



Exploring strategic branding resources for small and medium-sized brand-oriented companies

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify strategic branding resources for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) considering their financial challenges in implementing branding programmes. This qualitative study relied on data from in-depth interviews with company representatives inclusive of owners/founders, chief executive officers and marketing managers of 10 brand-oriented SMEs in Malaysia. Guided by the Resource-Based-View (RBV) managerial framework, thematic analysis was utilised to reveal themes pertaining to strategic branding resources for each of the ten companies; the data was subsequently triangulated among the ten companies to identify the most prominent themes. The utilisation of inherent company resources strategically, based on the company's uniqueness and capabilities, was found to be crucial for SMEs' success in branding. Concurring with past findings, strategic branding resources for SMEs that emerged from the data include brand uniqueness, product differences, human resources, brand symbolism, corporate culture and internal communications. Interestingly, two new branding resources emerged, namely brand innovation and social capital. This study contributes towards creating awareness and understanding regarding the potential of inherent strategic brand resources among SMEs that may improve their brand development. Moreover, these findings elucidate an alternative pathway for the formation of branding strategies among SMEs.

Keywords: ***branding, strategic brand resources, brand orientation, small and medium-sized enterprises***

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

A competitive brand is the driving force necessary to strengthen a company's economic growth. Branding refers to the strategic process through which a company creates a competitive brand. The positioning of brand values, however, requires a focus on resource development (Baumgarth, 2010; Gromark & Melin, 2011; Rahman, Rodríguez-Serrano, & Lambkin, 2018). These resources are the internal catalysts that facilitate the branding process and are used to accelerate the growth of the company. As such, these resources, and the processes by which they are capitalised, must be strategically managed by the company to improve competitiveness (Iyer, Davari, & Paswan, 2018; Rahman et al., 2018). These resources can be categorised into tangible and intangible resources (Iyer et al., 2018). Tangible resources include corporate logos, human resources and finances while intangible resources include social capital, corporate image and cultural capital.

Notwithstanding, the concept of branding is generally synonymous with big companies, not small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The main obstacles against the adoption of branding as a strategy by SMEs despite the presence of adequate resources, according to Odoom, Narteh, and Boateng (2017), are crises and resource redundancy. Given that most resources are finite, SMEs are encouraged to develop a more strategic approach to their resource expenditure. As a developing country, Malaysian SMEs face significant competition from larger local and international brands that are more likely to have vast resources. Government authorities have allocated significant funding for SMEs to help them become more sustainable; nonetheless, the SMEs remain generally uncompetitive (Fauziah, Rosmini, Siti Zaleha, & Muslim, 2012). Despite the available funding, many Malaysian SMEs fail to improve their brand due to their inexperience in branding (Mohd Tajuddin, Hashim, & Zainol, 2017), limiting the whole process to costly advertising but ignoring other branding practices that rely less on money but can still add more value. As a solution, SMEs are encouraged to focus on their inherent resources (Raki & Shakur, 2018; Odoom et al., 2017), such as the founder's personality, company and product uniqueness and employee support. Nevertheless, according to Suhaini and Noor Hasmini (2016) and Fauziah et al. (2012), SMEs in Malaysia are seldom aware of their potential resources for branding. They do not understand the importance of inherent and existing brand resources within the company that could be capitalised to become more competitive (Sandbacka, Natti, & Tahtinen, 2013), or their role in reducing the financial burden associated with promoting the brand (Krake, 2005).

Recent studies suggest that SMEs should focus on tangible resources to provide clarity on the role of their brands in the market (Fauziah et al., 2012; Razeghi, Roosta, Alemtabriz, & Gharache, 2014). However, Berthon, Ewing, and Napoli (2008) suggest that the use of these resources limit the creativity of SMEs; SMEs should aim to broaden their brand's creativity by developing intangible resources; simultaneously, expanding the impact of their brands in the market. Previous studies have also tended to focus on entrepreneurs (Fauziah et al., 2012) of specific industries, such as a micro industrial service companies (Sandbacka et al., 2013) or retail industries (Bridson, Evans, Mavondo, & Minkiewicz, 2013). The specificity of these studies detracts their ability to highlight the breadth and depth of resources in SMEs. Identifying the resources of different industries is necessary as each company has its own distinct approach to the development of its brand (Berthon et al., 2008; Dulyathip, 2014).

