



# Antecedents to the creation of 'Thai Select Unique' restaurant brand equity

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## Abstract

Thai cuisine is world renowned for its savoury flavours and the variety of its potential presentations. Consistently, Thai dishes have been at the top of international surveys for its quality, with the Thai government now supporting multiple programs to promote Thai food under the Thai Select branding campaign for use with restaurants. Therefore, the authors chose to investigate how diners perceived their local authentic food experience from restaurants, which had been awarded the Thai Select Unique (TSU) certification. From a potential population of 50 restaurants, ten TSU restaurants were randomly selected for a survey of diners concerning their opinions on how online advertising strategy (OA), their perceived quality (PQ), their brand awareness (BA), and brand loyalty (BL) played a role in the restaurant's overall brand equity (BE). From the conceptualized eight hypotheses, a preliminary confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and goodness-of-fit (GoF) analysis was conducted, followed by structural equation modelling (SEM) using LISREL 9.1 on the item statements from the questionnaires obtained from 415 TSU diners. Results revealed that all the causal variables in the model had a positive effect on BE, which can be explained by the combined influence of the factors ( $R^2$ ) being 93%. Furthermore, ranked in importance, OA, BA, BL, and PQ with total effects of 0.96, 0.88, 0.56 and 0.09, respectively. This study is also original and timely as it details how social media (SM) has become the foundation for what the authors have identified as '*selfie tourism*' in the development of a destination's brand equity.

**Keywords:** Brand awareness, brand loyalty, cuisine, culinary art, selfie tourism.

## Introduction

In the quest to explore, appreciate and understand local cultures, travellers often times look to the relationships between food and culture (Berno, Dentice & Wisansing, 2019), with local cuisine an essential element in a destination's importance (Dedeoğlu, Aydın & Onat, 2019). Local cuisine also adds to the traveller's sense of authenticity with gastronomy being an important aspect in the historical and cultural heritage of a destination's visit, once again adding authenticity and experimentation in a participatory way (Gheorghe, Tudorache & Nistoreanu, 2014).

In Thailand, many have come to understand this with Thai government officials having begun to take steps to preserve authentic Thai cuisine under a four-year master plan (2020 to 2024) to preserve and promote the wisdom of Thai food (Boyle, 2018). Specifically, Thailand's Ministry of Commerce, in an effort to increase Thai restaurant brand equity has established three distinct brands for use in the certification of both domestic and international Thai restaurants and their cuisine. Under the 'Thai Select' brand, three categories now exist for 579 certified restaurants in Thailand. These include Thai Select Premium with seven winners, Thai Select with 522 restaurants, and the Thai Select Unique (TSU) brand for local authentic dishes with 50 restaurants ("Thai select brandings", 2018).



The word 'unique' is used for the TSU brand because it is believed that due to recipes being handed down for generations; the food is actually Thai culinary art, which also creates a unique national identity. This is consistent with Berno et al. (2019) who have stated that regional cuisine is part of an area's unique history and its intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, scholars have come to recognize the significant strides Thailand has made in the promotion of its national cuisine while creating a culinary brand identity, which has shaped and promoted Thai destination tourism (Berno et al., 2019; King, 2009).

Additionally, Karp (2018) has reported that as many as 15,000 Thai restaurants exist worldwide, with the rise in popularity due to Thai cuisine's deliciousness, colour, delicacy, and presentation and preparation meticulousness. Thai cuisine is also known for its high nutritional value. Furthermore, 35,000 international travellers were surveyed in 2017 and were asked to identify and rank the world's 50 best dishes. From this, four Thai dishes were ranked in the top ten (Cheung, 2017).

Therefore, in an effort to further explore what factors affect a Thai restaurant's brand equity (BE), the authors chose to adopt some of Aaker's (1991, 1992, 2013) basic concepts including brand loyalty (BL), brand name awareness (BA), and perceived brand quality (PQ). In addition, given the ever-increasing importance of digital technologies and SM within the restaurant sector, the authors expanded their model to include online advertising strategy (OA). A brief literature review is presented for the reader's further overview of these concepts.

