

Building Brands in the Food Processing SMEs in Malaysia: A Proposed Exploratory Research

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Abstract— A strong brand can lead to several marketing advantages and increase companies' competitive strength. An ongoing systematic brand-building process is important for creating a strong brand. The type of organisation is one of the key drivers of brand-building and may influence a particular approach on the basis of the organisation's characteristics and context. SME brands are often built in a very different context from large organization. The process of building a successful brand in an entrepreneurial venture is interesting to investigate as it presents a different situation to brand building in a corporate space. Thus, this research responds to the need for an increased understanding of brand building in SMEs. It seeks to assess the nature and scope of brand building process within an SME context. This will be done through a case study design of the food processing SMEs in Malaysia. The research design adopts and adapts Centeno et al(2013) "Five phase of SME brand building model" that will help to direct the fieldwork, data analysis and findings. A series of semi-structured interviews will be conducted among owner / managers from the food processing SMEs to get a better understanding on the process of brand building within the entrepreneurial establishments..

Index Terms—Brand building, food processing SMEs. Malaysia SMEs

I. INTRODUCTION

De Silva & Takeda, [1] and Muhamad, Abdul, Mohd and Hassan[2] commented that the global food industry is currently facing a period of rapid change driven by globalization, trade liberalization, development of genetic, processing and information technology, intellectual property rights, health and food safety concerns, rising production costs, technological developments, changes in demand and competition and the situation is no exception to the Malaysian scenario. The F&B SMEs businesses have found it difficult to adapt to the rapid market changes and may be unable to compete with larger organizations [3]. As identified by Avermaete et al.[4] in their study, when there is demand in the

F&B industry, there is also an increase in the competition pushing the companies to become more efficient in management, marketing and innovation in order to meet the needs and wants of consumers.

Today manufacturing producers also face the increased challenge on how to differentiate their offerings from competitors as the offerings are becoming increasingly similar with lines between them becoming blurred and non-differentiable [5]. Differentiated products are less susceptible to imitation and provide evidence that the firm possesses unique capabilities or resources necessary for sustaining an advantage [6]. Branding is a differentiating factor that can attract consumer buying decisions so that the product is perceived and awarded premium status and price in the consumers' minds. Brands facilitate consumer acceptance and also pave the market path for innovations [7].

Malaysia's SMEs have to realize that brands are now the key drivers of growth and not an advertising and promotional campaign to meet their annual marketing goals. Nordin [8], recognized that branding is relevant for the survival and growth of all companies, big or small and is even more important and highly relevant to the SMEs [8, 9]). SMEs need to strengthen the branding to better position themselves to penetrate new market opportunities.

Previous researchers [9;10] acknowledged that branding create competitive advantage and is an important competitive tool [11-12] available to SMEs. In fact, brand differentiation is becoming an important tactic for combating competition in the hostile marketplace [13-15] an intangible resource in SMEs that stimulate demand [10]. Researchers [16, 11 17] had collectively agreed that an ongoing systematic brand-building process is important for creating a strong brand.

The importance of branding in SMEs literature has been extensively demonstrated by the early empirical studies (such as, Wong and Merrilees[10], Abimbola and Kocak,13] and Krake[18]and the latest research such as Muhonen, Hirvonen and Laukkanen [19]Odoom, Narteh and Boateng [20]and Rakhi & Shakur [21]. The reviewed studies provide relevant contributions in understanding the context of new and small ventures' branding; however the specific aspect of branding development strategy (from the creation to the brand building mix and brand management) has not yet been deeply investigated. Hence, it is imperative for SMEs to consider the brand building and brand management where the strong brands influence the consumer's thoughts, acts as a competitive tool against competitors and enhances the positive gains in their financial performance.