Studies on the strategic use of resources for branding commonly employ the resource-based view (RBV) of firms (e.g. Fauziah et al., 2012; Runyan, Huddleston, & Swinney, 2007; Iyer et al., 2018; Salleh, Sulaiman, Haque & Othman, 2017). RBV provides a complete picture of the strategic resources that might enable competitive strategies and the maintenance of brand competitiveness (Huang & Tsai, 2013). Therefore, exploring strategic brand resources from the internal perspective of companies across various industrial sectors is necessary in order to

arrive at a more holistic understanding of the resource concept for SME branding. This paper aims to list the various branding resources used by SMEs, classifying these resources based on their industry and sector characteristics. To this end, we review the relevant literature with respect to the branding of brand-oriented SMEs, as well as contemporary theories around brand strategic resources. This is followed by a discussion of the methodology, methods of analysis and presentation of our results, after which we undertake to discuss the meaning of these results. We conclude by exploring the theoretical and managerial implications of these findings, as well as giving insights on the limitations of this study and future research directions.

BRANDING IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

SMEs are often associated with a lack of branding resources (Odoom et al., 2017). However, various theorists have argued that the issue is not a lack of resources, but a lack of awareness regarding the resources an SME possesses and that might be deployed for branding purposes (Fauziah et al., 2012; Maznah & Mohd Noor, 2010; Norzanah, Puteri Fadzhline, & Syed Jamal, 2012; Suhaini & Noor Hasmini, 2016). The literature indicates that SMEs often ignore the potential of their existing resources and over-emphasise the importance of media, particularly television advertising (Gkarane, Efstratios-Marinos, Vassiliadis, & Vassiliadis, 2019; Huang, Yang & Lee, 2017). Consequently, SMEs tend to focus almost exclusively on their tangible resources, such as names and logos, while also thinking about finances as the only essential resource necessary for branding. These very perceptions are perhaps the main barrier that SMEs need to overcome if they wish to develop their brands and to run consistent promotional activities (Maznah & Mohd Noor, 2010; Saleh & Ndubisi, 2006). Ultimately, branding should be adopted as a key strategy in their business development plans for creating a competitive advantage (Mohd Zulkifli, Char, Yaso' & Hassan, 2010; Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn, & Gilmore 2015; M'zungu, Merrilees & Miller, 2019).

The focus on branding resources in SMEs differs quite significantly from that of well-established brand-oriented companies such as Nestlé, Nicorette, Volvo, DuPont and Tetra Pak (Baumgarth, Merrilees, & Urde, 2013). This difference in focus is a product of the unique characteristics of SMEs—their flexible, non-rigid and owner-centric management (Umidjon, Shuhua, Jayathilake & Renyan, 2014; Spence & Essoussi, 2010). The lack of branding resource awareness among SMEs significantly influences their approach to branding (Hirnoven, Laukkanen & Reijonen, 2013).

BRANDING IN BRAND-ORIENTED SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

The use of strategic branding resources in brand-oriented companies

Brand-oriented companies emphasise the use of strategic resources for branding (Muhammad Anees-ur-rehman, Wong, Sultan, & Merrilees, 2018; Baumgarth, 2010). One tangible resource integral to brand formation is brand uniqueness (Evans, Bridson, & Rentschler, 2012), which capitalises on a brand's visual distinctiveness in the market. This concept is perhaps best demonstrated through the use of logos, uniforms, symbols and brand names, which often provide consumers with decision-making shortcuts in terms of their ability to convey brand

information (Baumgarth, 2010). Product differentiation is also a significant branding resource and is used to distinguish a brand on the market (Bridson & Evans, 2004).

Traditionally, brand uniqueness and product differentiation have been seen as important in the retail (Evans et al., 2012), consumer product (Spence & Essoussi, 2010) and business-to-business sectors (Baumgarth, 2010); however, less attention has been paid to the importance of these resources in the services sector (King, Kam Fung, & Grace, 2013; Santos-Vijande, del Río-Lanza, Suárez-Álvarez, & Díaz-Martín, 2012).

