CONSUMERS' EVALUATION OF SMEs BRAND EQUITY: THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AS A MEDIATOR

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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of brand equity has often been described as the new research direction, particularly in small and medium enterprises. Accordingly, this study which was conducted in Malaysia investigated the sources of brand equity for Malaysian SMEs brand such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality with relationship quality as the mediator. Although past researches had investigated the effect of these sources of brand equity, only a few researchers discovered the effect of relationship quality as a mediator between the sources of brand equity and brand equity in the context of SMEs. In this study, the model was developed based on the theory of brand equity and the social exchange theory. The study employed systematic sampling where 538 questionnaires were distributed to the consumers of SMEs food products in Malaysia. The data gathered was analysed using the Structural Equation Model- Partial Least Square (SEM-PLS). The results indicated that packaging, word of mouth and brand personality have significant and positive effects on brand equity. It also showed that relationship quality has a direct relationship with brand equity. Moreover, relationship quality mediates the relationship between the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality, and brand equity. Consequently, the findings of this study have further strengthened the theory on brand equity and the social exchange theory and related literature as well. This study also put forth recommendations for SMEs food industries regarding the best approaches to build brand equity using the strategic sources of brand equity to ensure long-term relationships with customers in the light of the strong competitive advantage. For future research, it would be interesting to incorporate other strategic sources which may contribute to strengthen the theory besides providing the management the know-how for better-informed decisions.

Keywords: brand equity, packaging, word of mouth, brand personality, brand relationship quality, small and medium enterprises (SMEs)

ABSTRAK

Penilaian ekuiti jenama sering digambarkan sebagai hala tuju penyelidikan yang baharu terutamanya untuk perusahaan kecil dan sederhana (PKS). Sehubungan itu, kajian ini dijalankan di Malaysia yang bertujuan untuk mengkaji sumber-sumber ekuiti jenama bagi jenama keluaran PKS Malaysia seperti pembungkusan, komunikasi lisan dan personaliti jenama dengan kualiti hubungan sebagai faktor pengantara. Walaupun penyelidik terdahulu telah mengkaji kesan sumber-sumber ini ke atas ekuiti jenama, namun hanya beberapa orang pengkaji sahaja yang telah mendapati bahawa kesan kualiti hubungan sebagai pengantara antara sumber ekuiti jenama dan ekuiti jenama dalam konteks industri makanan PKS. Dalam kajian ini, model yang dibangunkan adalah berdasarkan Teori Ekuiti Jenama dan Teori Pertukaran Sosial. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah pensampelan sistematik yang mana sebanyak 538 borang soal selidik telah diedarkan kepada pengguna produk jenama PKS di Malaysia. Data yang diperolehi dianalisis dengan menggunakan *"Structural Equation Model- Partial Least Square (SEM)"*. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pembungkusan, komunikasi lisan dan personaliti jenama mempunyai kesan positif dan signifikan ke atas ekuiti jenama. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa kualiti hubungan mempunyai kesan hubungan langsung yang positif ke atas ekuiti jenama. Selain itu, kualiti hubungan didapati menjadi pengantara bagi hubungan antara sumber ekuiti jenama seperti pembungkusan, komunikasi lisan dan personaliti jenama serta ekuiti jenama. Oleh itu, penemuan kajian ini mengukuhkan lagi Teori Ekuiti Jenama, Teori Pertukaran Sosial dan juga kajian literatur yang berkaitan. Kajian ini juga mengemukakan cadangan kepada industri makanan PKS berkenaan dengan pendekatan yang terbaik dalam usaha untuk membangunkan ekuiti jenama dengan menggunakan sumber-sumber ekuiti jenama yang strategik. Ia adalah usaha untuk memastikan hubungan jangka panjang dengan pelanggan berdasarkan kelebihan daya saing yang mampan. Oleh itu, adalah disyorkan untuk kajian pada masa hadapan supaya dapat menggabungkan sumber-sumber strategik yang lain yang boleh mengukuhkan lagi teori ini, di samping membantu pihak pengurusan membuat keputusan yang lebih baik.

Katakunci: Ekuiti jenama, pembungkusan, komunikasi lisan, personaliti jenama dan kualiti hubungan, Perusahaan Kecil dan Sederhana (PKS).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACCCIM   Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce & Industry of Malaysia

AVE   Average Variance Extracted

CBBE   Consumer-based Brand Equity

CMV   Common Method Variance

CR   Composite Reliability

GDP   Gross Domestic Product

MATRADE   Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation

SEM   Structural Equation Model

SMEs   Small and Medium Enterprises

SME Corp   Small and Medium Enterprises Corporation

PLS   Partial Least Square

PUNB   Perbadanan Usahawan Nasional Berhad

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In today's business environment, branding is crucial for companies' survival and competitiveness whether they are large companies or Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and is even more important for the SMEs (Noharuddin, 2009). This is because having a strong brand will considerably enhance a firm's performance (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014; Geuens, Weijters, & Wulf, 2009). Brand can be described as a unique name and/or symbol (such as logo, trademark, or package design) intended to distinguish the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate goods or services from those of competitors (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Brand is successful when it is able to differentiate itself from competitors and creates better customer loyalty (Nedeljković-Pravdić, 2010).

Brand is important not only to consumers but also to companies. For consumers, strong brand will simplify their choice process, promise quality, reduce post purchase risk and motivate repeat purchase intention (Aaker, 1996; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). As for companies, brand with high brand strength will benefit them in terms of consumer preference, purchase intention, greater customer loyalty, larger margins gain, market share, less vulnerability to competitive attacks, consumer price insensitivity, additional brand extension opportunities, more cooperation from trade and other intermediaries and resilience to product-harm crisis (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010; Gill &

Dawra, 2010; Reijonen, Pardanyi, Tuominen, Laukkanen, & Komppula, 2014). All of these benefits become the added value to the brands. A brand with added value can be defined as brand equity (Farquhar, 1989).

From the perspective of branding, the success of brands in the market can be measured through brand performance and brand equity. Brand equity is seen to have a positive effect on business operations (Reijonen et al., 2014) and thus, lead Horan, O'Dwyer and Tiernan (2011) to state that brand equity is classified as a core concept in branding. Brand with high brand strength and stronger equity enjoy more favourable, strong and unique associations and have a well-established familiarity in the marketplace (Gammoh, Voss, & Skiver, 2011; Keller, 1998). As a result, recent marketing studies attempt to conceptualise, measure and manage brand equity that drives brand market performance and helps companies in strategic decision making (Tolba & Hassan, 2009). Practically, certain scholars (Keller, 1993; Tolba & Hassan, 2009) posited that companies are driven to investigate brand equity for two purposes. Firstly, for financial reporting purpose by estimating more precisely the value of brand. Secondly, for strategy formulation to improve marketing productivity. Further, Keller (1993) claimed that assessing the brand in the mind of consumers is essential especially for brand market performance.

In this study, brand equity is conceptualised based on consumer perceptions and referred to as consumer-based brand equity. As stated by Keller (1993), the source of brand equity comes from customers perception, therefore it is deemed critical to assess brand equity at the customer level. Furthermore, researchers (Aaker, 1996; Davcik, 2013; Hanaysha, 2015; Zamri & Rahmat, 2011) noted that consumer based brand equity is a

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valuable tool in brand positioning, evaluating the marketing strategy and firm's performance, improving and formulating branding strategies.

Products are said to have achieved high brand equity when consumers react positively to any marketing efforts where the brand is mentioned (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Marketing effort means any marketing action that has a potential effect in establishing and creating a strong brand equity in the consumer's mind (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015a; Tong & Hawley, 2009a; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). In branding literature, marketing efforts are predictors or sources of brand equity and it is deemed critical as it may increase or decrease brand equity (Yoo et al., 2000). Besides, Davcik (2013) discovered that business drivers also can be considered as the sources to brand equity. Business drivers can be defined as the process, such as people, market forces and knowledge that affect a change or give impetus to the formation of brand equity phenomenon (Davcik, 2013). In sum, either marketing efforts or business drivers, both play significant roles in influencing the formation of brand equity. In relation to that, this study was conducted to propose and validate several important sources or drivers that influence the formation of brand equity, and elucidate the manner of their influence, in order to develop the more effective business strategies for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are a very important business entity in many countries. In order to enhance SMEs performance, many researchers (Abimbola & Kocak, 2007; Mitchell, Hutchinson, & Quinn, 2013) proposed SMEs to focus on brand management practices as a strategy as it enables them to compete in highly competitive market. Moreover, researchers (Ankomah Opoku, Abratt, Bendixen, & Pitt, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2013; Ojasalo, Nätti, & Olkkonen, 2008) have stated that branding plays

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a pivotal role in small and medium business development particularly in considering SME marketing activity. As widely accepted that SMEs have limited resources and budget, and the brand management is expensive. However, Abimbola (2001) stated that these constraints can overcome if SMEs have a clear understanding of the importance of branding and thus lead them to come out with a comprehensive plan on branding strategy.

As such, this study aims to investigate branding strategy for SMEs brand by proposing the strategic sources of brand equity which is one of the branding strategies. The next section provides an introduction to Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

1.2 Introduction to the Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

This section is divided into two parts, firstly the background of Malaysian small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and secondly brand scenario faced by SMEs.

1.2.1 Background of Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

In most countries, SMEs contribute significantly to the economic development, political stability, and social uplifting (Khalique, Abdul, Shaari, & Ageel, 2011; Mohd Irwan, Kamarul Mizal, Juliana, & Noor Fazlinda, 2014). Malaysia is no exception. Nearly all of the businesses established in Malaysia are small and medium enterprises, thus SMEs are acknowledged as the backbone of economy as they are an important generator of employment and growth (Azmi & Salniza, 2012; Jasra, Khan, Hunjra, Rehman, & Azam, 2011; Khalique et al., 2011). In Malaysia, SMEs can be classified into three categories which are micro, small and medium companies (SME Corp., 2013).

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Generally, the scope and importance of SMEs' operation differ based on industries and countries. In Malaysia, SMEs are classified into several sectors such as manufacturing, services, agriculture, construction and mining & quarrying. The total number of business establishments under SMEs in Malaysia by 2015 is 97.3 percent or 645,136 out of 662,939 of total business establishments (SMEs Corp, 2016). Malaysian SMEs, particularly manufacturing is very prominent because of their significant contribution to the economic development (Khalique et al., 2011). This is because Malaysian SMEs also contribute significantly to Malaysian exports (Abidin, Effendi, Ibrahim, & Idris, 2014). Core activities of Malaysian SMEs operating in the manufacturing sectors are processing and production of raw materials for apparel, food, beverage, furniture, wood product, rubber, petroleum and the assembling and manufacturing of electrical and electronic appliances (Khalique et al., 2011; SME Corp., 2011). SMEs in the manufacturing of food products contribute the highest to gross output at RM69.5 billion (35.9 percent) and value added at RM8.3 billion (21.9 percent) (Department of Statistics, 2012; MITI, 2014).

SMEs are not only considered as an enabler of growth by being a supporter to larger firms but also as a driver of economic growth in achieving high income nation (National SME Development Council, 2012). Hence, the contribution of SMEs to economic growth is crucial. SMEs can create employment, form new industries, develop new and innovative products and form an integral part of value chain in the production network (Normah, 2006). For 2015, SMEs contribute 36.3 percent to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (SMEs Corp, 2016). SMEs also employ a workforce of over 6.6 million or 65.5 percent of total private sector employment in Malaysia. Two-thirds

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of workers are in the service sector (SMEs Corp, 2016). In terms of contribution to the economy, the gross output value and value added generated by SMEs in 2010 were RM507.1 billion and RM213.9 billion respectively (Department of Statistics, 2012). In terms of gross output, the contribution by medium sized SMEs is the highest, at RM214.7 billion or 42.3 percent. SMEs in the manufacturing sector recorded the highest proportion which is 60.9 percent or RM87.7 billion (Department of Statistics, 2012)

There is no doubt that Malaysian SMEs play a significant role in economic performance. As a result, the government is committed to strengthen the performance and accelerate the growth of SMEs. One of the steps taken was to launch SMEs Master plan 2012-2020 which is the first long-term plan for SMEs development in Malaysia. In addition to transforming and enhancing the strength of SMEs to a higher level, the SMEs Master plan 2012-2020's other objective is to set direction for SMEs by targeting an increase in the SMEs' GDP contribution from 32.2 percent in 2010 to 41 percent by 2020 (SME Corp., 2015; SMEs Corp, 2016). One of the focus areas is market access via promoting SMEs' brand recognition and awareness (National SME Development Council, 2012). As such, Small and Medium Enterprises Corporation (SME Corp), Malaysian External Trade Development (MATRADE), Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumers Affairs (KPDNKK) are among the ministries committed to facilitate such endeavors.

1.2.2 Malaysian SMEs Brand Scenario

In terms of brand scenario in Malaysian SMEs, the government is committed to spur branding efforts through SMEs Master plan 2012-2020. This can be seen through the

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introduction of the Putra Brand Awards and the Brand Laureate Awards, which are known as the Grammy Awards for Branding in Malaysia. The Putra Brand Awards was introduced by the Association of Accredited Advertising Agents Malaysia (4As) in 2010, and is the only brand awards in the country endorsed by the Malaysian External Trade Development (MATRADE) and supported by Branding Association of Malaysia, the Malaysian Advertisers Association and the Media Specialists Association (Association of Accredited Advertising Agents, 2017). The Putra Brand Awards aims to give recognition to local brands and selected public listed companies, and SMEs. The Brand Laureate Awards was launched by the Asian Pacific Brands Foundation (APBF) which attempts to promote branding in Asia-Pacific countries and Malaysia. Other than that, the aim is also to identify and develop Malaysian brands to become successful global brands in the market.

On the other hand, SME Corp and SIRIM QAS International Sdn. Bhd. collaborated in launching National Mark of Malaysian Brand (NMMB) that portrays as a mark of recognition for Malaysian products and services which have managed to achieve highest quality, excellence and distinction (MITI, 2014). Through this collaboration, they have also established the Branding and Packaging Mobile Gallery with the objective to reach out to rural SMEs in order to build and increase awareness on the importance of branding and packaging and to provide training across the country (MITI, 2014). These two strategic initiatives which originated from the SME-Brand Development Programme are aimed at promoting greater market access to SMEs. This programme is also a part of the government's objective in changing Malaysians perception towards SMEs products which have suffered the perception of being not up to expectation as the dominant

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international brands in terms of quality, reliability, and packaging standards (SME Corp., 2014).

Meanwhile, to develop branding effort and encourage SMEs to go global, MATRADE has introduced two types of grants under the Financial Assistance Scheme namely the Market Development Grant (MDG) and Brand Promotion Grant (BPG). According to MATRADE (2010), the objective of introducing MDG is to help and encourage SMEs to expand their business into international markets, while BPG was introduced with the intention of developing and promoting Malaysian companies' brand names in the international market.

Even though government introduced various incentives in order to increase the understanding and the awareness of the importance of branding among SMEs, the number of SMEs which participate and implement brand management in their companies is still low. It is found that after seven years of The Putra Brand Award had been introduced, surprisingly none of SMEs have won any awards (see Table 1.1). As for the The Brand Laureate Awards, a number of 35 SMEs food brands have won the Best Brand Product Branding Awards since it was introduced in year 2008 (see Appendix A). The same goes to National Mark of Malaysian Brand. As at 2016, out of 645, 136, only 130 companies have been awarded with the National Mark of Malaysian Brand after its introduction in 2010 (SME Corp., 2017). There are several reasons that could have contributed to this scenario. The first is, the requirements and the evaluation process that SMEs undergo is quite tough to fulfill and unaffordable because some of SMEs operates their business under limited budget and capital. The second is, misconception of branding. According to Fauziah, Rosmini, Siti Zaleha and Muslim

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(2012), misconception of branding will lead to inability to realize the value of branding or the benefits of branding for long term competitiveness and sustainable customer engagement. Besides, it also contributes to the failure to grow brand through company resources for company performance and value.

Therefore, many of SME owners perceive the process of brand building purely as a cost and do not see the importance of branding as a valuable asset which needs to be invested in (Baladi, 2011). Hence, many of them are still practicing conventional methods of doing business which is called _survival mentality' (Berthon, Ewing, & Napoli, 2008; Mohd Sani, 2005). At the same time, they still focus strongly on product and price (Asamoah, 2014; Mohd Sani, 2005; Spence & Essoussi, 2010) and pay little attention to intangible aspects such as design, packaging and branding (Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce & Industry of Malaysia [ACCCIM], 2012). In other words, SMEs emphasise more on daily operations and short-term sales simply to keep the business running (Krake, 2005; Ojasalo, Nätti, & Olkkonen, 2008; Wong & Merrilees, 2005). This argument is shown clearly in Economic census 2011 where it is evident that less than 14% of SMEs undertook some form of marketing and promotion activities (Department of Statistics, 2012). Besides, a survey conducted by the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce & Industry of Malaysia (ACCCIM, 2012) revealed that only 9% of SMEs focus on branding with another 8% on design and packaging.

Similarly, SMEs manufacturing specifically in food products also do not pay much focus on branding. Although SMEs manufacturing of food products contribute the highest to Malaysian gross output which is RM69.5billion (35.9%), it is hard to find a local brand with good reputation. This is because food industries in Malaysia are dominated by

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foreign brands such as Nestle and Unilever whereby they dominated more than 50% of the market shares (Euromonitor, 2015). High market share signals high brand equity and trust for global brand (Aaker, 1996; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Besides, SMEs' brand are yet to make any success in creating brand personality for their product because they are confusing their customer in highlighting their core brand personality (Ong, Salniza, & Rushami Zien, 2015b). This situation makes SMEs brands having to struggle to survive in the market (Ong, Salniza, & Rushami Zien, 2015c). And quite remarkably, poorly managed product brands caused many SMEs to fail within a few years of establishment (Horan et al., 2011; Odoom, Narteh, & Boateng, 2017).

Thus, in order to compete favourably in the marketplace and to acquire and hold market share, companies are suggested to create creative branding strategies which will enhance their sustainable competitive advantage by focusing on developing and managing one of the intangible assets which is brand equity (Asamoah, 2014; Berthon et al., 2008). The perception that branding is only for large companies with ample resources needs to be changed (Asamoah, 2014). This is because, by enhancing the level of brand equity, companies are able to obtain high revenue and better performance as they become more competitive in the market (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015b; Jumiati & Norazah, 2015).

Apart from that, competitive brand is imperative to all types of industries including food industry regardless of their size. For food industries, strong brand plays a significant role as this market is characterised by relatively low cost, low margin, high competition level and quick turnover (Mohan & Sequeira, 2012). Thus, their success very much depends on the volume of sales (Mohan & Sequeira, 2012). Furthermore, food products constitute a major part of consumers' budget in many countries including Malaysia

where Malaysian household spend roughly 34% of their income on food and beverage (Rozita & Halimahton, 2014). Hence, there is indeed a justifiable need to investigate appropriate strategies for companies to implement in order to maintain and increase their sales volume as well as market share. Brand is said to play a significant role in affecting sales and market share and this notion has been agreed by many researchers (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Mirzaei, Gray, & Baumann, 2011).

Existing literature shows that branding was first discussed in SMEs context in 2001 by Abimbola (2001). Since then, many branding issues in SMEs covering a diverse range of perspectives such as brand management (Berthon et al., 2008; Krake, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2013; Spence & Essoussi, 2010), corporate branding (Inskip, 2004), demand management (Abimbola, 2001) and leadership branding (Fauziah, Farzana, Rohaizat, & Mohd Naqiuddin, 2014) were dissected. Lately, the significance of understanding consumer based brand equity has been highlighted and has gradually increased (Asamoah, 2014; Baldauf, Cravens, & Binder, 2003; Maznah & Mohd Noor, 2010) as it was found to be significant in increasing companies' competitive advantage (Abimbola, 2001; Asamoah, 2014). However, SMEs branding still remains a relatively under-researched area even though it has been researched since 2001 (Mitchell et al., 2013; Ong et al., 2015b).

Thus, the lack of in-depth research on SMEs branding spurs the intention to conduct a study on investigating the sources of brand equity in SMEs. In principle, SMEs is acknowledged to have faced a constraint in the form of limited resources which hampers company's ability to compete in a crowded market. However, by focusing on building high brand equity as a valuable company's asset, their ability to compete will be

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improved (Hirvonen & Laukkanen, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2013). This is proven by Reijonen, Pardanyi, Tuominen, Laukkanen, and Komppula's (2014) findings, whereby they found that SMEs that put high attention on branding are able to achieve high growth in the market. Therefore, regardless of the challenges faced by SMEs, it is imperative to build a strong brand in the market from customers' viewpoint (Aaker, 1991; Azmi & Salniza, 2012; Yoo et al., 2000). This is because brand equity has a positive effect on company's future profit and enables company to achieve more predictable sales (Yoo & Donthu, 2001) which in turn lead to superior financial performance (Azmi & Salniza, 2012).

Table 1.1: *Putra Brand Awards: Foodstuff Category*

YEAR	GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE
2016	Gardenia	Maggi, Kit Kat	Cadbury
2015	Gardenia	Nestle Breakfast Cereals, Wall's, Massimo	Maggi, Munchy's
2014	Maggi, Gardenia	Cadbury	Wall's Jacob's Biscuit, Mamee
2013	Gardenia, Maggi	Cadbury	Wall's
2012	Gardenia	Mamee, Munchy's, Nestle Breakfast Cereal, Wall's	-
2011	Cadbury, Gardenia	Maggi	Nestle Breakfast Cereal
2010	Cadbury, Gardenia	Maggi, Munchy's	Julie's, Mamee

Sources: Association of Accredited Advertising Agents (2017)

1.3 The Statement of the Problem

With the rising aggressive competition in the international and local markets, the understanding of the importance of brand management practices is vital. Increased pressures to compete on price, increased competition through product introductions and store brands, and fragmentation of advertising and market segment are just a sample of aggressive competition that companies need to face. However, to successfully compete with competitors in the highly competitive market, companies have to focus thoroughly on improving brand equity pertaining to their products. Brand equity is one of the strategic brand management approach which is able to lead company's performance to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and superior financial performance or business wealth (Fauziah et al., 2012).

In Asia, most of the companies view brand as advertising and design rather than as a competitive tools (Davcik, 2013; Ok, Choi, & Hyun, 2011). Thus, only few companies are willing to invest in a brand. This makes branding strategy in Asian countries relatively stagnant as compared to western countries. Likewise in Malaysia, brand management practice in Malaysian SMEs is quite dismal which affects companies' competitiveness. As a result, Malaysian market is dominated by foreign brands, where they are estimated to control the market shares for more than 50% (Euromonitor, 2015). Low sales volume for SMEs product such as food product strengthen this fact (Maznah, Mohd Ikhmal, Mohd Noor, & Mohd Rizaimy, 2011). High market share and low sales volume indicates that customers have a high level of loyalty, trust and satisfaction towards foreign brands (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Ong et al., 2015c).

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Similarly, researchers (Maznah & Mohd Noor, 2010; Mohd Sani, 2005; Noor Hasmini, 2011) found that local brands are yet less successful in creating high brand equity and thus is unable to compete either locally or internationally. For that reason, Malaysian consumers prefer more on foreign brands as compared to local brands especially for SMEs product (Buletin Pengguna, 2009). They perceive that the quality of foreign brand is better than local brand (Amir, 2013; Buletin Pengguna, 2009; Lew & Sulaiman, 2014; Samat Buang, 2014). In addition, the level of brand awareness for local brand is also low as only few Malaysian consumers were able to recall and associate a Malaysian brand when asked (Lee & Yew Leh, 2011). Moreover, Malaysian consumers feel confused in associating SMEs brand because SME are yet less successful in highlighting their core brand personality (Ong et al., 2015b). Hence, SMEs brand received lackluster response from consumers. This makes SMEs brands having to struggle to survive in the market (Ong et al., 2015c).

Evidence from the marketing and small business management literature duly recognized that SMEs which put high attention on branding are able to achieve high growth in the market, high revenue and gain powerful competitive position in the market (Asamoah, 2014; Berthon et al., 2008; Reijonen et al., 2014). In branding, brand equity is a strategic asset that should be managed strategically for it affects companies' sustainable advantage for SMEs (Karadeniz, 2010; Odoom, Narteh, & Boateng, 2017; Oliver, 1997; Wood, 2000). Thus, to create high brand equity, strengthening the sources of brand equity is recommended (Davcik, 2013; Yoo et al., 2000). In other words, identifying the sources that influence the performance of brand equity is also vital and need to be done intensively and continuously in order to be competitive and to remain competitive in the

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market (Noor Hasmini, 2011; Valette-Florence et al., 2011). Furthermore, Norjaya and Abdul Rahman (2011) stressed that consumers' purchase decisions are influenced by many factors, and thus the process of identifying the important sources of brand equity that influences the formation of brand equity is necessary and need to be done continuously.

Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted to investigate the sources of brand equity especially in SMEs context in Malaysia (Odoom et al., 2017). This is supported by Ong et al. (2015c) where they stated that not many studies have been conducted on brand management in the food product industry for SMEs brand. In reference to this gap, literature indicates that packaging, word of mouth, and brand personality are important predictors that are worth considering. Researchers (Kunle & Ganiyu, 2013; Rundh, 2013, 2016) pointed out that packaging is considered as a key element of product strategy and also as a competitive tool in marketing strategy that is able to build brand equity and drive more sales with cost-effective way. Further, Murtiasih, Sucherly, and Siringoringo (2014) reported that word of mouth has a positive effect on brand equity. Moreover, Aaker (1997) and He (2012) stressed that brand personality is a vital element for the brand equity's source.

In parallel, research in small business management indicates that packaging (Beneke, Mathews, Munthree, & Pillay, 2015) word of mouth (Altshuler & Tarnovskaya, 2010) and brand personality (Ankomah Opoku et al., 2007) have a significant influence on successful SMEs. However, not many empirical studies has been conducted to examine the influence of packaging (Topoyan & Bulut, 2008), word of mouth (Murtiasih et al., 2014) and brand personality (Correia Loureiro, Lopes, & Kaufmann, 2014; Valette-

Florence, Guizani, & Merunka, 2011) on brand equity. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill the gap by examining the effect of important sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on brand equity from strategic perspectives since the investigation on this link is scarce especially in SMEs context in Malaysia.

In principle, packaging becomes one of the critical factors in consumer's decision making process and consumer buying behaviour (Deliya & Parmar, 2012). This is because packaging is able to communicate with consumers at the time they are actually in the store and becomes the symbol that communicates favourable or unfavourable implied meaning about the product (Silayoi & Speece, 2007). Moreover, packaging is also considered as a key element of product strategy and marketing tool that is able to build brand equity and drive more sales with cost-effective and at the same time enhance consumer-brand relationships, especially for low involvement or convenience products (Anselmsson et al., 2007; Keller, 2013; Kunle & Ganiyu, 2013; Rundh, 2013; Underwood, 2003). Furthermore, the significance of packaging has been highlighted in SMEs Master plan 2012-2020 for boosting high performance through greater market access (National SME Development Council, 2012).

For the food industries, packaging is vital especially in influencing consumers' purchase decision especially at point of purchase (Azad, Rafiee, & Hamdavipour, 2012; Wang, 2013). Deliya and Parmar (2012) stated that poor packaging is one of the causes of product failure in the market. Yet, despite the fact that packaging is important as a competitive advantage tool (Gómez, Martín-Consuegra, & Molina, 2015; Rundh, 2009),

relatively few studies were conducted regarding packaging in marketing literature especially on branding perspective (Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013).

Likewise, an extensive literature review indicated that numerous investigations on the effect of packaging have been conducted on purchase behavior, brand preferences and value creation (Deliya & Parmar, 2012; Rundh, 2016; Wang, 2013). There are only limited studies that examine the effect packaging on brand equity (Rigaux-Bricmont, 1982; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008). This is because marketers still view packaging as a container (Abdullah, Kalam, & Akterujjaman, 2013) and not as a competitive tools that able to increase sales and firms performance (Azad & Hassanabadi, 2013; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008). For the SMEs, packaging is one of the important factors to be considered with their limited financial budget. This is because low investment in packaging can increase brand sales more than high-cost advertising (Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). Thus, this situation represents one of the gaps in the current literature about explaining the effect of packaging on SMEs brand equity.

Apart from packaging, marketing communication also plays a significant role in the creation of brand equity and in driving sales (Keller, 2009) especially in the context of SMEs. The failure in communication will distort the meaning of the brand where it can be interpreted wrongly, narrowly and often negatively (Kaynak & Zhou, 2010). In marketing, word of mouth plays a considerable role as compared to advertising and publicity (Alam & Norjaya, 2010) especially in influencing and forming consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009; Xia & Bechwati, 2008). Earlier studies have shown that positive word of mouth communication has a significant relationship on brand equity (Bambauer-Sachse &

Mangold, 2011; Murtiasih & Siringoringo, 2013; Murtiasih et al., 2014; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Xingyuan, Li, & Wei, 2010).

In the context of SMEs, many of SMEs owners are dependent on word of mouth in carrying out their marketing strategies (Gundala, Jack, & Khawaja, 2014; Ong et al., 2015c) and generate brand awareness (Mitchell et al., 2013; Reijonen, 2010). Reijonen (2010) also stated that word of mouth is one of the most influential ways of promotion that suits well with SMEs which are characterized with limited resources. However, from the critical review of the literature, it is observed that very limited studies have been carried out to test the effect of word of mouth on brand equity in SMEs context. Hence, this study also aims to fill this gap by investigating the effect of word of mouth in influencing the creation of brand equity for SMEs food product.

Besides, brand personality also contributes significant effect on consumer perception. Brand personality is an important concept in brand management (Ambroise et al., 2005). A successful brand requires the building of a distinct brand personality (Lin, 2010). Brand personality can help to differentiate a brand in a product category (Plummer, 1985), enhance consumers' preferences and loyalty to a brand (Fournier, 1998), creates brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) and brand's positive evaluation (Ismail & Spinelli, 2012). Numerous studies were found to have examined the impact of brand personality on elements that reflect the components or consequences of brand equity such as brand preferences, brand attachment, purchase intention and brand trust (Balakrishnan, Saufi, & Amran, 2008; Othman & Rahman, 2014; Sung & Kim, 2010; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Toldos-Romero & Orozco-Gomez, 2015; Valette-Florence et al., 2011). Unfortunately, only few studies were found to have investigated the link

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between brand personality and brand equity (Correia Loureiro et al., 2014; Su & Tong, 2015; Valette-Florence et al., 2011) especially in SMEs context. Therefore, there is a further need of study to examine the effect of brand personality on brand equity for SMEs brand.

Additionally, scholars (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Noor Hasmini, 2012) stated that the recipe for a successful brand is through building a quality relationship with customers. This is because a quality relationship with customers enables company to obtain competitive advantage and further facilitates the process of brand success (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015d). Prior to their findings, relationship quality is commonly discussed as one of the important constructs used to measure the strength of a relationship (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Thus, it is not surprising that relationship quality has received tremendous attention from scholars and practitioners. However, as noted by Noor Hasmini (2012) studies on relationship quality in branding is still limited particularly in Asian countries.

Literatures has indicated that a number of prior studies have been conducted to investigate the antecedents of relationship quality in multi research contexts. Some researchers stated that the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality is important and found that it is related to relationship quality (Alam & Norjaya, 2010; Louis & Lombart, 2010; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008). In fact, certain researchers have argued that relationship quality has a significant relationship with brand equity (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Lin & Chung, 2013; Tuan & Ahmad, 2013) and it can play a mediating role between brand personality and brand equity (Lee, Back, & Kim, 2009). However, Ha, Janda, and Muthaly (2010) highlighted that studies that focus on

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relationship quality in influencing brand equity are rather sparse. In the same vein, the use of relationship quality as a key mediating variable in brand equity studies is also limited (Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014). Thus, Noor Hasmini (2012) proposed further study should be conducted to investigates the role of relationship quality as a mediator and also should be extended to the SMEs context. As such, these findings are the motivating factors for the present study to be conducted.

By considering all of the gaps mentioned above, this empirical study is believed to be able to fill the gaps. Consequently, this study is hoped to be able to contribute to the body of knowledge by filling the theoretical gaps in the current literature about the influence of packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on SMEs brand equity and the possible mediating role of relationship quality between packaging, word of mouth, brand personality and SMEs brand equity from the Malaysian perspective.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the problems highlighted in the earlier section, this study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. Do the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality have a significant effect on brand equity?

2. Do the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality influence relationship quality?

3. Does relationship quality have any significant effect on brand equity?

4. Does relationship quality mediate the relationship between the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and brand equity?

1.5 Research Objectives

Based on the highlighted problems, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the relationship between the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and brand equity.
2. To investigate the relationship between the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and relationship quality.
3. To investigate the relationship between relationship quality and brand equity.
4. To examine the mediating effect of relationship quality on the relationship between the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and brand equity.

1.6 Scope of the Study

In Malaysia, the manufacturing sectors including SMEs are among the industries that contribute to the Malaysian economy. In this present study, the role of SMEs food industry in creating the equity of the brand is investigated. The focus on the SMEs food industry is due to their significant contribution to the economic growth especially to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Likewise, the SMEs also need to identify, prioritise and minimize their business challenges in order to be more competitive and relevant in the business world. Hence, searching for the sources that enables to build

and boost their intangible performance which is brand equity becomes necessary. In relation to that, this study proposed three strategic sources that influence the formation of brand equity which are packaging, word of mouth and brand personality. All of these sources fit well with SMEs which are characterized with limited resources (Odoom, 2016; Ong et al., 2015b; Reijonen, 2010).

The study covers the consumer's perspectives. This is because consumer evaluation on a brand is more reliable owing to the fact that the brand power resides in their minds (Leone et al., 2006; Tong & Hawley, 2009b). Furthermore researchers (Keller, 1993; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Tong & Hawley, 2009b) have argued that the power of a brand lies in what consumers have learned, felt, seen and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time. In a nutshell, it means that consumer's evaluation towards brand is imperatives as it shows the consumer knowledge, familiarity, experience and associations with respect to the brand.

In relation to this, several successful SMEs brands of food product were selected; Adabi, Tamin, Kipas Udang, Kart's, Kawan, Brahim's, Ramly and My Chef. The selection of these brands was based on the familiarity and high recognition by Malaysian population in accordance to the year of business establishment. All of the selected brands have had their products in the market more than five years, expanded their business into international market and have been recognized as SMEs successful brand by Brand Laureate.

Besides, this study also intends to cover the mediating effect of relationship quality between the sources of brand equity and brand equity in SMEs brand. Thus, to analyse the relationship between independent variables, dependent variable and mediating variable, the brand equity theory and social exchange theory was used. Due to time and

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management constraints, only consumers in northern states of Malaysia (Perlis, Kedah and Penang) were approached.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study is important as it aims to contribute in terms of theoretical and practical perspectives in brand management. Moreover, this study seeks to offer best strategies for SMEs to develop their competitiveness through brand equity. Each of the contributions is detailed as follows:

1.7.1 Theoretical Significance

This study intends to make significant contribution to the brand equity theory by acknowledging the effects of the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality, and relationship quality as the mediating variable on brand equity. All of these important sources are able to develop superior customer values such as brand equity (Aaker, 1991, 1996). The findings of this study are expected to enhance the understanding of brand equity formation as well as the important role played by packaging, word of mouth, brand personality and brand relationship quality as the predictors of brand equity especially in the context of SMEs.

Likewise, this study also aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge by supporting and strengthening the Brand Equity Process Model (BECPM) and the underlying theory of Brand Equity. The results of this study are expected to support argument made by Yoo and Donthu's (2001) whereby they stated that the sources of brand equity have a positive bond with brand equity and able to enhance the company's performance.

At the same time, this study also intends to improve upon the existing literature by examining the mediating effect of relationship quality between packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and brand equity. This is because past literature has shown that study that investigates relationship quality as a mediator is scarce. Moreover, majority of past studies on brand equity were conducted in western countries and very few focused on Asian contexts such as Malaysia. Thus, it is believed that this contribution will expand the knowledge in brand equity theory as well as social exchange theory.

Another important contribution intended by this study is the examination of the creation brand equity in small and medium enterprises context. The review of the literature indicates that only few studies intended to examine the effect of marketing strategies and relationship quality on brand equity particularly in Asian's SMEs context. Thus, it is hoped that this study's analysis of results will enhance the establishment of generalisation across relevant research stream especially with regard to the role of relationship quality as a key mediating variable.