Consequently the aim pursued in this paper is to focus on this aspect, by analyzing the SMEs in the food processing

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industry in the country through a qualitative exploratory study, and in particular, focusing on their branding building process and branding management activities; to benchmark the brand building methods used by the entrepreneurial ventures against the five phase of SME brand building model by Centano et al (2013)[27] and to highlight the additional and/or different methods used by the food processing SMEs that will be discovered through the research process.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. An overview of Malaysia's Food Processing SMEs

According to Omar, Arokiasamy & Ismail[22], the definition for small medium enterprise (SMEs) in Malaysia are solely based on a fixed quantitative. As stipulated by the National SME Development Council, effective from 1 January 2014, definitions of SMEs in each of the respective sectors are based on the annual sales turnover or number of full-time employees. For the manufacturing sector, SMEs is defined as an establishment with sales turnover not exceeding RM50 million or full time employees not exceeding 200 workers whilst for services and other sectors, SME is an establishment with sales turnover not exceeding RM20million or full-time employees not exceeding 75 workers. An establishment must meet the requirement of either one of the two specified qualifying criteria, whichever is lower, to be considered as an SME(www.smecorp.gov.my) [23]

The Malaysia Economic Census Survey 2016, found that, 98.5 percent of the total business establishments in Malaysia are SMEs which are concentrated in three major industries namely the services, manufacturing, and constructions [24]. The SMEs in Malaysia is playing a significant contribution in the economy of Malaysia whereby in 2017, Malaysia SMEs GDP growth recorded a strong growth of 7.2 percent and the SMEs GDP contribution rose to 37.1 percent [25]). At the moment, local SMEs in Malaysia are focused on low to medium value-added activities of the value chain in the National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs). It was further reported that the manufacturing sector value added of SMEs rose to 6.8 per cent in 2017 (2016: 4.8%) led by food, beverages and tobacco subsector which registered a double-digit growth of 11.0 per cent from 2.9% in 2016 [25]. The food-processing sector account for about 10% of Malaysia's manufacturing output. Processed food contributed about RM21.1 billion and are exported to more than 200 countries in 2017.

The. Malaysia SMEs food and beverage (F&B) industry is one of the important sub-industries in the development of the manufacturing sector in Malaysia and has been identified as one of twelve prioritized industries in the Third Industrial Master Plan 3 (IMP3)[26]. Food processing industries especially ,are among the main contributors to the national export which was RM21.1 billion in 2017 .The F&B industry in Malaysia is predominantly Malaysian-owned and dominated by small and medium enterprises (SMEs) representing more than 80 per cent of the total number of establishments in the processed food industry which encompasses sectors such as cocoa and chocolate products, fishery products, cereals and cereal products, processed fruits and vegetables, confectionery, food ingredients, herbs and

spices, beverages, animal feed, and others (Malaysia Industrial Development Authority[27]. Due to changing life style pattern and purchasing power in Malaysian consumers, the demand for packaged or processed food products is growing for convenience food and health food (Nor Ghani , Abul Bashar, Jamaliah & Syed Shah Alam [28]) thus, representing a significant opportunity for long term growth.

B. Malaysian Government Policy on SMEs Branding

The Malaysian Government has been concerned to create and develop quality, resilient, and successful entrepreneurs which are competitive in all the potential growth sectors of the economy. The importance of branding is evident with the Third Industrial Master Plan(IMP3-2006-2020)) that incorporates strategies for branding Malaysia's products and services [26]. In line with the new economic model, Malaysia aims to have SMEs contribute 41percent in the county's GDP by year 2020 [29]. Thus, SME Masterplan (2012-2020)[30] was introduced to give more clear direction to SME through six high impact programmes. One of the programmes is to increase the market access by focusing more on marketing and branding. Malaysian companies need to be aware of best practices in competitive brand building and be able to integrate branding into their business strategies and practices.