Of course, there is no denying the importance of a company's human resources, with the employees of SMEs often acting as brand ambassadors who can provide free promotion for the company. Nevertheless, SMEs are typically associated with their founding entrepreneurs (Saraniemi, Juntunen, Niemelä, & Tähtinen, 2010). In contrast, in most brand-oriented companies, all staff are regarded as integral to branding and a lot of effort is placed on internal branding (Gromark & Melin, 2011). Such practice improves the brand culture of the company, thus establishing strong internal branding resource (Santos-Vijande et al., 2012). Moreover, the company's internal communication becomes a vital resource for soliciting information from staff and for conveying messages about the corporate brand (Horan, O'Dwyer, & Tiernan, 2011) because effective communication motivates the workforce to contribute to the company's financial success (Muhammad Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018; Cheng Ean, 2011). Appropriate modes of communication are necessary in preserving the company's reputation and maintaining good business relations worldwide (Napal, 2010).

Brand-oriented companies use both resources, tangible and intangible, in the implementation of their branding process (Santos-Vijande et al., 2012; Hankinson, 2001). Previous studies indicate that the type of industry or business sector influences the company's choice of strategic resources (De Chernatony, Drury, & Segal-Horn, 2003). Nevertheless, the unique characteristics of SMEs such as its flexible and non-rigid organisational structure and its owner-centricity should not be neglected in the branding strategic plan (Hirnoven, Laukkanen & Reijonen, 2013; Horan et al., 2011). Moreover, brand-oriented SMEs should focus more on the strategic value of their resources as opposed to focusing on the quantity of their resources.

Resource-based view

Previous studies have used the RBV to understand how companies achieve success by developing their existing resources (Jaafar, Nuruddin, & Syed Abu, 2015; Sigalas, Economou, & Georgopoulos, 2013). Several branding studies have also adopted the RBV to identify the resources or capabilities of SMEs, hoping to capitalise on these to improve company performance, with the RBV offering an internal-oriented theory (Fauziah et al., 2012; Huang, & Tsai, 2013; Runyan et al., 2007). RBV focuses on three important issues in relation to developing companies: resource exploration, strategy formation and performance (Fahy, 2002; Barney, 1991). RBV provides the researcher with a complete guide with which to identify the inherent potential of a company to achieve lasting competitiveness.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed face-to-face and in-depth semi-structured interviews with respondents from ten brand-oriented SMEs—companies that have been successful in terms of their brand development (Lee, 2013). Table 1 shows the business orientation of these companies and the number of years in operation, indicating their experience. These companies were evaluated and recognised by authorised bodies for their branding efforts. Companies were identified from various national and international brand award lists, such as the National Mark from SME Corporation, SME Brand Laureate, High Performing Bumiputera Companies (TERAS, 2013), Enterprise 50 (E50) and various business development bodies, such as the Land Public Transport Commission and the Ministry of Health Malaysia. In total, there were more than 100 companies that were listed in the aforementioned lists. A shortlist of 20 companies was developed to represent the different types of industries for both the manufacturing and service sectors. The chosen companies were those that have been listed in at least one of the brand recognition award lists, registered under the Companies Commission of Malaysia, owned by local entrepreneurs and operate within Malaysia. The selected companies also register annual sales of RM300,000 to RM5,000,000, employ 5 to 200 full-time employees, are customer-oriented and demonstrate market competitiveness in the product or service category. These selection criteria ensured that the study was able to capture the various approaches used in resource utilisation for strategic branding. The sample comprised of an equal number of manufacturing and service sector companies in order to balance the data and to identify similarities and differences that might exist with respect to the branding issue associated with each industry (Dulyathip, 2014; Park & Kim, 2013). Additionally, companies in the shortlist were scrutinized through available public information including websites and media reports to ensure that they were brand-oriented companies as defined in this study. The companies were then approached for their readiness to participate in the study. Ten companies agreed to participate (See Table 1).