1.7.2 Practical Significance

This study hopes to contribute on practical perspective by providing a better understanding on the importance of brand equity to Malaysian SMEs food product industry. Nowadays, being competitive in the market is required in today's market which is characterized in high competition. Therefore, reinforcing brand success by forming strong brand equity is needed. This study also attempts to propose and validate

the sources of brand equity that influence the formation of brand equity for SMEs food products.

The process of identifying the sources of brand equity must be done carefully. This is because the sources of brand equity might contribute to and detract from the process of strengthening brand equity (Buil, de Chernatony, & Martínez, 2013; Yoo et al., 2000). At the same time, SMEs need to identify the sources of brand equity that suit with their financial capability. This is because SME is known as business establishment with limited financial budget and capabilities. Thus, the findings of this study are expected to empower SMEs owner to strategically choose the important sources of brand equity in the context of food product.

Moreover, this study is expected to provide insights on the importance of relationship quality as a mediator between the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on SMEs food product industry. With such skills, SMEs brands have a better opportunity to secure high percentage of the market share at local as well as international markets.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

The key terms used in this study are defined as follows:

Brand Equity: It refers to a set of brand assets and liabilities that are associated to a brand, its name and symbol that could add to or detract the value provided by a product or service to a company or to its customers (Aaker, 1991).

Sources of Brand Equity: It refers to business drivers which can be defined as the process, such as people, market forces and knowledge that affect a change or give impetus to the formation of brand equity phenomenon (Davcik, 2013). The sources of brand equity for this study are made of packaging, word of mouth and brand personality.

Packaging: It refers to the product identification and differentiation as well as brand identity and value (Gómez et al., 2015).

Word of mouth: It refers to the idea of person-to-person conversation between consumers about a product (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011).

Brand Personality: It refers to the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brand (Geuens et al., 2009).

Relationship Quality: It refers to customer's general view towards their relationship strength with a certain brand (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990).

Brand Satisfaction: It refers to consumer's judgment towards a product or service feature in providing them with a pleasurable level of consumption related to fulfilling and matching their expectations (Zboja & Voorhees, 2006).

Brand Trust: It refers to the customer's belief that the product will perform in a manner of customers' long-term expectation and interest and their standard will be maintained over time (Aurier & de Lanauze, 2012).

Brand Commitment: It refers to the desire reflected by a brand and its customers to maintain valuable relationships on a long term period (Ok et al., 2011)

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs): It refers to small and medium industry in manufacturing products for packaged food and beverage in Malaysia.

SMEs brand: It refers to brand of product produced and manufactures by Malaysian SMEs and certified to use the logo ―Made in Malaysia (Barangan Buatan Malaysia)".

Brand equity asset is similar to *multidimensional brand equity*. Both terms are used interchangeably during the discussion.

1.9 Organisation of the Thesis

This section provides a brief review of the structure of the thesis. This study comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the background of the study, introduction to the Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), statement of the problem, research questions, objectives of the study, scope and significance of the study to the body of knowledge and definitions of terms.

Chapter 2 focuses on a review of the existing literature related to the constructs in this study. It critically reviews the relevant literature related to the constructs that formed the proposed research model. Specifically, the chapter comprises review on brand equity, marketing strategies, relationship quality and the theories that underpin this study. The last section concludes the chapter.

Chapter 3 explains the research methods adopted in this study. The first section explains the research framework for the study, followed by the hypotheses development. The next section discusses the research design, product stimuli, population frame and respondents. The operationalisation of the constructs, research instrumentation and data

analysis techniques are also discussed in this chapter. The last section concludes the chapter.

Chapter 4 presents the results of data analysis by using the structural equation modeling-Partial Least Square statistical approach. Hypotheses testing results are also presented, summarized and briefly discussed in this chapter.

Lastly, in chapter 5, the key findings of the study are summarized based on research objectives. Additionally, the contribution of the study to the body of knowledge, companies and industries are highlighted. Also, in chapter 5, recommendation and suggestions for future research are also provides.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the background of the study as well as the scenario of SMEs in Malaysia. These were followed by research problems, research questions and research objectives, significance of the study and scope of the study. Chapter 1 concluded with the organization of the thesis. The following chapter will discuss literature review and underpinning theory for this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter brings forth the extensive review of the literature on the definitions of brand equity and its dimensions and also past studies on brand equity. A detailed review on the marketing strategies namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality follows next. This chapter also lays out the review on the relationship quality and its effect on brand equity. Also enclosed in this chapter is the explanation on the underlying theories linked with the variables used in this study.

2.2 The Concept of Brand Equity

In branding literature, the success of brands in the market can be assessed through brand performance which is a good predictor for business performance (Wong & Merrilees, 2008). Brand equity is one of the several approaches for measuring brand performance. There are many definitions of brand equity that have been proposed in the literature since this concept was developed and started to gain attention from researchers and practitioners in the late 1980s (Veloutsou, Christodoulides, & de Chernatony, 2013). Aaker (1991) described brand equity as ―*a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers*"*(p.15)*. Nevertheless, Keller (1993) defined brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response

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to the marketing of a brand. Similarly, Yoo et al. (2000) defined brand equity as consumer's different response between a focal brand and an unbranded product when both have the same level of the marketing stimuli and product attributes. Even though there are many definitions of brand equity from different perspectives, the most comprehensive definition and most generally accepted and frequently cited by researchers is as defined by Aaker (Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998; Yoo et al., 2000).

In principle, brand equity can be examined from two different perspectives namely firm's perspective and consumer's perspective (Veloutsou et al., 2013). From the firm's perspectives which is often referred as financial value, brand equity can be defined as the incremental discounted future cash flows that would occur if the same product did not have the brand name (Simon & Sullivan, 1993). According to Feldwick (1996), proponents of financial perspective consider brand equity as the total value of a brand which is a separable asset when it is sold or included in a balance sheet.

From the consumer's or marketing perspective, the definition of brand equity refers to the value of a brand to the consumer which is known as consumer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1991). Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) means the added value of the brand to the consumer (Farquhar, 1989). Keller (1993) defined customer-based brand equity as *"the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (p.2).* Brand knowledge refers to the opinion, feelings, perceptions, images and experiences that is linked to the brand in the consumer's mind (Keller, 2009). Vázquez, del Río, and Iglesias (2002) defined CBBE as the overall utility that the consumer associates to the use and consumption of the brand; including associations expressing both functional and symbolic utilities. To date, the most

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comprehensive definitions is made by Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010) where they defined CBBE as *"a set of perceptions, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours on the part of consumers that results in increased utility and allows a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name"(pg. 48).*

Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) is a good starting point to access brand equity. A thorough understanding of brand equity from consumer's perspective is vital for successful brand management. This is because CBBE is able to show consumer knowledge, familiarity, experience and associations with respect to the brand (Keller, 2003a; Tong & Hawley, 2009b). Supported by Tong and Hawley (2009b), they argued that in order to measure a brand value, customer evaluation on a brand is more reliable. Thus, CBBE model is identified as the most suitable model that can be used to interpret why several brands are unable to be strong brands, how strong brands get into trouble, and what brand is impressive (Keller, 2001).

2.2.1 Dimensions of Brand Equity

Brand equity has sparked great interest among researchers and practitioners over the last 20 years (Tong & Hawley, 2009b). Since the 1980s, numerous studies were conducted to investigate brand equity regarding the dimensions of brand equity, factors influencing the formation of brand equity, and the consequences or benefit derived from brand equity.

Reviewing the literature, there are many classifications and dimensions proposed in the investigation of brand equity. Earlier scholars such as Aaker (1991) conceptualised brand equity as a set of assets (liabilities). He proposed five dimensions of brand assets

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which are brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary assets. However, from the consumer's perspective, other proprietary assets such as patents, trademarks and channel relationships are excluded or omitted because they are not directly related to consumer (Buil, de Chernatony, & Martínez, 2008; Tong & Hawley, 2009b) and do not measure the consumer's perception towards a brand (Mohan & Sequeira, 2012). On the other hand, according to Keller's (1993) viewpoint, brand knowledge is considered as an indicator of brand equity and formed by two dimensions; brand awareness and brand image. Principally, both scholars Aaker (1991; 1996) and Keller (1993) emphasized on the importance of brand awareness and viewed this dimension as a prerequisite to strong brands. They only differed on the views of brand loyalty dimension. Aaker (1991;1996) considered loyalty to be a determinant of brand equity, while Keller (1993) viewed it as a consequence of a strong brand and brand assets.

Based on the literature, Aaker's viewpoint on brand equity has dominated the empirical studies, perhaps because his framework is more practical to use and easy to be operationalised and measured (Anselmsson et al., 2007). Empirical studies by Atilgan, Aksoy, and Akinci (2005), Buil et al. (2008), Christodoulides, Cadogan, and Veloutsou (2015), Gill and Dawra (2010), Pappu, Quester, and Cooksey (2005), Tong and Hawley (2009b), and Yoo and Donthu (2001) all departed from Aaker's (1991;1996) framework where brand equity is determined by awareness, association, perceived quality and loyalty. Hence, this study also viewed brand equity based on four dimensions as proposed by Aaker's (1991;1996).

2.2.1.1 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is defined in the literature as the ability of a potential buyer to recognise or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category (Aaker, 1991). Similarly, Keller (1993) explained that brand awareness as the consumer's ability to identify a brand under different circumstances. Further, Keller (1993) conceptualised brand awareness as consisting of both brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition indicates the extent to which consumers can recognise a certain brand given within a group of brands. On the other hand, brand recall explains the extent to which customer's ability to remember a brand when thinking about a certain category of a product (Gill & Dawra, 2010). Baldauf et al. (2003) agreed that brand awareness is able to influence tastes of consumer, opinions and purchase, depending on the degree of familiarity towards products and services offered.

Brand awareness can be considered as an important mechanism in influencing consumers to make purchase decision, especially in benefits generation, such as learning, choice and advantage consideration (Atilgan et al., 2005; Keller, 2003b; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011). Previously, Gordon, Calantone and Benedetto (1993) stated that brand awareness and customer loyalty give high influences to the development of brand equity. They further stated that awareness leads to brand association that ultimately influence brand loyalty. In the same vein, Huang and Sarigöllü (2012) also added that brand awareness precedes building brand equity. Thus, in order to enhance the equity of a brand, companies should capitalise in marketing programmes so that consumers will have better awareness and familiarity towards

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offerings attached to brand association when evaluating a brand against others in similar or identical category (Petruzzellis, Romanazzi, Tassiello, & de Chernatony, 2010).

In the context of SMEs, Krake (2005) stressed that the creation of brand awareness is very important as it contributes to the companies' survival. Besides, a consensus made by scholars (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012; Keller, 1993) stated that brand awareness is also deemed to be of certain importance for the low involvement product categories as it will affect consumer decision making. Fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) such as groceries can also be explained as low involvement product even it might not be the case with other consumer groups. Hausman (2000) and Silayoi and Speece (2004) stated that there are two trends of consumer groups in the FMCG market, i.e. modern consumers where they search for different approach to achieve time efficient and simplify their purchase decisions and food preparation. The second group of consumers consists of those who put more effort in their grocery purchase. However, for the high involvement product categories such as car or other types of durable goods, consumers are said to be spending more time on the decision process and also getting familiar with unfamiliar brands (Anselmsson et al., 2007).

Therefore, this means that brand awareness plays a significant role in influencing consumers decision making, especially when they have pre-knowledge regarding that particular brand (Alamgir, Nasir, Shamsuddhoha, & Nedelea, 2011). For instance, a customer generally does not favour to purchase an unknown brand for any type of product which is low involvement or high involvement products. Consequently, brand awareness plays an important role in influencing consumers purchase decisions which

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leads in building brand equity (Biedenbach, Bengtsson, & Marell, 2015; Norjaya, Mohd Nasser, & Osman, 2007).

2.2.1.2 Brand Association

Brand association is related to information in the consumer's mind about the brand, either positive or negative, connected to the node of the brain memory (Emari, Jafari, & Mogaddam, 2012). Earlier scholars particularly Aaker (1991) defined brand association as anything linked in memory to a brand. These associations can derive from a wide range of sources and vary according to their favourability, strength and uniqueness (Keller, 1993). The importance of brand name association, for instance, is emphasised by Rio, Vazquez and Iglesias (2001) in obtaining differential advantages. Brand association acts as an information collecting tool to execute brand differentiations and brand extension (Janiszewski & Van Osselaer, 2000).

Reviewing past literature, association is one of the important elements for purchase decision and consequently brand loyalty, and is able to generate value to the customers and company (Chen, 2001). Besides, brand association also benefits in facilitating information retrieval, brand's differentiation, purchase rationalisation, building positive attitudes or feelings, and providing a basis for extensions (Aaker, 1991).

Scholars (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Atilgan et al., 2005; Keller, 1993; Rio et al., 2001) proposed that brand association is a vital element in the formation of brand equity and management. In the same vein, Moradi and Zarei (2012) also stated that brand association as the heart of brand equity, as well as a key component of competitive advantage. Therefore, referring to James (2005), he argued that the level of brand equity

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can be boosted if the brand association achieved the greater level. Other researchers (Aaker, 1991; Atilgan et al., 2005) also agreed that high brand equity indicates that consumers have strong positive association with respect to the brand.

It is indicated that the higher the brand association in the product, the more it will be remembered by consumers and they will be loyal towards the brand (Jumiati & Norazah, 2015). Therefore, creating high brand association is deemed important as it could provide value to the consumer by providing a reason to buy the brand, and by creating positive attitudes/feelings among consumers (Aaker, 1991).

2.2.1.3 Perceived Quality

Perceived quality can be described as ―*the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives" (Aaker, 1991, p. 85)*. Other researchers for instance Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco (2005) described perceived quality as a subjective judgment made by the consumer regarding the excellence or superiority of a product. In simple terms, perceived quality can be explained as product‗s ability to meet customer‗s expectations and provide customer‗s satisfaction as compared to competitor‗s offer (Gill & Dawra, 2010; Severi, Ling, & Nasermoadeli, 2014).

Perceived quality is not only the objective quality, but also consumer‗s subjective discernment of a product‗s performance which depends on their perception (Buil et al., 2008; Chattopadhyay, Dutta, & Sivani, 2010). For that reason, Baldauf et al. (2003) stated that product with high quality can be a competitive advantage tool to the firm. Moreover, product with high quality also provides opportunity for a firm to charge

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premium price which enables the company to earn huge profits and also can be exploited by introducing brand extensions (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Severi et al., 2014). In addition, Urde (1994) added that superior quality is an essential element to remain competitive in the market.

Past literature indicates that perceived quality is one of the important dimensions in the process of building brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Pappu et al., 2005; Yoo et al., 2000). According to Aaker (1991;1996), perceived quality is one of the vital element of brand equity and perceived quality itself is an essential part of study in evaluating brand equity. Besides, researchers (Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998; Norjaya et al., 2007; Yoo et al., 2000) mentioned that perceived quality is positively related to the brand equity. Norjaya et al. (2007) argued that perceived quality is an association that is usually central to brand equity. This means that the higher the level of perceived quality, the greater the level of brand equity (Gill & Dawra, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative for company to build positive perceived quality among consumers because it will enable them to improve the level of brand preference and the process of creating brand equity (Gill & Dawra, 2010). This is because these elements can facilitate the development of favourable perceived quality in the consumer's mind.

2.2.1.4 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is considered as a core dimension and a key consideration when placing a value on a brand to be bought or sold. Aaker (1991) defined brand loyalty as the attachment that a customer has to a brand. Yoo and Donthu (2001) viewed brand loyalty as the tendency to be loyal to a focal brand, which is demonstrated by the intention to

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buy the brand as a primary choice. In contrast, Keller (1993) viewed loyalty as a consequence of brand equity, i.e. when favourable attitudes result in repeat purchase. Oliver (1999) defined brand loyalty comprehensively as a deep held commitment to re-buy or repatronise a preferred product/ service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour. In simple words, brand loyalty is termed as the customer's willingness to purchase the same brand repeatedly without any intention to switch to others (Hameed, 2013).

Generally, there are two classifications of loyalty; behavioural and cognitive (Keller, 1998). From the behavioural perspective, loyalty can be defined as the degree to which a buying unit, such as household, concentrates its purchases over time on a particular brand within a product category (Tong & Hawley, 2009b). Whereas cognitive loyalty can be portrayed by the consumers' intention to buy the brand as the first choice (Keller, 1998; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Another indicator of loyalty is the customer's willingness to pay premium price for a brand as compared to other brand which offers similar benefits (Aaker, 1996; Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnavolu, 2002). Brand loyalty is an internal commitment to repurchase a preferred product or service regularly (Chattopadhyay, Dutta, et al., 2010). Usually, loyal customers will show a better response towards brand as compared to non-loyal customers (Chattopadhyay, Dutta, et al., 2010).

Basically, brand loyalty is considered as one of the most important determinants of brand equity (Aaker, 1991). In the same vein, researchers (Atilgan et al., 2005; Jumiati & Norazah, 2015; Yoo & Donthu, 2001) discovered that brand loyalty affects the

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creation of brand equity. This means that high brand equity is associated with high brand preference and loyalty (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995; Loureiro & Miranda, 2011). Therefore, assessing and managing brand loyalty is very important either for durable or non-durable product categories especially in the market which is highly competitive with increasing unpredictability and reducing product differentiation (Zehir, Sahin, Kitapci, & Ozsahin, 2011).

Assessing brand loyalty from consumer's perspective is important as it offers several benefits such as high commitment to repurchase the brand as a main choice or re-patronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future (Baldauf et al., 2003; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2006). From the company's perspective, loyalty can create barriers to entry from competing brands, allows premium price, gives the company time to respond to competitors' innovations and also serves as a buffer in times of intense price competition (Aaker, 1996). Thus, brand loyalty is considered as an important asset which results in better customer repurchase intention over time (Alamgir et al., 2011).

The above discussion indicates the significance of brand equity dimensions namely brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. All of the dimensions should be able to transform a brand to be a strong brand. In relation to that, this research aims to investigate the sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on brand equity with relationship quality as a mediator. Therefore, the next section will discuss the sources of brand equity and followed with the sources of brand equity namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality as the independent variables for this study.

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2.2.2 Studies on the Sources of Brand Equity

Brand equity from consumer's perception is a tool to measure brand performance in the marketplace and is found to have a significant influence on company's financial performance (Tong & Hawley, 2009b). Thus, brand equity has become the subject of many studies as can be gathered from the literature. Brand equity from consumer's perception which is also known as customer-based brand equity can be measured via direct approach and indirect approach. The direct approach focuses on consumer's responses towards companies' marketing programme, whereas indirect approach tries to identify potential sources of brand equity (Tong & Hawley, 2009b).

Referring to the indirect approach studies, there are a variety of the sources of brand equity in the literature (refer Table 2.1). Even though there is an extensive literature on brand equity and its measures, constructs and antecedents, Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010) argued that it is inconclusive, fragmented and confusing. Every researcher practices different approach in creating brand equity sources or construct thus making this field rather confusing and ill-defined (Davcik, 2013). Previous empirical studies on the constructs or predictors contributing to the brand equity formation have largely been focused on tangible factors of marketing mix such as advertising efforts (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Simon & Sullivan, 1993), price, store image, distribution intensity, advertising expenditure and price promotions (Yoo et al., 2000), marketing communication (Villarejo-Ramos & Sanchez-Franco, 2005), marketing mix (Chattopadhyay, Shivani, & Krishnan, 2010), brand personality and sales promotion intensity (Valette-Florence et al., 2011), celebrity endorsement and event sponsorship (Tong & Hawley, 2009a). In comparison to intangible aspects (subjective), the tangible

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aspects (objective) of marketing mix activities are seen as the biggest contributor to

brand equity formation (see Table 2.1). Table 2.1 below explains several sources of

brand equity that have been empirically tested by previous researchers.

Table 2.1:
A Summary of Studies on the Sources of Brand Equity

Author (Year)	Sources of Brand Equity	Product/ Service
Simon and Sullivan (1993)	Advertising expenditure, age of brand, order of entry, and current and past advertising share	Manufacturing industry
Yoo et al. (2000)	Price, store image, distribution intensity, advertising expenditure and price promotion	Athletic shoes, camera film and colour television set.
Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco (2005)	Marketing communication, price and promotion	Washing machine
Valette-Florence, Guizani, and Merunka (2011)	Brand personality and sales promotion intensity	Coffee, athletic shoes and car
Buil, de Chernatony, et al. (2013)	Advertising expenditure, attitude towards advertisement, monetary promotion and non-monetary promotion	Sportswear: Adidas and Nike Consumer Electronics: Sony and Panasonic Cars: BMW and Volkswagen
Gil, Andrés, and Salinas (2007)	Advertising, family, price and promotion	Convenient product: Milk, olive oil, toothpaste
Tong and Hawley (2009a)	Store image, celebrity endorsement, event sponsorship, TV advertising, print advertising, web advertising, price promotion and non-price promotion	
Moradi and Zarei (2012)	Country of brand and country of manufacture	Laptop and mobile phone
Ebeid (2014)	Distribution intensity, advertising, and monetary promotion	Cell phone and laptop (Nokia, Samsung, G-Tide, Dell, HP, Toshiba)
Maria, Loureiro, Lopes, and Kaufmann (2014)	Perceived service quality, brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand trust, brand personality and brand identification	Services (Supermarkets, electricity and mobile communications brands)
Murtiasih, Sucherly, and Siringoringo (2014)	Country of origin, word of mouth.	Automobile

2.2.3 Studies on the Sources of Brand equity in Malaysia Context

In Malaysia, study on the sources of brand equity has also gained attention from local researchers and has gradually increased. Reviewing the literature, prior studies showed that there are several sources that influence the formation of brand equity.

Gathered from the literature, there have been several empirical studies conducted to investigate the formation of brand equity in Malaysia. The researchers look on the factors that contributed to the formation of brand equity. Their studies can be divided into two, which are marketing mix elements and non-marketing mix elements. As for the marketing mix studies, Hanaysha and Haim (2015a) found that advertising contributes to positive impacts on the dimensions of brand equity namely; brand loyalty, brand image, brand awareness and brand leadership. Hanaysha and Haim (2015b) also reported in their findings that product innovation and service quality are important and both are considered as key strategic factors in affecting brand equity. By applying the resource based theory and social exchange theory, the factors of product innovation and service quality proves to be valuable vehicles for companies to enhance brand equity.

Further Hanaysha (2016a, 2016b, 2016c) extended his study into international fast food restaurant in Malaysia. His study conducted in East Coast region of Malaysia with 293 customers of international fast food restaurant brands. He found that customer service, physical environment and social media have a significant positive effect on brand equity.

As from the non-marketing mix studies on brand equity, Norjaya et al. (2007) stated that brand's country-of-origin image is considered as one of the sources of brand equity. Norjaya and Abdul Rahman (2011) have also further examined family influence and

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viral marketing as sources of brand equity formation for mobile phones and personal computer in the consumer context. Their findings revealed that there is a significant relationship and positive influence between viral marketing and all of the dimensions of brand equity. On the other hand, family recommendation has significant relationship only with two of the dimensions of brand equity i.e. perceived quality and brand loyalty. Meanwhile, all of the measured dimensions of brand equity namely perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand awareness/association have been found to have a positive relationship with brand equity. Hanaysha and Haim (2015) also contended that country of origin factor contributes and has positive effect on the dimensions of brand equity, namely; brand loyalty, brand image, brand awareness and brand leadership for building brand equity in Malaysian automotive industry. Other researchers, Noor Hasmini and Osman (2014) pointed out that market orientation influences the formation of brand equity. However, their investigation was approached from a different viewpoint which is authorised independent sales dealer.

Whereas in the service context, Silva, Rajab, Ahsanul, Farzana and Ali (2012) have developed a brand equity construct which nestled upon brand concept of functionality, image, perceived quality and brand loyalty when studying the important factors that contribute to the brand equity formation of Internet service providers in Malaysia such as Telekom Malaysia, Jaring and Maxis. Results show that perceived quality is the essential factor for developing brand equity as such confirming the significant influence of these four utmost important factors on brand equity. This result is parallel with the findings of Tan et al. (2013) in which Malaysian fast food brands (Marry brown and 1901 hotdogs) were found to have higher level of perceived quality than global brands

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(McDonalds', KFC and Pizza Hut). However, global brands reportedly have a higher level of brand awareness and overall brand equity than Malaysian products. Their study also revealed that brand awareness contributes greater variance on brand trust, attitudinal brand loyalty and overall brand equity than perceived quality.

Based on the Table 2.2, there are several sources of brand equity that have been tested in the literature. Even though those sources of brand equity have been empirically tested, marketers still need to identify other sources of brand equity. This is because consumer's decision making process is affected by many factors (Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011). If a company is able to manage the sources of brand equity effectively, it indicates that the company is successful in developing high brand equity as well as generating high profit (Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011).

Likewise, literatures indicated that majority of the studies in brand equity in Malaysia gave more focus on global brand, large companies and durable products (see Table 2.2). Only few of SMEs studies (Sh. Ahmad Fauziah, Farzana, Rohaizat, & Mohd Naqiuddin, 2014; Maznah & Mohd Noor, 2010; Mi & Rohaizat, 2013) have investigated SMEs brand management in general perspectives, not on brand equity. Thus, Fauziah et al. (2014) stated that studies on SMEs branding were rather limited especially on the investigation of the sources that influence the formation of brand equity especially in food industries. In sum, it is indicates that studies on SMEs brand is at infancy stage in Malaysia.

In relation to build a successful formation of brand equity, SMEs owner should carefully examine the sources of brand equity. This is because the process of understanding and

examining the sources of brand equity is critical as it might contribute to and detract from the process of strengthening brand equity (Buil, de Chernatony, et al., 2013; Yoo et al., 2000). In other words, brand equity should be actively managed by marketers over time by reinforcing and making necessary adjustments in their marketing effort (Baisya, 2013).

Hence, this background of literature serves as a platform for conducting a study to examine the sources that may influence the successful process of the formation of brand equity. Other than that, previous researchers (Azmi & Salniza, 2012; Baldauf, Cravens, Diamantopoulos, & Zeugner-Roth, 2009; Gill & Dawra, 2010; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Yoo et al., 2000) stressed that it is necessary for future researchers to conduct more studies in establishing and examining the sources of brand equity to enhance the explanatory power of brand equity phenomenon impacting various product categories. In the SMEs context, researchers (Altshuler & Tarnovskaya, 2010; Ankomah Opoku et al., 2007; Beneke et al., 2015) stated that packaging, word of mouth and brand personality has positively influence and able to contribute to the SMEs success. However, these three sources has received limited attention from researchers (Correia Loureiro et al., 2014; Murtiasih et al., 2014; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008). Besides, researchers (Keller, 2009; Seimiene & Kamarauskaite, 2014; Sung & Kim, 2010; Valette-Florence et al., 2011) argued that packaging, word of mouth, brand personality, and relationship quality are interrelated and is able to predict the creation of brand equity. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the sources of brand equity namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on SMEs brand equity in food product industries.

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Table 2.2: *A Summary of Studies on the Sources of Brand Equity: Malaysia Context*

Author (Year)	Sources of Brand Equity	Product/ Service
Norjaya et al. (2007)	Country of Origin	Durable Products: television, refrigerator and air-conditioner
Norjaya and Norzalita (2010)	Brand salience, brand performance, brand judgment, brand feelings and brand resonance	Banking Services
Norjaya and Abdul Rahman (2011)	Family Influence, Viral Marketing	Hand Phone and Personal Computer
Silva, Rajab, Ahsanul, Farzana and Ali (2012)	Functionality, Image of Brand, Perceived quality, Brand loyalty	Malaysian Internet Service provider (Telekom Malaysia, Jaring, Maxis)
Noor Hasmini and Osman (2014)	Market Orientation	Malaysian Automotive Industry
Severi et al. (2014)	e-WOM	Social Media
Subramaniam, Mamun, Permarupan and Noor Raihani (2014)	Brand loyalty Brand Image Perceived quality	Banking Services (BIMB)
Hanaysha and Haim (2015a)	Advertising, Country of Origin	Malaysian Automotive Industry
Hanaysha & Haim (2015c)	Product Innovation, Service quality	Malaysian Automotive Industry
Hanaysha (2016)	Customer service	Fast food restaurant brands
Hanaysha (2016b)	Physical Environment	Fast food restaurant brands
Jumiati and Norazah (2015)	Brand association, Brand Loyalty, Brand awareness, Brand Image	Brands: Adidas, Nike, Puma or Levi's
Zahari and Esa (2012)	Viral Marketing	Personal computer and mobile phones

2.3 The Sources of Brand Equity

The sources of brand equity play a significant role in influencing success in creating brand equity (Yoo et al. 2000). As for this study, the sources of brand equity consist of packaging, word of mouth and brand personality.

2.3.1 Packaging

Today, packaging has become an essential tool in marketing context as it can help a brand carve a unique position in the market place and in the consumer's mind (Agariya, Johari, Sharma, Chandrul, & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, packaging is the first point of contact with the brand and manufacturer for consumers (Gawek, Pauw, & Wijgerse, 2007). Packaging is positioned as a ―product-related attribute", which is one of the critical aspects in the process of creation and communication of brand identity (Underwood, 2003).

Brand identity, frequently called brand elements, is trademark-able device that serves to identify and differentiate a brand (Keller, 2013) and considered as one of the core elements in brand management especially in an intense competition (Rundh, 2013). There are multiple types of brand elements which consists of brand name, URL, logo, symbol, character, spokesperson, slogan, jingle, package, and signage (Keller, 2013). Each brand element can play a different role in building brand equity, so marketers ―mix and match" to maximise brand equity (Keller, 2013). Based on consumer-based brand equity model, marketers could choose brand elements to enhance brand awareness, facilitate the formation of strong, favourable and unique brand association, or elicit positive brand judgments and feelings (Keller, 2013). A brand element can provide a positive contribution to brand equity that conveys or implies certain valued associations or response (Keller, 2013). Brand element strategies are claimed successful when they are able to function as recall power; for example a half-eaten apple, immediately reflects the brand Apple.

In this study, packaging is selected as one of the constructs that will be tested to measure how it affects the formation of brand equity for SMEs food product. Reviewing the literature, packaging plays as an important marketing tool for many consumer products in a competitive business environment (Kunle & Ganiyu, 2013; Rundh, 2009). Besides, packaging is considered as an ultimate selling proposition to stimulate impulsive buying behaviour, increase market share and reduce promotional costs (Deliya & Parmar, 2012). Packaging is also considered as the ‗fifth P' of the marketing mix and is viewed as a cost-effective way to build brand equity and drive sales (Keller, 2013; Rundh, 2013). Frequently, packaging is called as the last five seconds of marketing as well as permanent media or the last salesman. Without packaging, the process of handling the core product and marketing it to consumers will be difficult, inefficient and costly (Simms & Trott, 2010).

Packaging is one of the most powerful tools which is able to attract consumers' attention and create competitive advantage (Ampuero & Vila, 2006; Löfgren, Witell, & Gustafsson, 2008; Rundh, 2009; Rundh & Bo, 2005; Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). Besides, packaging is also proven as a powerful means of shaping consumers' reactions and behaviours (Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013) by creating positive impression which is able to boost customer's desire to repeat purchases (Kunle & Ganiyu, 2013). Packaging is used by companies to create differentiation and identity for homogenous and non-durables products (Rundh & Bo, 2005; Underwood & Klein, 2002). For the non-durables or low involvement product, usually consumers would not extensively search for their brand information and majority of purchase decisions are made at the store shelf (Underwood & Ozanne, 1998). According to Rundh (2013), 50% to 70% of all

purchase decisions are made in a store. Thus, the product's information which is channelled mainly through its packaging is able to capture the customer's attention and facilitates quick and in-store decision making (Anselmsson et al., 2007; Gawek et al., 2007; Löfgren et al., 2008).

Besides, the concept of packaging needs to be strengthened because it is able to create consumer confidence and provide a positive overall impression of the content in the package (Rundh, 2013). Hence, Hine (1995 cited in Gawek et al., 2007) suggested that packaging should be considered as a useful strategy for branding as it is expected to give a greater impact when packaging and branding are used together simultaneously. For the food industries, packaging is important primarily as a marketing tool (Löfgren et al., 2008; Rundh, 2009; Rundh & Bo, 2005) and secondly as logistics function such as containing, protecting, preserving and delivering the food (Rundh & Bo, 2005; Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). Topoyan and Bulut (2008) have stated that packaging with a good and attractive design positively influences brand satisfaction. Packaging is able to add value to the products and contribute to profit margins (Olsson, Petterson, & Jönson, 2004). As a result, it is important to incorporate packaging as one of the strategies in the process of formation of consumer based brand equity for the low involvement product such as food packaged food and beverage.

2.3.1.1 Packaging and Brand Equity

Literature shows that packaging has a positive effect on a firm's value added and has been discussed and explained extensively. A number of studies found that packaging has a significant effect on the dimensions of brand equity such as consumers' quality

perception (Rigaux-Bricmont, 1982) and brand loyalty (Topoyan & Bulut, 2008). Moreover, packaging also has been found to have a significant effect on the consequences of brand equity (Gómez et al., 2015; Ogba & Johnson, 2010; Silayoi & Speece, 2004). purchase decision (Silayoi & Speece, 2004), product and consumer preferences (Mendez, Oubina, & Rubio, 2011; Ogba & Johnson, 2010) and purchase and usage behaviour (Gómez et al., 2015).

Past researchers have indicated that packaging has a significant impact on brand equity (Farhana, 2012; Underwood, 1996). Reviewing the literature, early researchers such as Rigaux-Bricmont (1982) investigated the effect of brand names and brand packaging on consumers' perceptions of quality. Their study evidenced that brand names and brand packaging do influence consumers' quality perceptions. The findings showed that brand and packaging images help the consumer in differentiating brands, accentuates the importance of various firms' marketing strategies and more particularly, their independence.

Besides, Topoyan and Bulut (2008) also discovered that packaging has a positive relationship with brand loyalty. However, the relationship can be regarded as moderate but weaker relationship. This finding is supported by Selnes (1993) where he added that brand loyalty which is one of the dimensions of brand equity is not only driven by the internal quality improvements, but also external activities such as packaging.

In parallel, Simms and Trott (2010) in their conceptual paper, have argued that packaging plays a vital role in product success particularly in new product development for low involvement product. However, packaging received under-utilised

considerations from marketers in improving their product performance and success. Thus, they proposed that an empirical study should be conducted in order to fully evaluate the role of packaging. Further, Silayoi and Speece (2007) also disclosed that packaging plays the most important role in consumer's likelihood to buy. Maznah, Mohd Ikhmal, Mohd Noor, and Mohd Rizaimy (2011) have also added that packaging also is able to increase sales and company's competitive advantage. In the same vein, Deliya and Parmar (2012) also stated that product packaging is valuable for brand equity, product differentiations, market segmentation, new product introduction, pricing, and promotion. All of the discussions indicate the important role of packaging in shaping consumer behaviour.

However, relatively little has been written regarding packaging in marketing and branding literature (Rundh & Bo, 2005; Simms & Trott, 2010; Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). Likewise, limited number of studies were found to examine the effect of packaging on brand equity (Rigaux-Bricmont, 1982; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008; Wang, 2013). This is because marketers still view packaging as a container (Abdullah et al., 2013) and not as a competitive tool that able to increase sales and increase firms performance (Azad & Hassanabadi, 2013; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008). For the SMEs, packaging is one of the important factors to consider with their limited financial budget. This is because low investment in packaging can increase brand sales more than high-cost advertising (Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). Thus, this situation represents one of the gaps in the current literature about explaining the effect of packaging on SMEs brand equity.

In summary, this study attempts to provide a more detailed investigation regarding the effect of packaging on branding literature which is brand equity in SMEs food industry in Malaysia since the study on this link is scarce (Gawek et al., 2007; Rundh, 2009; Underwood & Ozanne, 1998) especially on SMEs context (Odoom et al., 2017). For the next variable, this study opts to investigate word of mouth as the second source of brand equity. This is because packaging and word of mouth are found to be interrelated as they have been consistently discovered to play an important role in enhancing brand awareness and recognition and facilitate the formation of strong, favorable and unique brand associations in consumer memory (Farhana, 2012; Zehir et al., 2011).

2.3.2 Word of Mouth (WOM)

Word of mouth (WOM) is one of the sources of brand communication which is found to be more influential than others especially in guiding purchase decisions (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Trusov et al., 2009). Reviewing the literature, brand communication especially word of mouth has been recognised as one of the sources contributing to brand equity and can exert a positive influence on perceived brand quality as well as brand loyalty, brand association and brand awareness (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Simon & Sullivan, 1993; Villarejo-Ramos & Sanchez-Franco, 2005; Yoo et al., 2000). Word of mouth is able to influence effectively consumers to switch brands seven times more as compared to newspaper and magazine advertising (Trusov et al., 2009), four times more effectively than personal selling, and twice as effectively as radio advertising (Murtiasih & Siringoringo, 2013). Other than that, word of mouth is also able to convert consumers with unfavourable or neutral position into positive attitude

towards brand nine times more effectively compared to advertising (Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007; Murtiasih & Siringoringo, 2013).

