

Branding Strategies Effects in Enhancing SMEs Performance in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract--- *The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship of brand experience and brand image to SMEs performance through mediation of brand loyalty. The study is conceptualized in context of Saudi Arabia. The study highlights the factors which compels customers to show loyalty towards SMEs and role of loyalty to enhance firm's performance. This study includes theoretical model to describe relationships in presentable way. In this study, Discussion also being provided to explore relationships further and limitations of study also provided. Future directions also provided for future studies to consider in another services context*

Keywords--- *Brand Image, Brand Experience, Brand Loyalty, SME Performance, Saudi Arabia.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Small-medium enterprises (SMEs) contribute majorly to economical and sociological growth as recognized by (Gou, Tang, Su, & Katz, 2016) to the gross domestic product of a country⁽¹⁾. In Saudi Arabia, SMEs are the strength of the economy as 99% of private sectors consists of SMEs which absorbs 70% of the workforce and there's need to focus on their commercialization and marketing aspects (AL-Kinani, 2019)⁽²⁾. Globally, the rate of SME failure is very high and Saudi Arabia is facing the same issues according to Ajami (2015) who asserts that Saudi Arabian private sector is not doing enough and more knowledge is required in brand building to be able to solve this issue⁽³⁾.

This paper therefore is seeking to ascertain the results of the different strategies of branding on the performance of SMEs by looking at factors which are crucial for branding of SMEs. This study aims at discovering the attitude of consumers towards SMEs' brands to understand the branding strategy of successful SMEs as well as to understand the different success factors which affect customer loyalty in SME brands. More precisely, this study addresses the issues faced by Saudi Arabian SMEs. The outcome of this study will give an elaboration on the model to enhance performance of SMEs. The study will also look at how consumers respond to successful SME brands and understand the different success factors which influence customer loyalty in SME brands. It will also address the issues faced by Saudi Arabian SMEs and examine the model that can enhance the performance of SMEs.

Branding is an integral part of SMEs as it can contribute to their overall success and this is seen by brands competing on the basis of brands to be awarded as best brands (The BrandLaureate, 2015)⁽⁴⁾. One of the major

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challenges facing SMEs and start-up industries in Saudi Arabia is a lack of finances as most of them are unable to enhance their performance resulting in shutting down their operation within the first three years (Al-Saidlani, 2019)⁽⁵⁾. A lack of finances means that SMEs are unable to invest in branding that will make them stand out. A study by Mi and Baharun (2013) focuses on the need of branding for SME sector to use it as competitive tool to enhance their performance⁽⁶⁾. Furthermore, the performance of SMEs has been an interesting area to explore by researchers from decades (Bolton, 1971)⁽⁷⁾. Many scholars and economists have recognized the significance of customer loyalty to brands in the achievement of SMEs. Datuk Dzulkifli Mahmud pointed out that SMEs with a robust brand are more likely to achieve a competitive edge over large corporations (Bernama, 2013)⁽⁸⁾. However, this places small brands at a disadvantage as they are unable to compete with large brands due to a small customer base and less frequent purchases (Ehrenberg et al. 1990)⁽⁹⁾. Frequent buyers would prefer to purchase from global brands rather than from SMEs. This is commonly denoted as the double jeopardy phenomenon and contributes in lowering the market share of SME brands.

This study will further analyze stimulus organism response model theory to establish the direct and indirect stimulus through an integrated process and in this case, how customers behave towards SMEs that have established their brands. It will look at how a good image of brand and brand experience increases loyalty of brand which as a result increases brand performance. It's important to therefore establish how SMEs can reap benefits from branding strategies since their success directly correlates to the growth of the country's GDP.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs)*