Table 1. List of companies by business orientation and experience

Company	Industry	Years of experience
<i>Manufacturing</i>		
My-Sutera Sdn. Bhd, 1995	Garments (school and corporate uniform)	21
Jakel Trading, 1983	Retail (textiles)	33
Perniagaan Mudim Zakaria, 1987	Food and beverages (sauce and soy sauce)	28
Hyrax Oil Sdn. Bhd., 1991	Chemical (lubricating oil and insulation)	25
Natural Wellness Holdings Sdn. Bhd., 2004	Healthcare (supplements)	12
<i>Service</i>		
Esa Jurutera Perunding Sdn. Bhd., 1972	Consultation (civil engineering)	44
Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd., 2005	Animation (3D animations)	11
Metro Driving Academy, 1998	Transportation (driving academy)	18
RHR Hospitality Sdn. Bhd., 1993	Hospitality (hotels and restaurants)	23
Sani Express Sdn. Bhd., 2003	Transportation (express bus)	13

Interviews were then conducted with the company representatives consisting of either the owner/founder, chief executive officer or a representative suggested by the company. In line with previous studies, all participants were actively and directly involved in the strategic branding efforts of the company and have considerable knowledgeable on brand management (Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Guldenberg, 2013; Saraniemi et al., 2010).

The interview questions and probes were developed to acquire in-depth and extensive information (Dikko, 2016). To this end, questions should be open, broad and encourage respondents to expand on their ideas (Jepsen & Rodwell, 2008). As such, questions revolved around the exploration of resources used for branding according to the industry and sector. These questions were supported by sub-themes used to guide the interview process and to simplify the process of data analysis. Table 2 presents an example of the interview questions. The data collection was conducted in 2016.

Table 2. Interview questions

Theme	Sub-theme	Question
Resource usage	Tangible resources	1. What are the brand resources utilised in branding?
	Intangible resources	2. What are the implemented strategies to increase brand performances?

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Consistent with previous qualitative studies, this study used unstructured measurements to analyse the collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), thus ensuring the standardisation and consistency of the analysis. Within-case analysis were first conducted before proceeding with cross-case analysis in obtaining the company's overall theme. Guided by the Resource-Based-View (RBV) managerial framework, thematic analysis was utilised to reveal themes pertaining to strategic branding resources for each of the ten companies; the data was subsequently triangulated among the ten companies to identify then most prominent themes. A coding list derived from previous studies was employed to guide the study in exploring themes related to resource utilisation and their influencing factors.

Use of strategic brand resources for SMEs

According to the data, the use of tangible and intangible resources affects branding activities even before the development of a strategy aimed at branding. Figure 1 lists several commonly found tangible and intangible resources. Companies use both of these resources for branding purposes.

