



Authenticity perceptions, brand equity and brand choice intention: The case of ethnic restaurants



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 January 2015

Received in revised form 30 May 2015

Accepted 16 July 2015

Keywords:

Authenticity
Brand equity
Ethnic restaurants
Brand awareness
Brand association
Perceived quality
Brand loyalty

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationships between consumers' authenticity perception and four brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty), as well as how these four dimensions are interrelated with one another. This study also examines the impact of brand equity on consumers' brand choice intention for ethnic restaurants. Findings clearly indicate that consumers' authenticity perception is a critical determinant of brand equity and brand equity has a significant impact on consumers' brand choice intention. Findings of the present study would provide managers with a better understanding of the important role authenticity plays in ethnic restaurants' brand equity. Managerial implications for better brand equity management are provided.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, increasing awareness of cultural diversity and quest for authentic experiences are resulted in a rapidly growing demand for authentic and unique experiences (Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Okumus et al., 2007). Discovering this emerging trend, marketers have begun using authenticity as a brand-positioning and a product appeal strategy (Sedmak and Mihalič, 2008; Robinson and Clifford, 2012). Hospitality and tourism marketers have been incorporating the concept of "authenticity" into their marketing strategies for years (Sedmak and Mihalič, 2008). Similarly, adopting authenticity as a unique selling point has become a common strategy among ethnic restaurants.

Oftentimes, managers utilize authentic decorations, music, costumes and any other stimuli associated with the culture of the cuisine served in order to create an "authentic" dining environment (Jang et al., 2012; Liu and Jang, 2009; Tsai and Lu, 2012). Consumers' authenticity perceptions toward an ethnic restaurant are formed based on their overall evaluations of the ethnic cuisine served, indoor and outdoor settings of the restaurant, ambiance they feel,

and attendants they interact with (Lu, 2012). Accordingly, the more exotic and unique experiences an ethnic restaurant provides, the more likely that restaurant can shape its own identity and image in customers' mind. In this sense, the brand of a more authentic ethnic restaurant can be easily recognized by potential customers, and be correctly associated with the ethnic cuisine compared to the brands of less authentic restaurants.

The unique features of services such as intangibility, variability, perishability and inseparability make the brand equity a critical success factor for the hospitality industry (Sun and Ghiselli, 2010). The notion that brand equity can add value for customers and organizations has been well documented in the literature. For example, Kim and Kim (2004) argue that, for most restaurants, brand is the most valuable asset that improves firm's identity and reinforces competitive advantages if coordinated with appropriate marketing strategies. Studies report similar findings for hotel chains with strong brands that they are likely to build up their own identities and images relatively more quickly and easily than their competitors (Prasad and Dev, 2000).

Strong brand images enable customers to better recognize and understand intangible products and services. Furthermore, they can help customers reduce perceived monetary, social, and/or safety risks before the actual purchase takes place (Matzler et al., 2008). A strong brand provides a service firm with several possible benefits, including greater customer loyalty, higher profit margins,

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more effective and efficient marketing strategies, and brand extension opportunities (Kim et al., 2008a,b; O'Neill and Mattila, 2010). Therefore, the importance of branding and brand management has been recognized and studied for many years. However, as Hyun and Kim (2011) suggest, even though the importance of brand equity has been largely acknowledged for the restaurant industry, there is still little empirical research examining the factors that may influence restaurants' brand equity.

Furthermore, even though there is a growing research attention focusing on how important consumers perception of the authenticity of experiences/products (Robinson and Clifford, 2012), there is still a research gap connecting consumers' authenticity perceptions of ethnic restaurants and their ethnic restaurant selection behavior. The current study aims to address this gap by identifying the antecedents of brand equity and the critical role consumers' authenticity perceptions play in the formation of brand equity for ethnic restaurants. This study proposes and tests a customer-based brand equity model for ethnic restaurants through incorporating customers' authenticity perceptions with four core components of brand equity identified by Aaker (1991). As discussed earlier, authenticity can help an ethnic restaurant create a unique identity and image in customers' minds. Furthermore, consumers' perception of authenticity might play an influential role in building an ethnic restaurant's brand equity. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to empirically examine how consumers' authenticity perception influences dimensions of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) as well as how these four dimensions interrelate with one another. Furthermore, this study aims to examine the impact of brand equity on consumers' brand choice intention. This study is unique in that this is the first attempt to investigate how consumers' authenticity perception would influence a business's brand equity in the context of ethnic restaurants. As brand management is an important resource for businesses to achieve and maintain competitive advantage (Balaji, 2011), this study could deepen ethnic restaurateurs' understanding with respect to the important role of consumers' authenticity perceptions for their businesses' brand equity management. The finding of this study would also provide meaningful managerial implications for managers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Authenticity

