on their experience. Consequently, the points-of-view of other stakeholders are not captured in this study. Accordingly this study does not claim to have fully captured corporate service banding evaluation nor the cultural drivers of this construct. Meanwhile, although every attempt has been made within data reduction and analysis to allow the primary data from the interview to inductively speak for itself, the process of pattern coding and data reduction does raise the possibility of data being disregarded when it may have made a contribution to resolution of the research question. It is also acknowledged that there is the potential for bias in interpretation of primary data due to the researchers' involvement in the industry. Some measures have been implemented to reduce this risk; however it remains a limitation. At no juncture do the researchers make an absolute claim that a full understanding of the truth of the matter has been attained. Rather, this study assists in approaching a fuller understanding of the role of culture in corporate service branding construct. Therefore, this study facilitates a continued openness to new findings. This study provides a starting point for helping hotel managers to best align their corporate service brand strategy with customer needs. Given the theory building nature of this study, the findings require further empirical verification and extension in order to produce and validate a stable and reliable measure.

Acknowledgements

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