There are many ways that can be used to identify an SME including the size of the enterprise, the number of staff, the total capital investment, etc. Countries have a system of identifying SMEs centered on the number of staffs or the total yearly income. (SME Corp, 2013)⁽¹⁰⁾. However, the identification of SMEs cannot be done accurately based on a comparison of the firms' size (Hill, 2001 a)⁽¹¹⁾. According to Mendham and Bannok (1982), factors such as the business objectives, style of management and marketing strategy should also be considered⁽¹²⁾. Most studies conducted on SME branding concentrated on the effect of internal branding on the company's performance (Agostini, Filippini, & Nosella, 2014⁽¹³⁾; Asamoah, 2014⁽¹⁴⁾; Reijonen et al., 2012⁽¹⁵⁾; Berthon et al., 2008⁽¹⁶⁾; Krake, 2005)⁽¹⁷⁾. According to a study conducted by Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele, and Lye (2011), the competence of firms in creating brands had an important effect on the SMEs performance in Australia⁽¹⁸⁾. Similarly, Reijonen, Laukkanen, Komppula, and Tuominen (2012) have determined one of the major factors that affect the businesses' profits is brand orientation⁽¹⁹⁾. In addition to this, it was determined that the majority of studies conducted on this topic brought forward the perspectives of only the managers and owners and not much focused on customers (Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Guldenberg, 2013⁽²⁰⁾; Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele, & Lye, 2011⁽²¹⁾; Reijonen et al., 2012⁽²²⁾; Wong & Merrilees, 2008)⁽²³⁾. According to Centeno, Hart, and Dinnie (2013)⁽²⁴⁾, the opinion of clients is of utmost importance as well due to the external nature of branding as well as the fact that a brand's profitability is determined by the number of frequent purchases of the product (Aaker, 1996)⁽²⁵⁾. This indicates that for a brand to witness success, it has to have a strong internal structure which ultimately leads to frequent purchases by customers.

The core to a brands performance can be determined through a measure of brand loyalty (Aaker, 1996⁽²⁶⁾; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001⁽²⁷⁾; Russell-Bennett, McColl-Kennedy, & Coote, 2007⁽²⁸⁾; Sahin, Zehir, & Kitapci, 2011⁽²⁹⁾). Brand loyalty can be achieved by using two methods. The composite approach regards brand loyalty to be a composition of both the attitude and behavior of consumers. (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009⁽³⁰⁾; Ha, John, Janda, & Muthaly, 2011⁽³¹⁾). The second approach views both aspects on separate basis. (e.g., Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001⁽³²⁾; Kuikka & Laukkanen, 2012⁽³³⁾; Lin, 2010⁽³⁴⁾). From an analysis of marketing literature, it can be determined that both the attitudes and behavior of the customers have different impacts on brand loyalty. While attitudinal loyalty denotes to the preference of a buyer to pay more for a certain brand and expansion through referrals, but behavioral loyalty aims to have a direct impact on market share and profits of the product (Rauyruen et al., 2009⁽³⁵⁾; Sethuraman & Gielens, 2014⁽³⁶⁾). This study is centers on determining the results of both factors on SMEs in the restaurant industry and the effect that this has SME performance.