Shortcomings for Malaysia companies in implementing the branding activities as identified by Ministry of International Trade and Industry(MITI) in the IMP3 amongst others are : branding is practised only in the initial launch phase of product and service and not sustained throughout the product life cycle or service development; few companies have strategic brand blueprints to drive and integrate enterprise-wide brand-building activities at corporate or executive planning level; lack of brand competencies at strategic levels of organization, which leads to ineffective brand strategies and outcomes; and insufficient investments in the drivers of a brand along its value chains. Branding is also being practised more as a marketing and functional activity rather than a long term investment along the value chain process. One of the misperceptions towards the reluctance of branding is the lack of information on brand investment models wherein, brand equity or brand value creation is not well understood and pursued by the majority of Malaysian companies (IMP3)[26].

C. Branding in SMEs

Studies have found that organizations that direct their managerial actions and practices toward the development, acquisition and leveraging of branded products and services will be better placed to see positive gains in performance [31-32]. Studies also established that brand-oriented SMEs realize better brand performance [10, 33-34]. Brand orientation is driven by competition pace, customer needs, and in market characteristics [33,35] as well as industry factors [33-36]. SMEs with strong branding efforts have benefited both financially and non-financially [9,10,37]. Branding is a new concept for owners-managers in SMEs [38] but a systematic literature review study by Ahonen[39] revealed that branding does exist among SMEs but is a rarely

studied phenomenon. SMEs does employ branding in their operations [40-42 ,10,18] but due to the nature of their sizes and environment, the approach are less prominent [18 , 43, 9]. According to Baldinger,Blair and Echambadi[44], SME brands are more volatile in losing out on market share as compared to big brands. Besides being faced by the common lack of resources which disadvantage the SMEs, brand related issues are another one of the hindrances to SMEs growth [45] Centeno et al. 2013).

SME branding is a process that needs to be fast, flexible and focused on the key issue of the translation of the owner vision [38]. Although SMEs admit that having strong brand is important for their growth [10,42,46], SMEs rarely include brand management in their day-to-day activities [18]. SMEs place their focus on their products and towards developing a marketing plan that places high turnover as an essential factor rather than the long-term goal of creating brand recognition. Hirvonen et al. [33] pointed out that SMEs still hold negative attitude towards branding and consider putting financial efforts only in the future. Withdrawal from investment in branding are due to the SMEs managers' mentality[47]. Studies suggested that the owner / manager may play a strong role in brand management [48 ; 43] whereby most of SMEs owners have a survival mindset [41] and are simply short-term oriented [47] emphasizing on sales over brand building [18]. Another barrier is related to resource limitations[40;46;49-51]which include shortage of budget, time, knowledge and expertise [46]. However, Berthon et al.[41] contended that SMEs can creatively manage and leverage the full potential of their brands even with constrained budgets and SMEs can still go for branding with limited resources [42; 52]

D. Definition of Brand

Aaker [53], defined a brand as “a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors”. Brand is also a cluster of functional and emotional values that enables organizations to make a promise about a unique and welcomed experience[54] and a brand name is any word, device (design, sound, shape or color), or combination of these used to distinguish a seller's good and services[55].

Branding represents one of the core marketing practices that constitute patent, trademark, existing reputable name, symbols, and logos names to support the neither singular products nor businesses [56 -57].

Branding needs to extend beyond the basic product and provide distinctive identity to the products [58]. Companies try to differentiate their product with points of parity and points of differences as a tool to capture the attention of consumers' [59]. A strong brand comprises of positive, consistent customer perceptions about a product that differentiate it from competitive offerings [60] it acts as a guarantee of quality, increasing customers' confidence in their expectations being met [61] and reduces the buyer's decision making uncertainty.

Brands have become an unseparated part of a firm's value [60] ,an important strategic asset [62-63] one of the critical

success factors for companies [64] that drives every strategic and investment decision [65] .

E. Brand Building Process

Building strong brands has become an important issue for many organizations since it yields a number of marketing advantages and increases companies' competitive strength and advantage [66, 52]. Doyle [67] described brand building as the only way to build a stable, long-term demand at profitable margins. Through adding values that will attract customers, firms are able to provide a firm base for expansion and product development and to protect themselves against the strength of intermediaries and competitors.