## **Brief Literature Review**

### **Online Advertising Strategy (OA)**

According to Tangtatswas, Sornsaruht, and Pimdee (2019) restaurant consumer's lifestyles and behaviours have created the opportunity entrepreneurial innovation within the restaurant sector which now includes online sales and marketing channels. Specifically, SM has become a crucial medium in the ordering and delivery process between customers and staff, with popular platforms such as Facebook, Line, Snapchat, and Instagram being used by restaurant entrepreneurs (Collins, Thomas, & Tietjen, 2018). Suvattanadilok (2020) gives support to SM's importance in Thailand by reporting that Thais are the third greatest users globally of SM platforms and spend an average of three hours and 10 minutes per day online. The influence of these applications is, therefore, substantial to a restaurant's entrepreneur. Sasmita and Suki (2015) added to this, and stated that today's online shoppers use SM to gather product information and brand guidance which allows them to compare features and price (Deloitte Thailand, 2019).

Confirmation of online and SM importance can also be found in research from Bharadwaj, Chaudhary, Kittikachorn, and Rastogi, (2017) who stated that 40% of all Thai online purchases are digitally influenced by SM. Thailand is also projected to move into second place in Southeast Asia in 2020 for the total number of online transactions (Deloitte Thailand, 2019).

### **Perceived Quality (PQ)**

Various scholars have adopted Aaker's (1992) PQ dimension for use in destination tourism. Ekinci and Hosany (2006) also explored the idea in terms of a destination's personality being a contributor, and specifically identified the constructs sincerity,



excitement, and conviviality. Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott (2002) examined New Zealand's 'pure' global branding campaign, which showcased New Zealand's diverse people, culture, landscapes, and tourism activities. It was also reported that critical to the creation of a long-lasting destination brand is the identification of the brand's values. Kim and Lee (2018) added that price and word of mouth were important aspects in PQ for Seoul tourists as they perceived the overall quality of tourism services and products, with BA and PQ influencing brand image.

### **Brand Awareness (BA)**

Various studies have identified BA as a consumer's ability to remember a brand's logo, and their degree of acquaintance with it (Aaker, 1991, 1992; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Sasmita and Suki (2015) also stated that BA is a customer's association with a brand and a product they wish to purchase. Furthermore, consumers receive BA through various marketing channels (e.g. TV, newspapers, brochures, etc.) and online advertising strategies (e.g. Facebook, Line, Pramool, etc.) (Deloitte Thailand, 2019), which helps assure a product's credibility and quality. Thus, this reduces risk in product evaluation and selection prior to purchasing, which acts as a critical element aspect in BE oftentimes overlooked (Aaker, 1996). It also plays an essential role in most BE conceptual models (Farjam & Hongyi, 2015; Pouromid & Iranzadeh, 2012).

### **Brand Loyalty (BL)**

According to Seeman and O'Hara (2006) customer satisfaction is at the core of a successful business, which can eventually lead to BL and re-purchase or re-visit intention (Danaher, Wilson, & Davis, 2003; Day, 1974; Henderson, 2000; Jones & Sasser, 1995). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) also reported on 107 brands and consumer BL and found that purchase loyalty and attitudinal loyalty were key aspects. The authors also stated that the brand uniqueness might be due to brand trust and reliability or a positive impression after a brand's use. Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000) also reported that BL was one of four key antecedents in BE.