In the current business landscape, traditional forms of marketing such as television advertising, radio, printed advertising, magazines and newspapers are losing their power and effectiveness on consumers (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Keller, 2009; Trusov et al., 2009). Advertisement and promotions are no longer delivering expected results (Baisya, 2013). Besides, advertising is identified to be only effective in conveying the information but less effective in changing consumers' value perception (Xingyuan et al., 2010). Therefore, referring to Aaker's (1991) suggestion, if the firms believe that customers are bored with the current brand communication practices, a change is needed to freshen it all up. Hence, Keller (2009) proposed that marketers should ‗mix and match' communication options to build brand equity by deciding an appropriate brand communication strategy. In view of restriction of resource allocation such as fund which is a key strategic issue faced by most companies especially SMEs (Wong & Merrilees, 2005), word of mouth communication is incorporated into brand equity theoretical framework in this study as one of the sources of brand equity.

Word of mouth can be defined as an interpersonal communication among consumers concerning their personal experiences and evaluations of a firm or a product (Richins, 1983). Word of mouth is also termed as informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers (Westbrook, 1987). In its widest context, word of mouth communication includes any information about product, services, companies and/or

brand spread from one individual to another either in person or by using any type of communication medium (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005).

The influence of word of mouth communication is further extended with the advent of Internet and technology advancement. On the internet, consumers spread their opinions, comments and product review on virtual settings which is known as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Basically, traditional word of mouth and e-WOM have a common characteristic, the difference only on the channel used to spread the communication and the scale and speed of diffusion (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The functions of word of mouth and e-WOM are still the same where they spread the customer's experience to other person.

Word of mouth consists of several forms such as positive, neutral, or negative word of mouth. Based on literature, positive word of mouth can help create a favourable image of a company and its brand, increase customer's intention to purchase new products, and reduce promotional expenditure (Zhang, Zhang, & Law, 2014). The examples of positive word of mouth include relating pleasant, vivid, or novel experiences; recommendations to others; and even conspicuous display (Anderson, 1998). In contrast, negative word of mouth contributes harmful effect to product evaluation and customer's purchase decision (Zhang et al., 2014). The examples of negative word of mouth is behavioural namely product denigration, relating unpleasant experiences, rumour, and private complaining (Anderson, 1998). Companies will use positive word of mouth in promoting their product. Thus, promoting positive consumer's word of mouth and minimising or eliminating factors that may lead to negative word of mouth is important

in order to enable firms to succeed in their overall marketing strategy (Zhang et al., 2014).

In the consumer marketplace, word of mouth is considered as a powerful force of persuasion (Sen & Lerman, 2007) and a key role in creating brand awareness and brand equity (Mitchell et al., 2013; Murtiasih & Siringoringo, 2013). This is supported by Alam and Norjaya (2010), Ha (2004), and Zhang et al. (2014) as they highlighted that word of mouth communication is able to influence awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes and behavioural intentions. Word of mouth is also capable in reducing uncertainty and perceived risks in purchase decisions (Zhang et al., 2014). At the same time, word of mouth doesn't require much funding (Zailskaite-jakste & Kuvykaite, 2013).

2.3.2.1 Word of mouth and Brand Equity

Reviewing the literature, the roles of word of mouth either the traditional word of mouth or e-WOM has been researched extensively especially in marketing field. Literature shows that word of mouth has an impact on purchase intention (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012), brand equity (Murtiasih et al., 2014; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Severi et al., 2014), brand equity dilution (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011) and membership growth (Trusov et al., 2009).

Discussing the impact of word of mouth on the formation of brand equity, researchers (Murtiasih et al., 2014; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Severi et al., 2014) have empirically proven that word of mouth (word of mouth and e-WOM) have a significant effect and positive influence on brand equity. Chattopadhyay, Shivani, et al. (2010)

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found that word of mouth has a significant effect on only two of the brand equity dimensions which are perceived quality and brand awareness. In contrast, Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) examined the impacts of negative online product reviews, a specific type of word of mouth communication on consumer-based brand equity. By combining research on word of mouth communication and effects on brand equity dilution, their study has contributed a new theoretical framework to existing body of knowledge. Their findings showed that negative online product reviews can generate considerable detrimental effects on the consumer-based brand equity and thus lead to brand equity dilution.

In SMEs context, researchers (Abimbola, 2001; Berthon et al., 2008; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Krake, 2005; Ojasalo et al., 2008; Spence & Essoussi, 2010; Wong & Merrilees, 2005) have shown that word of mouth is the primary means by which SMEs generate brand awareness towards actual practice of company activities.

In sum, word of mouth evidently plays a considerable role in influencing and forming a favourable consumer's attitude and behavioural intentions (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Trusov et al., 2009; Xia & Bechwati, 2008). However, to date, research conducted to investigate the effect of word of mouth towards brand equity formation is still lacking. This is agreed by Murtiasih et al. (2014) where they stated that the impact of word of mouth on brand equity has not been extensively studied. Hence, this study aims to fill this research gap by adding relationship quality as a mediator and extending SMEs as the context of the study.

For the third variable, this study will incorporate the brand personality as one of the variable to be measured. Researchers (Tong & Li, 2013; Wang, Yang, & Liu, 2009) mentioned that brand personality is an important promotional tool in differentiating brand from competitors. In an empirical study conducted by Kim, Han, and Park (2001), it was shown that brand personality has a significant relationship with one of the elements of brand communication which is positive word of mouth. Thus, this study assumes that brand personality and word of mouth are related and have to be explored further.

2.3.3 Brand Personality

Brand personality is referred as ―*a set of human characteristics associated with a brand*" (Aaker, 1997. pg.347). Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) defined brand personality as a set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands. Besides, Valette-Florence and Barnier (2013) explained brand personality as an evaluation based on human personality traits applicable and relevant to the brand and cultural context in which they occur. In other words, brand personality is related to all personality traits which used to characterize a person and associated with a brand (Hashed, Salniza, & Hasnizam, 2016). Brand personality is very important as it reflect on how people feel about a brand, rather than what people think about the brand is (Keller, 1998).

Brand personality is beneficial to companies and consumers. For the companies, brand personality acts as an important component of brand image and equity, and it is linked to the brand value in the consumer's mind (Sung & Kim, 2010). For the consumers, Sung and Kim (2010) stated that brand personality can create and build a relationship with

them, especially if the personality is distinctive, constant, robust, and desirable. Hence, marketers and business owners agree that brand personality is considered as an effective approach to differentiate a brand from its competitors, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of marketing communication effort (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014; Arora & Stoner, 2009; Sung & Kim, 2010). Furthermore, brand personality is found to be less imitable than other product attributes, besides the usage of proper dimension of brand personality may yield more sustainable competitive advantage (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014). This is because a strong, positive brand personality leads to brand association that is favourable, unique, strong, and congruent, thus enhancing the level of brand equity (Freling & Forbes, 2005).

Researchers (Aaker, 1991; Freling et al., 2011) stated that brand personality is a conner stone of consumer-based brand equity. Thus, this leads to the rise of studies on the effect of brand personality on brand equity as it found has important implication in brand management (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014). Besides, most of the companies are turning to brand personality as a practical and essential marketing tool as it will increase brand equity with a consistent set of attributes (Freling et al., 2011; Hashed et al., 2016). Researchers (Aaker, 1997; Toldos-Romero & Orozco-Gomez, 2015) mentioned that brand personality is able to add value to the brand regardless of product type and product category. Hence, Lin (2010) mentioned that consumers usually will choose the brands that comply with their personality and thus, brand personality has been emphasised in many brands and products, including durable goods, non durable goods, entertainment and luxury goods and so on. In summary, brand personality is applicable and relevant to

all product categories (Ambroise et al., 2005; Maehle, Otnes, & Supphellen, 2011). Distinguished brand personality plays an imperative role in building brand success.

In order to measure the brand personality, several researchers have proposed a scale (Aaker, 1997; Ambroise et al., 2005; Geuens et al., 2009). Aaker (1997) conducted a study to develop a reliable and valid scale to assess brand personality. The measurement scale is called the Brand Personality Scale which consists of 42 traits with five dimensions such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. This model has widely been used in most of the academic publications since 1997. Additionally, this model has been adapted in other countries as well, such as Japan and Spain (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001), Mexico (Toldos-Romero & Orozco-Gomez, 2015), Malaysia (Balakrishnan et al., 2008) and Korea (Lee & Kang, 2013; Lee & Oh, 2006).

However, this scale has been critised for several reasons (Avis, 2012; Geuens et al., 2009). Researchers (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Correia Loureiro et al., 2014) stated that Aaker's (1997) scale is based on a loose definition of personality. In other words, the definition of brand personality is ill-defined and includes several other brand characteristics such as gender and age, which are not directly related to personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Gordon, Zainuddin, & Magee, 2016). Thus, Geuens et al. (2009) have proposed The New Measure of Brand Personality (NMBP) and they claimed that their measurement scale is more relevant for brands compared to Aaker's (1997) view. The New Measure of Brand Personality (NMBP) consists of five factors and twelve-item measure: (1) responsibility (3 items), (2) activity (3 items), (3) aggressiveness (2 items), (4) simplicity (2 items) and (5) emotionality (2 items). This

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measurement scale is organised to contain only personality items. Therefore, this study follows the Geuens et al.'s (2009) scale.

2.3.3.1 Brand Personality and Brand Equity

Research on brand personality and brand equity has gained importance in recent years. According to Toldos-Romero and Orozco-Gomez (2015), brand personality is the core dimension of brand image which needs to be considered as fundamental in an effort to build strong brand equity in the market. This is supported by numerous researchers (Aaker, 1996; Aaker, 1997; He, 2012; Keller, 1993) where they stated that brand personality is an important element of the source of brand equity. Moreover, brand personality influences brand loyalty (Karjaluoto, Munnukka, & Salmi, 2016; Kim et al., 2001), brand preferences (Ivens & Valta, 2012) and brand attachment (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Brand attachment and brand preferences lead to brand equity, while brand trust and brand loyalty are the components of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014; Kim, Kim, Kim, Kim, & Kang, 2008).

Brand personality has also been proven to play a significant role in ensuring brand loyalty, forming favourable attitude towards the brand and enhancing brand equity (Seimiene & Kamarauskaite, 2014). Earlier studies disclosed that brand personality enables consumers to differentiate a brand in a product category, enhances consumers' preferences and loyalty to a brand and creates brand equity (e.g Keller, 1993; Valette-Florence et al., 2011). Thus, in summary, brand personality and brand equity are two interrelated branding constructs that need to be understood while designing a brand management strategy. However, only a few studies were found to have investigated the

effect of brand personality on brand equity (Correia Loureiro et al., 2014; Hossien Emari, 2012; Su & Tong, 2015; Valette-Florence et al., 2011) especially for food product.

Su and Tong (2015) conducted a study to examine the effect of brand personality dimensions on brand equity in the global sportswear brands context. Their finding showed that the four dimensions of brand personality (competence, attractiveness, sincerity and innovation) are among the seven dimensions (with the three being activity, excitement and ruggedness) that has contributed significantly to the creation and enhancement of brand equity in sportswear context. The finding also showed that other dimensions of brand personality such as active, exciting, tough and sophisticated do not show a significant advantage in creating value for sportswear brand.

Correia Loureiro et al. (2014) also discovered that brand personality has greatest impact on the brand equity formation. Similarly, Valette-Florence et al. (2011) studied the relative impact of long-term brand management (brand personality) and short-term marketing mix instrument (sales promotion) on brand equity formation. They found that brand personality has a positive impact on brand equity at the aggregate level. The above finding is consistent with the study conducted by Hossien et al. (2012). Hossien et al. (2012) carried out a study to examine the effect of brand personality on brand equity in the chocolate industry in Iran.

Compared with western countries, studies on brand personality in Asia particularly in Malaysia are quite limited (Balakrishnan et al., 2008). Literature indicated that, only few empirical studies was conducted to investigates the effect of brand personality on brand

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management (Balakrishnan, Lee, Md. Shuaib, & Marmaya, 2009; Ong et al., 2015b) especially on SMEs. Hence, Balakrishnan et al. (2008) proposed that further investigation is needed for re-confirmation on the effect of brand personality on brand management. In the same vein, researchers (Ong et al., 2015b; Parijat, Saeed, & Pranab, 2011) argued more studies to be done to investigate the effect of brand personality on brand equity towards other SMEs brand as it may produce different result as compared to global brand. Hence, this study aims to empirically investigate the impact of brand personality on brand equity formation in the context of SMEs food product in Malaysia.

2.4 Relationship Quality

An intervening variable or a mediating variable acts as a bridge to the relationship between independent and dependent variables. Mediating variable also is able to clarify the cause and effect relationship (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Thus, the inclusion of mediating variable in any research framework should enrich its research design (Hanaysha, 2015). Hence, for the purpose of this study, relationship quality is incorporated as a key mediator between marketing activities and brand equity.

Relationship quality is an important concept introduced by Dwyer and Oh (1987), consolidated by Crosby et al. (1990) and further refined by many researchers over 29 years. The concept of relationship quality emerged from an extended issue of relationship marketing (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Bojei & Alwie, 2010). Relationship quality can be described as the activities which are managed to create and sustain relational exchanges and determine customer's perceptions and satisfactions towards brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Besides, Bojei and Alwie (2010) posited that relationship

quality refers to consumer's perception of how well the relationship fulfils the consumer's hope, predictions, goals and requirements.

Reviewing the literature, it shows that the concept of relationship marketing has been widely explored and it was found that relationship quality has been used as a mediator. For example, several studies had examined the role of relationship quality as a mediator between variables such as product innovation, service quality, perceived value and information sharing (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Lai, 2014; Wong et al., 2007).

Pi and Huang (2011) who conducted a study in Taiwan's telecommunication service industry revealed that commitment, satisfaction and trust mediate the relationship between relationship oriented promotion and customer loyalty. Besides, in automobile industry, Taleghani et al.(2011) investigated the effects of relationship quality (brand satisfaction, brand trust and commitment) between brand experience and services quality and customer's repurchase intention. They found that relationship quality mediates the relationship between brand experience and customers' repurchase intention.

Lai (2014) examined the effect of relationship quality in the context of travel agency sector in Macau, China. The findings showed that relationship quality mediates the relationship between perceived value and tourist's loyalty. However, in some studies, relationship quality was found to have acted as a partial mediator between independent variables and dependent variables (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002; Keating, Alpert, Kriz, & Quanzi, 2011).

In the context of Malaysia, several studies that have investigated the effect of relationship quality as a mediating variable (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Noor Hasmini

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& Osman, 2014; Shahrizal & Norjaya, 2013; Tan, Mavondo, & Worthington, 2011).

Hanaysha and Haim (2015c) conducted their study in automotive industry in Malaysia and stated that relationship quality mediates the relationship between product innovation, service quality and brand equity. In the same vein, Tan et al. (2011) also discovered that relationship quality plays an important role as a mediator between innovativeness, market orientation, learning orientation and firm's performance in palm oil sectors in Malaysia. Moreover, there are a number of studies that have investigated relationship quality dimensions namely brand trust, brand commitment and satisfaction as a mediator between certain independent and dependent variables (Zehir et al., 2011).

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that relationship quality has been researched as a mediator between several independent and dependent variables and plays a strong mediator role between them. However, the findings from previous studies are still questionable because the investigation on the connection between relationship quality and branding theories is limited (Shahrizal & Norjaya, 2013) especially in SMEs context. Therefore, another motivation for this study is to investigate the effect of relationship quality as a mediating variable between sources of brand equity and brand equity in the context of SMEs food industry in Malaysia.

2.4.1 Definition of Relationship Quality

Literature indicates that there are many terms that have been used so far to describe relationship quality such as relationship closeness, relationship strength and relationship intensity (Bove & Johnson, 2001). Despite a wave of research interest in relationship quality, however, only a few researchers share a common definition and measure of

relationship quality and there is yet a formal definition to this concept (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Huntley, 2006).

Relationship quality can be viewed from different viewpoints. From the seller's view point, Johnson (1999) defined relationship quality as ―*the overall depth and climate of the inter-firm relationship" (p.6)*. This definition takes into consideration the interchange between buyers and sellers, business-to-business relationships, rather than relationships between individual and companies.

From buyer's viewpoint, Huntley (2006) described relationship quality as ―*the degree to which customers are satisfied over time with the overall relationship as manifested in product quality, service quality, and price paid for value received, and the degree to which the relationship functions as a partnership" (p. 706)*. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) described relationship quality as an overall evaluation of relationship strength that can be used as an indicator of the health and future well-being of long-term relationships. From customer's view point, Crosby et al. (1990) viewed relationship quality as the situation where the customer can reduce their uncertainties by relying on the salesperson's integrity and future performance based on past performance. They viewed relationship quality as a trade-off between value and risk, whereby a customer's perceived uncertainty is negatively related to the value of his or her relationship with a seller. This relationship shapes the total impression that customers have pertaining to the entire relationship that they tie with firms (Wong & Sohal, 2002).

In summary, relationship quality is particularly relevant to the interaction between customer and company. Therefore, it is valuable to study the effect of relationship

quality in strengthening customer-brand relationship. This is because the success of any firm depends on its ability to retain the added values by establishing long-term relationship based on experience and knowledge, hence consumers can be connected and interact with the firm (Taleghani et al., 2011).

2.4.2 The Concept of Relationship Quality

Relationship marketing can be defined as ―*all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22)*. The main objective of relationship marketing is to improve marketing productivity by achieving efficiency and effectiveness (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995a). Therefore, building, improving, maintaining and developing successful relational exchanges with customers require firms to invest in additional resources to attain their goals (Haim, Noor Hasmini, & Hanaysha, 2014).

A key concept of relationship marketing is relationship quality, which is also referred to as relationship strength or relationship closeness and plays an important role in influencing customer's loyalty (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). A positive brand relationship leads to a strong emotional attachment of the consumer to the brand and results in a higher intention to repurchase the brand in order to maintain and nurture the good relationship (Fournier, 1998; Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes, & Vogel, 2010).

The best assessment of relationship strength and behavioural loyalty which is known as relationship quality consists of a combination of commitment, trust and relationship satisfaction (De Wulf et al., 2001; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012). These three core

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variables of satisfaction, trust and commitment which are treated as key interrelated components of relationship quality have mainly been tested in the field of relationship with service providers (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002).

2.4.3 Dimensions of Relationship Quality

Past literature shows that relationship quality can be measured through several dimensions and the dimensions vary from one study to another. However, many researchers reached a consensus that satisfaction, trust and commitment are the key indicators of relationship quality (Athanasopoulou, 2009; De Wulf et al., 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; Palmatier et al., 2006; Vesel & Zabkar, 2010). Indeed, these three dimensions are interrelated (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Taleghani et al. (2011) also mentioned that relationship quality in terms of consumers is composed of trust, commitment and satisfaction. To date, a combination of commitment, trust and satisfaction is the best measurement for the assessment of relationship strength and behavioural loyalty (Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2011; De Wulf et al., 2001; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012). However, in the service sector's context, Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) stated that the concept of relationship quality is composed of only two dimensions which are trust and satisfaction. This is in line with Crosby, Evans, and Cowles (1990) where they used trust and satisfaction in their study as the dimensions of relationship quality. As this study attempts to examine the effect of relationship quality in SMEs food industry context, the most relevant dimensions which are satisfaction, trust and commitment will be used as the indicators of relationship quality.

2.4.3.1 Satisfaction

Satisfaction is an important element and main determinant in the relationship between customer and companies (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015d; Tuan & Ahmad, 2013). This is supported by researchers such as Crosby et al., (1990) and Kim, Lee, and Lee (2005) where they considered satisfaction as one of the major factors in determining the brand relationship quality.

Satisfaction refers to customer's affective or emotional state towards a relationship where it reflects exclusively the customer's satisfaction with the overall exchange (Palmatier et al., 2006). Previously, Garbarino and Johnson (1999, p. 390) defined *satisfaction as an overall evaluation based on the total purchase and consumption experience with goods or service over time*. Oliver (1997) defined satisfaction as pleasurable fulfilment where the consumer senses that consumption fulfils some need, desire, goal or so forth and that this fulfilment is pleasurable. Similarly, Islam, Khan Khadem, and Alauddin (2011) described brand satisfaction as the extent of the product or brand matches customer's expectation.

According to Kim, Kim, Kim, Kim, and Kang (2008), satisfaction results from customers who have good experiences and positive evaluation towards a brand. They further indicate that customers who have confidence in a brand will be highly committed and continue to buy the brand which meets their satisfaction level. Customers' satisfaction towards products and services delivered by a brand has been shown and empirically proven that it influences customers to make decision to maintain the relationship (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994; Fornell, 1992; Haim et al., 2014).

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According to Prasad and Dev (2000), brand satisfaction is imperative in managing brand equity. This is because brand satisfaction plays a significant role in the process of creating brand equity. Unfortunately, the studies investigating the effect of brand satisfaction on brand equity is scarce and under researched (Ha et al., 2010). Thus, this study intends to fill this gap by examining the effect of brand satisfaction as a mediator on brand equity.

2.4.3.2 Brand Trust

In branding literature, the concept of brand trust is based on the idea of brand-consumer relationship, which is seen as a substitute for human contact between company and consumers (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995b). Trust can be defined as the confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared (Deutsch, 1975). Next, Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992) defined trust as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) viewed brand trust as the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of a brand to perform its stated function. Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005) described brand trust as the confident expectations of the brand's reliability and intention. It represents the confidence that the relational party in an exchange will not manipulate another's vulnerability. Accordingly, to trust a brand implicitly means that there is a high probability or expectancy that the brand will result in positive outcomes for the customer (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). On the other hand, distrust relationship aids to decrease the level of commitment in a relationship and lead the transactions to more direct short-term exchanges (Noor Hasmini, 2012).

Brand trust evolves from past experience and prior interaction (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999) because its development is portrayed more often as an individual's experiential process of learning over time (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005). According to Fournier (1998), trust is a vital element in the process of building strong consumer-brand relationships. Trust is considered as a key determinant of any long-term relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In reality, any kind of relationship entails vulnerability and uncertainty. However, when brand trust complements a relationship, it will result in a stable and lasting relationship (Louis & Lombart, 2010). Therefore, relationship based on trust is imperative and it becomes a major determinant of brand commitment.

2.4.3.3 Brand Commitment

Commitment has been broadly studied in relation to brands and their potential customers (Beloucif, Donaldson, & Kazanci, 2004). It has also been extensively underlined as an important component that clarifies the nature of a relationship between companies and customers, and it plays a vital role in sustaining long-term relationship as well (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Haim et al., 2014).

Commitment has been described as an exchange partner believing that an enduring relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it, that is, the committed party believes that relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Moorman et al. (1992) viewed brand commitment as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship with a brand. In a consumer-brand relationship context, Fournier (1998) defined brand commitment as an

emotional or psychological attachment to a brand within a product class. Commitment can also be termed as consumers' ultimate relationship disposition, encompassing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours toward a brand and their relationship with that brand (Hess & Story, 2005). Similarly, brand commitment can be defined as an average consumer's long-term behavioural and attitudinal disposition towards a relational brand (Taleghani et al., 2011).

Commitment is one of the most significant variables associated with successful marketing relationship and it is considered as a valuable dimension in measuring customer's loyalty and forecasting future purchase intentions (Dwyer et al., 1987; Haim et al., 2014; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In addition, Morgan and Hunt (1994) stated that successful relationship marketing requires both relationship commitment and trust between brand and its customers, and these elements are essential for relationship development. Consequently, Taleghani et al. (2011) argued that brand commitment has a strong relationship on customer repurchase intention for a brand. Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993) also asserted that customers who are committed to a relationship might have a greater tendency to remain consistent in selecting the same brand in future purchases. Therefore, commitment is not only an important characteristic to maintain a strong and long-lasting relationship, but also as an expression of willingness to stay with the same brand (Hilman & Hanaysha, 2015).

Relationship commitment exists when the exchange partner believes that an ongoing relationship with another partner is very crucial as to permit full efforts in sustaining it (Beloucif et al., 2004; Bojei & Alwie, 2010; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Successful

relationship provides strong platform for strengthening brand success and delivering customer's values (Hilman & Hanaysha, 2015).

2.5 The Sources of Brand Equity and Relationship Quality

This section discusses the relationship between the sources of brand equity namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and relationship quality.

2.5.1 Packaging and Relationship Quality

Packaging is also found to have a link with relationship quality (Löfgren et al., 2008). Earlier researchers (Fournier, 1998; Underwood, 2003) stated that packaging plays an important role in the formation and development of the consumer-brand relationship. Moreover, researchers such as Rundh (2009) and Pentina et al. (2013) pointed out that packaging and relationship quality are able to contribute to competitive advantage to firms. If these two elements are strategically managed by company, it will increase sales (Wang, 2013) and positively affect future sales (Pentina et al., 2013). This is because an appropriate packaging is able to generate a high level of brand preference and forms positive perception towards product quality and product value (Wang, 2013). Therefore, Wang (2013) argued that a greater understanding of packaging and relationship quality may help firms to create a more successful product become more competitive in the market.

Studies conducted by Gómez et al. (2015) have concretely proven that the element of packaging such as technical, functional and informative quality is able to influence consumer's satisfaction. Satisfaction in turn influences loyalty. These findings are

consistent with a study conducted by Löfgren, Witell, and Gustafsson (2008) who wished to acquire a clearer understanding on how customers evaluate different aspects of product packaging in the first and second moments of truth. The result of their study showed that benefits and attributes play different roles in affecting customer's satisfaction and loyalty in different parts of the consumption cycle. Furthermore, there are significant differences in the impacts of customer satisfaction on loyalty in the first moment of truth compared to the second moment of truth.

As for the SMEs, to the best of my knowledge, there are only a limited number of studies that investigated the impact of packaging on relationship quality in SMEs food industry context. Earlier studies on packaging in Malaysian SMEs gave more focus on the customers' perception (Maznah et al., 2011) and the development of the system for SMEs food packaging (Marjudi, Sulaiman, Mohamad Amran, Kahar, & Abdullah, 2011). Maznah et al. (2011) examined the effect of SMEs food product packaging towards consumers' perception. Four factors were identified that influence the consumer's perception towards SMEs packaging, which are design and graphic form, colour, typography and convenient of usage. They found that the right food packaging is able to influence positive perception on SMEs food products. On the other hand, Marjudi et al. (2011) conceptually proposed an approach to support the process of designing packaging for SMEs food product. From these two studies, it recognised the importance of packaging to SMEs food industry. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the effect of packaging on relationship quality for SMEs food industry in Malaysia.

2.5.2 Word of Mouth and Relationship Quality

Word of mouth is also found to have a significant relationship with brand relationship quality variables. Researchers (Alam & Norjaya, 2010; Ha, 2004; Xingyuan et al., 2010) investigated the effect of word of mouth on brand trust. Brand trust is considered as a key factor in the success of relationship marketing efforts (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sung & Kim, 2010). Ha (2004) examined the factors affecting consumer's perceptions on brand trust on the Web. Security, privacy, brand name, word of mouth, good online experience and quality of information were the measured factors. She revealed that word of mouth communication has a strong effect on brand trust among customers in e-commerce. It was also shown that there is a positive connection between brand communication specifically word of mouth on brand relationship quality. Alam and Norjaya (2010) also have confirmed that word of mouth has a significant effect on the level of brand trust among the consumers. These authors stressed that word of mouth is the most powerful form of communication in the business culture. Xingyuan et al. (2010) conducted a study to examine the effects of user experience, advertising and word of mouth communication as information sources on brand trust. The results of their study showed that information from word of mouth has a significant impact on brand awareness where the content of word of mouth centers on product knowledge, perceived value and brand availability.

Literature indicates that studies that investigate the link between the other two dimensions of relationship quality are scarce. File and Prince (1992) found that the information from word of mouth communication does not contribute significantly on the brand satisfaction.

2.5.3 Brand Personality and Relationship Quality

Brand personality also has a positive relationship with relationship quality (Louis & Lombart, 2010) and the dimensions of relationship quality (Ambroise et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2009; Sung & Kim, 2010).

Louis and Lombart (2010) conducted a study to examine the impact of brand personality on three major relational consequences which are trust, attachment and commitment to a brand. Data was collected via convenience sampling from 348 French consumers by using a self-administered questionnaire about the Coca-Cola brand. Findings showed that all of the nine personality traits of the Coca-Cola brand studied in their research directly affect at least one of the three relational consequences. In addition, they have an indirect influence (except for the charming and ascendant personality traits) on commitment via trust and attachment to the brand.

Sung and Kim (2010) investigated the impact of five brand personality dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness) on brand trust. Their finding showed that sincerity and ruggedness dimensions are more likely to influence the level of brand trust. On the other hand, Ambroise et al. (2005) conducted a study to investigate the impact of brand personality on brand commitment in two product categories in France. The construct of brand personality was measured through the seven personality facets such as charming, reliable, creative, attractive, classic, elegant, and enthusiasm. The findings of this study showed that brand personality does significantly influence brand commitment. Lee et al. (2009) found that brand personality has a positive effect on brand satisfaction in family restaurants in Seoul, Korea.

Reviewing the literature, it is shown that brand equity measure alone is not sufficient for building brands in the long term (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014). Rather, consideration has to be given to brand relationship factors (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006). Ahmad and Thyagaraj (2014) stated that brand personality and brand relationship are the two important building blocks of brand equity and they suggested future researchers to investigate the role of brand personality in the creation of brand equity, since this research stream is still in its infancy. Therefore, this study takes the challenge to investigate the impact of marketing activities such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on relationship quality in SMEs food industry in Malaysia.

2.6 Relationship Quality and Brand Equity

Previous studies have shown that relationship quality has a positive relationship in brand equity formation. Researchers have also shown that relationship quality has a significant positive influence on the dimensions of brand equity namely brand awareness (Kim et al., 2008; Loureiro & Miranda, 2011), brand association and perceived quality. Researchers (Azizi & Kapak, 2013; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Lai, 2014; Tuan & Ahmad, 2013) found that relationship quality also has a positive relationship with brand loyalty.

Overall, earlier studies confirmed that relationship quality has a significant effect on brand equity (Ha et al., 2010; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014). Hanaysha and Haim (2015c) assessed the mediating effect of relationship quality between product innovation, service quality and brand equity. They found that relationship quality plays a role as a mediator between product innovation, service

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quality and brand equity. Similarly, Noor Hasmini and Osman (2014) found that relationship quality mediates the relationship market orientation and brand equity in Malaysia automotive industry. This is supported by Ha et al.'s (2010) study where they revealed that relationship quality mediates the relationship between perceived quality and brand equity.

Next, another essential point is to confirm the effect of relationship quality on brand equity. Torres and Tribo (2011) conducted a study to examine the effect of customer satisfaction on brand equity and found that brand satisfaction has a positive effect on brand equity. Furthermore, Noor Hasmini (2012) also found that relationship quality assets namely satisfaction, trust and commitment are able to enhance the level of brand equity in the automobile industry.

However, literature review has indicated that studies relating to relationship quality are relatively scanty and that there is limited number of study focusing on relationship quality as a mediator especially in Malaysian SMEs context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the mediating effect of relationship quality on the relationship between marketing activities and brand equity.

Based on the discussions in sections 2.3 and 2.5, it is indicated that the sources of brand equity namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality have a significant positive relationship with relationship quality. In addition, literature also revealed that relationship quality is a significant predictor of brand equity. To elaborate further, earlier studies have indicated that customer satisfaction, trust and commitment are imperative in creating and nurturing brand equity. Thus, it can be concluded that relationship quality

could act as a mediating role between marketing strategies and brand equity. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), mediating variable is any variables which works between independent variable and dependent variable. Specifically, if the direct effect from independent variable to dependent variable does not exist, instead the effect exists indirectly through another variable, then that variable can be claimed as a mediating variable. In this study, relationship quality is treated as a mediating variable between marketing strategies and brand equity. As such, it can be considered as one of the contributions of this research. The next section will explain the underlying theories for the variables presented in this study.

2.7 Underpinning Theory

There are several theories in marketing research to explain the formation of brand equity. For this study, the main underpinning theories used to explain the research theoretical framework are: brand equity theory and social exchange theory.

2.7.1 Brand Equity Theory

The underlying theory used in this study is Brand Equity Theory. This theory takes into account that brand equity comprises the awareness of brand name, loyal customers, perceived quality and brand association that add or detract from the value of the product or service (Aaker, 1991). Reviewing the literature, there are several scholars who proposed the theory of brand equity. Among the most prominent are Farquhar (1989), Aaker (1991; 1996), Keller (1993) and Yoo et al. (2000). Farquhar (1989) provided the definition of brand equity as the added value endowed by a brand to a product. He added

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that brand equity can be examined through three main perspectives which are firms', trades' and consumers' respectively.

Brand equity as noted earlier is a multi-dimensional (Aaker, 1991; 1996). It consists of five dimensions of brand assets, which comprise brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association and other proprietary brand assets such as patent, trademark and channel relationship. Out of the five brand equity dimensions proposed by Aaker, the four dimensions of brand equity (i.e. brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand associations) reflect consumer's perceptions, evaluation and reactions to the brand, while other proprietary brand assets are not relevant to consumer-based brand equity and usually are omitted (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010; Tong & Hawley, 2009a). All of these four brand assets are the most frequently adopted dimensions in facilitating the findings of marketing and consumer's behaviour research in relation to brand equity (Tong & Hawley, 2009a; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Yoo et al., 2000). The management of these brand assets is critical since they are considered as key marketing assets (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010; Davis, 2002), which are able to nurture long-term buying behaviour (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010).

Other researchers for example Keller (1993), proposed similar dimensions in his conceptual model of brand equity and used the word brand knowledge to refer to brand awareness and brand image. Brand knowledge as proposed by Keller (1993) is considered as an element of brand equity. According to him, brand knowledge is made up of brand awareness and brand association, where these two dimensions refer to Aaker's five dimensions. Nevertheless, Keller (1993) conceptualised brand knowledge as a separate construct from brand equity. He has also suggested that there is a

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significant relationship between brand knowledge and brand equity (Keller, 1993). In Keller's (1993) conceptualisation, brand equity, which he called the customer-based brand equity, is defined as ―the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer‗s response to the marketing of the brand‖. This means that brand equity occurs when the customer is familiar with the brand and holds some favourable, strong, and unique brand association in their mind.

To enhance the level of brand equity, there is a need to create a positive response towards marketing strategies for the brand. Therefore, marketing programmes such as pricing policy, marketing communication effort, sponsorship, publicity and other activities must be designed effectively (Tong & Hawley, 2009b). Hence, there is an urgency for the managers to understand how their marketing programmes affect customer‗s learning and, subsequently, recall, for brand-related information (Noor Hasmini, 2011). Favourable customer‗s response and positive customer-based brand equity in turn can lead to enhanced revenue, lower costs and greater profits (Tong & Hawley, 2009b). Also, positive brand equity should increase the probability of brand choice, as well as produce greater customer loyalty and decrease weaknesses in face of competitive marketing actions (Keller, 1993). On the other hand, Blackston (1995) employed the term ‗brand meaning‗ as the qualitative dimension of brand equity. He mentioned qualitative dimension as the qualities of a brand that create value and is measured in terms of brand awareness, brand association and brand personality (Blackston, 1995).