Moreover, there is a need to determine which factors increase customer loyalty (Agostini et al., 2014; Ng & Kee, 2012⁽³⁷⁾). Many SMEs are encouraged to take the opportunity and study the success factors behind successful SME brands (SME Masterplan, 2013⁽³⁸⁾). Factors that affect consumer loyalty include perceived value, perceived quality, and commitment satisfaction, (Belaid & Behi, 2011⁽³⁹⁾; Walter et al., 2013⁽⁴⁰⁾). However, these factors were identified based on global brands and there has been limited information regarding the factors that affect SME brands. Several authors have determined the need for separate studies to be conducted on SMEs due to the separate nature of the businesses (Agostini et al., 2014⁽⁴¹⁾; Ng & Kee, 2012⁽⁴²⁾; Spence & Essousi, 2010⁽⁴³⁾). Berthon et al. (2008) shed light on the different management practices of SMEs and global companies⁽⁴⁴⁾. Similarly, Mi and Baharun (2013) have indicated the different issues in branding that affect global brands and SMEs⁽⁴⁵⁾. According to many different studies, the performance of the brand differs amongst global brands and SMEs. For instance, Caloghirou, Protogerou, Spanos, and Papagiannakis (2004) have determined that large enterprises use financial assets to boost their performance, while SMEs increase their performance through the effective utilization of human resources⁽⁴⁶⁾. In a separate study, Saini et al. (2013) found that different factors affect the success of large firms and SMEs⁽⁴⁷⁾. Subsequently, it can be deduced that the factors affecting customer loyalty will differ as well amongst large firms and SMEs. This is the same as Rauyruen et al. (2009), who claimed that different factors affect consumer loyalty between global firms and SMEs⁽⁴⁸⁾. This urge the need for a conceptual study to validate this research. Whereas, branding perspective is an important factor to determine the SME performance (Berger, 2016⁽⁴⁹⁾). Therefore, this study focuses on branding strategies to ensure their influence on SMEs performance.

2.2 Overview of Loyalty of Brand

Brand insistence is the first terminology of loyalty of brand introduced by Copeland (1923)⁽⁵⁰⁾. It is used to refer to a customer who is decisive in buying a certain product and would only look for an alternative where there is no other option available. Subsequently, much of marketing literature is based on brand loyalty (e.g., Brown, 1952⁽⁵¹⁾; Cunningham, 1956) and it has been the center of much research for nine decades⁽⁵²⁾.

Literature indicates that there are three different methods to define brand loyalty. This includes the attitude-based approach, the action-based approach, and the composite approach (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001⁽⁵³⁾; Day, 1969⁽⁵⁴⁾;

Dick & Basu, 1994⁽⁵⁵⁾; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973⁽⁵⁶⁾. Attitudinal loyalty refers to the psychological and inner feeling of a consumer, such as preference, emotion, and commitment to a specific brand in the hope to engage continued buying without showing the actual purchase action (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996⁽⁵⁷⁾; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001⁽⁵⁸⁾). The attitude-based method focuses on factors which influence customers' purchase behavior (Bennett & Bove, 2002⁽⁵⁹⁾). Preference, commitment, word of mouth endorsement, and customer enthusiasm to pay a much higher price are the common methods used to measure attitudinal loyalty (e.g., Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001⁽⁶⁰⁾; Fullerton, 2003⁽⁶¹⁾; Lin, 2010⁽⁶²⁾; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996⁽⁶³⁾; Zhang & Bloemer, 2008⁽⁶⁴⁾).

Action loyalty refers to the actual purchases made by the consumer. It is measured through the percentage of repurchases made by a consumer (Cunningham, 1956⁽⁶⁵⁾; Farley, 1964⁽⁶⁶⁾; McConnell, 1968⁽⁶⁷⁾). While the attitude model regards consumer purchases to be as result of a thoughtful process, the action based model claims that customers buy on the spot rather than through pre-planning (Bennet & Bove, 2002⁽⁶⁸⁾). Meanwhile, determination to repurchase and level of expenditure are common indicators of behavioral loyalty (Bennet & Bove, 2002⁽⁶⁹⁾; Pan, Sheng, & Xie, 2012⁽⁷⁰⁾; Zeithaml et al., 1996⁽⁷¹⁾). A meta-analysis by Curtis, Abratt, Rhoades, and Dion (2011)⁽⁷²⁾ when a customer had an intent to purchase, they were more likely to make the actual purchase.

Lastly, the composite model consists of both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. This model links brand loyalty with both attitudinal and behavioral factors. The difference between behavioral and attitudinal loyalty is that attitudinal loyalty occurs before the actual purchase which leads to the discovery of factors influencing loyalty formation. However, the behavioral concept claims that there is no prior planning to a consumer purchase. However, by taking any one individual aspect to measure brand loyalty would not bring about accurate results (e.g., Day, 1969⁽⁷³⁾; Dick & Basu, 1994⁽⁷⁴⁾; Mellens, Dekimpe, & Steenkamp, 1996⁽⁷⁵⁾; Pan et al., 2012⁽⁷⁶⁾).