The authenticity has been conceptualized by a number of researchers from several different perspectives, including original and staged (MacCannell, 1973), fabricated (Belk and Costa, 1998), iconic, indexical, and hypothetical (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), self-referential hyperauthenticity (Rose and Wood, 2005), symbolic (Culler, 1981), existential (Wang, 1999), literal or objective (Beverland et al., 2008), legitimate (Kates, 2004), sincere (Beverland, 2006), approximate and moral (Leigh et al., 2006), and emergent (Cohen, 1988). In hospitality and tourism, authenticity has been widely conceptualized as a universal value and a critical driving force that motivates individuals to travel to distant places and times (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Generally, the authenticity has been categorized into three dimensions: objective, constructive, and postmodern. Ebster and Guist (2005) argue that these three perspectives can be used to interpret the authenticity of ethnic themed restaurants.

The relationship between the concept of authenticity and tourists' motivation is first proposed by MacCannell (1973). He argues that consumers seek authentic experiences that cannot be found in modern life or in their daily routines. However, it may sometimes be difficult for consumers to distinguish a true

authenticity from a "staged authenticity", which refers to the seemingly authentic context that has been contrived. As such, objectivists (Boorstin, 1962; MacCannell, 1973) suggest (in)authenticity can be judged based on evidential or objective standards (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Wang, 1999). While the authenticity of experiences and products such as artifacts, cuisines, or rituals can be determined by experts who are knowledgeable about local traditions, it is possible that consumers may believe they have obtained authentic experiences, which in fact may not be true if the objects are contrived or what MacCannell (1973) calls "staged". Following objectivists' logic, in the context of ethnic restaurants, food ingredients, food preparation processes, restaurants' indoor and outdoor settings and decorations, servers' uniforms and service manners can be considered as authentic when they conform to native traditions.

On the other hand, constructivists suggest that authenticity cannot be objectively determined (Belhassen et al., 2008). Cohen (1988) asserts that the level of authenticity people seek depends on how people perceive and interpret what they see. He argues that authenticity perception is related, negotiated, and dependent on the context. Constructivists conceptualize authenticity as a subjective, socially and personally constructed perception of objects and cultures from unique observations rather than as an objective representation based on evidential or objective standards (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Constructivists argue that consumers might still perceive their experiences as authentic even if they know that the settings have been purposely schemed (Mkono, 2012). In the context of ethnic restaurants, consumers may consider two Chinese restaurants of the same name located in two different places with obviously different physical settings, menu items, and attendants' dressing as authentic because they may believe that both restaurants represent two different aspects of Chinese culture.

Lastly, postmodernists suggest that consumers search for an enjoyable illusion (Ebster and Guist, 2005). According to postmodernists, inauthenticity is not a problem because authenticity is not about whether something is real or staged, original or replicated (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006) but it is about how much an enjoyable illusion it creates. Postmodernists argue that the extension of the cultural realm in contemporary Western societies has included not only the enlarged markets for cultural goods and information, but also ways of commodifying culture for purchase and consumption (Bunten, 2008). Because of increasing demand from consumers, many institutions that are originally designed to provide authentic and traditional cultural experiences (e.g., museums and art galleries) have revamped their offerings to cater wider audiences through adding popular, pleasurable, trendy, and immediately accessible elements into their original canonical art and formative presentations. Studies suggest that postmodern consumers are affect-driven and experience-seeking hedonists (Jensen and Lindberg, 2000) who can accept or even enjoy incoherence, discontinuity and schizophrenia at the level of culture (Leigh et al., 2006). In other words, postmodern consumers are not likely to judge the authenticity of their experiences based on the objective criteria but based on their emotional experiences. According to postmodernist, in the context of ethnic restaurants, customers will still perceive a restaurant as authentic if what they see, what they eat, and how they feel are concurrent with their desired emotions or experiences.

Utilizing one of these three perspectives, consumers are likely to develop their own interpretations of authenticity even if they are not familiar with the objective criteria of a specific culture and how an authentic cultural cuisine or experience should be. Consequently, regardless of consumers' familiarity with a specific culture, authenticity can be a critical marketing tool for the creation of competitive advantage and for the promotion of business success.

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