Reviewing the literature, the theory of brand equity is further expanded by Aaker (1996) with the introduction of Brand Equity Ten Model (Aaker, 1996). Brand Equity Ten

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Model elaborated that the brand equity phenomenon requires tapping the scope of brand equity assets, such as brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand association (that creates brand image), brand awareness, and market behaviour (for example, market share, market price and distribution coverage). This guideline for the creation of a strong brand is generally accepted within the field of business writing, although none of them applies specifically to SMEs (Krake, 2005).
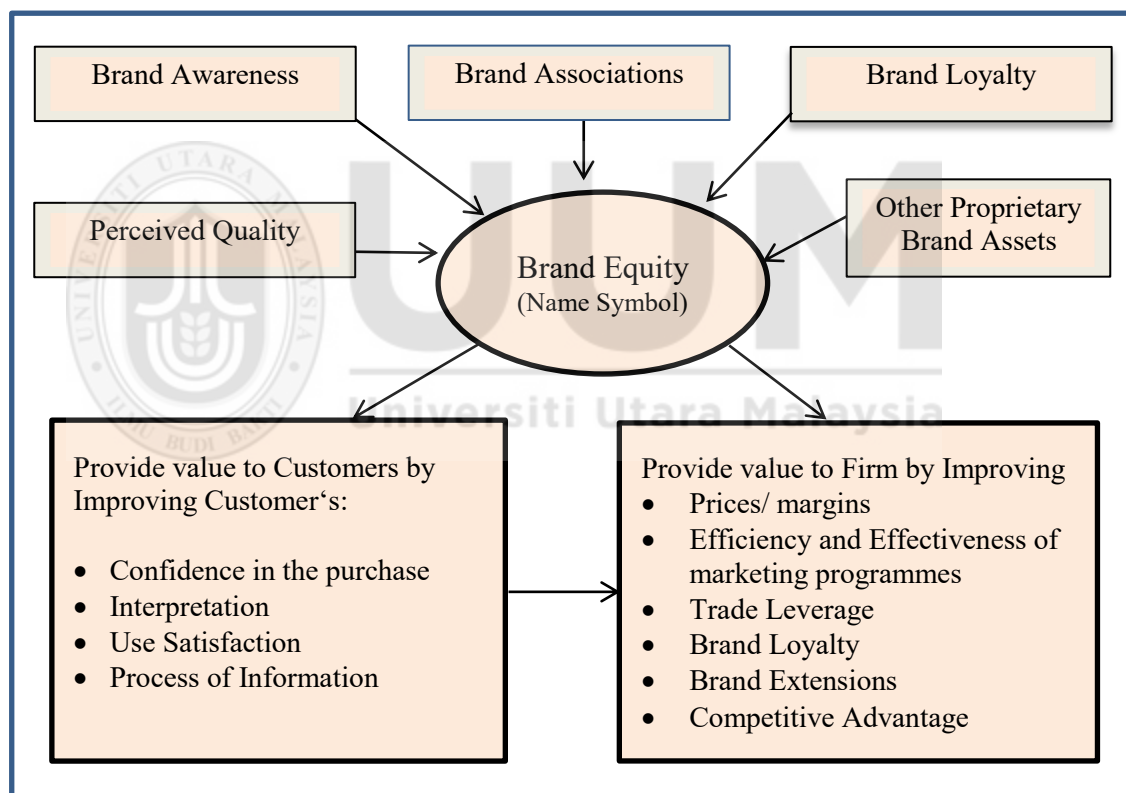

Figure 2.1:
Aaker's Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991)

Using Aaker's theory as the base, Yoo et al. (2000) created a conceptual model known as Brand Equity Creation Process Model (BECPM) (refer Figure 2.2). BECPM is an

extension of Aaker's idea as mentioned by Tong and Hawley (2009) and Yoo and Donthu (2001). BECPM is used to systematically examine the relationship among marketing efforts, brand equity dimensions and overall brand equity towards value to customers and firms (Yoo et al., 2000). In other words, Yoo et al. (2000) have proposed the idea to investigate the brand equity by considering antecedents-dimensions-brand equity linkages.
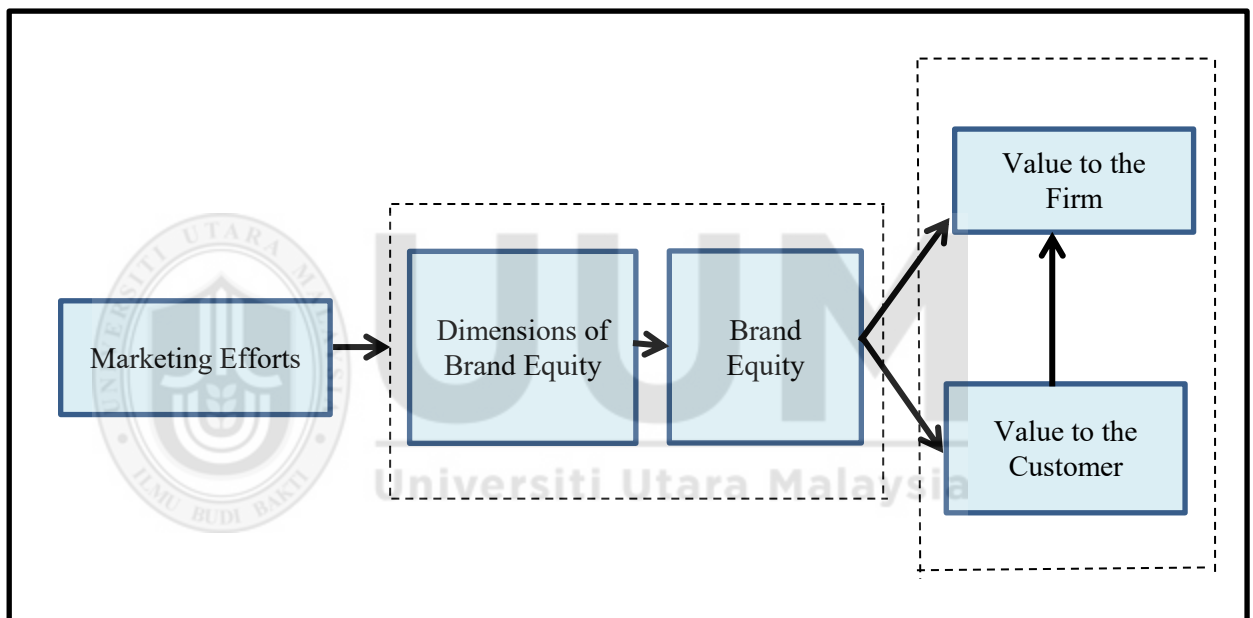
Figure 2.2:
Brand Equity Creation Process Model (BECPM).

Referring to the conceptual framework proposed by Yoo et al. (2000), they added a separate construct of brand equity which was not introduced in Aaker's original theory of brand equity. This separate construct refers to the overall brand equity and it is placed between the brand equity assets and the consequences of brand equity which gives value to the customer and to the firm. The rationale for setting this separate construct is to gain

more understanding on how each dimension of brand equity assets contributes to brand equity. The second extension proposed by Yoo et al. (2000) is the addition of marketing activities such as price, store image, distribution intensity, advertising spending and price promotions or deals as the antecedents of brand equity. They assumed that these marketing activities have significant effect on brand equity variable, which in turn strengthen the firm's and customer's value (Tong & Hawley, 2009b). The idea to propose the marketing efforts as an antecedent of brand equity is based on Keller's (1993) idea. According to Keller (1993), marketing efforts which are portrayed as antecedents are the most important predictors for the brand equity assets such as brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand association.

The empirical study conducted by Yoo et al. (2000) resulted in findings that from strategic brand management's perspective, two types of marketing efforts emerged which are brand-building activity and brand-harming activity. Frequent use of price promotions can decrease the level of brand equity and it is considered as an example of brand-harming activity. The more frequent the use of price promotion, the more value of brand equity will reduce. Conversely, elements of brand building such as high advertising spending, high price, distribution through retailers with good store images, and high distribution intensity can increase the level of brand equity. All of these elements identified are able to enhance the level of brand equity. Although Yoo et al. (2000) have provided theoretical and substantive explanations, they proposed that more studies should be carried out to examine more marketing actions to enhance the explanatory power of the brand equity phenomenon. This is because they have managed to test only a few marketing efforts.

Taking into account of Yoo et al's (2000) suggestion, many researchers have conducted studies to examine the sources of brand equity. Their findings showed that the sources of brand equity such as advertising frequency, word of mouth's recommendation (Chattopadhyay, Shivani, et al., 2010), price, store image, distribution intensity, advertising expenditure and price promotions (Yoo et al., 2000), country-of-origin image (Norjaya et al., 2007), even sponsorship, TV advertising, print advertising, and Web advertising (Tong & Hawley, 2009a), family influence and viral marketing (Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011), and market orientation (Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014) can create positive relationships with brand equity formation. Despite the fact that many sources of brand equity have been investigated, marketers still need to find new sources that can contribute and facilitate brand building. As mentioned by a few researchers (e.g. Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Norjaya et al., 2007), more studies should attempt to examine other potential sources of brand equity impacting various product categories. This is because consumer's decision making process is influenced by many factors (Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011). Thus, by using BECPM, this study aims to examine the impact of the selected marketing strategies on brand equity in the context of SMEs food product by engaging relationship quality as a mediator. All of these three marketing strategies namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality are predicted to be able to give an impact on brand equity formation.

2.7.2 Social Exchange Theory

Relationship marketing has been in the literature since 1980s. It emphasises on the company's capability to establish, develop and maintain successful relational exchanges with customers and sustain them. Within the relationship marketing paradigm, topics on

relationship quality have gained interest among researchers (Crosby et al., 1990). Relationship quality was first presented to practitioners and researchers by Gummerson in 1987 in the context of Erikson Quality program (Vieira, Winklhofer, & Ennew, 2008). Over the past two decades, relationship quality has become one of the important constructs of relationship marketing literature (Woo & Ennew, 2004) and gained importance as a main factor in maintaining and strengthening a long-term relationship and developing successful relationships between customer to buyer relationship and business-to-business relationship (Dorsch, Swanson, & Kelley, 1998; Dwyer et al., 1987; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Taleghani et al., 2011; Woo & Ennew, 2004). According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), relationship quality is a desire reflected by customers to build long-term relationship with a brand based on mutual trust and commitment. In particular, a consensus by scholars stated that relationship quality is made up of three main elements namely trust, commitment and satisfaction (Dorsch et al., 1998; Haim et al., 2014).

Based on past literature, commitment has been considered as a significant mediating factor that influences consumer behaviours (Aggarwal, 2004). Theoretically, there exists a considerable agreement on the role of brand commitment and trust as mediating factors that have direct effects on consumer behaviour (Sung & Campbell, 2009). Morgan and Hunt (1994) proposed that commitment and trust mediate the relationship between variables, and future researchers should consider further element to measure relationship quality.

Moreover, extant literature reveals that social exchange theory is a common theoretical framework for studying the interpersonal relationship between brands and their

customers (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Further, literature also shows that Thibaut and Kelley (1959) are among the earlier scholars who have discussed relationship in economic theories. Social exchange theory states that relational exchange participants can be expected to derive complex, personal, non-economic satisfactions and engage in social exchange (Dwyer et al., 1987). It is the model of human behaviour that was developed to explain the processes of building relationships with customers and sustaining them. According to social exchange theory, customers assess their relationships in comparison with the other alternatives.

Social exchange theory also has been applied in the field of customer relationships (Dainton & Zelley, 2011). It describes when and why customers are willing to develop and sustain their personal relationship with certain brands and not with others. Moreover, the theory explains the levels of users' satisfaction and to what extent they are willing to maintain it (Perkins & Algren, 2011).

Generally, social exchange theory has been recognised as an appropriate theory to explain relationship quality elements such as trust, satisfaction and commitment with regard to various brands (Perkins & Algren, 2011; Williams, 2012). The basic premise of this theory stresses that customers assess relationships in terms of their consequences (Dainton & Zelley, 2011). In particular, each relationship can be analysed in terms of the incurred costs as well as received rewards (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Cost refers to shortcomings which are not pleasant or stop us from reaching our objectives, whereas rewards refer to any pleasant paybacks that could enable us to attain a particular goal (Dainton & Zelley, 2011).

Nyadzayo, Matanda and Ewing (2011) considered social exchange theory as a relevant theory for understanding the effect of relationship quality on creating brand equity. According to Son, Narasimhan and Riggins (2005), theoretical assumption about the effect of relationship quality on brand equity is explained based on the main exchanges, benefits and value through social exchange theory. Moreover, Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005) indicated that relationships with customers are the main antecedents and assets of brand equity. Thus, social exchange theory provides the theoretical base for the link between relationship quality and brand equity (Hanaysha, 2015b).

Based on the above discussion, this research proposes that social exchange theory is relevant to understand the relationships between customers and brands. This study seeks to provide a contribution to this theory as well as to understand customer relationships in the field of branding.

2.8 Introduction to Key Research Variables

From the critical review of the literature, several key research variables for this study were identified and discussed in the following sub-sections.

2.8.1 Brand Equity

Brand equity can be described as a set of brand assets and liabilities associated to a brand, its name and symbol that could add to or detract the value provided by a product or service to a company or to its customers (Aaker, 1991). Keller (1993) explained that

brand equity is the differential response of brand knowledge of the consumer reaction to the marketing of the brand.

Brand equity has been expressed previously as a multidimensional (Aaker, 1991). Hence, Aaker (1991) stated that the dimensions of brand equity are; brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty. In contrast, Keller (1993) stressed that brand equity consists only two dimensions which are brand awareness and brand image. Researchers, Anselmsson, Johansson, and Persson (2007) highlighted that Aaker's viewpoint on brand equity dominates the empirical study on brand equity because his framework is more practical to use and easy to operationalise and measure. Hence, by considering Anselmsson et al.'s (2007) argument, it is imperative for this study to define and measure brand equity of SMEs food product by using the four dimensions namely brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty.

2.8.2 Packaging

Packaging plays a vital role in branding and product success (Agariya et al., 2012; Azad & Masoumi, 2012; Simms & Trott, 2010). The right packaging enables a brand to create a unique position in the consumer's mind and marketplace (Agariya et al., 2012). Thus, Rundh (2013) stressed that packaging is one of the important sources for creating competitive advantage. In sum, packaging is important for creating brand equity because it signals quality and influence the perceived quality (Anselmsson et al., 2007).

2.8.3 Word of mouth

Word of mouth is an important form of promotion that is able to convey product's information in a verbal approach (Chattopadhyay, Shivani, & Krishnan, 2010; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). In principal, word of mouth is known as the process of personal influence, in which interpersonal communication between a sender and a receiver can alter the receiver's behaviour or attitude (Chattopadhyay, Shivani, et al., 2010). Previous studies have indicated that positive word of mouth communication has a significant relationship on brand equity formation (Chattopadhyay, Shivani, et al., 2010; Murtiasih et al., 2014). Positive word of mouth is more effective and has a greater effect on people's willingness to use a product (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2014). Therefore, by considering the effectiveness of word of mouth is three times more than advertising, Mazzarol, Sweeney and Soutar (2007) suggested to companies to utilise word of mouth communication and incorporate it as one of the brand communication strategies.

2.8.4 Brand Personality

Brand personality can be described as a set of human characteristics associated to a brand (Aaker, 1997). Certain researchers, Aaker (1996) and Pappu et al. (2005) mentioned that brand personality contributes to the creation of brand equity. Recently, studies conducted by Correia Loureiro et al. (2014) and Valette-Florence et al. (2011) also indicated that brand personality has a positive link with brand equity. In sum, brand personality can be one of the sources of consumer-based brand equity and needs to be

considered when designing strategy for brand management (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014; Freling et al., 2011).

2.8.5 Relationship Quality

Relationship quality has gradually gained attention among researchers and practitioners as it is considered as one of the most important business assets for companies (Wong, Hung, & Chow, 2007). Researchers (such as Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006; Kaynak & Zhou, 2010; Wong et al., 2007) stressed that relationship quality has a significant effect on brand's success especially in highly competitive market. This is because relationship quality is able to develop and maintain long-term relationship with existing customers (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Wong et al., 2007). Relationship quality is composed of three dimensions namely brand satisfaction, brand trust and brand commitment.

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a review of literature related to the variables undertaken in this study, which are packaging, word of mouth, brand personality, relationship quality and brand equity. The next chapter introduces the theoretical framework, and discusses the hypotheses that were formulated based on the literature review and the discussion regarding the relationships among variables.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the framework of this study which was developed based on the literature and underpinning theories. The formulated hypotheses that explain the relationships among the variables are also discussed here. Specifically, this chapter consists of research framework, hypotheses development, research design, population and sample size, measurement, validation of instrument, pilot test, data collection and administration and data analysis techniques.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Based on the review of literature and underlying theories discussed in Chapter Two, the proposed theoretical framework for this study is as shown in Figure 3.1. The theoretical framework of this study is an integrative summary of the elements of sources of brand equity namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality. Relationship quality was examined to determine whether it mediates the relationship between packaging, word of mouth and brand personality with brand equity.