As summarized by Pickton [68], brand building today must encompass a more complex set of activities and target a broader audience than in the past. He further explained that “the brand building process is a business process — one that is planned, strategically-focused and integrated throughout the organization. It establishes the direction, leadership, clarity of purpose, inspiration and energy for a company's most important asset, its brand. Process measures are more about the resources used in brand building: the budgets spent; the expertise used; the selection and integration of audiences targeted; the management and integration of staff, both internal and external agencies, involved in branding; the interweaving of individual campaigns and creative treatments used for each element of the promotional mix and used over time; the use and management of databases pertinent to the brand; the geographical integration of the brand; the interplay between corporate branding and the individual brand; and so on.”

Brand building requires determining what an organization is trying to convey and to whom. One key to successful brand-building is to understand how to develop a brand identity – to know what the brand stands for and to effectively express that identity [69]. Lassen et al [40] purported that the process of building brands begins with the company identifying the essence of its brand, and culminates with targeted market communication.

F. Brand Building Model

Several authors have posited models or theories which highlight the elements of a successful brand building process. Examples include:

- 1) Aaker's [69] brand identity planning model which posits brand success using a process whereby customers, competitors and self are strategically analysed, and from this the brand's identity developed and managed through the brand position.
- 2) Keller [70] identified the strategic brand management process involving four main steps : identifying and establishing brand positioning, planning and implementing brand marketing programs, measuring and interpreting brand performance and growing and sustaining brand equity.
- 3) de Chernatony [11] outlined the process of building and sustaining brands. The eight stage process commences with the brand vision stage, through organization culture,brand objectives,audit brandsphere, the brand

essence, internal implementation, brand resourcing and ends with the evaluation stage

- 4) Davis's [71] postulated a four phase brand asset management model which shows brand success from adopting both an internal and external orientation, and moves through the phases of developing brand vision, brand picture, brand asset management strategy and supporting culture.
- 5) Gregory and Sellers [72] discussed that brands should be developed over time through a four-step process: intelligence gathering; strategy; communication; and management
- 6) Centeno et al. [45] described that brand-building in SMEs go through five-phases. At the first stage, brands represent the personality of the SME owners; the second and third stages concern the creation of brand differentiation (visual identity); the fourth stage brands transform into corporate brands and the final stage, brand owners continue with developing each one of the dimensions as means to grow their brands.
- 7) Five key activities in building brands consisting of identifying firm values (brand identity); planning and handling the service process; deploying corporate communications, engaging in networking, and stakeholders' activation and retaining were discussed by Sandback et al.[73]

Generally, the elements in the brand building processes in each theories and models are similar with each authors. The sequence of the steps might vary between the authors on which would start first or which are irrelevant. Aaker & Joachimsthaler [74] argued that, all models have two starting points: it must be clear which person or group is responsible for the brand and the brand strategy, and a process template must exist. If the brand building process is effectively managed, it should convey the essence, character and purpose of the company and the products. The branding process affects all forms of communications, from advertising to public relations to product packaging. It is the intentional declaration of who the company is, what does it believe and why customers should put their faith in the organization's products. The brand distinguishes the organization from its competitors and most importantly, branding is the promise that the company keeps to their customers, prospects, business partners, stockholders and employees. Investing in brand is investing in the company's future

Based on the review of previous researches, the brand-building process could be described as a number of sequential stages that would consist of four main phase. It is a continuous cycle of research, planning, implementation, and control. Although various process models can work, observations of effective programs suggested these guidelines: First, the process should include an analysis of customers, competitors, and the brand. Second, the process identifies the attributes, association and positioning of the brand. Third, the process must include programs to communicate the brand's identity (what the brand should stand for) to employees and company partners. Fourth, the process must include brand equity measurement and goals. Although previous researchers describing the brand-building

process are not consistent in their terminology or the exact number of stages involved, all these steps are commonly included. In practice, however, there is overlap and backtracking as it is difficult to separate the strategy stages from execution stages.

