

## The Antecedents of Brand Equity Development on Malaysian Internet Service Providers

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**Abstract:** This study attempts to identify the critical antecedents in the formation of solid brand equity in Malaysian Internet service providers which called, TMnet, Jaring, P1 Wimax and Maxis. However the paper proposes tests and investigates theoretical framework of the antecedents of brand equity by employing structure equation modeling (SEM) and collecting survey data from the large sample of Malaysian internet subscribers. Result confirmed that, all four of brand equity antecedents have stronger causal relationships with brand equity, Moreover results supported that perceived quality and consumer loyalty are the most determining factors for developing brand equity in Malaysian internet service providers. This research restricted to the selection of four brands. Clearly, a variety of choice situation must be investigated before generalizable comments can be made to guide the development of brand equity. Another limitation of the present study is the size and composition of the group which participated in the study. The outcomes provide insights to Malaysian internet service providers and other organizations of similar structure regarding how they may possibly manage marketing strategies for enhanced business performance.

**Key words:** Brand personality and image • Functionality • Perceived quality • Brand loyalty

### INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become an indispensable part of recent day society with billions of users world-wide. In recent years we have been witnessed an explosion of internet users from 394 million in the year 2000 to over 2.4 billion by June, 2012 [1]. Private Citizens, business corporations, academic and government institutions also have been heavily depended on Internet on a daily basis. Internet services have evolved radically from serving static web pages to delivering highly dynamic and interactive content with extensive multi-media support; as a result building brand equity has become the central concern of internet service providers therefore Malaysia internet service providers also haven't overlook this fact. Brand equity defined by way of the differential influence of brand knowledge on consumer reaction to the marketing of the brand" [2], has been shown to be of high importance for companies' competitive positions and performance, [3]. The idea of brand equity was initially established in the B2C market and it is a well-accepted fact

that brand equity and brand management are key for success in this setting [4,5]. Some researchers have claimed that brand equity has a negligible role in the B2B market as the number of buyers and sellers is fairly small, which makes it easier to develop knowledge about each other [6]. The exchange in business markets is also assumed to have a more rational foundation, since professional experts in different areas are involved in the purchasing process [7]. Since the last decade branding has extended to be one of the foremost highlighted areas in consumer marketing; whereas in the industrial marketing area there has only been limited consideration to this phenomenon,[8]. Astonishing, the majority of research in branding has some focuses on companies which serving consumer markets while it is revealed that brands play a significant role in industrial markets [9]. In spite of the fact that the concept of consumer brands has been broadly admitted, industrial or B2B brands have the need for acceptance, [10]. As we look around we can realize the tremendous, sights and messages exist in various forms that keep capturing our eyes. Marketers are

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trying thousands of paths to let us get in touch with their brands and products. But the right competition makes information harder to get through the audience and the target group, therefore as a consequence it has made brand harder to be differentiated. The equity of brand especially in the B2B markets can give blazing interest and eagerness to the purchasers to pay price premium for particular brand and this feature is one of the most influential factor for those company which have got plan to extend their brand in the market. Making Of most significant benefits from brand-loyal industrial buyers, willingness to recommend that brand to peers and give unique consideration to another product with the same name are most frequently repeated, [11]. Many of companies are concerned with the quality of their brand because they have already realized that the quality of their brand can bring good image for their customers, as well as that they can take plenty of advantages such as a price premium; Increased order by customers; Brands can be developed easily; Communication and interactions will be more readily admitted; there will be better business penetration; Better margins could be attained; and The company will be less at risk to competitive marketing actions of other companies, [12,7,13]. However, in retrospect, [14], has declared that the market battle is the battle of the brands, more so in a volatile business environment such as the Internet service its self. So could branding then become the savior in the current volatile market environment? Therefore, this study attempts to measure the endowment set forth by Malaysian Internet service called TMnet toward creating strong brand equity in order to stay profitable in the long run and be able to compete with its competitors.