Independent Variables

Dependent Variables

Sources of Brand Equity

```
┌─────────────────┐
│                 │
│    Packaging    │────┐
│                 │    │
└─────────────────┘    │        ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
                       │        │ RELATIONSHIP     │      │ BRAND EQUITY         │
┌─────────────────┐    │        │ QUALITY          │      │ • Brand awareness    │
│                 │    ├───────▶│ Brand satisfaction│────▶│ • Brand Association  │
│  Word of mouth  │────┤        │ Brand Trust      │      │ • Perceived Quality  │
│                 │    │        │ Brand Commitment │      │ • Brand Loyalty      │
└─────────────────┘    │        └──────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
                       │
┌─────────────────┐    │
│                 │    │
│ Brand Personality│───┘
│                 │
└─────────────────┘
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Mediating Variable
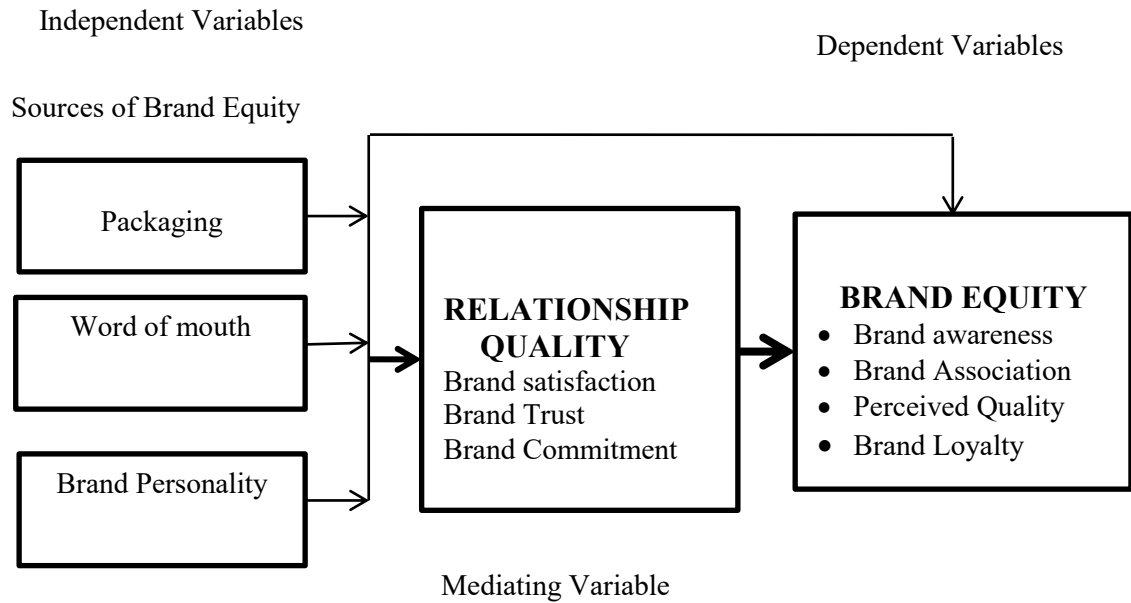
Figure 3.1:
Theoretical Framework

Brand equity has received tremendous attention in marketing research. The leading

scholar in brand equity, Aaker (1991), conceptualised that brand equity is a

multidimensional concept. The dimensions namely brand awareness, brand association,

perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary assets. Furthermore, Keller (1993)

explained that brand equity which is indicated by brand knowledge is formed by two

dimensions; brand awareness and brand image. Principally, both scholars Aaker (1991;

1996) and Keller (1993) emphasised the importance of brand awareness and view this

dimension as a prerequisite to strong brands. They differ only on the views of brand

loyalty dimension. Aaker (1991;1996) considered loyalty to be a determinant of brand

equity, while Keller (1993) viewed it as a consequence of a strong brand and brand assets.

However, literature indicates that Aaker's viewpoint on brand equity has dominated the empirical studies (Atilgan et al., 2005; Buil et al., 2008; Christodoulides et al., 2015; Gill & Dawra, 2010; Pappu et al., 2005). Hence, by considering the literature, this study aims to contribute to the theory of brand equity by assessing brand equity based on four dimensions as proposed by Aaker (1991;1996) in the SMEs' food industry in Malaysia based on consumers' perspectives.

In order to manage brand equity efficiently, the antecedents and consequences of brand equity should be taken into consideration (Noor Hasmini, 2011). However, literature on the brand equity theory reveals that neither Aaker's model nor Keller's model has examined how marketing efforts influence brand equity. In relation to this, Yoo et al. (2000) have extended Aaker's model by adding an antecedent of brand equity that is marketing activities in their model and the model is known as Brand Equity Creation Process Model (BECPM). The _antecedents' were treated as independent variables that are limited to only selected marketing activities such as price, store image, distribution intensity, advertising spending and price deals, while the dimensions were the brand equity multidimensional or the brand assets that refer to perceived quality, brand loyalty and the combination of brand awareness and association. However, due to the limitations in their study, Yoo et al. (2000) suggested that future researchers should examine other marketing efforts to enhance the explanatory power of brand equity phenomenon.

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As emphasised by Yoo et al. (2000), any marketing activity has the potential to affect brand equity because it represents the effect of accumulated marketing investment on the brand. They have also highlighted further that brand equity can be developed through a careful long-term investment. As such, to build, manage and maintain the level of brand equity, companies should treat the customer right, stay close to the customer, create switching cost, provide ―extras‖ and measure or manage customer satisfaction (Noor Hasmini, 2011).

Numerous sources of brand equity were identified to contribute to the creation of brand equity. Keller (1993) stated that packaging is one of the important sources which are able to improve the level of brand equity. Packaging can be classified as one of the alternatives that should be considered in the attempt to create a strong brand as it carry a major part of brand identity (Aaker, 1996). According to Aaker (1996), packaging is one of the alternatives that should to be considered in the attempt to create a strong brand. This is because packaging is able to carry a major part of the brand identity. Keller (1993) also stated that packaging is an attribute that is not related to the product and can be one of the sources of brand equity. Other than that, researcher (Rundh, 2013, 2016) argued that packaging plays an important role and can be classified as integrative tool in marketing strategy for creation of competitive advantage through brand differentiating and brand building at the sales outlet. Thus, this indicates that packaging is critical and thus, there is a need to incorporate packaging as one of the marketing strategies as it will add value to the product.

Moreover, Keller (1993) has also identified that word of mouth can develop brand equity through positive information about product. Word of mouth (WOM) also is

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considered as a critical aspect of brand building since it is one of the trusted sources of product information (Keller, 2013). Extant literature showed that positive WOM can help create favourable image of a company and its brand, increase customers' intention to purchase new products and reduce promotional expenditure (Zhang et al., 2014). However, not much evidence were found regarding the effect of WOM marketing in increasing company's performance such as brand equity (Trusov et al., 2009).

Brand personality is another important variable proposed by Aaker (1996) to improve brand equity and enhance the power of brand. Other researchers such as Ambroise et al. (2005) also mentioned that brand personality is considered as an important concept in brand management. According to Aaker (1996), brands without personalities are usually vulnerable, exposed to attacks like stationary fortresses. Thus, researchers (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014; Ankomah Opoku et al., 2007; Ong et al., 2015b) have recognised the importance of brand personality in acquiring sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace.

On the other hand, referring to Aaker's (1991) definition of brand equity where brand equity can be evaluated by the intangible assets and liabilities that linked to a brand. According to Aaker (1991, 1996), relationship quality is considered as important intangible value that contributes to the creation of brand equity assets such as brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand association. The proper implementation of relationship quality will have the potential to create intense, enduring brand equity as a successful relationship marketing which is not only to gain customer's confidence but to imply that the brand equity delivers what the customer wants (Aaker, 1996). Specifically, the ability of a brand to successfully develop brand satisfaction,

brand trust and brand commitment among its customers would provide it better chances to develop its overall brand equity and get it leveraged with the passing of time (Palmer, 2002; Peppers & Rogers, 1995). By enhancing relationship quality, brand equity can be created, maintained and expanded (Noor Hasmini, 2011). Thus, relationship quality with customers plays a significant role in the development of and contribution to the brand equity theory (Nyadzayo et al., 2011).

Literature has also shown that relationship quality has become one of the business strategies that gained attention among scholars to investigate. Relationship quality which consists of brand satisfaction, brand trust and brand commitment plays a significant role in the relationship between consumer and brand (Taleghani et al., 2011). There are a number of studies that have been conducted on relationship quality as a mediator between certain independent variable and dependent variable (Zehir et al., 2011). However, there has been a paucity of empirical evidence on relationship quality as a mediator between marketing strategies and brand equity in the context of SMEs food product. Therefore, this study intends to fill this gap.

Few scholars (Perkins & Algren, 2011; Williams, 2012) indicated that the most appropriate theory to explain relationship quality elements such as trust, satisfaction and commitment with regard to various brands accepted is social exchange theory. Such affirmation is consistent with Thibaut and Kelley (1959), who disclosed that social exchange theory is the most suitable theory to explain the interpersonal relationships between business and their customers. Further, they added that this theory is also able to describe when and why customers are willing to develop and sustain their personal relationships with certain brands while stopping with other brands.

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On the whole, this study gives emphasis on the importance of relationship quality and the said marketing strategies namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality linked with brand equity. Referring to the models of brand equity by Aaker (1991;1996), Keller (1993) and Yoo et al. (2000), the said marketing strategies provide companies a strong platform in enhancing brand equity. In specific, this study examined the effect of marketing strategies on brand equity with relationship quality as a mediator simultaneously in a framework, which is the contribution of this study.

3.3 Hypotheses Development

The hypotheses development for this study was formulated based on the research framework as shown in Figure 3.1 above. The following section addresses this relationship and the arguments from the literature.

3.3.1 Relationship between Packaging and Brand Equity.

In examining the effect of packaging on the formation of brand equity for SMEs food product, this study referred to the brand equity theory by Aaker (1991) and a conceptual model of brand equity known as Brand Equity Creation Process Model (BECPM) developed by Yoo et al. (2000). Reviewing the literature, packaging is categorised as a non-product related attribute which is an external aspect of the product that is able to signal quality and influence the perceived quality (Anselmsson et al., 2007; Keller, 1993). Researchers argued that packaging is an important element that has the ability to encourage purchase decision (Agariya et al., 2012) as well as generate brand satisfaction and loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2006) and create brand equity (Anselmsson et al., 2007).

Prior studies have examined the impact of packaging on brand loyalty (Topoyan & Bulut, 2008), purchase and usage behaviour (Gómez et al., 2015), purchase decisions (Silayoi & Speece, 2004), product preferences (Ogba & Johnson, 2010) and customer satisfaction (Löfgren et al., 2008). For the impact of packaging on brand equity, Keller (1993) and Underwood (2003) have stressed that the link exists. This is supported by Anselmsson et al. (2007) where he also stated that packaging is a vital element for creating brand equity especially for convenience product such as non-durable goods. However, regrettably to date, only Topoyan and Bulut (2008) and Rigaux-Bricmont (1982) investigated the link between packaging and the dimensions of brand equity. Topoyan and Bulut's (2008) findings indicate that there is a relationship between packaging and brand loyalty. However, the relationship can be regarded as between moderate and weak. Whereas Rigaux-Bricmont (1982) found that brand packaging has a significant influence on the consumers' perceived quality. From the discussion above, it can be safely said that there is a need to verify the impact of packaging on brand equity. Thus, the hypothesis was designed as follows:

H_1: There is a positive and significant relationship between packaging and brand equity.

3.3.2 Relationship between Word of mouth and Brand Equity.

In examining the effect of word of mouth towards brand equity formation, this study referred to brand equity theory by Aaker (1991) and a conceptual model of brand equity known as Brand Equity Creation Process Model (BECPM) developed by Yoo et al. (2000). Earlier studies were found to have examined the effectiveness of word of mouth in comparison to other tools of brand communication. Literature has shown that a study

by Trusov et al. (2009) was the first that aimed to achieve an understanding of the relationship between word of mouth and traditional media. The authors analysed the relative influence of referrals compared to the traditional instruments of marketing communication on the membership growth of a social platform. The results showed that word of mouth referrals positively influence membership growth and have a substantially longer carryover effect than traditional marketing activities.

Murtiasih and Siringoringo (2013) found that word of mouth influences brand equity significantly in the positive direction. Similarly, researchers (Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Severi et al., 2014) found that word of mouth has a significant and positive influence on brand equity. However, Chattopadhyay, Shivani, et al. (2010) found word of mouth enhances only two dimensions of brand equity which are perceived quality and brand awareness. On the other hand, Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) who investigated the effect of negative online word of mouth found that negative online product reviews have considerable detrimental effects on the customer-based brand equity and thus lead to brand equity dilution.

In the SMEs context, prior studies have noted that word of mouth is the primary means by which SMEs generate brand awareness towards actual practice of company activities (Abimbola, 2001; Berthon et al., 2008; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Krake, 2005; Ojasalo et al., 2008; Spence & Essoussi, 2010; Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Hence, by considering the discussion above, it is shown that word of mouth does affect brand equity formation. Thus, this study proposed the following hypothesis:

H₂: There is a positive and significant relationship between word of mouth and brand equity.

3.3.3 Relationship between Brand Personality and Brand Equity.

Consumers use brand personality dimension as a significant contributing factor towards brand's added value. Aaker (1996) and Aaker (1997) stated that brand personality is able to warrant a stable brand image over time and permits consumers to express their own personalities. Moreover, brand personality and brand equity are two interrelated branding constructs of which interaction needs to be understood when designing a brand management strategy (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2014).

However, most of the previous studies tend to explore the impact of brand personality on elements that reflect components or consequences of brand equity. For example brand personality affects purchase intentions (Tong & Li, 2013), brand preferences (Balakrishnan et al., 2008), relational consequences; trust, attachment and commitment to the brand (Louis & Lombart, 2010). Despite limited evidence that relates brand personality directly to brand equity and its dimensions, there are studies (e.g. Buil, Martínez, & Chernatony, 2013; Huang, Fang, Huang, Chang, & Fang, 2014; Heiki Karjaluoto, Munnukka, & Salmi, 2016; Ong et al., 2015b) acknowledging the effect of brand personality on dimensions of brand equity which is brand loyalty. Only few of them focused on the impact of brand personality dimensions on brand equity and they found brand personality has a positive impact on brand equity formation (Correia Loureiro et al., 2014; Hossien Emari, 2012; Su & Tong, 2015; Valette-Florence et al., 2011). Besides, brand personality also has been found to have a positive relationship

with a dimension of brand equity such as brand loyalty (Ong et al., 2015b). Based on brand equity theory and the review of earlier studies, this study proposed the hypothesis as the following:

H$_3$: There is a positive and significant relationship between brand personality and brand equity.

3.3.4 Relationship between Packaging and Relationship Quality

In order to create a successful product, greater understanding on packaging is essential (Wang, 2013). An appropriate packaging is able to generate a high level of brand preference and forms positive perception towards product quality and product value (Wang, 2013).

Prior studies have shown that other elements of brand element which are brand logo identification and brand logo benefit have a positive impact on relationship quality (Japutra, Keni, & Nguyen, 2015). Thus, packaging also is expected to have a positive influence on relationship quality. Researchers (Gómez et al., 2015; Löfgren et al., 2008; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008) found that packaging has an impact on relationship quality. Gómez et al.'s (2015) findings have concretely proven that the elements of packaging such as technical, functional and informative quality are able to influence consumer satisfaction. However, Topoyan and Bulut's (2008) findings differed where they found that the relationship between packaging and satisfaction can be regarded as moderate but weaker relationship. Hence, this study is conducted to investigate the relationship between packaging and relationship quality. Therefore, the hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H₄: There a positive and significant relationship between packaging and relationship quality.

3.3.5 Relationship between Word of Mouth and Relationship Quality

In examining the effect of word of mouth towards relationship quality several prior studies are referred to. Reviewing the literature, word of mouth is considered as a promotional tool which delivers a highly credible marketing information that is able to influence purchase decision (Hung & Li, 2007; Riivits-arkonsuo & Leppiman, 2014). This is because the advice from other consumers about product and services is able to generate a greater influence than marketer-generated information such as advertising (Hung & Li, 2007). Riivits-arkonsuo and Leppiman (2014) stressed that consumers' trust word of mouth more than other sources and they rely more on word of mouth when making purchasing decisions.

In this current study, word of mouth is expected to have a positive influence on relationship quality. Prior studies have linked word of mouth and relationship quality (Alam & Norjaya, 2010; File & Prince, 1992; Ha, 2004). Alam and Norjaya (2010) and Ha (2004) confirmed that word of mouth has a significant effect on the level of brand trust. Their findings showed that the better the word of mouth, the higher the level of brand trust the consumer has. Hence, a reliable word of mouth's communication is an important source for consumer because all the tangible product and intangible services may be confirmed by consumers. However, another study by File and Prince (1992) found that word of mouth did not contribute significantly towards the level of brand satisfaction.

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Therefore, based on brand equity theory and social exchange theory, this study proposed the hypothesis as follows:

H_5: There is a positive relationship and significant between word of mouth and relationship quality

3.3.6 Relationship between Brand Personality and Relationship Quality

In examining the impact of brand personality on relationship quality, prior studies were referred. Past researchers found that brand personality has a significant influence on relationship quality assets such as satisfaction (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Lee et al., 2009), trust (Louis & Lombart, 2010) and commitment (Aaker et al., 2004; Ambroise et al., 2005; Louis & Lombart, 2010). Based on social exchange theory and the results of prior studies, this study has proposed the following hypothesis:

H_6: There is a positive and significant relationship between brand personality and relationship quality.

3.3.7 Relationship between Relationship Quality and Brand Equity

Previous studies argued that relationship quality significantly affected the formation of brand equity (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Lin & Chung, 2013; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014; Tuan & Ahmad, 2013). Based on Hunt and Morgan (1995), resources namely commitment and trust cannot be duplicated or purchased. As such, these resources can be used to form a strong brand equity and build sustainable competitive advantage (Azizi & Kapak, 2013). In the same vein, researchers (Kim et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2009; Ong, Salniza, & Rushami Zien, 2015a)

discovered that relationship quality has a positive influence in building dimensions of brand equity namely brand awareness, brand association and brand loyalty. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H$_7$: There is a positive and significant relationship between relationship quality and brand equity

3.3.8 The Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on The Relationship between Packaging and Brand Equity.

Earlier studies indicated that packaging is a significant antecedent of relationship quality (Gómez et al., 2015; Löfgren et al., 2008; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008). Researchers also found that relationship quality has a significant positive influence on brand equity (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014). In principal, brand equity is a relational market-based asset that is required to create and sustain customer relationship which is considered as the hub of brand equity (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2005), and it is categorised as a key element in gaining long-term customer relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Based on the discussion above, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H$_8$: Relationship quality significantly mediates the relationship between packaging and brand equity.

3.3.9 The Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Word of Mouth and Brand Equity.

Previous studies have demonstrated that word of mouth has a positive relationship with relationship quality dimensions namely trust (Alam & Norjaya, 2010; Ha, 2004), commitment and satisfaction (File & Prince, 1992). Other studies have indicated that relationship quality has a significant positive influence on brand equity (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Kim et al., 2008; Loureiro & Miranda, 2011; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H_9: Relationship quality significantly mediates the relationship between word of mouth and brand equity.

3.3.10 The Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Brand Personality and Brand Equity.

Earlier studies revealed that brand personality significantly influences relationship quality dimensions namely trust (Lee & Kang, 2013; Louis & Lombart, 2010; Sung, Kim, & Jung, 2009; Sung & Kim, 2010), commitment (Lee & Kang, 2013; Louis & Lombart, 2010), and satisfaction (Aaker et al., 2004). Likewise, past studies have found that relationship quality has a significant positive relationship with brand equity (Ha et al., 2010; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Kim, Lee, & Suh, 2015; Torres & Tribo, 2011). Besides, a study by Lee et. al., (2009) found that brand personality has an indirect and positive effect on satisfaction and brand loyalty. By considering Prasad and Dev's (2000)

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argument where they stated that customer relationship is important in managing brand equity, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_{10}: Relationship quality significantly mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand equity

3.4 Research Design

This study adopted quantitative research approach to assess the structural relationship for the five constructs; brand equity, packaging, word of mouth, brand personality and relationship quality. Quantitative research is appropriate in order to understand how one or more variables can influence each other (Creswell, 2013). Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to test several hypotheses based on Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991) and Social Exchange Theory.

This study was conducted based on a cross sectional approach where the data was collected from the respondents once throughout this study. In particular, this study employed a survey method where a set of a structured close-ended questionnaires were distributed to collect the quantitative data. The unit of analysis in this study was individual for the target population of the study was the consumers of SMEs food product.

3.5 Product Stimuli

SMEs food product was chosen as the product stimuli for this study. For the brand selection, there were several successful SMEs brands of food product have been selected

from a list of companies provided by SMEs Corp at their official website (www.smecorp.gov.my) namely Adabi, Tamin, Kipas Udang, Kart's, Kawan, Brahim's, Ramly and My Chef. All of these brands have their products in the market more than 5 years. They have also expanded their business into the international market. In addition, these brands have been recognised as SMEs successful brands where they were declared as the winner of Best Brand Product Branding Awards (The BrandLaureate, 2016). For the selection of the brands, this study employed the same approach as previous study on brand equity (Norjaya et al., 2007; Ong et al., 2015b; Yoo et al., 2000) which chose a brand based on the familiarity and high level of recognition by the population in accordance to the year of business establishment. From the listed brands, respondents will be asked to answer preliminary questions where they are to choose one of the brands that they are familiar with. Following that, they were asked to answer all the questions in the questionnaire booklet.

3.6 Sampling and Population Frame

The population for this study comprised the consumers of SMEs food product in Malaysia. Specifically, consumers of SMEs food product were selected to participate in answering the questionnaire because they have the experience and knowledge of using SMEs food product.

Thus, to accomplish the research objectives, data was collected from the respondents in northern states of Malaysia. The population of consumers in northern states of Malaysia which is Perlis, Kedah and Penang is 4,139.3 million (Department of Statistics, 2016). For the population exceed than 1,000,000, the minimum sample size required is 384

(Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2001; Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Table 3.1 shows the generalized guideline for sample size decisions.

Table 3.1:
Sample Size of a Given Population

N	S
20,000	377
30,000	379
40,000	380
50,000	381
75,000	382
>1,000,000	384

N= population size   S= sample size
Source: Krejcie & Morgan (1970)

Referring to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) recommendation in Table 3.1, the sample size required to represent the population of 4,139.3million is 384. Moreover, Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) also pointed out that for factor analysis, the ideal number of cases is at least 300. However, the sample size of 384 was increased by 40% to minimize the potential low response rate from respondents who may not cooperate (Kura, 2014; Salkind, 1997). As a result, the sample size for this study was 538 as indicated in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2:
Population in Northern States of Malaysia

No.	States	Population ('000)	Percentage	Sample Size	Sample size*40%
1	Perlis	253.6	6%	23	32
2	Kedah	2,173.9	52%	200	280
3	Penang	1,711.8	42%	161	226
	Total	4,139.3		384	538

Source: Department of Statistics (2016)

3.7 Sampling Techniques

This study utilised multistage area probability sampling as recommended by Sudman (1980). The main reason for chosen multistage area probability sampling is because of this type of sampling technique has the least bias and offers the most generalization, where every element has an equal chance of being selected as a subject from the population (Blumberg, Cooper, & Schindler, 2008; Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). There were two cluster stages involved prior selecting the particular venue for data collection. Firstly, Peninsular Malaysia was grouped into four regions which were Central, East Coast, Northern and Southern (Tourism Malaysia, 2013). The common goal of a research is to manually collect data that are representative of the population to be studied (Bartlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins, 2001; Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

In Malaysia, the total population is 31.7 million (Department of Statistics, 2016). However, due to the time and management constraints, thus northern states was chosen as it also able to represent consumers at other regions in Malaysia because it consists of well-developed and less developed area (Mardhiyah, 2016). Moreover, northern states of Malaysia were recruited to respond to Noor and Lingam's (2014) suggestion that is to extend the study beyond the Klang Valley area. This is because the consumers at these three states have quite similar characteristics and thus, there is a minimum variation in terms of consumer behavior. Hence, they can then be considered as a homogenous group (Noor & Lingam, 2014). In addition, the population at northern states is larger than Klang Valley. Statistics shows that the population of northern states is 12.9% whereas Klang Valley is only 7.2% (Department of Statistics, 2016; World Population Review,

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2017). Therefore, the population at northern states is considered able to represent consumers at other regions of Malaysia.

Secondly, northern states which are Perlis, Kedah and Penang were then divided into main cities/ town. In total, seven cities were selected (Kangar, Padang Besar, Arau, Alor Star, Sungai Petani, Langkawi and Georgetown). At each cities/ town, several shopping centers were identified and selected for data collection purposes. The reason for choosing these cities/ town is; they have a larger population in the northern Malaysia. Thus, the numbers of malls involved in this study are as follows: three malls in Perlis, five malls in Alor Star and five malls in Penang as shown in Table 3.3.

This study used systematic sampling to select the respondents who comprise every 10[th] customer that walk-in into each mall. The respondents were approached at the entrance to fill the questionnaire. If the 10[th] customer was not a consumer for SMEs food product, then the questionnaire would be given to the next customer as a substitute. Earlier researchers (Chattopadhyay, Shivani, & Krishnan, 2010; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015b; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Pappu & Quester, 2006; Wong & Sohal, 2002) also employed the same approach. The number of questionnaires distributed to each state displayed in Table 3.3. In Perlis, 32 questionnaires were distributed in three shopping malls; Kayangan Square Mall (12), Padang Besar (12) and C-Mart Arau (11). In Kedah, 280 questionnaires were distributed at five shopping malls; Alor Star Mall (56), Amanjaya Mall Sungai Petani (56), Langkawi Fair Shopping Mall (56), Giant Sungai Petani (56) and Mydin Mall Alor Star (56). In Penang, 226 questionnaires were distributes in five shopping malls: Sunshine Supermarket (46), Jusco Aeon Hypermarket

(46), Komtar (45), Giant Bayan Baru (45) and Tesco Hypermarket Gelugor (45). Table 3.3 shows the distribution.

Following suggestion by Sudman (1980), the questionnaire was distributed at different times of the day; morning, at noon and in the evening, the first half was 10am to 3 pm as well as second half from 3pm to 8 pm, on different days on weekdays and weekends to minimise periodicity and non-coverage issues.

Table 3.3:
Name of States and Selected Hypermarket/supermarkets

No	States	Sample Size	No	Name of Mall	Sampling	Valid	Not Co/v
1	Kedah	280	1	Alor Star Mall	56	41	1
			2	Amanjaya Mall Sungai Petani	56	40	2
			3	Langkawi Fair Shopping Mall	56	43	1
			4	Giant Sungai Petani	56	40	1
			5	Mydin Mall Alor Star	56	40	1
2	Penang	226	6	Sunshine Supermarket	46	38	2
			7	Jusco Aeon Hypermarket	46	37	1
			8	Komtar	45	35	1
			9	Giant Bayan Baru	45	34	2
			10	Tesco Hypermarket Gelugor	45	35	1
3	Perlis	32	11	Kayangan Square Mall	11	10	1
			12	Padang Besar	11	9	0
			13	C-mart Arau	10	10	1
		538			538	412	15

Note: Not Co/v=not completed and not valid

3.8 Operationalisation and Measurement of Variables

This study aimed to investigate the effects of the sources of brand equity on brand equity by incorporating relationship quality as a mediator in SMEs food product industry in Malaysia. The measurement items of constructs were adopted and adapted from the past studies to fit with the scope of the study which is guided by research objectives. The following section discusses the measurement scales of each construct.

3.8.1 Brand Equity

Brand equity is known as a key intangible asset that arises from past brand building activities (Christodoulides et al., 2015). For that reason, it is very critical to choose the right definition for brand equity in relation to tangible the intangible assets. Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities that is associated to a brand, its name and symbol that could add to or detract the value provided by a product or service to a company or to its customers. Further, Aaker (1991) stated that brand equity can be measured through five dimensions namely brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand. However, the fifth dimension i.e. other proprietary brand asset is omitted in customer based brand equity study, as it is not related to customer's perspective (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010). Similarly, Yoo et al. (2000) suggested that brand equity can be measured through brand awareness/association, brand loyalty and perceived quality. In contrast, Keller (1993) proposed that brand equity can be measured through brand knowledge which consists of two components namely brand awareness and brand image.

Brand awareness in this study refers to the strength of a brand's presence in consumers' mind and can be measured through brand recognition and brand recall under different circumstances (Buil et al., 2008). As such, this study employed and adapted a measurement scale from Buil et al. (2008), which was based on works of Aaker (1991) and Yoo et al. (2000) to fit the context of food industry. Moreover, the items were selected because their reliability was acceptable which was 0.89 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2010). The items are presented in Table 3.4.

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Besides, brand association in this study refers to the consumers' belief that the brand has attributes and benefits that satisfy their needs and wants and is able to form the overall brand attitude. To measure brand association, this study employed and adapted measurement scale from Norjaya et al. (2007), which was based on the works of Yoo et al. (2000) and Aaker (1991). The items were selected because of their reliability was acceptable which was 0.94 (Hair et al., 2010).

Perceived quality is the third dimension which refers to the consumer judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority (Buil et al., 2008). Four items were adopted from Buil et al. (2008), which were based on the works of Yoo et al. (2000). As shown in Table 3.4, there are three items used to measure the dimensions of perceived quality. The items were selected as their acceptable reliability was 0. 93 (Hair et al., 2010).

Lastly, brand loyalty is an important dimension in measuring brand equity. For this study, brand loyalty refers to customer's attachment to a brand (Buil et al., 2008). To measure brand loyalty, three items were adapted from Buil et al. (2008), which were based on works of Yoo et al. (2000). This is because the acceptable reliability for these items was 0.91 (Hair et al., 2010). Table 3.4 shows the definition and items for measuring brand loyalty in this study.

Table 3.4:
Measurements of Brand Equity

Brand Equity Dimensions	Operational Definition of Dimension	Items	Source
Brand Awareness	The strength of a brand's presence in consumers' mind and can be measured through brand recognition and brand recall under different circumstances	1. I am aware of this brand 2. When I think of food product, this brand is one of the brands that comes to mind 3. This brand is a brand of food product that I am very familiar with 4. I know what this brand looks like 5. I can recognise this brand amongst other competing brands of food product	Adapted from: 1. Buil et al. (2008) 2. Yoo and Donthu (2001)
Brand Association	The consumers' belief that the brand has attributes and benefits that satisfy their needs and wants and able to form the overall brand attitude	1. I know how the symbol of this brand looks like 2. I have no difficulties in imagining this brand in my mind 3. I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of this brand 4. I have an opinion about this brand	Adopted from: 1. Norjaya et al. (2007)
Perceived Quality	The consumer judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority	1. This brand offers very good quality products 2. This brand offers products of consistent quality 3. This brand offers very reliable products 4. This brand offers product with excellent features.	Adopted from: 1. Buil et al. (2008) 2. Yoo and Donthu (2001)
Brand Loyalty	The customer's attachment to a brand	1. I consider myself to be loyal to this brand. 2. This brand would be my first choice when considering packaged food product 3. I will not buy other brands of food product if this brand is available at the store	Adopted from: 1. Buil et al. (2008) 2. Yoo and Donthu (2001)

3.8.2 The Sources of Brand Equity

For this study, the sources of brand equity are consists of three namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality. The definition and measurement scale of these sources are given below.

3.8.2.1 Measurement of Packaging

This study used nine items to measure packaging on a seven-point Likert scale (1=totally disagree; 7 =totally agree). According to earlier scholars (Arens, 1996; Deliya & Parmar, 2012), packaging can be defined as the container for a product which encompasses the physical appearance of the container including the design, colour, shape, labeling and material used. For this study, packaging refers to the product identification and differentiation as well as brand identity and value. The items were adapted from Gómez et al. (2015) with minor modifications to the wording to ensure appropriateness with the study context. The definition and the number of items to measure packaging are presented in Table 3.5.

3.8.2.2 Measurement of Word of Mouth

This study defined word-of mouth as the idea of person-to-person conversation between consumers about a product (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011). The measurements for word of mouth were adopted from Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold's (2011) scale. Seven questions related to word of mouth were adapted with minor modifications to the wording to ensure appropriateness with the study context. All of the items were

measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1=totally disagree; 7=totally agree). Table 3.5 summarises the word of mouth scale.

3.8.2.3 Measurement of Brand Personality

Brand personality in this study refers to the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands (Geuens et al., 2009). Thus, this study employed and adopted the measurement for brand personality from Geuens et al. (2009). There were 12 items and all items were scored on 7-point scale ranging from not characteristic of the brand to very characteristic of the brand. Items' scores were summed and then averaged within each factor to derive mean score for each factor. Details are presented in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5:
Measurement of the Sources of Brand Equity

Sources of BE	Operational Definition	Items	Source
Packaging	Packaging refers to product identification and differentiation as well as brand identity and value.	1. When I buy a product of this brand, the colour of the packaging is the first thing that catches my attention 2. The packaging's attractive design influences my purchasing of this brand. 3. I value the packaging for this brand as it seems more hygienic. 4. I prefer to buy product of this brand with its current packaging because it is easy to open 5. I prefer to buy product of this brand with its current packaging because it is easy to close 6. The ease of use/serving of product of this brand favours product purchase 7. The informative elements printed on packaging of this product (product information and content) help me to make the right decision for product purchase 8. The location of the information printed on the packaging of this product (e.g. expiration date) helps my purchase decision. 9. The symbols and codes on the packaging favour the purchase of this brand.	Adapted from Gómez et al. (2015)

Table 3.5 (Continued)

Sources of Brand Equity	Operational Definition	Items	Source
Word of mouth	The idea of person-to-person conversation between consumers about a product.	1. I often refer to word-of mouth communication to know what brands make good impressions on others. 2. To make sure I buy the right brand, I often refer to word of mouth communication 3. I often consult word of mouth communication to help choose the right brand. 4. I frequently gather information from word of mouth communication before I buy a certain brand. 5. If I don't refer to word of mouth communication when I buy a brand, I worry about my decision 6. When I buy a brand, word-of mouth communication makes me confident in purchasing the brand 7. I seek advice from family, friends and neighbours before I purchase certain brand	Adapted from: Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011)
Brand Personality	A set of human characteristics that associate with a brand	I think this brand is: 1. Responsibility: • Down to earth • Stable • Responsible 2. Activity: • Active • Dynamic • Innovative 3. Aggressiveness • Aggressive • Bold 4. Simplicity • Ordinary • Simple 5. Emotionality • Romantic • Sentimental	Adopted from Geuens et al. (2009)

3.8.3 Relationship Quality

As mentioned earlier, relationship quality consists of three dimensions namely satisfaction, trust, and commitment. Instrument for this study was developed based on past studies with little modifications in order to suit the context of this study. In practice, relationship quality refers to the activities that are directed to create, improve, and sustain successful relational exchange (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Based on recommendations suggested by Morgan and Hunt (1994) to explore other relationship marketing variables for further critical assessment, replication and extension, brand satisfaction was incorporated into this study. The definition and measurement scale of these elements are given below.

3.8.3.1 Measurement of Brand Trust

Brand trust for this study refers to the customer's belief that the product will perform in a manner of customers' long-term expectation and interest and their standard will be maintained over time (Aurier & de Lanauze, 2012). Specifically, brand trust was measured by using three items adopted from Aurier and de Lanauze (2012). They were selected due to their high reliability with Cronbach's alpha read at 0.84 (Hair et al., 2010). The definition and the number of items to measure brand trust are presented in Table 3.6.

3.8.3.2 Measurement of Brand Satisfaction

In this study, brand satisfaction refers to the judgment of a product's features that is able to provide a pleasurable level of consumption related to fulfilling and also matching with

customers' expectations (Zboja & Voorhees, 2006). For the purpose of this study, brand satisfaction was measured using five items adapted from Zboja and Voorhees (2006). They were selected because of their Cronbach's alpha value ranges from 0.94 to 0.96 (Hair et al., 2010).

3.8.3.3 Measurement of Brand Commitment

This study defined brand commitment as a lasting desire to maintain a valued relationship (Ok et al., 2011). In order to measure brand commitment, this study used four items adapted from Ok et al. (2011). They were selected because of their reliability with Cronbach's alpha value at 0.8 (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 3.6:
Measurement of Relationship Quality(RQ)

Dimensions of RQ	Operational Definitions	Items	Source
Brand Satisfaction	A judgment on a product's features that able to provide a pleasurable level of consumption related to fulfilling and also matching with customers' expectations.	1. I am satisfied with my decision to purchase this product 2. My choice to buy this brand was a wise one 3. I think that I did the right thing when I bought this brand 4. I am happy that I bought this brand 5. I truly enjoyed my purchase of this brand.	Adopted from: Zboja and Voorhees (2006)
Brand Trust	Customer's belief that the product will perform in a manner of customers' long-term expectation and interest and their standard will be maintained over time.	1. This brand is honest in what concerns its consumers 2. This brand is reliable 3. Buying the product of this brand is a guarantee	Adopted from: Aurier and de Lanauze (2012)
Brand Commitment	A lasting desire to maintain a valued relationship.	1. I will stay with this brand through good and bad times 2. I am willing to make small sacrifices in order to keep using this brand 3. I have made a pledge to stick with this brand 4. I am committed to this brand.	Adopted from: Ok et al. (2011)

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3.9 Research Instrumentation

This section discusses the process of designing the questions or items that represented each variable in this study. A set of questions which is known as questionnaire, was developed to obtain the relevant data on brand equity for SMEs brand. Questionnaire is one of the common tools widely used in collecting data for business and management as well as social science research (Rowley, 2014). For this study, the questionnaire was divided into 6 sections namely (1) Section A - packaging, (2) Section B – word of mouth, (3) Section C - Brand Personality, (4) Section D - Relationship Quality, (5) Section E - Brand Equity and (6) Section F - Respondent's Background (refer Appendix 3). A total of 52 items were used in the questionnaire to examine each variable as stated in the research framework of this study. This study used a seven point Likert scale for section A, B, C, D and E except section F which is respondent background. A seven point Likert scale was chosen for this study because it is able to increase the reliability measure (Cooper & Schindler, 2006).