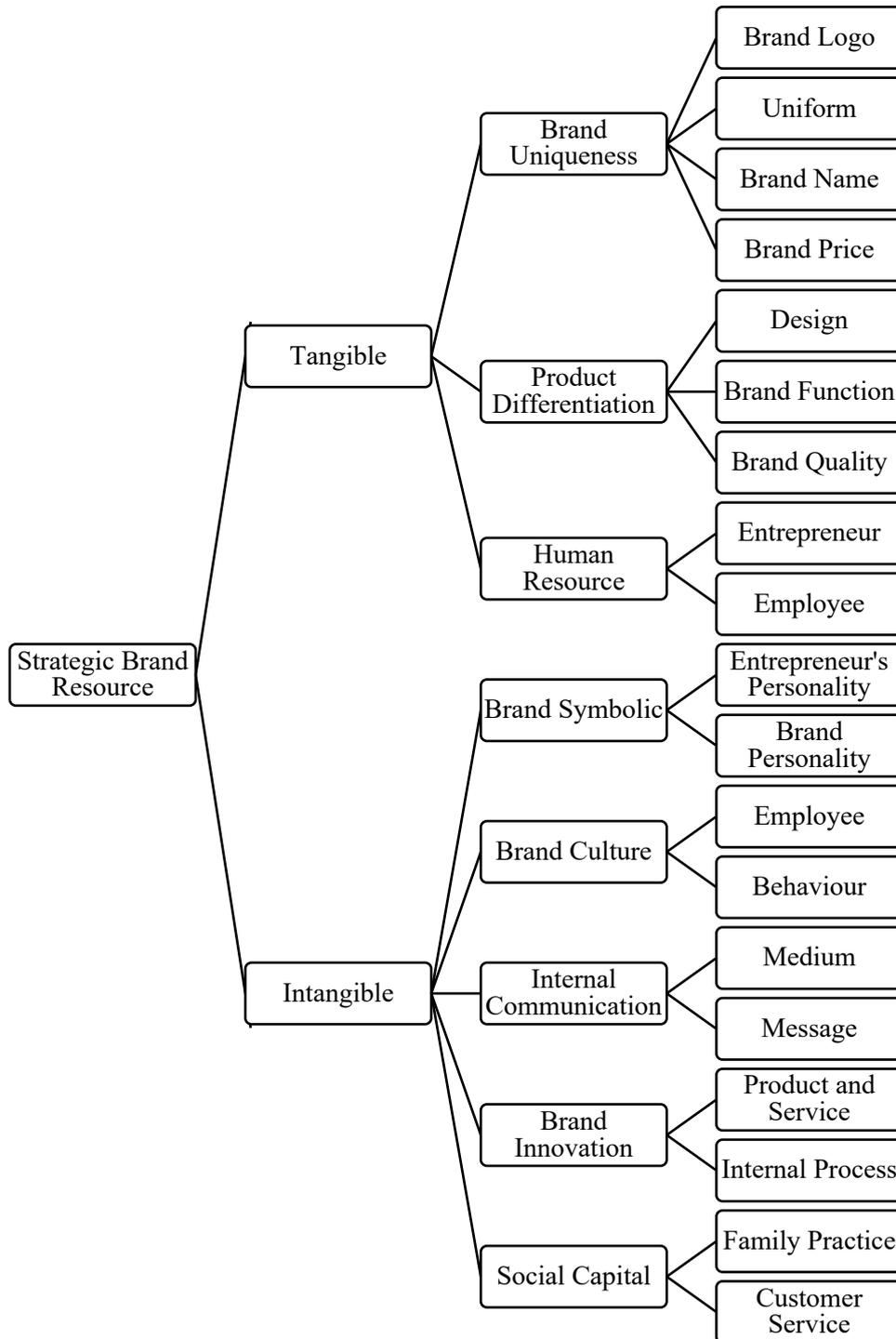


Figure 1. List of resources for branding

Tangible resources

Tangible resources are often prioritised by SME and are the most routinely capitalised set of resources. Nevertheless, not all of these resources are developed with the specific intention of developing the brand. Tangible resources are considered as playing a fundamental role in branding because of their immediate visual effect and ability to create direct customer appeal. The data indicate that for the SMEs, tangible resources could be categorised into three categories: brand uniqueness, product differentiation and human resources.

Brand uniqueness, compared to other tangible and intangible resources, is viewed as the most important resource in branding. According to the participants, in light of the highly competitive market that they are in, brand uniqueness ultimately becomes the most important heuristic influencing customer decision. Although four elements were found to be most important for brand uniqueness, brand price is most often cited to be interrelated. Pricing is thought to be linked with other brand benefits (e.g. value-for-money is synonymous with quality; consistency in pricing is synonymous with trust), and as such, price is viewed as a highly valued medium in communicating what the brand has to offer for customers. According to one respondent:

“One more thing in terms of price...we control our prices. We avoid raising the price when we are already making a profit. We maintain our prices for our customers. Compared to our competitor, we are cheaper. That’s the advantage we have: cheap prices and a greater quantity of our product per package.”

(Company F)

As for quality, it is viewed as the main offering of the company when it involves product character, thus unsurprisingly making it as one of the most highly utilised resources in brand development.

On the other hand, contrary to the findings of previous studies, many of participants did not indicate a high appreciation of logos as fundamental to their branding. For them, the logo as a brand symbol does not necessarily offer much information about the brand for their customers; and only a few explored the potential of consistency in developing their brand. Nevertheless, some participants did express that their companies are starting to pay attention to the brand name in building a reputation in the market. The use of human resources depends on their involvement in the brand development process. They are still the brand ambassadors due to their involvement with the society and the reputation of the brand name, as shared by one participant:

“Yes, I am (company manager) who has a lot to do such as dealing with employee discipline and personal problems. We advise them. I am fully involved in human resource management. I conduct a second stage interview whether they were eligible to hold a position in the company or not.”

(Company I)

It is thus clear that resource utilisation is influenced by the initial perceptions of SMEs, with branding largely synonymous with the availability of tangible resources. In reality, while many of these resources are put to good use, their use is not based on the awareness of the strategic resources. This focus on tangible resources significantly obscures the ability of the entrepreneur to realise the full potential of these resources as brand development agents.