### **Review of Literature**

**Internet Service Providers and Brand Equity:** Brand equity has been the focus of branding research for several years. Even though the contexts these studies were conducted in where mostly rooted in packaged product settings, it is essential for scholars to consider brand equity in service markets for the following reason. Firstly Brand equity can contribute to visualizing service products. Service products are intangible and it's really hard to visualize and are often categorized as experience and credence service [15]. Second, given that service products are intangible and customers often find it difficult to gather relevant information prior to purchase, changing service brands is costly for customers who are experienced and satisfied with a particular company [16]. This provides the opportunity in which service companies

can boost the retention rate through establishing the brand equity perceived by customers. This notion is also consistent with previous research [17, 1]. Consequently, based on previous works, the present study attempts to integrate and verify the relationships of antecedents and consequences of brand equity in internet service provider in Malaysia. There is some agreement amongst researchers [18, 19], that there are at least two dissimilar brand equity perspectives namely customer based and financial-based brand equity. From the financial perspective, brand equity can be viewed as the financial asset value created by brands [20], which may be demonstrated as "the additional cash flow created by a brand" [20]. The customer-based perspective, the focus of the present study, was primarily suggested by [21, 4] and is based on the evaluation of consumer reaction to a brand name. Various researchers consider brand equity as the value added to a product or service by a particular brand name, such as the "customer-based brand equity" of [22]. [21]Study more clearly considers consumer response, identifying brand equity as the "differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand." Brand equity can also be beheld as the result of consumer behaviors.

**Brand loyalty:** Brand loyalty has been considered as a pivotal prerequisite for a firm's competitiveness and profitability [7, 13, 23]. The ultimate goal of every firm is to maintain its brands with high customer loyalty. Unfortunately, all brands are not able to maintain high customer loyalty rate. The growth and maintenance of consumer brand loyalty has been considered, mostly, as a cornerstone part of the companies' marketing strategies, particularly in the face of highly competitive markets with growing unpredictability and decreasing product differentiation [24]. The significance of brand loyalty recognized in the marketing and consumer science literature since last three decades [25]. In this connection, [12] has argued the role of loyalty in the construction of brand equity process and has precisely noted that in most of the cases brand loyalty results to certain marketing advantages such as reduced, marketing expenses, more new customers and superior trade leverage. Daryl Travis considers that brand loyalty is "the final objective and meaning of brand equity", adding that "brand loyalty is also brand equity". Some authors see brand loyalty as a behavioral response and as a function of psychological processes. Consequently brand loyalty is a function of both attitudes and behaviour (habit). Thus, the concept of brand loyalty represents a general concept, presenting

individual differences, through which a consumer's overall buying behaviour patterns within a product class are described. Analysing brand loyalty cannot be done without considering its relationship to other descriptive dimensions of brand equity like awareness, perceived quality, or associations, [26].

H1: There is positive relationship between Brand loyalty and brand equity

**Perceived Brand Quality:** A brand's perceived quality is a result of a global assessment made by the consumers' perception about aspects and dimensions relevant to the quality of the products represented by the brand [27]. The main dimensions which the quality is perceived refer to: performance (level of primary attributes, products' functionality), features (level of secondary attributes, complementary to those related to performance), conformance (specifications meeting and lack of defects), reliability (consistency of performance over time), durability (expected economic life of the product), serviceability (availability of maintenance service, spare parts etc.), style and design. Consumers will associate brands with a certain level of quality, not necessarily based on a detailed knowledge of technical, functional or other specifications, but mostly on the inter-personal communication with other users of the brand, direct experience in using the brand or the company's efforts to communicate and promote the brand, [17]. A brand's perceived quality may be analyzed from three perspectives: consumers perceive an absolute level of quality (for example, low, medium, or high), consumers perceive a relative level of quality (a certain competitive positioning of the brand considering quality for example, the best, among the best, among the poorest, or the poorest) and consumers perceive the quality associated to the brand as being consistent or inconsistent, [27]. A high perceived quality attracts interest from wholesale and retail channels, creates premises for brand extensions to other product categories or industries and provides the basis for a high price strategy, the price premium thus obtained being subject to reinvestment in future developments.

H2: There is positive association between perceived brand quality and brand equity.