3.10 Pre-testing the Questionnaire

The main objective of pre-test is to protect the questionnaire from the potential question-constructing problems and to check its content validity and terminology before the actual data collection is performed. The pre-test ensures the survey questions are clear, have clear response and understandable by respondents (Creswell, 2013). Other than that, the result of the pre-test can be used to improve the quality of the questionnaire through measurement refinement. Babbie (2013) stated that the best way to conduct a pretest is to ask the respondents to complete the questionnaire after reading through it

once, because a question may seem to be error-free on a first reading, but may be impossible to answer. Hence, a draft of questionnaire was subjected to extensive pretests by academics and consumers.

The proposed survey instrument with cover letter was provided to four academicians to test the structure, layout, face validity, content validity and reliability. The first stage of pre-test was conducted on four academicians, while the second stage of pre-test was conducted with five selected consumers. This process was to ensure the questions were understood clearly by the respondents, and to get any suggestions, opinions and constructive comments from the respondents. On average, almost all of the respondents did not have any difficulty in answering the questions. However, there were several comments and suggestions for improvement from the respondent which were taken into consideration resulting in some improvements in terms of format, structure and technical words. The respondents spent approximately 20 minutes to answer the questionnaire.

3.11 Pilot Test

After performing some changes and refinement, the questionnaires were ready for pilot test. Generally, a pilot test enables researchers to identify possible problems encountered during the actual research such as error in the research protocol, or the proposed instrument is inappropriate or too complicated (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). The main objective for conducting a pilot test is to gather information from a small sample prior to a larger study in order to improve the quality of the questionnaire by identifying and excluding the potential problems (Malhotra, 2010). Besides, a pilot test can also improve the reliability of the items used to measure the constructs, and to ensure that the

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items are well understood by the respondents. For this study, a number of 100 respondents were selected using convenient sampling among staffs at the Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Polytechnic (PTSS). The selection of PTSS staffs as the respondents was because they are also consumers and easy to access. Each of the respondents took approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Based on the feedback gathered in the pilot study, the questionnaire was further improved to facilitate completion of the final version of the questionnaire (see Appendix C).

According to Sekaran (2003), reliability of measure indicates the stability and consistency of instrument taping the variable. For this pilot study, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to assess the consistency of the scale. The greater the degree of consistency and stability of an instrument used, the greater its reliability. The result of measure of reliability from the pilot study is shown in table 3.7. The reliability estimates range from 0.870 to 0.964. This value is considered sufficient for the research purpose. According to Hair et al. (2006), if the value of Cronbach's alpha is 0.70 and above, it indicates the items used to measure the variable are good. The scales can be regarded as relatively reliable.

Table 3.7:
Reliability of Cronbach's Alpha in Pilot study.

Construct	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Pilot Study
Packaging	9	0.881
Word of mouth	7	0.934
Brand Personality	12	0.870
Relationship Quality	12	0.945
Brand Equity	16	0.964

3.12 Data Collection Procedures and Administration

This study investigated the consumer perception on brand strength. Therefore, this study employed a consumer survey conducted in the shopping malls in northern region namely Perlis, Kedah and Penang. The actual data collection was conducted over five weeks (25 April 2016 to 29 May 2016). The data was collected using a questionnaire. Specifically, the process of data collection began with getting an official letter from Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business (OYAGSB), with details that included introducing the researcher, explaining the purpose of the study and also getting permission from shopping mall administration for distributing the questionnaire at shopping mall.

In the second stage of data collection, a structured questionnaire was distributed by the researcher and the enumerators at selected hypermarkets and supermarkets. In order to find participants who were SMEs food brand consumers, preliminary questions were asked to the respondents; if they have any experience of using SMEs food product. If yes, then they were selected as a sample. For the duration of nearly 5 weeks of data collection, a total of 538 questionnaires were distributed as targeted to the respondents. However, only 412 questionnaires were returned. Out of these 412 questionnaires, 15 were excluded because of a significant part of these questionnaire was not completed and unanswered. After conducting outliers' assessment, only 313 questionnaires were utilised for further analysis. Out of 313 completed and usable questionnaires, 230 questionnaires were labelled as early responses and 83 questionnaires were labelled as late responses and later used for testing non-responses bias.

3.13 Data Analysis Techniques

To achieve the research objectives, two types of software were used to analyse the research data. Firstly, for the descriptive statistics, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22 was used. Secondly, to estimate the measurement and structural models of this study, Partial Least Square Path Modelling (PLS), a component-based Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) system, was used.

3.13.1 Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

Structural equation modelling (SEM) is powerful statistical method which is able to identify the relationships in social and behavioural science research (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014; Lei & Lomax, 2005). This statistical analysis has been widely applied in multitude field of studies and has become one of the useful quantitative methods in specifying, estimating and testing the hypotheses of theoretical model (Lei & Lomax, 2005; Reinartz, Haenlein, & Henseler, 2009). SEM is a combination and integration of factor analysis and path analysis. Factor analysis identifies whether survey items measure the same construct, that is, whether the latent variables are represented by the indicators or observed variables. On the other hand, path analysis identifies relationships between variables in cause-effect relationships in a regression model. Therefore, structural equation modelling utilised both factor analysis and path analysis to simultaneously estimate measurement of, and the relationship between, numbers of theoretically related constructs.

SEM has been used to analyse complex models that consist of multiple exogenous (independent) and endogenous (dependent) variables. It is considered a second-

generation multivariate analysis with its main purpose to overcome limitations of the first-generation multivariate analysis, such as standard regression-based analysis, discriminant analysis, logistic regression, and analysis of variance (Chin & Newsted, 1999). One of the benefits of SEM is its capability of simultaneously assessing the reliability and validity of the constructs, and the relationship among the constructs (Chin & Newsted, 1999).

There are two types of structural equation modelling, which are (1) the covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) and (2) the variance-based analysis or component based analysis, which uses least square functions and is known as Partial Least Squares Path Modelling (PLS-SEM). The next section will discuss the Partial Squares Path Modelling as a tool to test the research hypotheses.

3.13.2 Partial Least Squares Path Modelling (PLS-SEM)

While CB-SEM is the most popular method, recently PLS-SEM has been extensively used in business research especially in marketing, strategic management, management information systems, operation management and accounting (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011; Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014; Kock, 2016). One of the reasons that contributes to the increase number of using PLS-SEM is the ability of this statistical software to handle a common issues that occur in the social sciences study such as non-normal data and a complicated model (Hair, Hult, et al., 2014).

As for this study, PLS path modelling was used for the model analysis because this study aimed to predict factors that influence relationship quality that lead to brand equity consumer based. This is because PLS path modelling enables researchers to

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simultaneously estimate the factor loadings of the measurement model and the path coefficients of the structural model simultaneously (Anderson & Swaminathan, 2011). In addition, the model of this study is considered a complicated model as it involved in testing second order constructs which contain two layers of constructs. As mentioned by researchers (Becker, Klein, & Wetzels, 2012; Hair, Hult, et al., 2014), if the research model is classified as a complex model, the application of PLS-SEM is the best. Therefore, this study considered PLS path analysis as the better alternative than the covariance –based (CB-SEM) analysis.

In PLS-SEM, two main methodological elements are considered (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). They are evaluation of measurement model and evaluation of the structural model. The next section elaborates on these two elements.

3.13.2.1 Evaluation of Measurement Model

The measurement model or outer model (PLS term) is considered as an important step in developing the PLS model. This is because, during this stage, the validity and reliability of the measurement model are determined. In social science research, validity and reliability are considered as core factors used to examine the integrity of measures. Generally, the reliability can be measured by composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. Reliability indicates the stability and consistency of the measurement used. Reliability shows the internal consistency to which a measuring instrument measures what the theory intends to measure. Similarly, the Cronbach's alpha is recommended when measuring the internal consistency of the position of items (Sekaran, 2003). A reliability analysis was conducted to measure the scale of packaging, word of mouth and

brand personality as well as the dependent variable (brand equity) and the mediating variable (relationship quality). According to Nunnally's (1978), the Cronbach's alpha is accepted at the lowest limit of 0.70. Nonetheless, for the study that is exploratory in nature, several researchers (Hair, Sarstedt, et al., 2014; Hair, Wolfinbarger, Ortinau, & Bush, 2008) opined that a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.60 or more is considered to be significant. Items of each construct with the suggested reliability threshold were used for further analysis. In addition to the above, validity test was done to show the reliability of the tool that was developed to measure the specific theory which is intended to be measured (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). There are three types of validity test which are construct validity, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

i. Construct Validity

Construct validity is conducted to affirm how well the results obtained from the use of the measure fit with the concepts around which the investigation is designed (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). In other words, construct validity will indicate whether the instrument is connected to the concepts that are theorised or otherwise (Ramayah, Lee, & In, 2011). This is done through convergent and discriminant validity tests. As recommended by Hair et al. (2010), a cut-off value of loadings at 0.5 is considered as significant.

ii. Convergent Validity

After determining the construct validity of the items, next is convergent validity. Convergent validity involves the degree to which several items reflect a construct converging in comparison to items measuring different constructs (Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010). According to Hair et al. (2010), convergent validity can be evaluated using factor

loadings, composite reliability and average variance extracted. In this regard, Hair et al.'s (2010) recommendation was followed for the factor loadings.

iii. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity is used to differentiate measures of a construct from one another. In contrast with convergent validity, discriminant validity test whether the items do not unintentionally measure something else (Urbach & Ahlemann, 2010). Discriminant validity is measured by scrutinising the correlations between the measures for possibly overlapping constructs. It is expected that the model items will load strongly in their own constructs, with the average variance shared between each construct as well as other construct based on the suggestion made by Compeau, Higgins and Huff (1999). In PLS, discriminant validity can be measured using two commonly assessment which are Fornell-Larker's criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and cross loading (Wynne W. Chin, 1998a). The summary of validity guidelines to assess the measurement model is listed in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8:
Validity Guidelines for Assessing Measurement Model

No.	Validity Test	Criterion	Guidelines
1.	Construct validity	Loading	Items loadings at least > 0.5
2.	Convergent validity	Loading	>0.5
		Composite Reliability	> 0.7
		AVE	> 0.5
3.	Discriminant validity	a. Fornell and Larker criterion	The square root of the AVE should be greater than the correlations among latent variables
		b. Cross loading	The indicator loading should be higher than cross-loadings

3.13.2.2 Evaluation of the Structural Model

The coefficient of determination (R^2 value), which is a measure of the model's predictive accuracy is one of the most commonly used measures to evaluate structural model. The coefficient shows the combined effects of the exogenous latent variables on the endogenous latent variable. It also represents the amount of variance explained by all exogenous constructs on related endogenous constructs. The value of R^2 ranges from 0 to 1 with higher value showing higher levels of predictive accuracy. However, the acceptable value of R^2 depends on the field of study. According to Chin (1998), when the R2 value of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19, its indicates substantial, moderate and weak. In addition to evaluate the R2 values of all endogenous constructs, the change in the R2 value when a specified exogenous construct is omitted from the model can be used to evaluate whether the omitted construct has a substantive impact on the endogenous constructs. In other words, the effect size represents the measure of the strength of the relationship existing between independent and dependent factors in spite of the sample size (Hill, Bloom, Black, & Lipsey, 2008).

The predictive relevance of the model can be viewed based on its quality which is assessed by using the blindfolding procedure to obtain Q2 – 1-SSE/SSO. If Q2 is positive, the model has predictive validity; if it is negative, the model does not have predictive validity (Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro, 2005). Finally, the PLS path modelling bootstrapping technique was used to test the hypotheses formulated for this study and various statistical decisions were made thereafter.

3.14 Model Evaluation: Goodness-of-Fit (GoF)

Goodness-of-fit (GoF) was employed to assess the overall/global fit measure of the PLS model based on R^2 for the endogenous variables and to obtain the cut-off values for PLS model validation (Akter, Ambra, & Ray, 2011). GoF refers to the geometric mean of average AVE (average communalities) and average R^2 for the endogenous constructs and it is normed between 0 and 1 (Tenenhaus et al., 2005).

Based on Wetzels, Odekerken-schröder and Oppen (2009), the formula to measure the GoF is as follows:

$$\text{Gof} = \sqrt{Average\,AVE \; x \; Average \; R^2}$$

Where:

R^2 = the amount of variance explained by the exogenous variables
AVE = the average square loading (average communality) of the items representing a construct.

In comparison with the baseline values (GoF_{small} = 0.1, GoF_{medium} = 0.25, GoF_{large} = 0.36), the Gof value from the model can be used to explain the overall/ global predictive power of the model.

3.15 Chapter Summary

This chapter summarised the detailed research plan on how this study would be conducted. The proposed theoretical framework and hypotheses development were the basis for the selection of research methodology. Besides, the justification for using the instrumentation and measurement and data collection administration in order to achieve

the current research objectives was also described in this chapter. Finally, the strategy of data analysis, techniques and presentation of findings were also emphasised.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the analysis and the findings of the study. Before the hypotheses were tested, the respondents' demographic profiles were presented using SPSS Version 22. The findings from the exploratory study on item generation follow next. Lastly, assessment of the research model and the investigation of the mediating role of relationship quality by employing Structural Equation Modeling - Partial Least Squares Modeling (SEM-PLS) are elaborated on.

4.2 Response Rate

In compliance with data collection requirements, 538 questionnaires were personally distributed to the customers of SMEs food product in the Northern region of Malaysia (Penang, Kedah and Perlis). To avoid multiple responses from same customers, the researcher selected three hypermarkets from each state particularly in the capital cities. Each of the respondents was asked to answer the questionnaire if they did not receive one before.

Out of the 538 questionnaires distributed, 412 questionnaires were returned. Fifteen questionnaires were not usable because they had more than 25 percent of the items unanswered, resulting in an effective sample of 397 usable and completely answered questionnaires. This represented an effective response rate of 76.6 percent.

4.3 Data Screening

Once the data have been collected from respondents, the next step was to conduct several preliminary checks on the data. This was to ensure that the data collected were qualified for further analysis.

This section discusses the findings of the data screening process. This process works by eliminating any ambiguities that can contribute to data bias. Steps involved in the process are editing, handling missing data, checking for normality and checking for outliers.

4.3.1 Missing DataAnalysis

Missing data is an issue of significant concern in research as it can influence the results (Cavana et al., 2001). According to Hair et al. (2010), if the missing values are more than 50 percent and the study still fulfill the sample size requirement, researcher is advised to drop the case of respondents. In actual data, fifteen questionnaires returned had missing value more than 50 percent. As a result, the questionnaires were dropped from further process which is data analysis. Therefore, only 397 questionnaires were usable and completely answered.

4.3.2 Assessment of Outliers

Outliers refer to any observations or subsets of observations which appear to be inconsistent with the remainder of the data (Bendre, Barnett, & Lewis, 1994). In a regression-based analysis, the presence of the outliers in the dataset can seriously distort the estimates of regression coefficients and lead to unreliable results (Verardi & Croux,

2008). Hence, the process of identifying the outlier is very important and must be conducted carefully in order to ensure that only "true outlier" is dropped from the dataset. The process of identifying outliers started with preliminary analysis whereby it was shown that the distribution of the data for this study is non-normal. Thus, the researcher conducted the process of identifying an outlier by univariate and multivariate approach.

In order to identify univariate outliers, the researcher conducted standardised z-score test. From the results, it was found that there are 40 cases (Case ID: 1, 397, 154, 19, 2, 293, 75, 4, 65, 8, 58, 16, 125, 128, 317, 362, 396, 33, 185, 358, 11, 160, 38, 9, 296, 244, 298, 29, 42, 125, 363, 218, 116, 349, 331, 24, 149, 164, 261, 20) that have the value of standardised z-score exceeding +3.29 which is the level of acceptance by most researchers.

For the multivariate outliers, Mahalanobis Distance was used. Identifying the outliers based on Mahalanobis Distance is considered as an effective way by setting some predetermined cut-off value that helps to determine whether a point can be considered as outlier or not (Van Bruggen, Lilien, & Kacker, 2002). Specifically, Mahalanobis can easily be attained by running a simple linear regression on SPSS by the selection of the variable which is called as response number and adding it to the list of the dependent variable, and adding all of the measurement items excluding the demographic variable in the list of independent variable. Using this procedure, the current study was able to detect the outliers by creating a new output variable called Mah_1. Analysis carried out under Mah_1 found 44 cases identified as outliers out of 397 cases, because their Mah_1 was greater than the threshold value of 74.47 which is taken from chi-square table (see

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Appendix D). These 44 cases were later deleted from the main dataset. After deleting all the univariate and multivariate outliers, this study finally utilised only 313 cases for the data analysis.

4.3.3 Normality Test

Normality test was conducted with latent variables and it was found that all of the variables were normally distributed. Table 4.1 shows the value of skewness for all of the variables are in the range of -0.697 to -0.248, while the values of kurtosis are in the range of -0.333 to -0.120. Based on the range of the normality acceptance value which is at ± 1, all of the variables were determined as normally distributed (Hair, Hult, et al., 2014).

Table 4.1: *Skewness and Kurtosis*

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Packaging	50.371	6.056	-0.517	-0.238
Word of mouth	37.307	5.638	-0.300	-0.167
Brand Personality	63.435	7.387	-0.697	-0.120
Relationship Quality	66.898	8.245	-0.284	-0.268
Brand Equity	91.182	11.267	-0.248	-0.333

4.3.4 Multicolinearity Test

Running a multicolinearity test among independent variables is highly recommended before further action is taken for testing the proposed model (Hair et al., 2010). Multicollinearity occurs when correlation matrix between two or more independent variables is extremely high correlated (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Based on Hair et al. (2010), the detection of multicolinearity arises when correlation value is over 0.90.

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This test is facilitated by examining the tolerance value and the variance influence factor (VIF). Referring to Hair et al. (2010), tolerance value is the amount of variability of the chosen independent variable that is not explained by other independent variables, whereas VIF is the inverse of tolerance. The tolerance value and VIF cut-off points are 0.10 and 10 respectively, indicating that VIF value should be closer to 1.00 in order to indicate little or no multicollinearity problem. Referring to Norjaya and Abdul Rahman (2011), multicollinearity problem may occur if the VIF value is 5.0 or more. In addition, Gujarati (2004) added that collinearity is considered as a problem only if VIF exceeds 10.

Table 4.2 highlighted the value of multicollenearity for all of the independent variables. The VIF included in the table below shows the scores are below three with the largest number of 2.655. Since all of the results reported in the Table 4.2 are below than 5.0, this indicates that there is no serious problem of multicollinearity.

Table 4.2:
Multicollinearity Test

	Collinearity Statistics			
	Relationship Quality		Brand Equity	
	Tolerance	VIF	Tolerance	VIF
Packaging	.598	1.673	.465	2.151
Word of mouth	.546	1.833	.533	1.876
Brand Personality	.525	1.904	.445	2.249
Relationship Quality			.377	2.655

4.3.5 Non-response Bias

Existing literature acknowledge that non-respondents sometimes vary systematically from respondents both in attitudes, behaviours, personalities and motivations, by which any or all might affect the result of the study (Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2006). Non response bias attempts to measure any differences between respondents across time. According to Lineback and Thompson (2010), there are multiple approaches to examine non response-bias. In this study, non-response bias was tested using t-test by making a comparison in term of similarities between mean, standard deviation, and standard error of early and late responses. With that, Levene's test of the early and late responses was conducted to test non-response bias of main variables such as packaging, word of mouth, brand personality, relationship quality and brand equity.

According to scholars (Armstrong & Overton, 1977; Malhotra et al., 2006), respondents who respond late to the survey are considered to possess similar characteristics as non-respondents. Thus, following Armstrong and Overton's (1977) time trend extrapolation approach, this study divided the respondents into two main groups: those who responded within 30 days as early respondents and those who responded after 30days as late respondents. Most of the respondents in this sample; that is 230 (73%) responded to the questionnaire within 30 days, while the remaining 83 (26.5%) responded after 30 days. Thereafter, these two groups were compared on all variables. An independent t-test were used to test whether mean score differ between early and late respondents (Pallant, 2013). The result of independent t-test of this study is presented in Table 4.3.

As presented in Table 4.3, the results of the independent sample t-test showed that the equal variance significance value for each of five variables were greater than 0.05 significance level, implying that the variances are assumed to be approximately equal. Besides, the two groups were found to come from the same population since there are no significant differences between early and late respondents for the main variables (p<0.05). Therefore, non-response bias did not appear to be a concern for this study and data set from both groups can be combined for further analysis.

Table 4.3:
Independent Sample T-test Results

Variables		Levene's test for equality of variances			T-test for equality of means	
		N	mean	F	Sig.*	Sig*(2-Tailed)
Packaging	Early	230	48.3391	5.345	.044	.000
	Late	83	56.0000			
Word of Mouth	Early	230	36.0391	.493	.483	.000
	Late	83	40.8193			
Brand	Early	230	61.8826	.865	.353	.000
Personality	Late	83	67.7349			
Relationship	Early	230	64.9174	4.509	.035	.000
Quality	Late	83	72.3855			
Brand Equity	Early	230	88.9304	3.234	.073	.000
	Late	83	97.4217			

*p<0.05

4.3.6 Common Method Variance

Common method variance (CMV) refers to the variance that is attributable to the measurement method rather than to the construct or constructs that supposedly represented by the measures (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Common method variance has become a major concern for researchers especially when the survey uses self-report questionnaires to collect the data from the same respondent (Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003). This is because

CMV is the amount of spurious correlations between variables that is used to measure each variable. Since CMV has become a serious matter to handle and may lead to erroneous conclusions about relationships between variables by inflating or deflating findings (Pace, 2010), it should be managed efficiently.

For this study, several steps were adopted to minimise the effect of CMV. Firstly, by acknowledging and informing the participant or respondent that there is no right or wrong answer in answering the questionnaire. Besides, respondents were also given assurance that their answer will be treated as confidential throughout the research process and strictly for academic purposes. Hence, it will reduce an apprehension of evaluation. Secondly, by improving on the scale items used in this study. This was achieved by avoiding vague concepts in the questionnaire and when such concepts were used, simple examples were provided. To further improve scale of items, all of the questions were written in a simple and specific language.

In addition to the steps explained above, this study also adopted Harman's single factor test as proposed by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to examine common method variance. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), common method variance is problematic if a single latent variable accounts for the majority of the explained variance. This study performed an un-rotated principle component analysis on all measurement items, extracting nine factors with Eigen values greater than 1.0, which accounted for 67.740% of the total variance. Factor one accounted for only 41.428% of the variance. Hence, this figure indicated that common method variance was not a major concern and was unlikely to inflate the relationship between variables measured in this study.

4.4 Respondent' Profile

A number of variables were used to describe the sample characteristics namely gender, age, marital status, educational level, occupation and income level. Table 4.4 exhibits the differences in the demographic profile of respondents based on the variables mentioned earlier.

Table 4.4:
Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Characteristics	Number of Respondents (n=313)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	102	32.6
	Female	211	67.4
Ethnicity	Malay	286	91.4
	Chinese	18	5.8
	Indian	9	2.9
Age	Under 20 years old	6	1.9
	20 to 29 years old	127	40.6
	30 to 39 years old	125	39.9
	40 to 49 years old	51	16.3
	50 to 59 years old	3	1.0
	Over 60 years old	1	0.3
Marital Status	Single	118	37.7
	Married	191	61.0
	Divorced	4	1.3
Highest Level of Education	High School Certificate/SPM	60	19.2
	Diploma/STPM/Certificate	54	17.3
	Bachelor Degree	135	43.1
	Master/PhD	64	20.4
Occupation	Employed	213	68.1
	Self-employed	26	8.3
	Unemployed	67	21.4
	Housewife	7	2.2
Household Monthly Income	RM1000 and below	75	24.0
	1001 to 3000	92	29.4
	3001 to 5000	82	26.2
	5001 to 7000	35	11.2
	7001 to 9000	18	5.8
	9001 and above	11	3.5
SMEs Brand Name Currently Consumed	Adabi	112	35.8
	Tamin	27	8.6
	Kipas Udang	81	25.9
	Kart's	5	1.6
	Kawan	5	1.6
	Brahim's	11	3.5
	Ramly	67	21.4
	My Chef	5	1.6

Referring to the Table 4.4, three hundred and thirteen respondents participated in this survey. Female respondents accounted for more than half (67.4 percent) of the total respondents, however, very few responses (0.3 percent) were collected from senior citizens of over 60 years of age. Most of the respondents are young, with most of them are between 20 to 29 years of age (40.6 percent) followed with the ones in age bracket of 30 to 39 years of age (39.9 percent). Moreover, the ethnicities of respondents are; Malay (91.4 percent), Chinese (5.8 percent) and Indian (9 percent). As for the monthly income, the majority of the respondents earned between RM 1001 to RM3000 monthly. Most of them are considered highly educated with more than half (80.8 percent) holding Certificate/Diploma, Bachelor's Degree, Master and PhD. The majority of the respondents are employed and self-employed (76.4 percent).

As for the SMEs products that they currently consume, 37 percent of the respondents consume Adabi, 24.4 percent consume Kipas Udang, 22.9 percent consume Ramly, 8.6 percent consume Tamin, 2.8 percent consume Brahim's, 1.5 of respondents consume Kawan and My Chef and 1.3 percent of respondents consume Kart's product. More details on descriptive statistics of respondents are shown in Appendix F.

4.5 Reliability Test

There are two types of reliability. Construct (inter-item) reliability and individual reliability. The construct reliability of measurement is assessed by examining the composite reliability (CR) and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of all measures. According to Hair et al. (2010), if the value of Cronbach's alpha is in the range between 0.60 to 0.70, it indicates that the value is in the lowest limit of acceptance, while if a

Cronbach's alpha value is between 0.70 to 0.80, it is considered adequate. A Cronbach's alpha with coefficient value more than 0.80 indicates high reliability of measure. Based on the composite reliability and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) values presented in Table 4.5, most of the constructs exhibited CR and Cronbach's alpha more than 0.80 with the value ranged from 0.847 to 0.956. This indicates that all of the constructs have an internal consistency and high reliability, thus suitable for further analysis.

Table 4.5:
Reliability Test

Construct	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Packaging	7	0.847	0.884
Word of mouth	7	0.899	0.923
Brand Personality	8	0.898	0.918
Relationship Quality	12	0.932	0.942
Brand Equity	16	0.959	0.963

4.6 Analysis of Research Model

This section which reports the findings of this study that are related to the analysis model is divided into two parts. In the first part, the findings of the analysis of the measurement model are described for the purpose of identifying the connection reliability and validity of the instruments applied prior to carrying out the analysis on structural model. As for the second part, it contains a report on the findings of hypothesis testing that generally involves the analysis of the structural model of this study.

4.6.1 Assessment of the Measurement Model

This section contains the specification of measurement model for each underlying constructs with a discussion by using the path diagram. The diagrams of the measurement models are presented in Figure 4.1. According to PLS approach, the measurement model includes only the relationships among the latent variables and manifest variables (indicator). The measurement model is assessed in terms of item loadings and reliability coefficients (composite reliability), as well as the convergent and discriminant validity of all of the multi-item scales. The measurement properties to assess the convergent validity, discriminant validity, item loadings, and reliability are based on guidelines generated by previous scholars (e.g. Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). The purpose of generating the measurement model is to examine for evidence of convergence and discriminant validities as well as reliability or internal consistencies of the items. Once validity and reliability are confirmed, the items can be used for further analysis. Before the measurement model can be generated, all constructs should be linked in a path according to the proposed model using the SmartPLS 3.0 software.

The dependent variable which is brand equity was conceptualised as a first order construct containing four dimensions which are brand awareness (BA), brand association (BASS), perceived quality (PQ) and brand loyalty (BL). Brand equity was measured by 16 items and was labeled as BA1, BA2, BA3, BA4, BA5, BASS1, BASS2, BASS3, BASS4, PQ1, PQ2, PQ3, PQ4, BL1, BL2 and BL3.

In this study, there are three independent variables. All of the independent variables; packaging (PKG), word of mouth (WOM), and brand personality (BP) were conceptualized as a single order construct. Packaging was measured by nine items and was labeled as PKG1, PKG2, PKG3, PKG4, PKG5, PKG6, PKG7, PKG8, and PKG9, whereas word of mouth (WOM) was measured by seven items and was labelled as WOM1, WOM2, WOM3, WOM4, WOM5, WOM6 and WOM7.

The third independent variable which is brand personality (BP) was also conceptualised as a first order construct. In total, twelve items were used to measure brand personality and was labeled as BP1, BP2, BP3, BP4, BP5, BP6, BP7, BP8, BP9, BP10, BP11 and BP12.

Relationship quality which is measured as a mediating variable was also conceptualised as a first order construct. In total, twelve items were used to measure relationship quality and labeled as RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6, RQ7, RQ8, RQ9, RQ10, RQ11, and RQ12. The subsequent section reports the evaluation of the measurement model.

4.6.1.1 Convergent Validity

In Smart-PLS 3.0, the convergent validity is used to identify the extent of which indicators of a specific construct converge or share a high proportion in common (Hair et al., 2010). Leading scholars in PLS (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair, Hult, et al., 2014) stated that convergent validity can be assessed by looking at the value of Composite Reliability (CR), AVE (average variance extracted) and factor loadings. To achieve sufficient convergence validity, the loadings must be greater than 0.5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hulland, 1999), the AVE should be greater than 0.5 (Fornell &

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Larcker, 1981); and CR must be 0.7 or greater than 0.7 (Hair, Hult, et al., 2014; Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009).

For this study, all outer loadings were examined. Following the rule of thumb for retaining items by earlier researchers (e.g. Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hulland, 1999), it was discovered that all of the items (56 items) were over the recommended acceptable cut-off point of 0.5. However, in order to increase the value of AVE, seven items labelled as PKG8, PKG9, WOM 5, BP9, BP10, BP11 and BP12 (refer table 4.6) were dropped for further analysis.

Table 4.6:
Item Deleted to Increase AVE Value

Construct	Indicator	No of Item Deleted	AVE value (Before)	AVE value (After)
PKG	PKG8, PKG9	2	0.469	0.522
WOM	WOM5	1	0.619	0.666
BP	BP9, BP10, BP11, BP12	4	0.427	0.588

Referring to table 4.7, the composite reliability exceeds the acceptable cut-off point of 0.7 and the AVE is greater than 0.5. For comparison purpose, a Cronbach's alpha is also provided. The values are above the minimum requirement of 0.7 for all constructs. Thus, the results demonstrate that the measurement model for this study has a convergent validity and good internal consistency (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair, Hult, et al., 2014; Hulland, 1999). In sum, the reliability of the entire latent construct was verified and satisfied. Next, the discriminant validity was assessed.

Table 4.7:
Internal Consistency of the Initial Model

Construct	Composite Reliability	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
Packaging	0.884	0.522	0.847
Word of Mouth	0.923	0.666	0.899
Brand Personality	0.918	0.588	0.898
Relationship Quality	0.942	0.577	0.932
Brand Equity	0.963	0.620	0.959
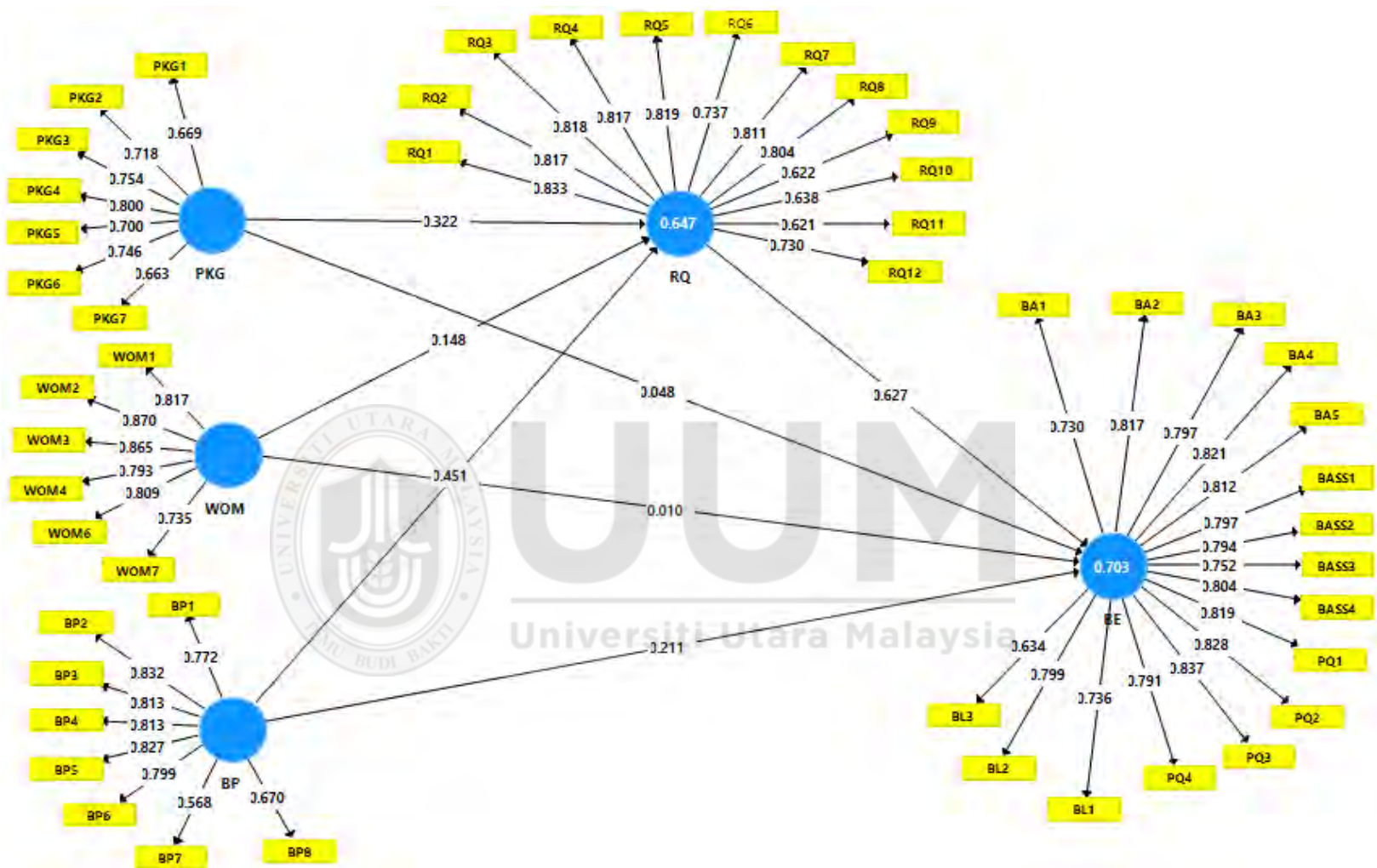
Figure 4.1:
Results of the Measurement Model

Table 4.8:
Reliability and Validity of the Measurement Model

Construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Packaging	PKG1	0.669	0.522	0.884	0.847
	PKG2	0.718			
	PKG3	0.754			
	PKG4	0.800			
	PKG5	0.700			
	PKG6	0.746			
	PKG7	0.663			
Word of mouth	WOM1	0.817	0.666	0.923	0.899
	WOM2	0.870			
	WOM3	0.865			
	WOM4	0.793			
	WOM6	0.809			
	WOM7	0.735			
Brand Personality	BP1	0.772	0.588	0.918	0.898
	BP2	0.832			
	BP3	0.813			
	BP4	0.813			
	BP5	0.827			
	BP6	0.799			
	BP7	0.568			
	BP8	0.670			
Relationship Quality	RQ1	0.833	0.577	0.942	0.932
	RQ2	0.817			
	RQ3	0.818			
	RQ4	0.817			
	RQ5	0.819			
	RQ6	0.737			
	RQ7	0.811			
	RQ8	0.804			
	RQ9	0.622			
	RQ10	0.638			
	RQ11	0.621			
	RQ12	0.730			
Brand Equity	BA1	0.730	0.620	0.963	0.959
	BA2	0.817			
	BA3	0.797			
	BA4	0.821			
	BA5	0.812			

Table 4.8 (Continued)

Construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Equity	BASS1	0.797			
	BASS2	0.794			
	BASS3	0.752			
	BASS4	0.804			
	PQ1	0.819			
	PQ2	0.828			
	PQ3	0.837			
	PQ4	0.791			
	BL1	0.736			
	BL2	0.799			
	BL3	0.634			

4.6.1.2 Discriminant Validity

After assessing the convergent validity of the measurement model, the discriminant validity of the measurement is evaluated. Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which a construct is different from other constructs in terms of how much a certain constructs correlate with other constructs, as well as how much indicators represent only a single construct (Hair et al., 2014). In this study, discriminant validity was assessed in two ways; (1) analysis of average variance extracted, and (2) by examining the cross loadings of the indicators.

The first assessment in discriminant analysis is to examine by comparing the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with the latent variable correlations as suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). This criterion is known as *Fornell-Larker criterion* (Henseler et al., 2009). To achieve adequate discriminant validity, Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested that the square root of the AVE should be greater than the correlations among latent variables. The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) by a

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construct from its indicators should be at least 0.70 (e.g. AVE>0.5) and should be greater than the correlations among latent constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). If this requirement is satisfied the constructs indicate adequate discriminant validity. Table 4.9 represents the square root of the average variance extracted which is greater than the correlations among latent variables, suggesting adequate discriminant validity.

Table 4.9:
Discriminant Validity Assessment Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	BE	BP	PKG	RQ	WOM
BE	**0.787**				
BP	0.714	**0.767**			
PKG	0.619	0.627	**0.723**		
RQ	0.824	0.744	0.689	**0.760**	
WOM	0.548	0.613	0.569	0.608	**0.816**

Note: BE = Brand Equity, BP= Brand Personality, PKG= Packaging, RQ= Relationship Quality, WOM= Word of mouth

Secondly, discriminant validity can be determined by comparing the indicator loadings with cross-loadings (Chin, 1998). To achieve adequate discriminant validity, Chin (1998) suggested that all of the indicator loadings should be higher than cross-loadings. Table 4.10 compares the indicator loadings with other reflective indicators. All indicator loadings are greater than the cross-loadings, suggesting adequate discriminant validity for further analysis.

Table 4.10:
Loadings and Crossloadings

	BE	BP	PKG	RQ	WOM
BA1	0.730	0.571	0.479	0.615	0.416
BA2	0.817	0.611	0.497	0.685	0.426
BA3	0.797	0.556	0.488	0.633	0.393
BA4	0.821	0.574	0.467	0.630	0.424
BA5	0.812	0.580	0.488	0.657	0.426
BASS1	0.797	0.523	0.461	0.599	0.352
BASS2	0.794	0.583	0.452	0.613	0.365
BASS3	0.752	0.449	0.411	0.541	0.335
BASS4	0.804	0.541	0.437	0.627	0.451
PQ1	0.819	0.565	0.530	0.672	0.439
PQ2	0.828	0.609	0.544	0.693	0.491
PQ3	0.837	0.592	0.546	0.702	0.486
PQ4	0.791	0.620	0.545	0.718	0.500
BL1	0.736	0.536	0.433	0.657	0.432
BL2	0.799	0.589	0.513	0.687	0.504
BL3	0.634	0.450	0.465	0.598	0.416
BP1	0.538	0.772	0.487	0.567	0.486
BP2	0.657	0.832	0.548	0.653	0.533
BP3	0.588	0.813	0.532	0.628	0.526
BP4	0.618	0.813	0.529	0.613	0.487
BP5	0.573	0.827	0.506	0.616	0.491
BP6	0.552	0.799	0.499	0.579	0.465
BP7	0.306	0.568	0.297	0.390	0.330
BP8	0.463	0.670	0.390	0.458	0.402
PKG1	0.402	0.407	0.669	0.469	0.466
PKG2	0.426	0.423	0.718	0.456	0.482
PKG3	0.481	0.489	0.754	0.523	0.410
PKG4	0.437	0.484	0.800	0.523	0.384
PKG5	0.392	0.384	0.700	0.490	0.332
PKG6	0.536	0.527	0.746	0.547	0.428
PKG7	0.436	0.438	0.663	0.465	0.377
RQ1	0.673	0.642	0.553	0.833	0.568
RQ2	0.665	0.648	0.572	0.817	0.480
RQ3	0.668	0.647	0.582	0.818	0.506
RQ4	0.700	0.612	0.596	0.817	0.467
RQ5	0.695	0.640	0.538	0.819	0.469
RQ6	0.593	0.577	0.493	0.737	0.474
RQ7	0.702	0.634	0.558	0.811	0.494

Note: BE= Brand Equity, BP= Brand Personality, PKG= Packaging, RQ= Relationship Quality, WOM= Word of mouth

Table 4.10 (Continued)

	BE	BP	PKG	RQ	WOM
RQ8	0.658	0.633	0.591	0.804	0.497
RQ9	0.494	0.413	0.451	0.622	0.399
RQ10	0.484	0.385	0.443	0.638	0.334
RQ11	0.512	0.380	0.384	0.621	0.387
RQ12	0.604	0.457	0.479	0.730	0.428
WOM1	0.482	0.502	0.501	0.537	0.817
WOM2	0.490	0.514	0.495	0.509	0.870
WOM3	0.477	0.518	0.481	0.531	0.865
WOM4	0.405	0.481	0.415	0.442	0.793
WOM6	0.409	0.470	0.472	0.465	0.809
WOM7	0.407	0.513	0.411	0.480	0.735

Note: BE=Brand Equity, BP= Brand Personality, PKG= Packaging, RQ= Relationship Quality, WOM = Word of mouth.

Overall, the reliability and validity tests conducted on the measurement model are satisfactory. All reliability and validity tests are confirmed and this indicator that the measurement model for this study is valid and fit to be used to estimate parameters in the structural model.

4.6.2 Assessment of the Structural Model

After analysing the measurement model, the next step in the PLS analysis was to evaluate the structural model for this study. The validity of the structural model can be assessed by using the coefficient of determination (R^2) and path coefficients. In this study, PLS-SEM algorithm function is used to obtain R^2 values, while PLS-SME bootstrapping function is used to generate the t-values statistics. For this study, the bootstrapping generated 5000 samples from 313 cases. The result of the structural model is presented in Figure 4.2.

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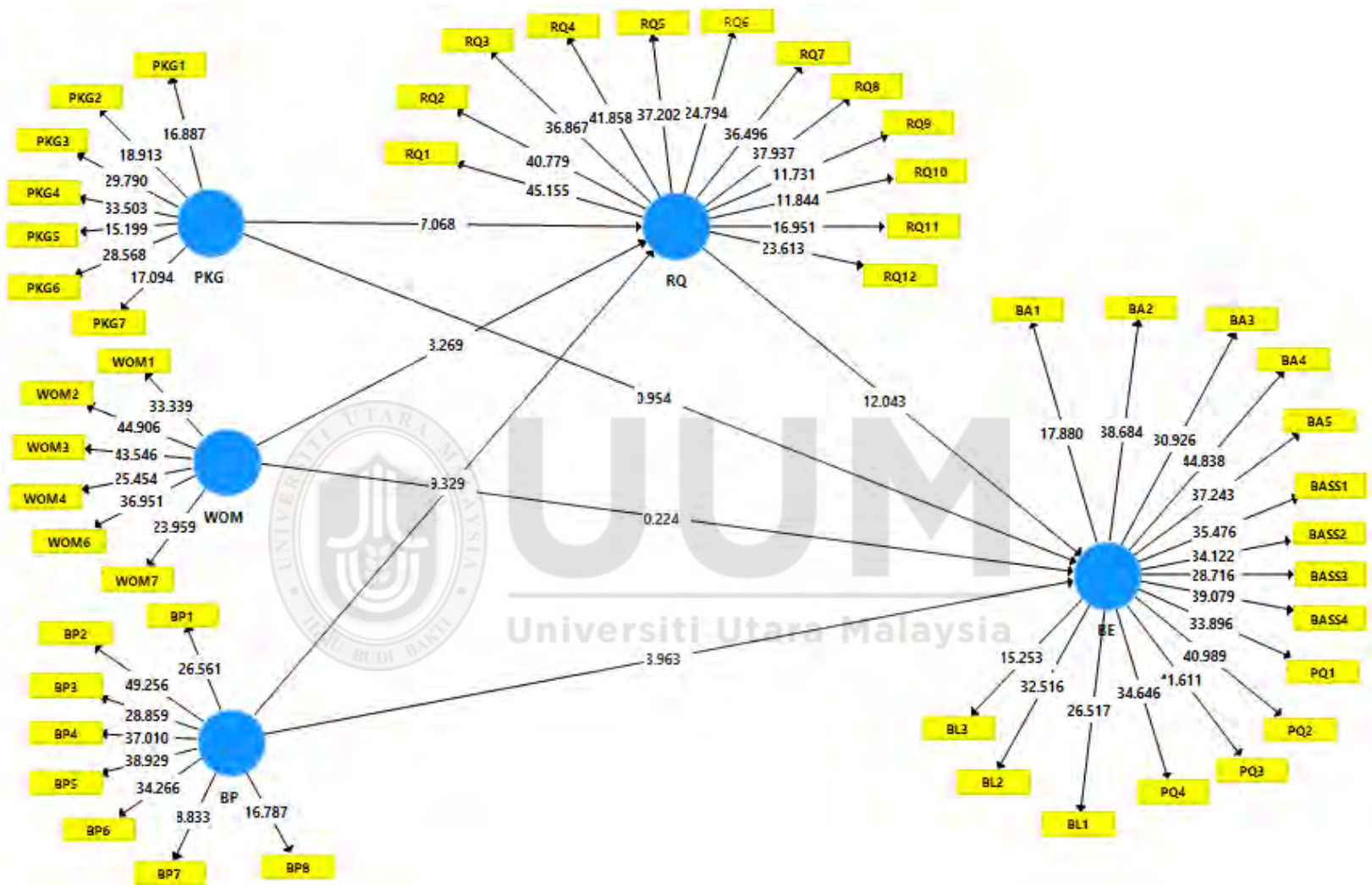
Figure 4.2:
Results of the Structural Model

4.6.2.1 Assessment of Coefficient of Determination (R² Value)

One of the important criteria for assessing the structural model in PLS-SEM is the R-squared value, which is known as the coefficient of determination (Hair, Hult, et al., 2014; Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014). The value of R^2 represents the proportion of variation in the endogenous variable (dependent variables) that can be explained by one or more predictor variable (Hair et al., 2010; Hair, Sarstedt, et al., 2014). According to Hair et al. (2010), the acceptance value for the R^2 depends on the research context, whereas Falk and Miller (1992) proposed that the cut-off value for R^2 to be accepted is 0.10. Hair, Sarstedt, et al. (2014), stated that the rule of thumb regarding acceptance value of R2 is 0.75, 0.50 and 0.25 respectively, describing substantial, moderate or weak levels of predictive accuracy. Meanwhile, Chin (1998) suggested that R^2 value of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19 in PLS-SEM can be considered as substantial, moderate and weak respectively. Table 4.11 presents the R^2 values of the two endogenous latent variables.