### **Brand Equity (BE)**

Wood (2000) wrote that the concept of BE began when marketing literature researchers attempted to define the relationships between consumers and brands. Cant, Strydom, Jooste, and du Plessis (2006) added that BE is 'the added value' a brand brings to a product. Aaker (2013) also suggested that brand quality and BE are related, with other scholars suggesting that BE has a strong effect on a consumer's revisit intention (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009; Keller, 2008) and the justification for a higher menu price (Aaker, 2013). Furthermore, Aaker (1991) defined BE as assets or liabilities linked to a brand, which includes such things as a brand's name and symbol. Yoo et al. (2000) and Im, Kim, Elliot, and Han (2012) felt that tourist destination BE should include brand awareness, brand image, brand associations, and brand loyalty.

Past discussions of BE have also detailed the importance of marketing communications on increasing a brand's equity and retaining customer loyalty. According to Tangtatswas et al. (2019), changes in consumers' lifestyles and behaviours has created the need for restaurant owners to exhibit entrepreneurial innovation. Innovation now includes the need for online ordering and delivery options, as well as the use of SM for customer feedback.

Therefore, given the global presence and ever-increasing consumer desire for Thai cuisine, the authors set forth to study which aspects were important in the development

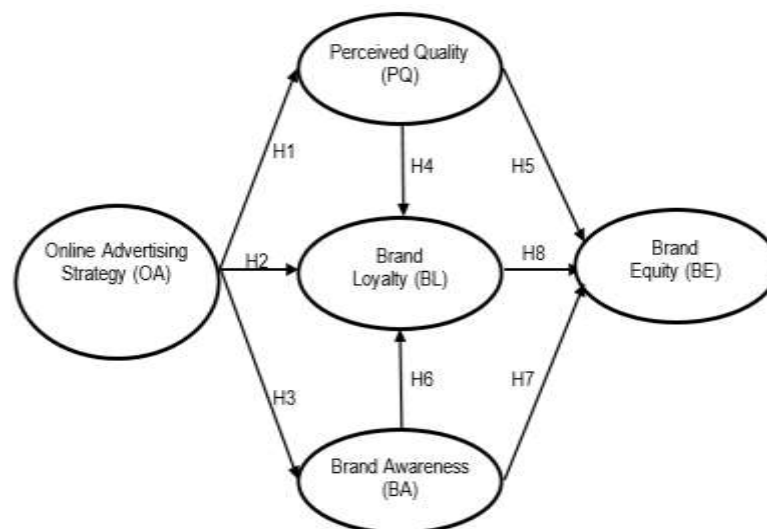
of brand equity in certified ‘Thai Select Unique’ restaurants in Thailand. The objectives are highlighted as follows:

### Objectives

1. To investigate the interrelationships through structural equation modelling of the factors influencing a TSU’s brand equity in Thailand.
2. Goodness of Fit (GoF) confirmation prior to the SEM.
3. To make recommendations to TSU entrepreneurs on which aspects lead to sustainability and profitability.

### Conceptualized Model

From a review of the literature, the authors present the eight hypotheses conceptualised model shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1.** Thai Select Unique brand equity conceptual model  
Source: Authors’ review of the literature and theory.

*Hypothesis H1: OA affects directly PQ.*

*Hypothesis H2: OA affects directly BL.*

*Hypothesis H3: OA affects directly BA.*

*Hypothesis H4: PQ affects directly BL.*

*Hypothesis H5: PQ affects directly BE.*

*Hypothesis H6: BA affects directly BL.*

*Hypothesis H7: BA affects directly BE.*

*Hypothesis H8: BL affects directly BE.*

### Materials and Methods

#### Population and Sample

The study’s population was drawn from a Thai Commerce Ministry list of certified Thai Select Unique restaurants in Thailand, which at the inception of the research was reported as 50 (“Thai select brandings”, 2018). From this list, the authors randomly selected ten names, whereupon, each restaurant’s owner was contacted by phone and asked to participate in the study. Research ethics assured no participant in the study was coerced to participate in the



study and that the methods used related specifically to the study's research questions. Furthermore, the sampling technique and individuals selected were proven to be highly representative of the individuals desired for the study. The restaurant's 'uniqueness' had already been verified and certified by the Thai Commerce Ministry. Confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents was also respected. Finally, the study's validity and viability had also been approved by the Dean of the author's faculty along with a standing research approval committee. From this initial process, eight owners accepted the invitation and two declined. Therefore, the authors once again went back to the list and randomly selected two more restaurants, whereupon, calls were placed and positive response for the survey was received from the remaining two restaurants.