**Brand Personality and Image:** Consumers use brand personality as relevant determinants of the brand's added value. Brand personality confirms a stable brand image

over time) and permits consumers to express their own personalities [7,2]. Brand personality associations, when strongly initiated in consumer memory; also influence on consumer behaviors and attitudes toward the brand, [28]. Although evidence relates brand personality dimensions directly to brand equity, various studies explore the impact of brand personality on elements that reflect components or consequences of brand equity. [2]. The main purpose of any identity marketing program is creating a strong image among existent and potential customers, image which is depicted through intensity, clearness and durability, [29]. Brand image relates to the consumer's perception of the brand being define as a set of beliefs held about a particular brand or as a set of associations, usually organized in some meaningful way. Implicit in all the above definitions is that brand image is a consumer-constructed notion of the brand. Consumers form an image of the brand based on the associations that they have remembered with respect to that brand, [19]. Brand image represents an entrance barrier to any market, as in their buying decisions process consumers include mainly brands with a strong image in their considered set. A strong image can convey several advantages for any firm as follows: facilitates personnel-customers interaction, minimizes defames towards the corporate name, positively affects the internal climate of the firm, facilitates hiring of valuable employees, attracts investors etc. Considering all the above, it is logical for any firm to firstly establish and develop the main dimensions of brand identity and then communicate it among consumers so as to eventually generate a favorable brand image. Often brands have a personality, like "rugged", "dependable", or "youthful". The brand personality can result from creative advertising and/or consumer inferences about the user or usage situation.

H3: There is positive association between brand personality and brand equity

**Functionality:** In general, attributes relate to product performance. They can be further divided into product related and non-product related attributes. Product related attributes are connected to the product's physical characteristics and vary by product category. They are familiarly called features, (Yasin *et al.*, 2007). As an example, components, materials, on-screen programming and stereo sound are all product related attributes of a video cassette recorder. Non-product related attributes are defined as external aspects which relate to a product's purchase or consumption.

They include four types of information: price, packaging, the identity of the typical consumer and where and in what situations the product is used. Consumers recognize attributes in products and with many product categories, especially shopping goods, actively compare alternatives. The non-product attributes have little to do with product function, but may serve as important cues to help create further associations (Sekaran, 2010 and J. Charlene Davis, 2007). For example, consumers often associate price with quality. It is likely that, in their minds, they may group products in a category by price. Packaging usually does not affect product function, but serves as a cue to product quality. Quality products are usually sold in quality packages. Associations with the other two non-product attributes can be formed by consumer observation and often can reflect some consumer inferences.

H4: There is positive association between functionality and brand equity.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Data Collection and Method:** The main objective of this study is to find out the casual relationship of brand equity antecedents. Even though abundant information is presented worldwide in this area of study, it is quite worth exploring to gain a superior understanding on how their issues in forming brand equity are analogous to those in the context of Malaysian internet service providers. An initial sample of 435 volunteers tested the research questionnaire and enabled testing measurement scales for reliability and validity. Each of the responses received was screened for errors, incomplete and missing responses. Efforts were also taken to contact the affected respondents through e-mail for clarification and corrections, especially on the missing or blank responses. The responses that had a few blank answers and which involve 5-point interval-scaled questions were assigned with a mid-point scale of 3. After the selection process was carried out, only 420 respondent completed the questioner indicating a response rate around 92%.the sample was consisted of 64% female with 44% respondent aged less than 30 years, 24% respondent ages between 31 and 36 years and finally 26% of respondents aged over 36 years. The respondent who were well educated, 51% were completed secondary education and more than 45% postsecondary education level. All respondent rose from TMnet outlet, Maxis, Jarring and P1 outlet from Klang Valley area in Malaysia.