Table 4.11:
R² Values for the Endogenous Variable

Endogenenous (Latent Variables)	Variance Explained (R²)	Result
Relationship Quality	64.7	Moderate
Brand Equity	70.3	Substantial

As indicated in Table 4.11 and structural path model reported in Figure 4.2, the research model explained 64.7% of the total variance in relationship quality and 70.3% of the total variance in brand equity. This suggests that the three sets of exogenous latent variables (i.e. packaging, word of mouth and brand personality) collectively explained 64.7% and 70.3% of the variance of the relationship quality and brand equity

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respectively. Hence, following Falk and Miller's (1992) and Chin's (1998) criteria, the two endogenous latent variables (dependent variables) showed acceptable levels of R^2 value, which are considered as moderate and substantial.

4.6.2.2 Assessment of Effect Size (f^2)

The f^2 effect size is a measure of the impact of specific exogenous variables on an endogenous variable (Chin, 1998). The f^2 effect size measures the change in the R^2 value when a specified exogenous variable is omitted from the model. It is used to evaluate whether the omitted exogenous variable has a substantive impact on the R^2 values of the endogenous variables. The effect of f^2 needs to be calculated by using below formula as it is not automatically provided in PLS-SEM.

$$\text{Effect size: } f2 = \frac{R2_{incl} - R2_{excl}}{1 - R2_{incl}}$$

Referring to Cohen's (1988) suggestions, if the f^2 values are 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35, they indicate as having small, medium and large effects respectively (Hair et al., 2013). As such, the exogenous constructs affecting their respective endogenous constructs were considered one by one for calculating effect size as shown in Table 4.12 and Table 4.13.

Table 4.12:
Effect Size on Relationship Quality (endogenous construct)

Exogenous Construct	Included	Excluded	F-squared (f^2)	Effect Size
Packaging	0.647	0.591	0.1586	Medium
Word of mouth	0.647	0.635	0.0340	Small
Brand Personality	0.647	0.543	0.2946	Medium

Table 4.13:
Effect Size on Brand Equity (endogenous construct)

Exogenous Construct	Included	Excluded	F-squared (f²)	Effect Size
Packaging	0.703	0.701	0.0067	None
Word of mouth	0.703	0.703	0.000	None
Brand Personality	0.703	0.685	0.0606	Small
Relationship Quality	0.703	0.566	0.4613	Large

As indicated in Table 4.12, the endogenous construct which is relationship quality is explained by three exogenous constructs with the effect sizes (f²) are ranged from 0.1586, 0.0340 and 0.2946. Following Cohen's (1988) guideline, the effect sizes of the three exogenous latent variables on relationship quality can be considered as medium, small and medium respectively.

The second endogenous construct is brand equity. Brand equity is explained by four exogenous constructs which the effect sizes are between 0.0067, 0.000, 0.0606 and 0.4613. Table 4.13 indicates that the effect sizes of the four exogenous constructs namely packaging, word of mouth, brand personality and relationship quality on brand equity are as none, none, small and large respectively.

4.6.2.3 Assessment of Predictive Relevance of the Model (Q²)

The quality of the structural model can be assessed by considering the R² values and effect sizes. Besides, it can also be assessed by using a blindfolding procedure to generate the cross-validated communality and cross-validated redundancy. Based on the recommendations by Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2011), cross-validated redundancy is assessed by the PLS-SEM estimates of both the structural model and the measurement models to predict data. If an endogenous construct's cross validated redundancy measure

value (Q²) for a certain endogenous latent variable is larger than zero, its explanatory latent constructs exhibit predictive relevance.

Q² is a procedure to assess how well the model predicts the data of omitted cases which is referred to as predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2013). The value of Q² can be obtained by using blindfolding procedure. However, the blindfolding procedure is only applied to endogenous constructs that have a reflective measurement model specification (Hair, Hult, et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2011). To use blindfolding to obtain Q² value, Hair et al. (2011) suggested that the number of cases in the data must not be a multiple integer number of the omission distance d, otherwise the blindfolding procedure will contribute to inaccurate results. Further, Hair et al. (2011) suggested that to choose the value of d, it must be between 5 to 10. Therefore, for this study, seven is used as a value for d which d represents as case to obtain cross-validated redundancy measure for each dependent variable.

Referring to Hair, Hult, et al.'s (2014) guidelines, the model is considered to have a predictive relevance for a certain endogenous construct if the cross redundancy value is larger than zero and otherwise if the value is less than 0.

For the structural model, Table 4.14 shows the predictive relevance of the structural model for brand equity. As indicated in Table 4.14, the Q² values for brand equity and relationship quality are is 0.401 and 0.344 respectively. These results show that all of the Q² values are considerably larger than zero, thus providing support to the claim that the model has adequate prediction quality.

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Table 4.14:
Predictive Relevance of the Structural Model

	SSO	SSE	Q² (=1-SSE/SSO)
BE	5,008.000	2,998.756	0.401
BP	2,504.000	2,504.000	
PKG	2,191.000	2,191.000	
RQ	3,756.000	2,462.727	0.344
WOM	1,878.000	1,878.000	

Note: BE=Brand Equity, BP= Brand Personality, PKG= Packaging, RQ= Relationship Quality, WOM = Word of mouth.

4.6.3 Hypotheses Testing

The final step was to test the hypothesised relationships by running bootstrapping algorithm in PLS-SEM 3.0. According to Hair et al. (2011), in PLS analysis, path coefficient is very important. For the path coefficient assessment, the statistical significant level is determined by the t-value and p-value. If the path coefficient value shows the value are not significant or against the hypothesised direction, the prior hypotheses are suggested not to be accepted. On the other hand, if the path coefficient value shows the hypothesised direction, the hypotheses are suggested to be accepted. The critical t-value for a two-tailed test must be >1.64 (with significant level of 1%), 1.96 (with a significant level of 5%) and 2.58 (with a significance level of 10%).

4.6.3.1 Hypotheses Testing

To validate the structural model and proposed hypotheses, the path coefficient between two latent variables is assessed by conducting bootstrapping procedure. In this study, bootstrapping procedure was used whereby the researcher set 5,000 subsamples in producing standard errors and obtaining t-values. Figure 4.2 and Table 4.15 explain the

path coefficient and the bootstrapping results, as well as the result of the hypotheses for this study.

The results presented in Table 4.15 indicated that packaging has a significant positive effect on brand equity (β = 0.048, t-value = 4.610, p = 0.000), suggesting that H1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on brand equity. Result (Table 4.15, figure 4.2) indicated that word of mouth has a significant positive effect on brand equity at p<0.01 (β = 0.010, t-value = 1.980, p = 0.024), supporting Hypothesis 2. Similarly, in examining the effect of brand personality on brand equity, result indicated that brand personality had as significant positive effect on brand equity (β = 0.211, t-value = 9.061, p = 0.000). Hence, Hypothesis 3 was fully supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that packaging is positively influence relationship quality. As shown in Table 4.15, a significant positive influence between packaging and relationship quality (β = 0.322, t-value = 7.076, p = 0.000) were found, indicating support for hypothesis 4. Regarding the influence of word of mouth on relationship quality, result (Table 4.15, Figure 4.2) indicated that word of mouth has a significant positive effect with relationship quality (β = 0.148, t-value = 3.245, p = 0.001). Hence, Hypothesis 5 was also supported.

Brand personality was also predicted to be positively influence to relationship quality (Hypothesis 6). Result indicated that brand personality has a significant positive relationship with relationship quality (β = 0.451, t-value = 9.341, p = 0.000). As such,

Hypothesis 6 was supported. Similarly, Hypothesis 7, which predicted a positive influence between relationship quality and brand equity. Result (Table 4.15, Figure 4.2) revealed that relationship quality has a significant positive effect on brand equity (β = 0.627, t-value = 12.053, p = 0.000), which indicated that Hypothesis 7 was also supported.

Table 4.15:
Hypotheses Testing Results

No.	Hypotheses	Path Coefficient	Standard Deviation	T-value	P Value	Decision
H1	Packaging -> Brand Equity	0.048	0.054	4.610	0.000	Supported
H2	Word of mouth -> Brand Equity	0.010	0.052	1.980	0.024	Supported
H3	Brand Personality -> Brand Equity	0.211	0.055	9.061	0.000	Supported
H4	Packaging -> Relationship Quality	0.322	0.046	7.076	0.000	Supported
H5	Word of mouth -> Relationship Quality	0.148	0.046	3.245	0.001	Supported
H6	Brand Personality -> Relationship Quality	0.451	0.048	9.341	0.000	Supported
H7	Relationship Quality -> Brand Equity	0.627	0.052	12.053	0.000	Supported

Note: *(p<0.01), ** (p<0.05), *** (p<0.10)

4.6.3.2 Testing Mediating Effects

Referring to Henseler et al. (2009), another critical evaluation of a structural model is assessing the direct and indirect relationships between exogenous and endogenous latent variable. The direct and indirect relationship can be tested by conducting moderating and mediating analysis. For this study, only mediating relationship were assessed. This is based on the theoretical reasoning that suggests relationship quality as key mediating factors that influenced long-term relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994)

As this study used Smart PLS 3 in analysing the data, thus, Preacher and Hayes' (2004; 2008) method of bootstrapping, the indirect effect (a*b) was applied. The decision over bootstrapping procedure is done on the basis of t-value of the indirect effect (a*b) as shown in Table 4.23. If the t-value of a*b is >1.96, mediation is said to exist, otherwise non-existence. Next, after assessing the mediating effect, the variance accounted for (VAF) calculation was used to determine the strength of the mediation effect. Table 4.16 shows that all of the three hypothesised relationships (H8-H10) concerned were supported as having mediating effects in this study, whereas Table 4.17 shows the value of mediating effect.

4.6.3.2.1 Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Packaging and Brand Equity

For the Hypothesis 8, the bootstrapping analysis showed that the indirect effect of packaging on brand equity was significant with ß = 0.202 (0.322*0.627) and t-value of 8.371. Also as indicated by Preacher and Hayes (2008) of the indirect effect of 0.202, if 95% Boot Confident Interval (CI) [LL = 0.155, UL = 0.249] does not straddle a 0 in between, it indicates that the mediation effect is statistically significant. The direct effect of packaging on brand equity was significant (ß = 0.048, t-value = 4.610, p-value = 0.000). Hence, the result indicated that packaging has an indirect effect on brand equity via relationship quality. The VAF value (Table 4.17) showed that relationship quality fully mediates the relationship between packaging and brand equity and thus, Hypothesis 8 was supported.

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4.6.3.2.2 Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Word of Mouth and Brand Equity

The bootstrapping results also revealed that there was a significant indirect effect of word of mouth on brand equity, ß = 0.093 (0.148*0.627) and t-value = 3.721. Also as indicated by Preacher and Hayes (2008) of the indirect effect of 0.095, if 95% Boot Confident Interval (CI) [LL = 0.044, UL = 0.142] does not straddle a 0 in between, it indicates there is a mediation effect. The direct effect of word of mouth on brand equity was significant at p<0.01 (ß = 0.010, t-value = 1.980, p-value = 0.024). The VAF value (Table 4.17) also indicated that relationship quality play full mediation effect in the relationship between word of mouth and brand equity. Thus, H9 was supported.

4.6.3.2.3 Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Brand Personality and Brand Equity

For the mediating effect of relationship quality on the relationship between brand personality and brand equity, the indirect effect of brand personality on brand equity was significant as ß = 0.283(0.441*0.627) and t-value of 3.250. Also as indicated by Preacher and Hayes (2008) of the indirect effect of 0.283, if 95% Boot Confident Interval (CI) [LL = 0.112, UL = 0.453] does not straddle a 0 in between, it indicates there is mediation effect. The direct effect of brand personality on brand equity was significant (ß = 0.211, t-value =9.061, p-value = 0.000). The VAF value (Table 4.17) showed that relationship quality partially mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand equity. Thus H10 was supported.

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Table 4.16:
Summary of Mediating Effect Tests

Hypotheses		a		b		Indirect Effect		SE	Bootstrapped Confidence Interval	
		β	t	B	t	β	t		95% LL	95% UL
H8	PKG → RQ → BE	0.322	7.076	0.627	12.053	0.202	8.371	0.024	0.155	0.249
H9	WOM → RQ → BE	0.148	3.245	0.627	12.053	0.093	3.721	0.025	0.044	0.142
H10	BP → RQ → BE	0.451	9.341	0.627	15.053	0.283	3.250	0.087	0.112	0.453

After assessing the mediating effect, the variance accounted for (VAF) calculation was to follow next. In a PLS path model, variance accounted for (VAF), is used to determine the strength of the mediation effect. The VAF value is calculated by using the formula below:

$$VAF = Indirect\ effect\ /\ total\ effect$$

Referring to Hair, Hult, et al.'s (2014) recommendation, if the value of VAF is less than 20%, it can be concluded that (almost) no mediation. In contrast, when the VAF value has very large outcome which is above 80%, it indicates full mediation. And, if the value of VAF is more than 20% and less than 80%, it can be characterised as partial mediation. For this study, the value of VAF is indicated in Table 4.17.

Table 4.17:
Mediating Value

Relationship	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	VAF (%)	The Effect of Mediation
PKG → BE	0.202	0.250	80.8	Full mediation
WOM → BE	0.093	0.103	90.29	Full mediation
BP → BE	0.283	0.494	57.29	Partial Mediation

In conclusion, the findings confirmed that relationship quality plays full mediating role between packaging and word of mouth and brand equity. Besides, relationship quality partially mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand equity.

4.7 Goodness of Fit of the Overall Model

The final step in data analysis based on Partial Least Square approach is estimating the goodness of Fit (GoF) of the research model. Goodness-of-fit (GoF) in PLS is used as an index to judge the overall model fit in PLS path model (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013). According to Tenenhaus et al. (2005), GoF refers to the geometric mean of the average communality and average R^2 for the endogenous constructs. A cut-off value of 0.5 has been proposed for communality as it equals AVE in PLS path modeling (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Wetzels et al., 2009). In order to assess the GoF value in PLS path modeling, Wetzels et al.'s (2009) formula is used:

$$Gof = \sqrt{Average\ AVE \times Average\ R^2}$$

Table 4.18 is presented to show the goodness of fit for the overall model in this study. By using the formula above, the Gof value is 0.6354 which exceeds the cut off value of 0.36 for large effect sizes of R^2. As such, it can be concluded that this model is large of effect or strength and has better explaining power in comparison with the cut-off values (GoF$_{small}$ = 0.1, GoF$_{medium}$ = 0.25, GoF$_{large}$ = 0.36). This value also provides adequate support to validate the PLS model globally.

Table 4.18:
*Goodness of Fit (*R²*)*

Construct	R²	AVE
Brand Equity	0.703	0.620
Relationship Quality	0.647	0.577
Geometric Mean	0.675	0.5985
Goodness of Fit		**0.6354**

4.8 Summary of Hypotheses Results

The summary of hypotheses results of this study is presented in Table 4.19. It can be seen in the Table 4.19 that hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, H9 and H10 were supported.

Table 4.19:
Summary of the Results of the Structural Model

No.	Hypotheses	Decision
	Direct Relationships	
H1	Packaging -> Brand Equity	Supported
H2	Word of mouth -> Brand Equity	Supported
H3	Brand Personality -> Brand Equity	Supported
H4	Packaging -> Relationship Quality	Supported
H5	Word of mouth -> Relationship Quality	Supported
H6	Brand Personality -> Relationship Quality	Supported
H7	Relationship Quality -> Brand Equity	Supported
	Mediating Effects	
H8	Packaging -> Relationship Quality -> Brand Equity	Full mediation
H9	Word of mouth-> Relationship Quality -> Brand Equity	Full mediation
H10	Brand Personality -> Relationship Quality -> Brand Equity	Partial mediation

4.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the results of the study. In sum, this study received a good response rate from the respondents. The profile of the respondents was also illustrated. Ten hypotheses were tested using Structural Equation Modeling: Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS version 3.0 was employed to test the hypotheses and to test

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the mediating effects. A complete main effect model was presented to examine all the relationships in the proposed model. In addition, the Global Fit Measures (GoF) was also conducted on the model to measure whether the model is valid and can be used for prediction globally.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter recaps the findings discussed in the previous chapter. It provides a detailed discussion on the results of this study with reference to the established hypotheses. Moreover, the limitations and the future research directions are highlighted. This study offers recommendations on how to help the Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises in food industries to obtain competitive advantage by improving their brand equity.

5.2 Discussion of Research Objectives and Results

This study presented empirical evidence of the status of brand equity of SMEs food product in Malaysia. The following section discusses in detail the results regarding the effect of packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on brand equity and the mediating role of relationship quality. The theoretical and practical implications for SMEs food industries are also explained. To recap, out of 10 hypotheses presented, all of the hypotheses were supported. This section discusses the research results and to what extent they can benefit the SMEs food product industries in enhancing the status of their brand equity.

5.2.1 The Effect of Packaging, Word of mouth and Brand Personality on Brand Equity

The first research objective of this study was to investigate the effect of packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on brand equity. The discussions of findings are presented below.

5.2.1.1 Packaging and Brand Equity

The first objective of this study concerned the contribution to brand equity. The findings of this study discovered that packaging has a positive and significant effect on brand equity. The result of this study were found consistent with previous studies (Rigaux-Bricmont, 1982; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008; Wang, 2013). The most important is, this result has supported Aaker's (1991) brand equity theory and Yoo et al.'s (2000) BECPM where they stated that packaging is one of the predictors or sources that are able to influence the formation of brand equity.

Referring to this finding, it is shows that packaging has a positive influence on brand equity and thus, it can be one of the sources of consumer' perception that is able to contribute to the formation of brand equity. This finding explains that packaging with an attractive, innovative and creative features are able to affect the formation of brand equity. Specifically, the finding of this study evidenced that packaging has an effect on the formation of brand equity assets which consist of four dimensions which are brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty.

This finding also is in line with the argument made by earlier scholars (Anselmsson et al., 2007; Keller, 1993; Ogba & Johnson, 2010; Underwood, 1996) whereby they stated

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that packaging is an important element positioning and branding, specifically in creating brand equity for convenience products. Further, Rundh (2009) added that packaging is a relevant tool in marketing and considered as an important tools in creating competitive advantages. As this study focused on food product which is low involvement goods which characterized relatively similar product, packaging was said as essential and have a substantial influence in facilitating consumers in product selection and purchase decisions (Fernqvist, Olsson, & Spendrup, 2015; Gómez et al., 2015; Silayoi & Speece, 2004).

Interestingly, this study provides evidence in the SMEs perspectives. Thus, this study's findings opened up the importance of packaging as an important tool in marketing of SMEs food product from the perspective of branding. For food product, packaging with an attractive design and innovative features are able to attract more customers and increase customer's intention in purchasing product especially at shelf space in a supermarket (Azad & Masoumi, 2012; Rundh, 2016). Hence, it is suggested SMEs owners to focus on several element of packaging such as technical (colour, protection, design and hygiene), functional (ease to open and close) and informative (symbols, logo and location of information) in creating an effective food product packaging.

Even though the cost incurred in developing product packaging is quite high, however, it is worthwhile for companies to consider packaging as one of the strategies in developing marketing strategy. It is because relatively low investment in packaging can increase brand sales more than high-cost advertising (Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). By allocating sufficient amount of budget for packaging, it benefits in capturing more customers and thus, enhances company's competitive advantage. Through an attractive,

innovative and effective packaging, SMEs can create competitive offering to the market and are able to attract more customers to purchase its product over time, especially at the point of sales. Moreover, SMEs owners should upgrade their knowledge on packaging in order to enhance their understanding regarding food product packaging and increase their creativity in designing product packaging. Knowledge on consumers' view on packaging is also vital as it will increase understanding on consumer choice and developing attractive products and packaging. In addition, they may also seek help and consultation from government agencies for instance SME Corp, MATRADE and PUNB in creating and enhancing their product packaging.

5.2.1.2 Word of mouth and Brand Equity

As expected, this study found that word of mouth has a significant and positive effect on brand equity. Word of mouth in this study refers to positive information which comes from family members, colleagues, experts and other sources (such as other customers who have previous experiences). This analysis has indicated that positive information obtained through family members, colleagues, experts and other sources are able to affect the formation of brand equity. This result is consistent with earlier studies (Murtiasih et al., 2014; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman, 2011; Severi et al., 2014; Zahari & Esa, 2012). The findings of this study proved that word of mouth is one of the important predictors in the formation of brand equity as stated by Aaker (1996). It is because positive word of mouth may shape positive attitude towards product (Bhayani, 2016) and it is more influential than other types of communication (Trusov et al., 2009).

In this study, word of mouth is measured using Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold's (2011) scale. Since word of mouth is more effective at the stage of information search, therefore the questions used in this study is more on information search (Bhayani, 2016). From the analysis, it is shown that positive word of mouth has a significant and positive effect on brand equity. The findings of this study supported the theory of brand equity whereby Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993) stated that word of mouth which is one of the elements of brand communication is able to improve brand equity and enhance the power of a brand.

Interestingly, this study also provides empirical evidence on the effect of word of mouth on brand equity in the context of Malaysia SMEs food product industry. This is because past studies were found to support the positive effect on the relationship between word of mouth and brand equity and mainly investigates the global brands (e.g.: Toyota, Honda, Samsung, iPhone). Therefore, based on this finding, it is proposed that SMEs to focus on word of mouth as one of the marketing communication tools as it does not require high cost. SMEs are characterized by limited budget on capital. The rationale behind this fact could be that by receiving positive information from people you trust, consumer's confidence is enhanced towards the brand. Further, Reijonen (2010) also stated that word of mouth is one of the influential ways of promotion for SMEs in promoting their product to consumers since word of mouth does not require any cost as compared to other promotional activities.

As positive word of mouth has positive impact on the sales of product (Lopez & Sicilia, 2013), it is suggested that SMEs to encourage their consumers to spread positive experience on using the product and thus it will attract attention from being a

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prospective consumer to become a consumer of the product. Thus, SMEs owner may choose and provide a suitable platform for their consumers to spread positive WOM through their companies' websites, customer hotline and Facebook.

5.2.1.3 Brand Personality and Brand Equity

This study found that brand personality has a positive and significant effect on brand equity ($\beta = 0.211$, t-value = 9.061, p = 0.000). This finding proved to be consistent with previous studies that examined the effect of brand personality on the formation of brand equity (e.g. Correia Loureiro, Lopes, & Kaufmann, 2014; Su & Tong, 2015; Valette-Florence et al., 2011).

In this study, brand personality refers to a set human personality trait that are both applicable and relevant for brands (Geuens et al., 2009). This study used Geuens et al.' (2009) brand personality measurement to assess consumer' brand personality. From the analysis it shows that consumers' brand personality has a significant and positive effect on brand equity. The findings of this study supported the theory of brand equity whereby Aaker (1996) proposed that brand personality is one of the important factors to improve brand equity and enhance the power of a brand. Besides, this study also highlighted an interesting finding by indicating that brand personality also has a positive relationship with brand equity in the context of SMEs food product. This is because past studies that supported the positive effect on the relationship between brand personality and brand equity has mainly investigated on the global brands (e.g.: Nike, Sony, Pepsi, and Coca-Cola). Therefore, based on this finding, SMEs are suggested to create and develop the personality that is suitable for their product in order to encourage people to consume the

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product. In other words, SMEs owners may choose to set the personality of the brand to cater self-expression of customers by utilizing the sources of brand equity such as packaging and advertising as it believed to shape the personality intended for the business.

Referring to the context of studies which is SMEs, Ankomah Opoku et al. (2007) proposed that SMEs companies should consider the brand personality antecedent while designing marketing strategies for the companies especially in developing and implementing several long-term strategies such as customer loyalty (Das, 2014). This is because a successful brand personality is able to contribute a sustainable competitive advantage to companies (Aaker, 1996). However, the process of determining the correct personality for the brand and product is not easy and quite challenging (Tuan, Tat, Shamsuddin, Rasli, & Jusoh, 2012). This is because brand personality must be unique and long lasting in the mind of customers and at the same time customers will recommend to others as well as to repurchase them. Moreover, the uniqueness in emphasising the brand personality is considered as a competitive advantage tool which will provide challenges to competitors from imitating easily.

In order to build a successful brand personality, this study suggests the marketers must first decide on the positioning and the image they want, than embark on marketing strategies to create the image and, subsequently, a personality for a brand. Once the brand has acquired a suitable personality, consistent efforts should be made to maintain and strengthen the personality. To conclude, by developing a strong brand personality, SMEs food companies can powerfully differentiate themselves from their competitors

and can increase brand equity which would lead to increase in the company's profitability.

5.2.2 The Effect of the Sources of Brand Equity on Relationship Quality

To attain the second objective of this study, the effects of independent variables namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on relationship quality were investigated. Interestingly, this study found that the important sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality have a positive and significant effect on relationship quality. A detailed discussion on each hypothesised effect is illustrated in the following sub-sections.

5.2.2.1 Packaging and Relationship Quality

The findings of this study indicated that packaging has a significant positive effect on relationship quality. This means that customers tend to develop better brand trust and commitment when they perceive the product has a good packaging, which in turn improves the level of satisfaction. This result is in line with a number of earlier studies (Fournier, 1998; Löfgren et al., 2008; Pentina et al., 2013; Rundh, 2009; Underwood, 2003) which reported that products with good, creative and innovative packaging are able to strengthen customer relationship with a brand and enhance the formation of consumer-brand relationship which is relationship quality. Similarly, researchers (Abdullah, Kalam, & Akterujjaman, 2013; Gómez et al., 2015; Löfgren et al., 2008; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008) supported that packaging has a positive effect on satisfaction which is a dimension of relationship quality.

For the food industries, packaging is important primarily as a marketing tool (Löfgren et al., 2008; Rundh, 2009; Rundh & Bo, 2005) and secondly as logistics function such as containing, protecting, preserving and delivering the food (Rundh & Bo, 2005; Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). As this study focuses on SMEs food industries, thus, this study recommends SMEs owners to provide added value to food products by improving their packaging design in order to attract more customers and establish long-term relationship with them. Packaging with an attractive and innovative design and function is able to add value to products and contribute to profit margins (Olsson et al., 2004).

Packaging is considered as one of the most powerful tools which is able to attract consumers' attention and create competitive advantage (Ampuero & Vila, 2006; Löfgren et al., 2008; Rundh, 2009; Rundh & Bo, 2005; Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013). Besides, packaging has also been proven as a strong means of shaping consumers' reactions and behaviours (Vilnai-Yavetz & Koren, 2013) by creating positive impression which is able to boost customer's desire to purchase and repeat purchase (Kunle & Ganiyu, 2013).

5.2.2.2 Word of mouth and Relationship Quality

The finding of this study has indicated that word of mouth has a significant positive effect on relationship quality. These results seemed to be consistent with previous studies which found that word of mouth has a positive effect on relationship quality (Alam & Norjaya, 2010; de Matos & Rossi, 2008).

According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002), word of mouth communication is important in relationship quality as it is able to replace lost customers. This means that customers

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are motivated to spread positive word of mouth when they have good perception towards product. Furthermore, researchers (Alam & Norjaya, 2010) found that word of mouth has a significant effect on brand trust. The relationship is a positive relationship which means the better the word of mouth, the higher the level of brand trust. Researchers (Che-ha & Hashim, 2007; de Matos & Rossi, 2008) also found that positive word of mouth is an important factor in explaining customer satisfaction. The above findings proved that word of mouth is a powerful marketing tool in the form of communication in the business world (Alam & Norjaya, 2010) and have a positive relationship with relationship quality.

Word of mouth is an informal communication which is person to person conversation between consumers regarding the products in the market. In comparison with other marketing communication, word of mouth is less expensive, effective and credible as compared to traditional advertising in building trust, satisfaction as well as commitment (Polyorat, 2011). Furthermore, word of mouth is seen as one of the most influential ways of promotion and it is found to suit well with the constraints faced by SMEs such as limited resources (Reijonen, 2010). Thus, SMEs owners and marketing practitioners are recommended to incorporate word of mouth communications into their business strategies in order to build profitable relationship with consumers by capturing loyal customers, ensure ongoing revenues and profits and strengthen brand success (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Ong et al., 2015c).

Based on the findings of this study, it is indicated that the better the word of mouth the higher the level of relationship quality the customer has. Findings also show that consumers seek to get the information about brands from friends and relatives as they

perceived that information from them are trustworthy. Recommendation by friends and relatives also prove to be effective in promoting relationship quality. Word of mouth is considered as the most powerful form of communication in the business as it can either hurt the company's brand name or make it (Alam & Norjaya, 2010). Companies that have high word of mouth advocacy rate are able to grow fast while those that do not have high word of mouth advocacy rates stagnate or shrink (Abimbola & Kocak, 2007)

5.2.2.3 Brand Personality and Relationship Quality

The findings also showed that brand personality has a significant positive effect on relationship quality. This means that customers tend to develop better brand trust and commitment when the product has a clear personality, which in turn improves their level of satisfaction. This result is in line with a number of earlier studies (Aaker et al., 2004; Ambroise et al., 2005; Kang & Sharma, 2012; Louis & Lombart, 2010) which reported that brand with strong brand personality can strengthen the level of relationship quality towards brand.

Based on the findings, it is interesting to show that brand personality has a significant effect on relationship quality in the context of SMEs food product. This is because past studies that supported the positive effect on the relationship between brand personality and relationship quality mainly investigated on the global brands (e.g.: Nike, Sony, Pepsi, and Coca-Cola). Therefore, it is essential for SME to develop and deliver an attractive and differentiated brand personality effectively through various marketing strategies, including product design, packaging, merchandise assortment, visual

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merchandising, and promotional activities such as advertising in order to increase relationship quality.

It is generally known that SMEs entity face limited resources (e.g. money, time and manpower) to implement branding strategies. As such, this finding provides insights on how to focus on creating a unique brand personality that would deliver the best result in today's competitive food industries. This is because product with a strong brand personality could lead to a relatively higher product evaluation as compared to a product that merely focuses on physical features and functions (Lin & Huang, 2012). It means that if the companies are successful in building personality for their brands or product, they will be able to increase the level of satisfaction and trust, and thus lead local consumers to put high commitment to the brand by becoming loyal consumers. In a nutshell, SMEs with strong brand personality are able to build good relationship quality among consumers. In addition, the high level of relationship quality that is given by the consumers could ensure the local brands to be strong and stable, and consequently, to enable SMEs to fend off the global competitors' forces by becoming market leaders in the local markets. This is supported by researchers (Ong et al., 2015b; Sung & Kim, 2010) where they stated that success in building brand personality leads to the development of more persuasive branding strategies that can be as a competitive tool as brand personality is able to provide challenges for competitors to imitate easily.

5.2.3 The Effect of Relationship Quality and Brand Equity

The third research objective of this study is to investigate the effect of relationship quality on brand equity. In principal, relationship quality is considered as a marketing

strategy that is able to attract and retain customer with product or brand. The importance of relationship marketing is highlighted as to attract, sustain and develop customer relationship with a brand for a long period of time (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The relationship quality measures the strength of the relationship between a brand and its customers. This study hypothesised that relationship quality as an important mediating variable that is able to influence the formation of brand equity. This is proven as this finding showed that relationship quality has a significant and positive effect on brand equity (β = 0.627, t-value = 12.053, p=0.000).

The findings of this study concurs with previous studies (Azizi & Kapak, 2013; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014; Tuan & Ahmad, 2013). In addition, this study also supported the theory of social exchange whereby the consumers are willing to develop and sustain their personal relationship with certain brands based on main exchanges, benefits and value (Son et al., 2005). Thus, the significant results of this study explained and highlighted the importance of building customer relationship in enhancing brand equity. It is believed that through higher access to customers, companies would have better ideas of their customer's needs and expectations which then could enable them to fulfill those customer's expectations and keep values on the long-term. Such activities turn to be the main characteristics of successful brands.

Interestingly, the findings of this study revealed that relationship quality is not only considered as an important factor in establishing brand equity for large companies, but also critical for SMEs. Thus, based on this finding, SMEs food industries are recommended to put significant emphasis on developing customer relationships to enhance and improving the level of brand equity. SMEs owners and entrepreneurs are

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suggested to develop strategic and tactical initiatives to ensure that consumers are satisfied with the product, have trust in it and feel attached to it. When a brand has won trust amongst consumers, the gain trusts are able to help extend the product lifecycle and eventually the SMEs owners to expand their market share. Nyadzayo et al. (2011) stated that relationship quality is a vital strategy in developing brand equity. Therefore, it is imperative for SMEs owners to put an effort on building good relationship quality. By having good relationship quality, repetition of purchase is expected to increase, and more importantly the brand equity is formed. The entrepreneurs also are advised to employ not only standard marketing mix but also experiential marketing techniques, which results in increased interactions and emotional connections between customer and brand (Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2011). This is because SMEs food industries may gain competitive advantage when allocating sufficient resources for their customer relationship development.

The third objective of this research was to investigate if relationship quality has any significant effect on brand equity. The above discussion seemed to satisfy this objective.

5.2.4 The Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality

With regard to the fourth objective of this study which was to examine the mediating effect of relationship quality on the relationships between the sources of brand equity (packaging, word of mouth and brand personality) and brand equity and its dimensions, the findings of this study showed that such effect exists and it is supported. Based on the findings, relationship quality which consists of three dimensions namely brand trust, brand satisfaction and brand commitment plays an important role as a mediating variable

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between the aforementioned independent variables and brand equity. Thus, this study confirmed that relationship quality can be considered as one of the strategies that are able to enhance the level of brand equity since it motivates and encourages customers to stay loyal with the brand that has a high equity. The details of findings are discussed below in the following sub-sections.

5.2.4.1 Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Packaging and Brand Equity

This research found that there is a mediating effect of relationship quality on the relationship between packaging and brand equity. This result is consistent with the previous studies (Gómez et al., 2015; Löfgren et al., 2008; Topoyan & Bulut, 2008) which found that packaging indirectly influence brand equity through relationship quality. One of the significant contributors to brand equity is relationship quality because good relationship quality inspires and motivates consumers to remain and stick with certain brand name.

Based on this finding, relationship quality plays crucial roles as a mediator in the relationship between packaging and brand equity. Moreover, the results of this study supports the social exchange theory, which stipulated that in assessing relationship between consumer and brand, the consumers tend to put high consideration on the incurred costs and rewards received (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This means that in the context of food product industries, if the customers satisfy with product packaging which is good and attractive in terms of design, highly informative and better in logistics function (e.g. container, protector, preserve and deliver the food with product packaging)

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it leads to increase the relationship quality, then this in turn increases the level of brand equity to the product. Therefore, this study has contributed to extending the packaging and brand equity framework in the SMEs food industry context.

The findings of this study provide several managerial implications for packaging and brand equity in SMEs food industry. This study revealed the important role of the effect of product packaging on brand equity among Malaysian consumers towards Malaysian SMEs food products. Hence, in order to develop and create brand equity, SMEs food industry must gain some understanding on customer expectations regarding packaging while buying SMEs brand. In other words, SMEs which can create good, creative and informative packaging that can meet customer expectation to the product can be competitive. They are also able to build customers'good perception towards the brand and lead to build good relationship quality and make customers become loyal with their brands.

Hence, with regard to the fourth research objective, this study confirms that relationship quality has a significant full mediating effect on the relationship between packaging and brand equity.

5.2.4.2 Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Word of Mouth and Brand Equity

As regards to word of mouth, this study showed that relationship quality mediates the relationship between word of mouth and brand equity. The result of this study found that word of mouth has a positive relationship on relationship quality. This result is supported by prior studies (File & Prince, 1992; Ha, 2004; Norjaya & Abdul Rahman,

2011) which found positive relationship between word of mouth and relationship quality. Word of mouth proved to be an important construct ($R^2 = 0.647$) in explaining relationship quality. Next, relationship quality was found to exert positive relationship on brand equity. The result is supported by earlier studies (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015c; Loureiro & Miranda, 2011; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014) which found positive relationship between relationship quality and brand equity. Consequently, relationship quality mediates the relationship between word of mouth and brand equity (ß = 0.093, t-value = 3.721). The findings indicated that relationship quality plays a full mediating role in the relationship between word of mouth and brand equity since the VAF value is 90.2%.