G. Branding Themes

Role of SMEs owner

In SME brand building process brand owner/manager play a pivotal role [9; 52; 46; 75; 18]. As, brand activities are subjectively affected by brand owner/manager personality (beliefs and values) and goals [52;46; 19] As proposed by Kennedy and Wright [76], preceding to any branding process, brand owners/managers should know about branding area, conduct a full investigation (market and self-analysis), and improve their management skills. The ability to synchronize branding efforts with their resources will benefit firm better and consequently realize higher brand performance [20]. Hodge et al. [77] proposed that SMEs owners/managers should engage in planning brands and investing in branding strategically whilst improving brand performance through evaluating the branding impact both internally and externally [76].

Brand Identity and Brand Differentiation

Brand identity is the central step of the brand building process and is defined as how the firm wants the brand to be perceived [16]. Brand identity is concerned with how managers and employees make a brand unique[78].

Aaker[16] posited that the concept of a brand - the brand as a product, an organization, a person and a symbol must be considered in developing the brand identity whereby it should have depth and richness and is not a positioning statement. 'de Chernatony[11] explained that "Brand identity refers to the characteristics or associations of the brand that strategists in an organization want to implant in the minds of their internal and external constituencies. The brand identity structure consists of a core identity and an extended identity and a brand essence. The core identity creates the focus both for customers and the organization. The extended identity includes all of the brand identity elements not included in the core. The brand is interrelated with the product's (or company's) 'essence' and cannot be separated from it ". According to Aaker & Joachimsthaler [78] the brand identity should help establish a relationship between the brand and the customer by generating a value proposition potentially involving functional, emotional and self expressive benefits or by providing credibility. The concept of brand identity offers the opportunity to develop the brand's positioning better and encourages a strategic approach to brand management and a carefully managed identity system also acts as a protective barrier against competitors[11].

Furthermore, firms should identify their brand identity, encompassing brand values, vision, positioning [19] and brand culture, personality, and attributes comprising of name, logo, slogan, & web domain [76] which should remain unchanged (40;73;76). Brand identity is an actual source of

competitive advantage which is driven by brand orientation [19; 33]. Apart from choosing brand identity, other branding activities that should be done consists of developing marketing program [40], choosing the right means of communications [77], and keeping consistent and continuous communication [40].

Brand Positioning and Communication

According to Godeshwar[80], the brand positioning helps in prioritizing the focus of the brand identity and resultant communication themes which enable the company to set forth the communication objectives such as the type of message, brand differentiation to be achieved, and themes that appeal to the target customers .Positioning is related with creating the perception of a brand in the customer’s mind and of achieving differentiation that it stands apart from competitors’ brands/offerings and that it meets the consumer’s needs/expectations”. Parts of brand identity are emphasised and chosen for active communication, through the brand position statement(s).

The brand position statement expresses how the brand should be seen by external stakeholders and / or by employees. Aaker[16] purported that the brand position statement should demonstrate an advantage over competitor brands and represent current communication objectives. Communications must involves all points of contacts between the brand and the audience including product design , new products and distribution strategy.

Branding should also be implemented internally through communication of core values and brand identity to all staff members [76]. It was also suggested by Odoom [20] that SMEs owners/managers go beyond traditional marketing and instead, focus towards developing mix-marketing and communication approaches which are in line with the SME brand.

Brand Evaluation

Tracking or brand evaluation phase. This involves the measurement part of the outcomes of the initial phases. Companies need to continuously track their brands against the effect of competition, especially in the face of aggressive competition [16; 11; 70-71]. They should track their the progress as to how their brands are doing in the marketplace, and what impact certain market interventions will have on the brand equity[80; 11; 16]. Progress can be monitored in terms of the level of purchasing, consumption, brand recognition, brand recall, advertising awareness, etc.

III. PROPOSED RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of this research, the “Five Phase SMEs Brand Building Framework” by Centano et al[45] will be adopted and adapted to the food processing SMEs in Malaysia. This is considering the recommendation by Centano et al.[45] for future research on testing the framework to other SMEs sector.