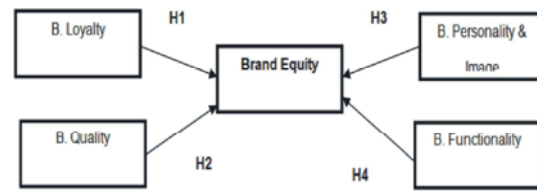


Fig. 1: Hypothesized model of brand equity

## Measurement

**Brand Equity:** Previous studies have been demonstrated that the brand equity measurement is international and resembles to the definition of a ‘value-added’ to the product and service. Measurements tools like price premiums [31], groups of consumer-based perceptions [31], or purchase behavior [32] agree with this interpretation. In contrast, [33] develop a multidimensional consumer brand equity scale and identify three dimensions: Loyalty, perceived quality and brand association/attention (confirmed by Washburn and Plank, 2002). [31] add a fourth dimension, brand personality and image of the brand. [33]Propose an overall brand equity measure in addition to their multidimensional brand equity scale, so the four dimensions also aggregate into a second-order factor that measures brand equity or overall added brand value.

**Brand Personality and Image:** Culture is one of the crucial factors which can influence on brand [34], hence this study turns to the brand personality scale [26], which reflects the same French context. This scale, which achieves good reliability and validity across product categories and brands, consists of 23 adjectives (introverted, warm, affectionate and sophisticated) and contains five dimensions (agreeability, conscientiousness, sophistication, fallaciousness and introversion). The dimensionality of the brand personality construct does not exclude the use of a global measurement to indicate brand personality's valence. Analogous to the framework of Allport (1961), which introduces the concept of a ‘whole personality,’ brand personality in this study, as represented by a revealed second-order factor, stands for a general evaluation of the anthropomorphic inferences that consumers develop toward the brand. [35]similarly adopt a second-order conceptualization of brand personality that influences loyalty positively.

**Brand Quality and Loyalty:** Perceived brand quality has been measured as the customers' overall awareness of brand quality and the firms' services quality compared to

others, as well as the perception of the consistency of quality [36,34]. A brand’s perceived quality is a consequence of a global assessment made by the consumers based on their view about aspects and dimensions considered relevant for the quality of the products represented by the brand. Brand loyalty was measured as the customers' preference of the company as the first choice provider of services and product, their commitment to use the product and services again, their commitment to recommend company's products and services to others, as well as their own consideration of themselves as being loyal to their product and services [34]. The measurement of others constructs are adapted from the study of Pierre (2011) which has done on brand personality. Likert-type scale with the anchors “1—strongly agree” and “5— strongly disagree”. Appendix 1 gives an overview of the utilized constructs and their measures.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

**Primary Analysis and Measurement Model:**

The hypothesized relationships between the constructs have been tested by using structural equation modeling. Prior to conduct the analysis, the Harman's single-factor test was carried out to control for common method biases [36]. In first step, the individual items have been tested conducting an exploratory principal components factor analysis. In this analysis, we observed that no any single predominant factor occurred from the data. Instead, the exploratory factor analysis identified five factors with acceptable eigenvalues greater than one and with the first factor accounting for 38.06% of variance. The cumulative variance explained by all factors was 67.373%. According to the results, this test did not point out major problems with common method biases. Besides to this examine, we have conducted a confirmatory factor analysis in the structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine for common method variance. We have involved a distinct examination for any such influence by controlling the effects of a common latent factor in our structural model of the hypothesized relationships [37]. We tested a model proposing that a single factor underlies the study variables by linking all items to a single factor. We haven’t found any important common variance among the items and consequently the suggested relationships, which proposes that common method biases are not a subject to reflect in our study. We confirmed that the individual items for the latent constructs presented adequate reliability and discriminant validity as well.

Table 1: Measurement Model of the study

Construct	Scale Items	Standardized loading
P.B. Quality ( $\hat{\alpha}$ =0.89; VE=0.55; CR=0.83)	P.B.Q.1	0.67
	P.B.Q.2	0.88
	P.P.Q.3	0.74
	P.B.Q.4	0.69
Brand Loyalty ( $\hat{\alpha}$ =0.79; VE=0.50; CR=0.78)	B.L.1	0.77
	B.L.2	0.82
	B.L.3	0.77
	B.L.4	0.44
Brand personality and image ( $\hat{\alpha}$ =0.74; VE=0.61; CR=0.82)	B.P.1.1	0.79
	B.P.1.2	0.73
	B.P.1.3	0.79
	B.P.1.4	0.55
Brand functionality ( $\hat{\alpha}$ =0.92; VE=0.70; CR=0.88)	B.F.1	0.83
	B.F.2	0.77
	B.F.3	0.70
	B.F.4	0.89
B. Equity ( $\hat{\alpha}$ =0.79; VE=0.65; CR=0.78)	B.E.1	0.69
	B.E.2	0.78
	B.E.3	0.73
	B.E.4	0.81