The attitude-based approach disregards the actual purchase and only focuses on the intention to purchase. (Mellens, Dekimpe, & Steenkamp, 1996⁽⁷⁷⁾). On the other hand, behavioral loyalty is unable to identify the factors which ultimately bleed to a purchase. This means that there would be no difference between a purchase and a repurchase (Day, 1969; Dick & Basu, 1994⁽⁷⁸⁾; Mellens et al., 1996⁽⁷⁹⁾). While customers may be inclined to repurchase, they are also affected by competitors and advertisements. (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996⁽⁸⁰⁾). Therefore, loyalty comprises of both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions (Day, 1969⁽⁸¹⁾; Oliver, 1999⁽⁸²⁾). This study acknowledges the importance of measuring both dimensions because attitudinal loyalty alone does not guarantee to increase profits for a firm in which repurchase action is needed (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001⁽⁸³⁾; Rauyruen et al., 2009⁽⁸⁴⁾; Sethuraman & Gielens, 2014⁽⁸⁵⁾). There are two techniques to investigate brand loyalty. The composite approach regards brand loyalty as a composition of both the attitudinal and behavioral factors (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009⁽⁸⁶⁾; Erdogmus & Budeyri-Turan, 2012⁽⁸⁷⁾). The second approach involves measuring attitudes of loyalty and behaviors of loyalty separately (e.g., Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Kuikka & Laukkanen, 2012⁽⁸⁸⁾; Lin, 2010⁽⁸⁹⁾; Rauyruen et al., 2009⁽⁹⁰⁾).

According to marketing literature, both factors affect consumer brand loyalty separately. Attitudinal loyalty is connected to the readiness of a customer to pay extra for a brand compared to the alternative, while behavioral loyalty focuses on increasing the profits and the market share of the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001⁽⁹¹⁾);

Rauyrueen et al., 2009⁽⁹²⁾; Sethuraman&Gielens, 2014⁽⁹³⁾ . This study focuses on composite approach for measurement of loyalty of brand.

2.3 Brand Image (BI)

Brand image is described as “the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers, as reflected in the associations held in consumer memory” (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman, & Hansen, 2009)⁽⁹⁴⁾. Brand image is a meaning connected by customers with the brand “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory.” This is a synopsis of the things that clients associate with the brands which lead towards association and perception of brand. Hsieh, Pan, and Setiono (2004) consumers can determine their brands satisfaction through an understanding of the brand image⁽⁹⁵⁾. Furthermore, brand image influences the way customers collect data, differentiate brands, build optimistic feelings, and form a need to purchase (David, 1991)⁽⁹⁶⁾. The image of brand comprises of the way the customer feels about that brand (Faircloth, 2005), it differs between various brands (Faircloth, 2005)⁽⁹⁷⁾. Furthermore, brand image helps drive consumers to purchase products that will help strengthen their perception of themselves (Tepeci, 1999)⁽⁹⁸⁾. Attractive brand images can lure customers to the purchase of the brand. Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) argued that companies that possess the ability to attract customers towards a brand image and then strengthen the image in the customers’ minds will achieve higher profitability⁽⁹⁹⁾. As a result, companies can increase their competitive advantage as well as provide more value in a brand (Boush&Loken, 1991⁽¹⁰⁰⁾; Keller, 1993)⁽¹⁰¹⁾. Besides, according to Rooney (1995), brand loyalty can be created by introducing a strong image of the brand to the client. Brand image is used to develop and identify aspects that have a strong effect on the consumer and strengthen them through business marketing⁽¹⁰²⁾. Brand image was beginning to gain recognition due to research that indicated the positive memory that the customer associated with certain brands.