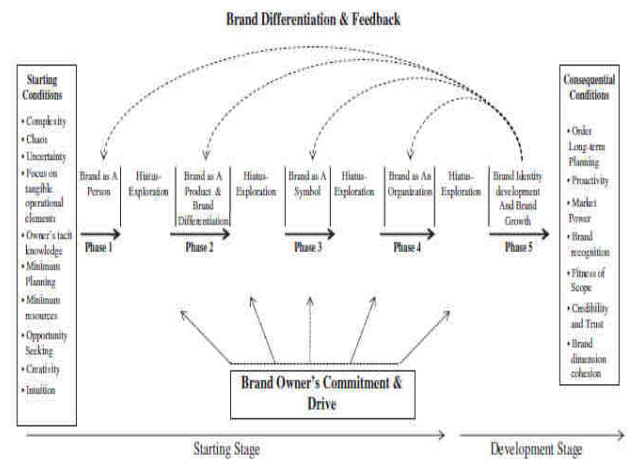
The framework described that the phenomenon of brand-building is composed of two stages, a starting and a development stage . The starting stage included four phases in which each one of the brand identity dimensions is created and the development stage composed of one phase of brand

identity development. During these two stages, brand owner / managers (BOMs) learn new sets of competencies.

In the starting stage, the ‘ brand as a person ’, the ‘brand as a product’, the ‘brand as a symbol’ and the ‘brand as an organization’ dimensions were created..

In the second stage which is during the fifth phase, brand owners continued developing each one of the dimensions as means to grow their brands and in due course reach a set of consequential conditions of the process.

The five phase of SMEs brand building model [45] is depicted by figure 1 :



Source : The five phase of SME brand building model,(Centano et al ,2013)

IV. PROPOSED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology to be utilized for this study is through qualitative approach focusing on case studies with food processing SMEs in Kelantan,Malaysia.. An interpretive research approach focused on using case studies is to maximise this exploration of the contextual richness and complexities of branding within the food processing SMEs [81]. In this context a range of qualitative research techniques, such as interviews, direct observation, documentation and archival material enabled interpretivist research to be conducted in a natural setting. The research approach adopted ensured that the findings were context specific, and considered multiple realities and perspectives of SMEs.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews with business owners/managers will form the primary data collection method. These are designed to explore the owner/manager’s background, the history of the business, its branding activity and to understand their perception of context specific implementation of branding in their organization.

V. CONCLUSION

The food industry is pivotal in every country especially their contribution on global growth even during economic slowdown. In Malaysia, food industries are among the main contributors to the national export which was RM21.1 billion billion in 2017 [25]. Modernisation and urbanisation have

significantly impacted consumers' lifestyles and preferences. Sophisticated consumers are increasingly demanding convenience and functional products in terms of packaging, application and delivery format. The local food processing SMEs in this industry are facing stiff and intense competition in the local and global market as consumer behavior changes and with the proliferation of foreign products to the market differentiation is a must for survival. Thus, brands is important in the formulation of company strategies as a source for sustainable competitive advantage as branding yields a number of marketing advantages that increases the companies' competitive strength.

There is a dearth in research in SME branding as compared to the importance and contribution of SMEs in the global business arena. However, SMEs does employ branding in their operations [40; 41,10;18;42;39] but due to the nature of their sizes and environment, the approach are less prominent [9 -11; 43]. Past literature focusing on brand building research has mostly been conceptual and/or that there is a lack of empirical testing Also most of the studies regarding brand building process have been carried out in foreign context and have not been conducted in Malaysian context especially in this industry. This study aims to fill this gap by finding the brand building process of the food processing SMEs in Malaysia through benchmarking the five phase of SME brand building framework [45], thus, providing an insight into the mindset of the Malaysian SMEs and the cultural differences that may exist therein in their approach to brand building.

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