Intangible resources

The use of intangible resources is often heavily dependent on the prior development of tangible resources. As such, not all companies use intangible resources in developing brands. Among the intangible resources, brand symbolism is the most highly utilised. We found that the personality of the founding entrepreneur has a significant effect on employee behaviour and on the perceptions of customers towards the brand, affecting how they embed emotional values into their daily routines. Consequently, a special brand personality creates a meaningful relationship between the brand and the customer.

According to the participants, brand culture is another important resource in their branding efforts because it influences how the employees, as ambassadors of the company, perceive and act towards the brand, and how they communicate about the brand to others outside the company. This culture is represented by the employees' behaviour and set of perceptions that reflect their cumulative sense of commitment to develop and safeguard the brand as well as to translate and communicate the brand value to customers such as through consistent endorsements. The brand culture embedded throughout the workplace facilitates the process of brand development. To this end, internal communication is often a substantial driving agent for branding. Two-way communication is used both for communicating and to gain information from employees and customers through various mediums. Face-to-face communication is the preferred medium to communicate with employees.

Innovation is also a brand resource, although companies often prefer to perceive innovation as something routine to their products, services or processes. Innovation is viewed as part and parcel of the business, and is pursued towards fulfilling customer utilitarian rather than symbolic needs, and thus is not perceived as a highly valuable branding resource. A participant explained:

"We created our bottle design to be more attractive, comfortable to hold and safe by using polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic materials that are suitable for food. Previously, we used glass. We chose to use plastic because it's unbreakable, easy to store..." (Company F)

Companies also leverage on social capital for their branding efforts. This involves entrepreneurs and employees trusting their brand to create a coherent set of behaviours toward branding and to influence customer perceptions. This is achieved through a focus on family practices and the provision of quality customer service. A participant said:

"...because we're like family. We do not want people to have boundaries in developing brands...sometimes we spend time together, such as doing a potluck. That is exactly what I mean, we are like a family to everyone. However, we still maintain a professional culture in working to ensure that our objectives are met." (Company G)

Family practices applied in the company were often apparent in their internal branding processes. For example, internal integrity was often translated into relationships with customers, wherein employees would strive towards the provision of quality customer service in the course of selling their brands. A participant commented:

"...that's why customer service is our strength. For example, we will call if our passengers are 5 minutes late. We will take them to the nearest station. We also assign the Manager-on-Duty, who is available every night we, to patrol the main stations to monitor and assist with passenger problems." (Company I)

Therefore, the passion exhibited by a company in developing their brand often becomes a driving force for exploring the potential of intangible resources. The value added by intangible resources, such as family-oriented practices and passion, encourage these companies to improve and upgrade their branding efforts. This process was described in exploring the brand's emotional value.

Usefulness of each strategic resource for different industries

The findings indicate that all companies, regardless of industry type, seek to develop their tangible and intangible resources. Moreover, the degree of resource utilisation between sectors was balanced.

This study found that the type of service provided, and the unique characteristics of each SME influenced their strategies for strengthening their brands. For example, while customer service is a core value of Company H, the company also possesses several tangible resources, such as its corporate logo, corporate colours and a litany of employees that can be leveraged to strengthen their customers' recall of their brand. Similarly, Company B as a service-based company, often emphasises its commitment to provide the best quality customer service:

"...for 41 years, the only goal that we have focused on is to provide good service. The positive impression from the customers helps us to become word-of-mouth among clients." (Company B)

The unique characteristics SMEs also motivate the companies in the service sector to be more creative and detailed in exploiting their assets, such as spreading brand uniqueness through their buildings, company vehicles and uniforms. For example, Company D painted an animated cartoon character on their office building. On the other hand, Company I painted the walls in their office building red and black. Nonetheless, service companies often utilise their employee uniforms to convey brand uniqueness, with the uniform providing free advertising that promotes their unseen brand promises. The exploitation of these tangible resources is essential for customers to remember their brand promise. Furthermore, it is within the nature of the service sector to communicate their brand promise to their customers through to symbolism of staff uniforms. One participant stated:

"I (the company manager) told my employees to wear uniforms to be recognisable and to take action if there is a complaint from the customers... the uniform brings a brand image. People know our brand when we wear uniforms. The uniform carries the brand..." (Company I)