Fit indices:  $\chi^2=159.3$ ,  $df=77$ ,  $\chi^2/df=4.81$ , RMSEA=0.064, GFI=0.96, AGFI=0.95, NFI=0.93, CFI=0.95, IFI=0.95, CN 0.05=259, CN 0.01=286.

Note. Cronbach's Alpha ( $\hat{\alpha}$ ), variance extracted (VE) and construct reliability (CR).

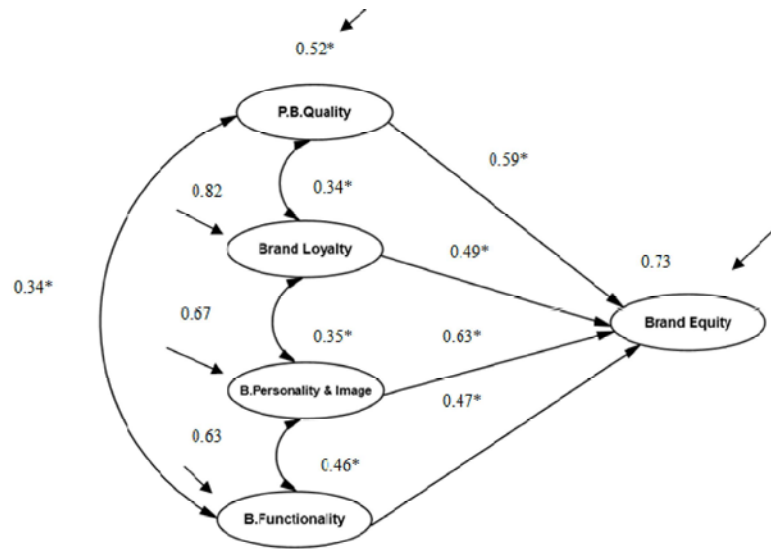
\*P<0.01.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients calculated for all constructs exceeded 0.7, which confirmed the reliability of applied measures (Hair, Black, Babin anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Following common procedures have been proposed for ascertaining measurement quality in structural equation modeling (SEM), however we have assessed a measurement model to gauge construct reliability and construct validity [40]. The consequences of measurement model analysis are shown in Table 1. As an evident, the loading estimates and the fit indices indicated validity of the measurement model. The descriptive statistics for all constructs and their correlations have returned in table 2 for more illustration. The stated hypotheses were confirmed by examining the proposed structural equation model.

Mean values show that, on average, all measures is fairly high, averaging above 3 on the 5-point Likert scales (Table 2). Correlations among all variables excite and they are positive and significant. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using analyze of momentum square (AMOS-20) software and a reduced sample of 420 respondents due to

Table 2: Descriptive analysis and correlation

Constructs	Mean	Std.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
P.B. Quality	4.71	0.68	1				
Brand Loyalty	4.31	0.76	0.65**	1			
B.P & I	3.89	0.53	0.56**	0.55**	1		
Brand.F	3.51	0.74	-0.42**	0.29**	-0.24**	1	
Equity	2.04	0.66	0.62**	0.57**	0.54**	-0.43**	1



\*Significance at the.01

Fig. 2: Structure model- Standardized path among latent variables

list wise deletion as recommended when the sample is large, more assesses the measures. Each factor in confirmatory factor analysis CFA carries four indicators. Four indicators per factor give appropriate consequences for sample size  $N > 200$  (Marsh *et al.*, 1998). CFA exams all scales simultaneously. Each item loads only on its respective factor. CFA results show that the measurement model fits the data rationally well ( $\chi^2=159.3$ ;  $df=77$ ;  $RMSEA=0.064$ ;  $CFI=0.95$ ;  $GFI=0.96$ ). All loadings between indicators and latent variables are statistically significant (P. 0.001). Standardized paths between factor and indicators are all above.40 and hence they are meaningful (Chin, 1998).