A qualitative research by Xing-wen and Zhang (2008) asserts that loyalty is directly influenced by brand image⁽¹⁰³⁾. Tu et al. (2012) observed the connection between corporate brand image and consumer loyalty amongst customers who visit Starbucks in Taiwan⁽¹⁰⁴⁾. Al-Azzam and Salleh (2012) pointed out that a progressive correlation existed between image of brand and loyalty of brand based on a study conducted on the tourism industry⁽¹⁰⁵⁾. However, Roy and Chakraborti (2015) conducted a study amongst users of mobile phones in India and established that there was no direct correlation between the image of the brand and customer loyalty⁽¹⁰⁶⁾. Hsiang et al. (2011) examined the correlation between variations of images of brand and brand equity scopes (brand loyalty) in Taiwan⁽¹⁰⁷⁾. This indicated that brands with a strong influence and a positive image had less brand loyalty. Wu et al. (2011) here exists an indirect correlation between image of brand and loyalty of brand (¹⁰⁸). The study among clients of medical cover in Taiwan showed both loyalty of brand and image of the brand are determined by the customer satisfaction level. On the other hand, the structural path coefficients between customer loyalty and image of brand bore no much consequence. Lai et al. (2009) discovered that image of the brand did not affect brand loyalty amongst users of Chinese mobile phones⁽¹⁰⁹⁾. Sang (2009), scrutinized the between brand image and brand loyalty amongst clients of spontaneous restaurant chains diners in the United States and found that there was no positive relationship between the two⁽¹¹⁰⁾. Similarly, Chen and Myagmarsuren (2011) observed the same effect amongst users of telecommunication services in Taiwan⁽¹¹¹⁾.

2.4 Brand Experience (BE)

Brand experience is used for building, generating, and upholding a correlation between customers and the brand and is one of the factors that affect loyalty of brand (Sahin et al., 2011)⁽¹¹²⁾. Brand experience has been closely observed recently (Alamanos, Brakus, & Dennis, 2015⁽¹¹³⁾; Brakus et al., 2009⁽¹¹⁴⁾; Humphrey Jr, Laverie, & Rinaldo, 2015)⁽¹¹⁵⁾.

Marketing experts need to recognize the influence of experience of brand and its capability to influence marketing strategies. Brand experience is created through customer word-of-mouth and the customer sharing their experiences on different occasions. (Muk, Chung, & Kim, 2015)⁽¹¹⁶⁾.

Experiences of Brand is well-defined as a “subjective, internal (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments” (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53)⁽¹¹⁷⁾. The interface between the customer, the brand and the company can be denoted as brand experience (Schmitt et al., 2009)⁽¹¹⁸⁾. Furthermore, Alloza (2008) defined brand experience as the way the customer perceives and establishes a connection with the brand at any specific time⁽¹¹⁹⁾. Brakus et al. (2009) indicated of the existence of four aspects of experiences of brand⁽¹²⁰⁾. These include affective, sensory, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions. According to Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010), a sensory dimension is “visual, gustative, auditory, olfactory, and tactile stimulations provided by a brand” (p. 533)⁽¹²¹⁾. The affective aspect refers to the effect that the brand has on consumer feelings and emotions. Furthermore, it is stated that the affective dimension include brands that have the ability to establish a connection with the customers emotionally.

The third dimension is intellectual; it refers to brands that make use of different techniques to stimulate the thought process in the consumer as well as develop curiosity. The last dimension is behavioral, which refers to the actions that the consumers take when they are introduced to a brand (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010)⁽¹²²⁾.