Findings also indicate that employees, corporate culture, corporate communications and social capital are important resources used by service companies as agents with which to build their internal branding and relationships with customers. Although manufacturing companies are also concerned with the development of these resources, they are particularly significant for service companies. For example, the owner of Company B would often meet with current and former customers. Employees were also encouraged to keep in touch with the customers until the finalisation of their projects:

"My boss would always meet our customers to get new projects. Our name is well-known among our competitors in the same industry... We (the employees) will follow the project until it is finished and get feedback from the customer. We will only close the project once all problems have been resolved." (Company B)

The findings also show that the focus on customer relationships is also dependent on the type of industry. For instance, Company C, being part of the retail industry, requires that employees keep in touch with customers, with this being a routine practice within the company:

“Here, one customer is equal to one staff. We always assure our customers benefits in term of lower prices, guarantees that the quality of our fabrics is the best, unbreakable and offer them a variety of designs. As such, we constantly persuade our customers. It has become a routine ...” (Company C)

In conclusion, the characteristics of service companies and SMEs affect their choice of strategic resources for branding. The characteristics of service companies require that they be more creative in exploring the potential of brand resources to spread their brand image and to strengthen brand awareness. Brand-oriented SMEs, on the other hand, tend to explore their internal resources, which allows them to identify and exploit their strategic brand resources. Therefore, despite clear differences in the intensity of resource usage and goals, the resource utilisation for both sectors is balanced.

DISCUSSION

Use of brand strategic resources for branding

In addressing the first objective of this study, to identify strategic brand resources, we found that brand-oriented SMEs develop their brands using their own resources. Although these companies explore all of their potential strategic resources, they do not necessarily exploit all of those internal strategic resources. Furthermore, these companies are largely unaware of the potential for brand innovation and social capital as strategic brand resources.

Tangible resources

Brand uniqueness is often associated with branding activities. Brand price is often used as a differentiation factor; Saraniemi et al. (2010) observed that price is often related to quality. In the Malaysian context, price is represented by the value of the Malaysia ringgit, and is linked with special benefits to the customer, such as product uniqueness, brand personality and customer service, which must be distinct from those offered by other brands. Product differentiation is also a major resource for SMEs. This is consistent with the findings of Huang and Tsai (2013) who found that design, function and quality are important brand resources for solving customer technical problems. Improving their brand name is obviously the main aim for many companies, associating their brand name with their reputation and uniqueness; nonetheless, their approach to developing their brand name is often passive. This finding is consistent with Bridson et al. (2013), who found that SMEs often leverage on the uniqueness of brand names to distinguish themselves in the competitive market. Furthermore, this study found that companies often exploit the strength of their founding entrepreneurs, company managers and employees in the course of developing their brands. On the one hand, while this finding is at odds with the findings of previous research which suggest that the success of an SME is the product of the dominant role of its founding entrepreneur (Fauziah et al., 2012), it corroborates with Gromark and Melin (2011), who found that all staff within a brand-oriented

company play a role in the development of their brand. As a result, human resources at all levels of a company function as brand ambassadors for the community.

Intangible resources

Brand symbolism is another important resource that a company can develop. For example, it is often the personality of the founding entrepreneur that is responsible for the creation of positive perceptions and emotional bonding among employees and customers towards the brand. This would suggest a level of support for Bridson et al. (2013) with respect to the capabilities of human resources to create emotional relationships. Apart from that, another valuable resource for the company is its brand personality, which is created from the strength of product differentiation (Bridson et al., 2013). Brand-orientated companies also embrace a brand culture among their employees. This culture is nurtured through the daily routines of the company and involves the basic roles and responsibilities of employees, as well as the social activities of the company. The adoption of culture as a strategic resource for branding must be practised at every level of the organisation, with all employees practising the same culture.

Two new intangible resources identified in this study include brand innovation and social capital. None of the respondents in this study were aware that innovation was considered a strategic branding resources, despite its contributions in sustaining brand competitiveness. Innovations are continuously carried out to ensure that branding is relevant to the strategic resources, satisfies customer preferences and is sustainable in the market. This is consistent with the findings of Gehlhar, Regmi, Stefanou, and Zoumas (2009) as well as Merrilees and Miller (2008), who found that occasional innovation was necessary to ensure appropriate positioning as a brand leader in the market. With respect to social capital, companies create social capital by building internal trust among the staff that allows them to work in a harmonious environment; this trust is often inculcated by embracing everyone as part of a big family. Internal trust enables the staff to influence the perceptions of customers through the staff's commitment to go the extra mile in customer service to protect the company's reputation. Such quality service is becoming increasingly routine for companies; however, Runyan et al. (2007) suggests that social capital is only used as a resource where companies encounter market problems.