Besides supporting earlier findings, this study also provides empirical evidence that support the principal notion of the social exchange theory. Relationship quality is found to play a significant role as intervening variable between word of mouth and brand equity. If the level of positive word of mouth perceived by customers lead to increase relationship quality, then this in turn increases the success in creating brand equity. Thus, this study has contributes to extending the word of mouth and brand equity framework in SMEs food industry context.

The findings of this study provided several managerial implications for word of mouth and brand equity in SMEs food industry. The importance of word of mouth on consumer behavior is undeniable. Word of mouth play a critical role in product persuasion (Sen & Lerman, 2007), creating and developing brand equity (Mitchell et al., 2013; Murtiasih et al., 2014) and consumer purchase decisions (Bhayani, 2016). This is because word of mouth is found to play a crucial role and become more effective as it able to influence

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the customers at the searching stage of decision making (Bhayani, 2016). Thus, this study is found consistent with previous researches that revealed the important role of the influence word of mouth on brand equity among Malaysian customers towards SMEs food products. Hence, in order to develop brand equity, SMEs food industry must gain some understanding on their customers regarding how word of mouth influenced them in buying food product.

This study also indicated that managers can focus on word of mouth as their branding strategies to form brand equity by using relationship quality to strengthen the relationship. By doing so, SMEs are able to get continuous revenue from their business and gain high competitive advantage. Therefore, SMEs food industries may consider to look into the role of word of mouth marketing in establishing profitable relationships with their customers, which could lead to brand equity.

5.2.4.3 Mediating Effect of Relationship Quality on the Relationship between Brand Personality and Brand Equity

The result of this study showed that relationship quality mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand equity. Result of this study found that brand personality has a positive relationship on relationship quality. This result is supported by prior studies (Aaker et al., 2004; Lee & Kang, 2013; Louis & Lombart, 2010) which found positive relationship between brand personality and relationship quality. Brand personality proved to be an important construct ($R^2 = 0.647$) in explaining relationship quality. Next, relationship quality was found to exert positive relationship on brand equity. The result is supported by earlier studies (Ha et al., 2010; Hanaysha & Haim,

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2015c; Torres & Tribo, 2011) which found positive relationship between relationship quality and brand equity. Consequently, relationship quality mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand equity. This is supported by the previous studies (Kim et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2009) which found that relationship quality mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand equity. The findings of this study also indicated that relationship quality plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between brand personality and brand equity since the VAF value is 57.29%.

Theoretical literature stated that relationship quality is a key mediating factor that is able to influence long-term relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Thus, as expected, this study too found that relationship quality is an important variable in strengthening the relationship between brand personality and brand equity. And, interestingly, this study confirmed that relationship also exists the Malaysian SMEs food industry as earlier studies had focused on global brands and large companies. The finding indicates that, if the level of brand personality perceived by customers lead to increase relationship quality, then this in turn increases the level of brand equity.

The finding also contributed to the theory of brand equity and social exchange theory by providing empirical evidence of the mediating effect of relationship quality between brand personality and brand equity in SMEs food industries in Malaysia due to scarcity of past studies in this area. In relation to that, this study proposed some managerial implications for brand personality and brand equity in SMEs food industry. The importance of brand personality to the SMEs food industry is because they have the ability to create rich experiences to the consumers, which play a crucial role in developing and creating brand equity. In addition, due to the highly competitive market,

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the SMEs owners must create a suitable personality that suits with the company's product. This study revealed the important role of the influence of brand personality on brand equity among Malaysian consumers towards SMEs food products. Hence, in order to develop brand equity, SMEs food industry must gain some understanding on the emotions of clients regarding their personality while buying SMEs food brand.

The tenth research objective is about the mediating effect of relationship quality on brand personality and brand equity. The findings discussed above appeared to meet this research objective.

5.3 Contribution of the Research

This study attempted to investigate the effect of the predictors and relationship quality in the creation of brand equity. It combined three important elements into an integrated framework (refer theoretical framework, pg. 92) in the context of SMEs food industries in Malaysia. In this study, relationship quality was considered as a mediator that is able to mediate the relationship between the predictors and brand equity. This study provides benefits to the theoretical and practical aspects. The contributions are discussed in separate sub-sections as follows.

5.3.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study is useful and adds value to the body of knowledge in a number of ways. First, this study contributes to the marketing knowledge, particularly to the theory of brand equity building. This study provided an empirical evidence of the multidimensionality of brand equity from consumer's perspective. As mentioned earlier, the framework of this

study came from the expansion of Aaker's (1991) model by incorporating Yoo et.al.,'s (2000) ideas. It means that this study supported Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) conceptualisation of brand equity. In Aaker's (1991) model, brand equity consists of four brand equity assets (which were referred to as brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty). A number of prior studies, for example (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995; Pappu et al., 2005) were found to have established the multidimensionality of brand equity consumer based by Aaker (1991). However, prior studies that specifically focused on sources of brand equity on creation of brand equity in SMEs may still be limited. Thus, the findings of this study may add some views on the effect of predictors of brand equity on the creation of brand equity in SMEs by using actual consumers to empirically examine the dimensionality of brand equity consumer based construct.

Moreover, the findings of this study contributed to the body of knowledge by supporting and strengthening the Brand Equity Process Model (BECPM) and the underlying theory of Brand Equity. The findings supported and strengthened the argument made by Yoo and Donthu's (2001) whereby predictors of brand equity (such as in this study refers to packaging, word of mouth and brand personality) have a positive bond with brand equity and would enhance the company's performance.

Another contribution of this study is the identification of the role of relationship quality as an important marketing strategy in brand-building effort. In fact, the positioning of relationship quality as a mediator in the relationship between packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and brand equity also makes a significant contribution to the theory of brand equity and social exchange theory as well. The mediator effect was

neither presented in Yoo et al.'s (2000) model nor in Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993). This separate construct of relationship quality was placed between the predictors of brand equity and brand equity assets. The introduction of relationship quality as a mediating variable was based on the key mediating variable (KMV) of relationship quality proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994). The basic discussions, which focused on social exchange literature, clarified the importance of relationship quality and stressed further examination in terms of extension and application. Therefore, this study extended the relationship of marketing variables. In addition to trust and commitment, another variable such as satisfaction was applied in the context of Malaysian SMEs food industries.

Besides, this study also contributes to the theoretical perspective in terms of sampling procedures. In terms of the sampling procedure, the test of the mediation effect of relationship quality on the relationship between packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and brand equity makes a significant theoretical contribution as this examination executes in the Malaysian market, which have different culture practices from the western. This finding increases the understanding of brand-building efforts, especially in Eastern countries, which have received less attention from researchers.

Indeed, this study is expanded by concentrating in small and medium enterprises context which enhances the knowledge of the brand management practices in different context of investigation. In particular, most of the prior studies (Ebeid, 2014; Hanaysha & Haim, 2015a; Murtiasih et al., 2014; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014; Valette-Florence et al., 2011; Yoo et al., 2000) have investigated several sources of brand equity, however their

study was restricted to global brands and large companies. Thus, this study has increased the knowledge of brand equity phenomenon from SMEs context of study.

The present study measures brand equity in low involvement product category (e.g. SMEs food products) which was limited in previous studies on consumers-based brand equity measurement. Several studies on brand equity (Hanaysha & Haim, 2015a; Noor Hasmini & Osman, 2014; Norjaya et al., 2007) in Malaysia were concentrated on high involvement product and global brands.

Following the above discussions, it is clear that this study has made important contributions by empirically proposing the important sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality as important insights for brand equity literature as well as social exchange literature especially in the context of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

5.3.2 Practical Contribution

This study also provides practical benefits in a number of ways. First, this study provides some insights on the importance of brand management particularly brand equity for SMEs food product industry. Based on the result of this study, it is shows that brand management is not just for large companies but also for SMEs. This study also provides SMEs owner a better understanding on the importance of having brand strength and how to improve the equity of their brands in the market. By establishing higher brand equity, the Malaysian SMEs food industry could improve their product's competitiveness and in achieving higher market performance. In the long run, it will

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help SMEs to improve their positions in the marketplace by increasing market shares and help Malaysia to achieve developed country status by 2020.

Second, as found in this study, the sources of brand equity affect the formation of brand equity in SMEs. This finding is useful for company to decide the sources of brand equity that influence the formation of brand equity and thus enable companies to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. This study proposed three important sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality that should be emphasized by SMEs in order to build and enhance the level of brand equity. These three sources can be classified as strategic sources as it able to enhance SMEs brands equity without requiring high financial budgets. Product with good and innovative packaging, strong and consistent brand personality and positive word of mouth are able to increase the level of brand equity for SMEs brand. By giving attention on strategic sources, brand management will not be a burden to SMEs.

Third, the positive and significant mediating effect of relationship quality as found in this study indicates the SMEs owners should establish and maintain good relationship quality with consumers in relation to build relationship between the sources of brand equity and brand equity. Thus, this study emphasised the importance of building and maintaining a successful customer relationships which in turn will boost the level of brand equity in the context of SMEs food product industry in Malaysia. As noted by Chen and Myagmarsuren (2011), relationship quality is one of the important strategies to be considered when establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with customers. By concentrating on relationship marketing strategy which is relationship quality, companies will be able to build a loyal customer base and ensure the company's

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long-term revenues. Being able to manage relationship quality could foster the image of SMEs' brands and create positive perception towards their products. Hence, this study acknowledged the significance of relationship quality through its dimensions; brand satisfaction, brand trust and brand commitment in affecting brand equity of SMEs food industries.

5.4 Limitations of the Research and Future Directions

This study has several limitations even though this study has provided support for a number of hypothesised relationships between the exogenous and endogenous variables, and those limitations can be regarded as avenues for future research. Firstly, this study adopts a cross-sectional design which does not allow causal inferences to be made from the population. Therefore, a longitudinal design in future needs to be considered to measure the theoretical constructs at different point in time to confirm the findings of this study. This is because a longitudinal study requires data to be collected several times during a certain period to see the influence of relational variables on brand equity. According to Doucette (1996), a longitudinal study allows for an assessment of causality relationships that are not possible in cross-sectional data.

Secondly, this study was conducted in the context of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the food product industry. Although the selection of products has been planned deliberately, for a forthcoming research, it can be extended to other SMEs sectors or other brands of the same product category. Indeed, the investigation can also be extended to service industry in SMEs.

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Thirdly, the research model of this study was able to explain 64.4% of the total variance in relationship quality and 69.8% of the total variance in brand equity. In other words, the remaining 35.6% and 30.2% of the variance for the relationship quality and brand equity respectively remain to be explained by other factors. Therefore, future research may expand the study on brand equity by considering other factors that are important to improving brand equity such as product innovation, brand identity, brand experience, brand salience and brand community. Such variables have been demonstrated in the literature to play a significant role in improving brand equity from consumer perspective (Ding & Tseng, 2015; Li, 2011; Ponnam, S., & Balaji, 2015; Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, & Pervan, 2015; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; Vieceli & Shaw, 2010).

Fourthly, the conceptual framework of this study does not take into consideration the factors that moderate the influence of marketing strategies namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality on brand equity. Therefore, future research may expand the present model by incorporating moderator factors such as country of origin (Esmaeilpour & Abdolvand, 2016) and purchase involvement (Parkvithee & Miranda, 2012) which may have a significant influence on the branding context.

Finally, more attention should be paid to investigating brand equity at cross-national validation. This is because the effect of marketing strategies (namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality) on brand equity may differ depending on the cultural practices of certain country. Therefore, further studies should be conducted to investigate whether these marketing strategies would give the same effect across countries.

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5.5 Conclusion

This study has presented an interesting contribution to the literature as well as to the practitioners. The findings developed a stronger basis by recommending the important sources of brand equity such as packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and relationship quality as a marketing effort that provides a great contribution to the brand-building effort. The exploration of the sources of brand equity building in the context of SMEs companies increases the understanding of the importance of intangible assets in building competitive advantage.

This study provided a conceptual framework for understanding the effect of sources of brand equity in influencing the creation of brand equity. The important sources of brand equity namely packaging, word of mouth and brand personality that are able to influence brand equity assets through the mediating variable of relationship quality revealed the importance of these variables in influencing the brand equity assets which consists of brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty.

This study has also revealed that relationship quality plays a significant mediating role on relationship between marketing strategies and brand equity. Relationship quality was found to mediate the relationship between packaging, word of mouth and brand personality and brand equity. This means that the effect of the sources of brand equity on brand equity is greater when the strategy of relationship quality is incorporated in the theoretical framework. Therefore, it can be concluded that adopting relationship quality strategy tends to generate competitive advantage and lead to better business performance for SMEs. The findings offered guidelines and suggestions towards incorporating

relationship quality into branding strategies for the purpose of enhancing brand equity and company's competitive advantage.

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APPENDIX A:

SMEs Best Brands Product Branding Awards: Food and Beverage Product

YEAR	BRANDS	PRODUCT
2016	**None**	
2015	Ceygold	Tea
2014	**None**	
2013	Grand Imperial	Chinese Cuisine
	Hui Lau Shan	Desset
	Mykuali	Instant Noodles
	Pappa Rich	Malaysian Delight
	Kebab Turki Baba Rafi	Kebab
2012	Coliseum Cafe	Western Cuisine
	Charlie Brown Cafe	Café
	Chatime	Bubble Tea
	Goodday Fresh Milk	Fresh And Low Fat Milk
	My Chef	Ready Cooked Meals
	Pasific Coffee	Coffee
	Shogun	Japanese Buffet
	The Big Rajah Food Caterers	Food Catering
2011	Colavita	Olive Oil
	Grand Saisaki	Japanese Cuisine
	Jasmine	Rice
	Ramly	Frozen Meat Patties
	Subway	Sandwiches
	Tutti Frutti	Frozen Yogurt
2010	Chek Hup	Coffee
	Colavita	Olive Oil
	Dairy Champ	Condensed/Evoporated Milk
	Jati	Rice
	Mm Vitaoils	Edible Oil Products
	Sakae Sushi	Japanese Cuisine
	The Loaf	Delicatessen
2009	The Loaf	Food & Beverage
	The Ship	Food & Beverage
	Koong Who Tong	Food & Beverage
	Jasmine Food Chek Hup	Food & Beverage
2008	Big Apple	Food & Beverage
	Chek Hup	Coffee
	Daily Fresh	Corn And Snack
	Kipas Udang	Food & Beverage

APPENDIX B:

Letter of Recommendation for Data Collection and Research Work

KEDAH AMAN MAKMUR ● BERSAMA MEMACU TRANSFORMASI

UUM/OYAGSB/R-4/4/1
20 April 2016

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam,

LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FOR DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH WORK

This is to certify that **Suhaini Binti Mat Daud (Matric No: 95260)** is a student of Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia pursuing her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). She is conducting a research entitled *"Marketing Strategies and Brand Equity In SMES : The Role of Relationship Quality as a Mediator"* under the supervision of Dr. Noor Hasmini binti Abd Ghani.

In this regard, we hope that you could kindly provide assistance and cooperation for her to successfully complete the research. All the information gathered will be strictly used for academic purposes only.

Your cooperation and assistance is very much appreciated.

Thank you.

"KNOWLEDGE, VIRTUE, SERVICE"

Yours faithfully,

ROZITA BINTI RAMLI
Assistant Registrar
for Dean
Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business

c.c.   Supervisor
Student's File (95260)

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APPENDIX C:

Questionnaire

Tuan/puan yang dihormati,

Tuan/puan terpilih untuk mengambil bahagian di dalam kajian akademik yang bertajuk:

STRATEGI PEMASARAN DAN EKUITI JENAMA DALAM INDUSTRI PKS: PERANAN KUALITI HUBUNGAN SEBAGAI MEDIATOR

Saya memohon jasa baik tuan/puan menjawab soalan ini dengan ikhlas bersandarkan persepsi dan pengalaman tuan/puan sendiri. Tuan/puan hanya memerlukan 15 minit untuk melengkapkan borang soal selidik ini dan **TIADA JAWAPAN BETUL ATAU SALAH** ke atas jawapan-jawapan yang tuan/puan berikan. Oleh itu, saya memohon jasa baik tuan/puan menjawab soalan ini dengan ikhlas bersandarkan persepsi dan pengalaman tuan/puan sendiri Bagi memudahkan tuan/puan menjawab soalselidik ini, sila baca dengan teliti semua arahan yang berkaitan bagi setiap bahagian.

Untuk makluman tuan/puan, maklumat yang diperolehi daripada soal selidik ini adalah untuk **TUJUAN AKADEMIK SEMATA-MATA** dan akan **DIRAHSIAKAN**.

Terima kasih untuk segala kerjasama dan penglibatan tuan/puan dalam kajian ini. Penglibatan tuan/puan sangatlah dihargai.

Suhaini Bt Mat Daud
011-10941170

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

You are invited as a participant in this research entitled:
MARKETING STRATEGIES AND BRAND EQUITY IN SMEs: THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AS A MEDIATOR

Please do not hesitate to answer this questionnaire frankly based on your perception and experience. To assist you in completing this questionnaire, please read carefully all instructions pertaining to every section.

*For your information, all the data gathered from this questionnaire are **STRICTLY FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSE** and will remain **CONFIDENTIAL.***

Thank you for your coorporation and involvement to this survey. Your participation is highly appreciated.

Doctoral Researcher,
Suhaini Bt Mat Daud
01000 Kangar, Perlis
011-10941170
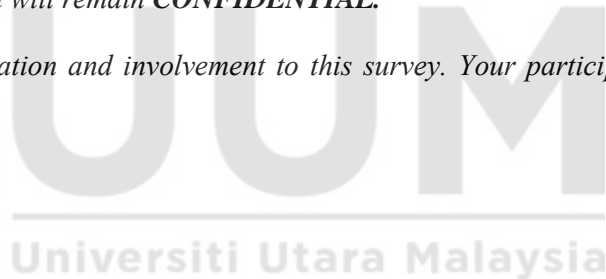
Istilah

Perusahaan Kecil dan Sederhana (PKS) – merujuk entiti perniagaan yang memperoleh jualan tahunan tidak melebihi RM50 juta ataupun mempunyai jumlah pekerja sepenuh masa tidak melebihi 200 orang. Dalam konteks kajian ini, PKS merujuk kepada PKS dalam sektor pembuatan produk makanan dan minuman di Malaysia.

JenamaPKS- merujuk jenama produk keluaran PKS yang dikilangkan di Malaysia dan mempunyai logo ―Barangan Buatan Malaysia‖.

Terminology

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) *– refers to the business entities with annual sales turnover not exceeding RM50 million or with full-time employees not exceeding 200 persons. In this study, SMEs refers to Malaysian SMEs' food product.*

SMEs Brand *– refer to the brand of product produced by SMEs and manufactured in Malaysia and certified to use the logo "Made in Malaysia "(Barangan Buatan Malaysia).*
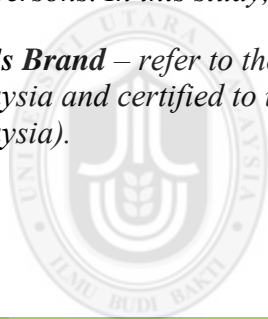
Skala/*scale*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sangat tidak setuju/*Strongly disagree*	Tidak setuju/Disagree	Kurang setuju/ Slightly disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Sedikit setuju/Slightly agree	Setuju/Agree	Sangat setuju/Strongly agree

PENGETAHUAN PRODUK/ PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE

Bahagian ini adalah merupakan bahagian wajib jawab. Sila jawab soalan ini dengan jujur. Sila tandakan (/) pada kotak yang berkenaan dan isikan jawapan pada tempat kosong yang berkaitan.

Instruction: This section is a preliminary question. Please answer all of the questions frankly and honestly. You are indicated to tick (/) at appropriate box and fill in your answer at the blank.

Soalan Wajib Jawab/ *Preliminary Questions*:

1. Saya mempunyai pengalaman menggunakan produk makanan keluaran PKS/ *I have experience using SMEs food product.*

    ☐ Ya/ *Yes* (Jika Ya, sila jawab soalan no. 2 dan bahagian seterusnya/ If yes, proceed to the next question and the following section)

    ☐ Tidak/ *No*

2. Saya kerap menggunakan produk makananan keluaran PKS/ *I regularly consume SMEs food product.*

    ☐ Ya/ *Yes*

    ☐ Tidak/ *No*

3. Berikut adalah merupakan jenama produk makanan keluaran PKS yang sedang saya gunakan pada masa ini? *Please tick (/) the brand of SMEs food product that you are currently using?*

    ☐ Adabi   ☐ Tamin

    ☐ Kipas Udang   ☐ Kart's

    ☐ Kawan   ☐ Brahim's

    ☐ Ramly   ☐ My Chef

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BAHAGIAN B/ Section B:
PEMBUNGKUSAN/ PACKAGING

Berdasarkan jenama yang dipilih, sila nyatakan pendapat tuan/puan tentang pengaruh pembungkusan dengan membulatkan jawapan ikhlas anda menggunakan tahahp skala di bawah bermula dengan skala 1: hingga skala 7: sangat setuju. Sila pilih SATU skala yang paling tepat sahaja.

*Based on the selected brand, please indicate your perception regarding product packaging by circling your frank response. Please use scale 1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree. Please choose only **ONE** appropriate scale.*

No.	Pernyataan-pernyataan *Statements*	Sangat tidak setuju					Sangat Setuju	
1	Warna pembungkusan adalah antara factor utama yang menarik minat saya untuk membeli produk jenama ini. *The colour of the packaging is the first thing that attracts my attention to buy this brand.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Reka bentuk pembungkusan yang menarik mempengaruhi pembelian saya jenama ini *The packaging's attractive design influences my purchasing of this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Saya menghargai pembungkusan produk ini kerana ia kelihatan lebih bersih *I value the packaging for this product as it seems more hygienic.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	Saya memilih untuk membeli produk jenama ini dengan pembungkusan yang digunakan sekarang kerana ia mudah untuk dibuka. *I prefer to buy product of this brand with its current packaging because it is easy to open*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	Saya memilih untuk membeli produk jenama ini dengan pembungkusan yang digunakan sekarang kerana ia mudah untuk ditutup. *I prefer to buy product of this brand with its current packaging because it is easy to close*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	Ciri produk yang mudah untuk digunakan mempengaruhi pembelian produk jenama ini. *The ease of use of product of this brand favours purchase intention*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Unsur maklumat yang tertera pada pembungkusan produk ini (maklumat produk dan kandungan) membantu saya untuk membuat keputusan yang tepat dalam pembelian produk *The informative elements printed on the packaging of this product (product information and content) help me to make the right decision for product purchase*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Lokasi maklumat yang tertera pada pembungkusan produk ini (contoh: tarikh luput) membantu saya membuat keputusan pembelian. *The location of the information printed on the packaging of this product (e.g. expiration date) helps my purchase decision.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	Simbol-simbol yang tertera pada pembungkusan mempengaruhi pembelian jenama ini *The symbols on the packaging favour the purchase of this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Berdasarkan jenama yang dipilih, sila nyatakan pendapat anda terhadap komunikasi bualan dengan menggunakan tahap skala di bawah bermula dengan skala 1: sangat tidak setuju hingga skala 7: sangat setuju. Sila pilih **SATU** skala yang paling tepat sahaja

*Based on the selected brand, please indicate your perception regarding word-of-mouth communication by circling your frank response. Please use scale 1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree. Please choose only **ONE** appropriate scale.*

No	Pernyataan-pernyataan *Statements*	Sangat tidak setuju						Sangat setuju
1	Saya sering merujuk komunikasi bualan untuk mengetahui jenama yang mempunyai tanggapan baik dalam kalangan orang ramai. *I often refer to word-of mouth communication to know what brands make good impressions on others.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Bagi memastikan saya membuat pembelian jenama yang betul, saya sering merujuk komunikasi bualan. *To make sure I buy the right brand, I often refer to word-of-mouth communication*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Saya sering mempertimbangkan komunikasi bualan untuk membantu memilih jenama yang betul *I often consult word-of-mouth communication to help choose the right brand.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	Saya sering mendapatkan maklumat daripada komunikasi bualan sebelum membeli jenama tertentu. *I frequently gather information from word-of-mouth communication before I buy a certain brand.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5.	Jika saya tidak merujuk kepada komunikasi bualan, saya bimbang dengan keputusan pembelian saya *If I don't refer to word-of-mouth communication when I buy a brand, I worry about my decision*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.	Apabila saya membeli sesuatu jenama, komunikasi bualan akan membuatkan saya yakin dengan pembelian tersebut. *When I buy a brand, word-of mouth communication make me confident in purchasing the brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	Saya mendapat cadangan daripada keluarga, kawan-kawan dan jiran sebelum saya membeli jenama tertentu. *I seek advice from family, friends and neighbours before I purchase certain brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Nota:
Komunikasi bualan merujuk kepada perbualan tidak formal mengenai sesuatu jenama/ produk di kalangan ahli keluarga, kawan-kawan dan jiran-jiran.

Berdasarkan jenama yang dipilih, sila nyatakan pendapat anda terhadap personaliti jenama dengan menggunakan tahap skala di bawah bermula dengan Skala 1: sangat tidak setuju hingga skala 7: sangat setuju. Sila pilih **SATU** skala yang paling tepat sahaja.

*Based on the selected brand, please indicate your perception regarding brand personality by circling your frank response. Please use scale 1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree. Please choose only **ONE** appropriate scale.*

No.	Pernyataan-pernyataan *Statements*	Sangat tidak setuju						Sangat setuju
I think the brand (refer to the selectedbrand) is:								
1	Realistik *Down-to-earth*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Stabil *Stable*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Bertanggungjawab *Responsible*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	Aktif *Active*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	Dinamik *Dynamic*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	Inovatif *Innovative*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Agresif *Aggressive*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Berani/ jelas *Bold*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	Biasa *Ordinary*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	Mudah/ senang disebut/ mudah dikenali *Simple*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	Romantik *Romantic*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	Sentimental *Sentimental*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Nota:
Realistik – Merujuk sifat produk yang menggambarkan keadaan sebenar
Stabil – Merujuk sifat produk yang kukuh dan mantap
Aktif – Merujuk sifat produk yang kuat dan bertenaga
Dinamik – Merujuk produk yang bersifat cergas dan bertenaga
Inovatif – Merujuk produk bersifat inovasi
Agresif – Merujuk sifat produk yang menggambarkan keadaan suka melawan atau suka menentang
Berani – Merujuk sifat produk yang menggambarkan ciri gagah berani
Biasa – Merujuk sifat produk yang biasa atau normal
Mudah – Merujuk sifat produk yang mudah untuk digunakan
Romantik – Merujuk sifat produk yang menggambarkan kasih sayang, keindahan dan kemesraan
Sentimental – Merujuk sifat produk yang menyentuh perasaan dan bersifat lembut

Berdasarkan jenama yang dipilih, sila nyatakan pendapat anda tentang kualiti hubungan dengan menggunakan tahap skala di bawah bermula dengan skala (1): sangat tidak setuju hingga skala (7): sangat setuju. Sila pilih **SATU** skala yang paling tepat sahaja.
*Based on the selected brand, please indicate your perception regarding relationship quality by circling your frank response. Please use scale 1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree. Please choose only **ONE** appropriate scale.*

No.	Pernyataan-pernyataan *Statements*	Sangat tidak setuju						Sangat setuju
1	Saya berpuas hati dengan keputusan saya untuk membeli jenama ini *I am satisfied with my decision to purchase this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Pilihan saya untuk membeli jenama ini merupakan langkah yang bijak *My choice to buy this brand was a wise one*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Saya merasakan bahawa saya telah melakukan perkara yang betul apabila saya membeli jenama ini *I think that I did the right thing when I bought this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	Saya berasa gembira membeli jenama ini *I am happy that I bought this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	Saya benar-benar menikmati pembelian saya bagi jenama ini *I truly enjoyed my purchase of this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	Jenama ini menangani dengan jujur perkara-perkara yang membimbangkan penggunanya *This brand is honest in what concerns its consumers*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Jenama ini boleh dipercayai *This brand is reliable*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Membeli produk daripada jenama ini merupakan satu jaminan *Buying the product of this brand is a guarantee*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	Saya akan kekal memilih jenama ini tidak kira pada masa baik atau tidak baik. *I will stay with this brand through good and bad times*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	Saya bersedia membuat pengorbanan kecil untuk terus menggunakan produk ini *I am willing to make small sacrifices in order to keep using this product.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	Saya berikrar untuk setia dengan jenama ini *I have made a pledge to stick with this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	Saya komited terhadap jenama ini *I am committed to this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Berdasarkan jenama yang dipilih, sila nyatakan pendapat anda tentang jenama dengan menggunakan tahap skala di bawah bermula dengan skala (1): sangat tidak setuju hingga skala (7): sangat setuju. Sila pilih **SATU** skala yang paling tepat sahaja.
*Based on the selected brand, please indicate your perception regarding branding by circling your frank response. Please use scale 1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree. Please choose only **ONE** appropriate scale.*

No.	Pernyataan-pernyataan *Statement*	Sangat tidak setuju					Sangat setuju	
1	Saya tahu akan kewujudan jenama ini *I am aware of this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Apabila saya berfikir tentang produk makanan, jenama ini adalah salah satu daripada jenama yang terlintas difikiran saya *When I think of food product, this brand is one of the brands that comes to mind*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Jenama ini adalah jenama yang biasa saya gunakan *This brand is a brand of food product that I am very familiar with.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	Saya tahu produk jenama ini. *I know what this brand looks like*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	Saya dapat mengenal/mengecam jenama ini berbanding jenama pesaing lain *I can recognise this brand amongst other competing brands of food product.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	Saya tahu rupa simbol jenama ini *I know how the symbol of this brand looks like*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Saya tidak menghadapi kesukaran dalam membayangkan jenama ini dalam fikiran saya *I have no difficulties in imagining this brand in my mind*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Saya boleh mengingat dengan cepat simbol atau logo jenama ini. *I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	Saya mempunyai pendapat mengenai jenama ini *I have an opinion about this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	Jenama ini menawarkan produk yang berkualiti *This brand offers very good quality products*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	Jenama ini menawarkan produk yang mempunyai kualiti yang konsisten. *This brand offers products of consistent quality*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	Jenama ini menawarkan produk yang sangat boleh dipercayai *This brand offers very reliable products*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13	Jenama ini menawarkan produk dengan ciri-ciri yang sangat baik *This brand offers product with excellent features*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14	Saya menganggap bahawa saya setia dengan jenama ini *I consider myself to be loyal to this brand*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15	Jenama ini akan menjadi pilihan pertama saya apabila saya membeli produk makanan. *This brand would be my first choice when considering food product*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

16	Saya tidak akan membeli jenama lain sekiranya jenama ini ada di kedai tersebut. *I will not buy other brands of food product if this brand is available at the shop.*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

BAHAGIAN G: LATAR BELAKANG
SECTION G: BACKGROUND

Arahan: Sila tandakan (/) pada kotak yang berkenaan dan isikan jawapan di tempat kosong yang berkaitan.

Instruction: Please tick (/) appropriate box and fill in the blanks

1. Jantina/ *Gender*

☐ Lelaki/ *Male*   ☐ Perempuan/ *Female*

2. Etnik/ *Ethnicity:*

☐ Melayu/*Malay*   ☐ Cina/*Chinese*

☐ India/*Indian*   ☐ Lain-lain (Sila nyatakan)
                              *Others (Please specify)*_____

3. Umur anda/ *Your age*

☐ Kurang daripada 20 tahun   ☐ 21 hingga 30 tahun
   Under 20 years old   *21to 30 years old*

☐ 31 hingga 40 tahun   ☐ 41 hingga 50 tahun
   31 to 40 years old   *41 to 50 years old*

☐ 51 hingga 60 tahun   ☐ Melebihi 60 tahun
   51 to 60 years old   *Over 60 years old*

4. Tahap pendidikan tertinggi/ *Highest level of education*

☐ Sijil Sekolah Menengah/ *Higher School Certificate (SPM)*

☐ Diploma/ Diploma Lanjutan/ Sijil
   Diploma/ Advanced Diploma/ Certificate

☐ Ijazah/ *Bachelor Degree*

☐ Ijazah Lanjutan (Sarjana/ PhD)/ *Post Degree (Master/ PhD)*

5. Status Perkahwinan/ *Marital Status*

☐ Belum Berkahwin/ *Single*   ☐ Berkahwin/ *Married*

☐ Bercerai/ *Divorced*

6. Pekerjaan/*Occupation*

☐ Pekerja/ *Employed*

☐ Bekerja Sendiri/*Self-employed*

☐ Tidak Bekerja/U*nemployed*

☐ Surirumah/ *Housewife*

7. Pendapatan bulanan isi rumah anda/ *Your household monthly income*

☐ 1000 dan ke bawah/ *1000 and below*   ☐ 1001 hingga 3000/1001 to 3000

☐ 3001 hingga 5000/ *3001 to 5000*   ☐ 5001 hingga 7000/ *5001 to 7000*

☐ 7001 hingga 9000/ *7001 to 9000*   ☐ 9001 dan ke atas 11,000/ *9001 and above*
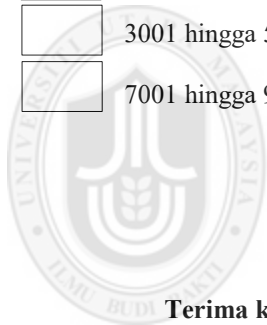
Terima kasih kerana sudi melibatkan diri dalam kajian ini.
Thank you for participating in this survey.

APPENDIX D: Chi-square Table

F-statistics with other P-values: [P=0.05](#) | [P=0.01](#) | [P=0.001](#)

df	P = 0.05	P = 0.01	P = 0.001
1	3.84	6.64	10.83
2	5.99	9.21	13.82
3	7.82	11.35	16.27
4	9.49	13.28	18.47
5	11.07	15.09	20.52
6	12.59	16.81	22.46
7	14.07	18.48	24.32
8	15.51	20.09	26.13
9	16.92	21.67	27.88
10	18.31	23.21	29.59
11	19.68	24.73	31.26
12	21.03	26.22	32.91
13	22.36	27.69	34.53
14	23.69	29.14	36.12
15	25.00	30.58	37.70
16	26.30	32.00	39.25
17	27.59	33.41	40.79
18	28.87	34.81	42.31
19	30.14	36.19	43.82
20	31.41	37.57	45.32
21	32.67	38.93	46.80
22	33.92	40.29	48.27
23	35.17	41.64	49.73
24	36.42	42.98	51.18
25	37.65	44.31	52.62
26	38.89	45.64	54.05
27	40.11	46.96	55.48
28	41.34	48.28	56.89
29	42.56	49.59	58.30
30	43.77	50.89	59.70
31	44.99	52.19	61.10
32	46.19	53.49	62.49
33	47.40	54.78	63.87
34	48.60	56.06	65.25
35	49.80	57.34	66.62
36	51.00	58.62	67.99
37	52.19	59.89	69.35
38	53.38	61.16	70.71
39	54.57	62.43	72.06
40	55.76	63.69	73.41
41	56.94	64.95	74.75
42	58.12	66.21	76.09
43	59.30	67.46	77.42
44	60.48	68.71	78.75
45	61.66	69.96	80.08
46	62.83	71.20	81.40
47	64.00	72.44	82.72
48	65.17	73.68	84.03
49	66.34	74.92	85.35

APPENDIX D: Chi-square Table (continue)

df	P = 0.05	P = 0.01	P = 0.001
50	67.51	76.15	86.66
51	68.67	77.39	87.97
52	69.83	78.62	89.27
53	70.99	79.84	90.57
54	72.15	81.07	91.88
55	73.31	82.29	93.17
56	74.47	83.52	94.47
57	75.62	84.73	95.75
58	76.78	85.95	97.03
59	77.93	87.17	98.34
60	79.08	88.38	99.62
61	80.23	89.59	100.88
62	81.38	90.80	102.15
63	82.53	92.01	103.46
64	83.68	93.22	104.72
65	84.82	94.42	105.97
66	85.97	95.63	107.26
67	87.11	96.83	108.54
68	88.25	98.03	109.79
69	89.39	99.23	111.06
70	90.53	100.42	112.31
71	91.67	101.62	113.56
72	92.81	102.82	114.84
73	93.95	104.01	116.08
74	95.08	105.20	117.35
75	96.22	106.39	118.60
76	97.35	107.58	119.85
77	98.49	108.77	121.11
78	99.62	109.96	122.36
79	100.75	111.15	123.60
80	101.88	112.33	124.84
81	103.01	113.51	126.09
82	104.14	114.70	127.33
83	105.27	115.88	128.57
84	106.40	117.06	129.80
85	107.52	118.24	131.04
86	108.65	119.41	132.28
87	109.77	120.59	133.51
88	110.90	121.77	134.74
89	112.02	122.94	135.96
90	113.15	124.12	137.19
91	114.27	125.29	138.45
92	115.39	126.46	139.66
93	116.51	127.63	140.90
94	117.63	128.80	142.12
95	118.75	129.97	143.32
96	119.87	131.14	144.55
97	120.99	132.31	145.78
98	122.11	133.47	146.99
99	123.23	134.64	148.21
100	124.34	135.81	149.48

APPENDIX E:

Normality Test

	No.	Missing	Mean	Median	Min	Max	Standard Deviation	Excess Kurtosis	Skewness
OPKG	123	0	50.371	51	35	63	6.056	-0.517	-0.238
OWOM	124	0	37.307	37	21	49	5.638	-0.300	-0.167
OBP	125	0	63.435	63	47	79	7.387	-0.697	-0.12
ORQ	126	0	66.898	67	45	84	8.245	-0.284	-0.268
OBE	127	0	91.182	93	60	112	11.267	-0.248	-0.333
OBA	186	0	28.856	30	19	35	3.808	-0.436	-0.353
OBASS	187	0	22.649	23	13	28	3.186	-0.144	-0.383
OPQ	188	0	17.364	18	11	21	2.223	-0.108	-0.400
OBL	189	0	16.601	17	8	21	2.734	0.152	-0.575

APPENDIX F:

Descriptive Statistics of Respondents

Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	102	32.6	32.6	32.6
	Female	211	67.4	67.4	100.0
	Total	313	100.0	100.0	

Ethnicity

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Malay	286	91.4	91.4	91.4
	Chinese	18	5.8	5.8	97.1
	Indian	9	2.9	2.9	100.0
	Total	313	100.0	100.0	

Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Under 20 years old	6	1.9	1.9	1.9
	21 to 30 years old	127	40.6	40.6	42.5
	31 to 40 years old	125	39.9	39.9	82.4
	41 to 50 years old	51	16.3	16.3	98.7
	51 to 60 years old	3	1.0	1.0	99.7
	Over 60 years old	1	.3	.3	100.0
	Total	313	100.0	100.0	

Edu

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High School Certificate/ SPM	60	19.2	19.2	19.2
	Diploma/ STPM/ Certificate	54	17.3	17.3	36.4
	Bachelor Degree	135	43.1	43.1	79.6
	Master/ PhD	64	20.4	20.4	100.0
	Total	313	100.0	100.0	

Marital Status

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Single	118	37.7	37.7	37.7
	Married	191	61.0	61.0	98.7
	Divorced	4	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	313	100.0	100.0	

Occupation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Employed	213	68.1	68.1	68.1
	Self-employed	26	8.3	8.3	76.4
	Unemployed	67	21.4	21.4	97.8
	Housewife	7	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	313	100.0	100.0	

Income

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1000 and below	75	24.0	24.0	24.0
	1001 to 3000	92	29.4	29.4	53.4
	3001 to 5000	82	26.2	26.2	79.6
	5001 to 7000	35	11.2	11.2	90.7
	7001 to 9000	18	5.8	5.8	96.5
	9001 and above	11	3.5	3.5	100.0
	Total	313	100.0	100.0	

APPENDIX G:

Common Method Variance

Total Variance Explained						
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	23.200	41.428	41.428	23.200	**41.428**	41.428
2	3.526	6.297	47.725	3.526	6.297	47.725
3	2.501	4.466	52.191	2.501	4.466	52.191
4	1.928	3.442	55.634	1.928	3.442	55.634
5	1.684	3.007	58.640	1.684	3.007	58.640
6	1.508	2.693	61.333	1.508	2.693	61.333
7	1.349	2.409	63.743	1.349	2.409	63.743
8	1.198	2.139	65.881	1.198	2.139	65.881
9	1.041	1.858	67.740	1.041	1.858	67.740
10	.962	1.717	69.457			
11	.914	1.632	71.089			
12	.838	1.497	72.586			
13	.766	1.367	73.953			
14	.745	1.330	75.284			
15	.728	1.301	76.584			
16	.672	1.199	77.784			
17	.626	1.118	78.902			
18	.601	1.073	79.975			
19	.589	1.052	81.027			
20	.580	1.036	82.063			
21	.537	.959	83.022			
22	.504	.899	83.921			
23	.489	.873	84.794			
24	.454	.810	85.605			
25	.444	.792	86.397			
26	.424	.758	87.154			
27	.413	.737	87.891			
28	.388	.693	88.584			
29	.378	.674	89.258			
30	.365	.652	89.911			
31	.355	.634	90.545			
32	.344	.615	91.159			
33	.320	.571	91.731			
34	.309	.551	92.282			
35	.305	.544	92.826			
36	.288	.514	93.340			
37	.268	.478	93.818			
38	.254	.453	94.271			
39	.248	.443	94.714			
40	.246	.439	95.153			
41	.240	.428	95.582			
42	.227	.405	95.987			
43	.226	.404	96.390			
44	.207	.369	96.759			
45	.197	.352	97.111			

APPENDIX G: Common Method Variance (continued)

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
46	.179	.320	97.431			
47	.178	.317	97.749			
48	.171	.305	98.054			
49	.165	.294	98.348			
50	.159	.283	98.631			
51	.149	.266	98.897			
52	.140	.250	99.147			
53	.129	.231	99.378			
54	.123	.220	99.598			
55	.116	.206	99.804			
56	.110	.196	100.000			

Total Variance Explained

Measurement Model
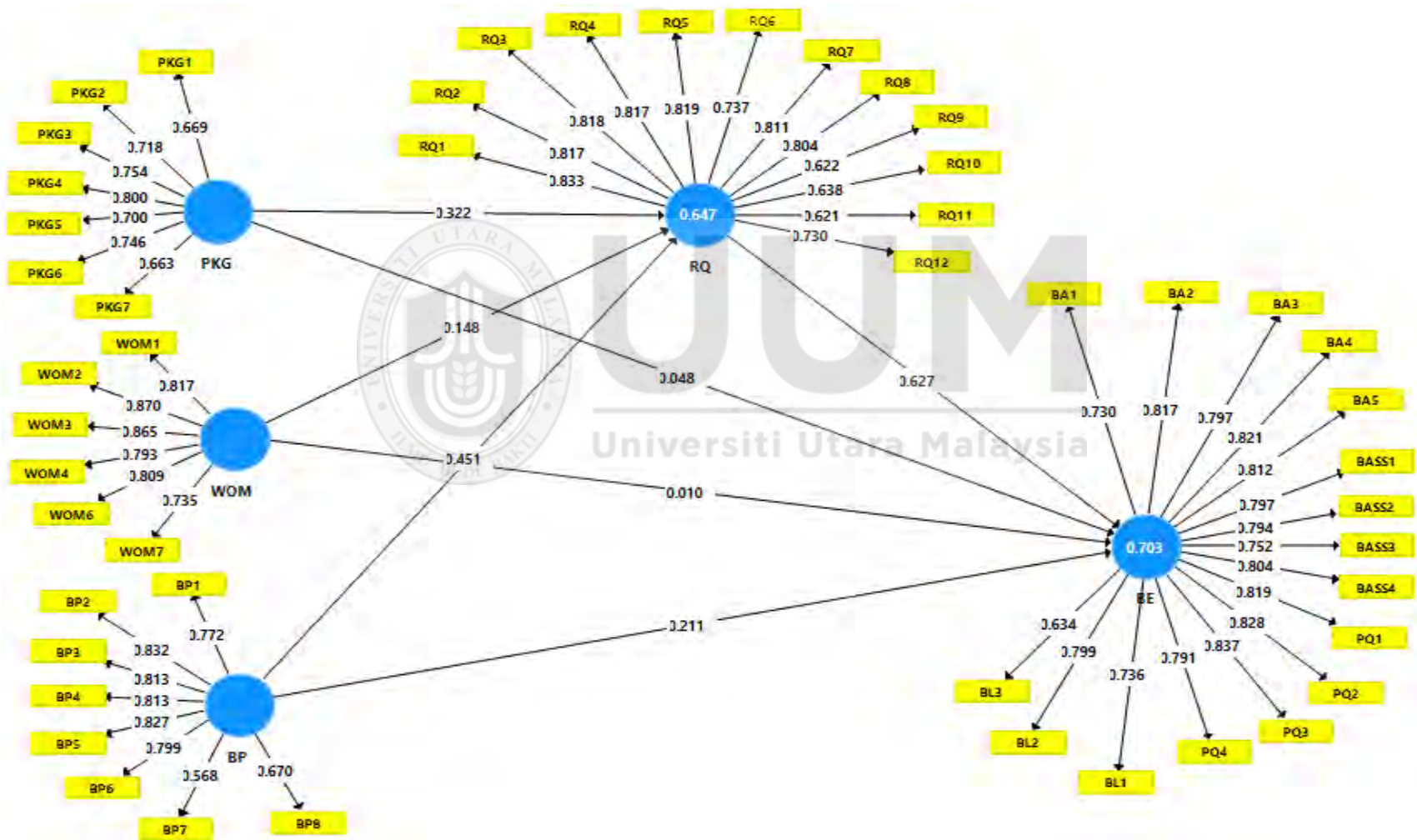
APPENDIX I:

Structural Model