**Structure Model and Hypothesis Testing:** Structural equation modeling (SEM), examines the hypotheses concerning the key influences among latent constructs variables. The fit indices for the structural model indicate a reasonably decent model fit ( $\chi^2=163.2$ ;  $Df =79$ ;  $RMSEA=0.059$ ;  $CFI=0.98$ ;  $GFI=0.93$ ). The result confirm that all the paths were significant at  $p < 0.05$ . However the outcome of study reports the positive influence of

customer perceived brand quality on brand equity exist (H1: Standardized path coefficient =0.59;  $t=4.78$ ;  $p < 0.002$ ). In relation with the second hypothesis, brand loyalty also have positive influence on brand equity as a result H2 (Standardized path coefficient =0.49;  $t=3.68$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) is accepted at 0.001 level of significance  $p < 0.05$ . The result showed that the brand personality as well as image also results to positive impact on TM internet service provider brand equity as well due to that fact of the  $p < 0.05$  therefore H3 is supported (Standardized path coefficient =0.63;  $t=5.69$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ). Results related hypothesis four revealed that functionality has significant influence on internet service provider brand equity. Hence, H4 is supported where  $p < 0.05$  (Standardized path coefficient =0.47;  $t=5.38$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Figure 2 depicts the full model. Of the four paths hypothesized in the model.

**CONCLUSION**

This study provides an approach to map and ensure the nature of brand equity for TMnet, Maxis and P1, Jaring service and assesses the relationship of brand

equity with functionality, brand personality and image, brand loyalty and perceived quality of brand. Function and brand personality & image are described as an intangibles source of brand equity, for this purpose, the study takes firm adherence to suggestion by [21] that the study should consider cognitive dimensions as sources of brand equity that is what is in the consumers' minds. The illustrations are brand knowledge; brand awareness that because the differential responses consequently create customers' based brand equity. The study also establishes that all these organizations are functions oriented brands which concur to the earlier finding by Paul Temporal, 1999 who has pointed out that functionality is common to product that includes both goods and services. The study added that all these organizations are image oriented product, thus confirming similar finding by Park *et al*, 1986, who declared that brand equity consist of function and image. The fundamental objective of this research is to assess whether TMnet, Jaring and Maxisnet are function, image, brand loyalty and perceived quality oriented product in relation to their brand equity. In order to achieve this objective, this study conducted structure equation modeling. The result of confirmatory factor analysis in this study have reveal that the perceived quality of brand is the most important factor to build brand equity followed by brand loyalty, functionality and image. All these four factors have significant positive effect on brand equity.

**Limitation and Direction for Future Studies:** While every effort has been made to make this study as comprehensive as possible, certain limitations were present. This research restricted to the selection of four brands. Clearly, a variety of choice situation must be investigated before generalizable comments can be made to guide the development of brand equity. Another limitation of the present study is the size and composition of the group which participated in the study. Only four companies' users from the Malaysia were recruited for testing. Therefore, generalization about the whole population of Internet uses is unsuitable. It would be value to conduct similar research on other nationalities to gain a vibrant picture of consumer attitude through what is, essentially, a global medium. Finally, this study is very much limited by time and cost. It would be very time consuming to conduct a survey that covers across the selected population and is a fairly good sample of the population in question. Future research is needed to extend the outcome of this study. Future multinational research extensions might elucidate similarities and

difference between nations population including demographic significance. Similarly, future investigation is required to determine under what situations brand equity beliefs, attitudes and demographics characteristics results to brand equity and brand preference. Furthermore, study is required in the business to business brand equity. Future research could test whether attitudes toward brand depends on the service provider. Possibly, the attitudes of those accessing the internet through commercial providers differ from those with institutional or corporate access. Future research could apply the social contract concept to build brand building. Such research would clarify whether attribute underlying branding social contracts are media specific or constant across a range of media. Understanding branding concept will allow more actual and diverse use of building brand expenditure and lead to great customers' satisfaction.

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