## Research Tools

The research instrument was divided into six parts, with part one consisting of six items related to the patron's personal and restaurant decision-making characteristics. Part two through part six made use of a seven-point level Likert type scale to evaluate the opinions of each TSU restaurant patron. The number '7' was used as the anchor point for opinions in which the individual had the 'most agreement', while the number '1' was used to anchor opinions that 'strongly disagreed' with the item's statements. In addition, Cronbach  $\alpha$  assessment was used scores were from 0.76 – 0.89 (Table 4), which was ranked as 'good' (Nunnally, 1978).

## Data collection

The study's authors along with a graduate assistant research team, set out in November 2019 with a target of 460 Thai Select Unique restaurant patrons as outlined in Table 1. The survey team used a random process in which every fifth table of diners was selected and used to determine the opinions of the survey participants. Willingness for the survey was excellent, which led to a response rate of 415 customers, representing 90.22% of the targeted total sample.

**Table 1.** Thai Select Unique restaurant sampling process overview

Thai Select Unique Restaurant	Goal	Actual	
		Number	%
1. Kampun, Central Festival East Ville Branch	46	43	93
2. Chan Hom Restaurant	46	42	91
3. Ban Chalong Restaurant	46	44	96
4. Khua Kling Pak Sod, Ratchakhru Branch	46	40	87
5. Baan Ice Paragon Branch	46	43	93
6. Somtum Der, Saladaeng Branch	46	39	85
7. Pot Ministry Paragon	46	41	89
8. South Tiger	46	43	93
9. Anchan Cafe	46	38	83
10. Maan Muang	46	42	91
Totals	460	415	90

Source: Authors' questionnaire survey.

## Data Analysis

The SEM path analysis for the study made use of LISREL 9.10. Prior to the final SEM, a CFA and GoF were accomplished (Table 3).

## Results

### Participant Characteristics and Responses



Table 2 shows the details of each participant's response to the survey. From it, two striking details emerge. The first one is that 96.63% reported going to the restaurant was a group decision and the second item, 99.52% reported they had been to the same restaurant more than once. The customer's gender statistic showed that the majority were female (55.88%), and single (58.8%), with 22.17% indicating they had finished their university studies.

**Table 2.** Thai Select Unique restaurant customer characteristics (*n* =415)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	184	44.34
Female	231	55.66
Total	415	100
<b>Education</b>		
Unfinished secondary school	74	17.83
High school diploma	110	26.51
College work but not graduated	139	33.49
Undergraduate degree	76	18.31
Graduate degree	16	3.86
Total	415	100
<b>Relationship Status</b>		
Single	244	58.80
Married	138	33.25
Divorced / Widowed	2	0.48
Other	31	7.47
Total	415	100
<b>Occupation</b>		
Government agency	15	3.61
Service class	142	34.22
Business	82	19.76
Professional	75	18.07
Dependent	101	24.34
Total	415	100
<b>Decision making for this restaurant</b>		
Alone	14	3.37
Group	401	96.63
Total	415	100
<b>Past restaurant experience</b>		
First time	2	0.48
More than 1 time	413	99.52
Total	415	100

Source: Authors' survey.

## The GoF Analysis



Table 3 gives us a detailed overview of the CFA GoF assessment. From it, we can ascertain that the LISREL 9.1 output fit the model and all indices were validated.