Literature has indicated a positive connection between experience of brand and loyalty of brand (Alamanos et al., 2015⁽¹²³⁾; Iglesias et al., 2011⁽¹²⁴⁾; Muk et al., 2015⁽¹²⁵⁾; Sahin et al., 2011⁽¹²⁶⁾; Ueacharoenkit & Cohen, 2011)⁽¹²⁷⁾. Biedenbach and Marell (2009) indicated that consumer experience was more dominant on affecting brand loyalty in the B2B service industry⁽¹²⁸⁾. They pointed out the need to apply this model in the B2C context testing the model on tangible goods in B2C markets. Shim (2012) also pointed out that image of the brand has a direct effect on consumer experience⁽¹²⁹⁾. The literature indicates that there is a potential correlation between experience of the brand and loyalty of the brand with local automobile brands in Malaysia. Thus, brand experience is an essential component of this research. Loyalty of brand is directly influenced by the type of experience that the consumer has with the brand and can potentially affect brand satisfaction and consumers confidence in the brand. Prior research has indicated that the consumers experience with a product is related to the level of loyalty of brand of that consumer (Brakus et al., 2009⁽¹³⁰⁾; Sahin et al., 2011)⁽¹³¹⁾. Nevertheless, other research has indicated otherwise (Forsido, 2012⁽¹³²⁾; Nysveen et al., 2013). It shows the limited studies that have explored the effects of experience of brand and loyalty of brand amongst consumers of automobile brands.

III. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

3.1 Theoretical Framework

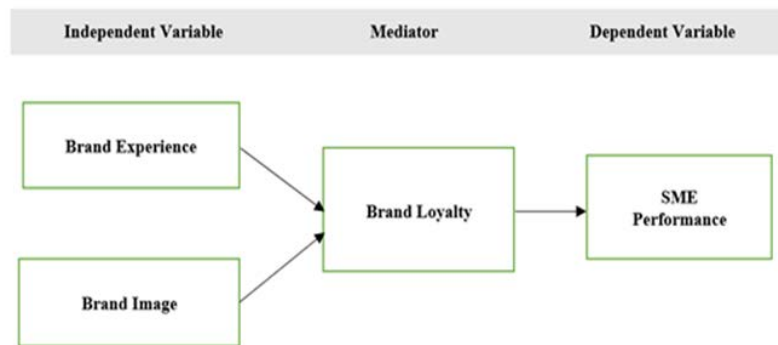


Figure showing the relationship between variables (independent and dependent and mediator)

The theoretical framework of study examines the relationship of branding strategies to SMEs Performance. Study in hand incorporates experience of brand and image of brand as independent variable, loyalty of brand as mediator and SME performance as dependent variable. The relationships of variables are shown in framework above indicating that brand loyalty only comes after the SMEs have a good brand experience and brand image which will result in an increase in the SME performance.

3.2 Underpinning Theory

The framework is centered on theory of stimulus organism response model. The theory explains the direct and indirect effects of stimulus on response through an integrated process (Russell & Mehrabian, 1977)⁽¹³³⁾. This theory is well recognized to explain customers behavior towards SMEs (Algharabat, 2007) and in this instance, the stimulus is the experience of the brand and brand image⁽¹³⁴⁾. Stimulus organism theory states that stimuli can be anything which causes responses through a process. In context of management sciences, stimulus are the factor which trigger customers to perform any task (Sherman, Mathur, & Smith, 1997)⁽¹³⁵⁾. These stimuli process can be psychological or intentions of customers (Changa, Eckmanb, & Yanb, 2011)⁽¹³⁶⁾. This study incorporates brand loyalty as a process. The response is defined as outcomes of process (Jacoby, 2002) leading to higher brand performance⁽¹³⁷⁾

Brand experience and brand image not only help the brands to attain loyalty of customers but also helps SMEs to improve their performances. Therefore, organizations are encouraged to put their efforts to design branding strategies to reach optimum performance. The model demonstrated in this study is supported by earlier studies and provides deep insights for future researches. This study focuses on image of the brand and experiences of the brand image only to generate loyalty of customers' which is a limitation since branding strategies are so many. Future studies can also consider other branding strategies too. Moreover, this study focus is SMEs in Saudi Arabia context; future studies can consider this research for SMEs in different contextual environments.

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