Use of each brand strategic resources across industries

The second objective of this study was to identify branding resources according to industry and sector. This study found that the usage of resources was evenly divided between sector and industries despite differences in the backgrounds of these businesses. Companies were focused on their internal strategic resources to develop their brands rather than sectorial characteristics or type of industry. Sampled companies used both resource categories in the course of branding. Ironically, despite the obvious importance of services to service sector companies, most still perceive tangible resources as integral for their branding strategies. Prominent tangible resources included brand uniqueness and product differentiation.

Service-oriented companies should aspire to be more creative and not focus only on using intangible resources. While intangible resources can certainly build meaningful relationships between companies, brands and customers, their appearance is less pronounced than tangible resources, which are more distinct and recognisable. Likewise, manufacturing companies should not depend solely on tangible resources, but should also make a point of emphasising the use of intangible resources.

Furthermore, the characteristic of service companies requires that they be more flexible in exploring the potential of resources, thus allowing them to reinforce brand awareness and brand image more positively and meaningfully. How creatively service companies explore and exploit this resource is perhaps what makes companies in this sector so unique. The strength

of their tangible resources enables manufacturing companies to be more confident in exploring the market; nevertheless, these companies should refrain from ignoring the importance of intangible resources. Our findings show that the characteristics of brand-oriented companies play a central role in their selection of resources, which is also contingent on their industrial sector. This finding is consistent with the findings of Horan et al. (2011). Brand-oriented SMEs develop their brands based on their capabilities and tend to explore whatever strategic resources they can use for branding, with these resources being somewhat reflecting their character, as well as the relative strengths and weaknesses of the company.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, several key conclusions can be surmised. In terms of resource use, SMEs do in fact possess the resources necessary for branding, with all the listed resources owned by the sampled companies having been developed internally. Therefore, efficient resource management is important for SMEs to ensure they develop their brand continuously based on their capabilities and the capacity of their resources. Furthermore, SMEs should not rely excessively on government support schemes or subsidies because the very nature of these guarantees that the level of support for branding activities will be episodic at best and may not reflect continuously changing market trends. As such, there is a need to develop a brand continuously and from within. To this end, SMEs need to manage their resources more efficiently and with flexibility.

Our findings show that the use of resources between industries is well-balanced. Service companies in this sample exploit both tangible and intangible resources, as do the manufacturing companies. Despite the services sector being synonymous with employees, culture, internal communications and social capital, the findings show that they also exploit other resources, such as brand uniqueness, product differentiation, brand symbolism and innovation. Similarly, the manufacturing companies in this sample were concerned about their customer relationships despite producing visible products. This study also found that the types of industry was an important determinant of the intensity of customer engagement.

For many SMEs, the lack of financial resource in their early stages deters them from focusing on branding. However, as the company continues to evolve and its financial resources become more predictable, the company's focus shifts toward strategic branding. Interestingly, many of the SMEs were able to develop strategies that rely on resources that are already available internally. Focusing on these internal strategic resources can help companies to reduce their dependency on their financial resources for branding purposes.

IMPLICATIONS

This study fills an obvious gap in the research literature in terms of the conceptualisation and operationalization of strategic brand resources in the context of SME branding across industries. The designation of strategic brand resources, particularly for SMEs branding, has received little in the way of scholarly attention. This study also has significant implications in terms of policy contributions to SMEs. First, SMEs should focus on management training and the development of strategic internal resources. Second, SMEs should be made aware of the list of diversified strategic resource across industries, thus helping them to better analyse and explore their existing potential resources. Third, emphasis should be placed on social capital because it requires nurturing from the beginning to bind the commitment of employees towards brands to customers. Future studies should focus on problem-solving regarding SMEs

resources, using a larger sample of successful SMEs as well as survey methods to generalise the conclusions about the use of strategic brand resources for branding. A study of external strategic brand resources would also help to identify resources that can reinforce brand communication processes within the market.

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