**Table 3.** GoF analysis.

Indices	Criteria	Values	Results	Supporting theory
Chi-square: $\chi^2$	$p \geq 0.05$	0.85	validated	Rasch (1980)
$\chi^2/df$	$\leq 2.00$	0.75	validated	Byrne, Shavelson, and Muthén (1989)
RMSEA	$\leq 0.05$	0.00	validated	Hu and Bentler (1999)
GFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.99	validated	Jöreskog, Olsson, and Fan (2016)
AGFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.97	validated	Hooper, Coughlan, and Mullen (2008)
RMR	$\leq 0.05$	0.01	validated	Hu and Bentler (1999)
SRMR	$\leq 0.05$	0.01	validated	Byrne (2010)
NFI	$\geq 0.90$	0.99	validated	Schumacker and Lomax (2010)
CFI	$\geq 0.90$	1.00	validated	Lei and Wu (2007)
Cronbach's $\alpha$	$\geq 0.70$	0.78-0.89	validated	Tavakol and Dennick (2011)

Source: GoF analysis using LISREL 9.1 by the authors.

### CFA Results

Table 4 also shows us a detailed overview of the analysis for the internal latent variables PQ, BA, BL, and BE, as well as the external latent variable OA and their associated manifest variables.

**Table 4.** CFA results for the study's latent variables.

Constructs	$\alpha$	AVE	CR	Manifest variables	loading	R <sup>2</sup>
Perceived quality (PQ)	0.78	0.58	0.80	This restaurant offers very good quality food (pq1)	0.68	.46
				This restaurant offers consistent food quality (pq2)	0.73	.54
				This restaurant offers very reliable foods that is unique to the area (pq3)	0.86	.74
Brand awareness (BA)	0.89	0.80	0.89	Brand awareness (baw)	0.91	.82
				Brand association (bas)	0.88	.78
Brand loyalty (BL)	0.82	0.74	0.89	I am loyal to this restaurant (bl1)	0.90	.82
				I recommend this restaurant whenever I can (bl2)	0.83	.68
				I only frequent this restaurant (bl3)	0.84	.70
Brand equity (BE)	0.85	0.59	0.81	I prefer to visit this restaurant to a similar restaurant (be1).	0.79	.62
				When comparing different restaurants, I still prefer this restaurant to others (be2).	0.74	.55
				If two restaurants have nearly the same features and price, I still prefer this restaurant (be4).	0.78	.60
Online advertising strategy (OA)	0.89	0.68	0.89	This restaurant advertises online frequently (oa1)	0.73	.54
				I like the online advertisements for this restaurant (oa2)	0.91	.83
				The online advertisements for this restaurant uses emotional elements and storytelling (oa3)	0.78	.61
				The online advertisements for this restaurant use many aesthetic elements (oa4)	0.87	.76

### Correlation Decomposition Analysis



Table 5 presents the correlation decomposition results (Bollen, 1987). From it, we can interpret that TSU restaurant customers placed great importance on OA in the restaurant's BE as the TE=0.96, which was followed by BA (TE=0.88), BL (TE=0.56), and PQ (0.09). We also note the relative strengths of all the variables on BE which was quite strong as R<sup>2</sup> was 93%. An interpretation of this data suggests that for a TSU restaurant owner, using online media channels and digital technologies to heighten their brand's awareness is crucial to their customers, which then eventually leads to an increase in the restaurant's BE.

**Table 5. Mediation effects on BE**

Dependent variables	R <sup>2</sup>	Effects	Independent variables			
			OA	PQ	BA	BL
BE	.93	DE = Direct Effect	-	0.06	0.45*	0.56**
		IE = Indirect Effect	0.96**	0.03	0.43*	-
		TE = Total Effect	0.96**	0.09	0.88**	0.56**
BL	.73	DE	0.06	0.05	0.77*	
		IE	0.79**	-	-	
		TE	0.85**	0.05	0.77*	
BA	.92	DE	0.96**			
		IE	-			
		TE	0.96**			
PQ	.93	DE	0.97**			
		IE	-			
		TE	0.97**			

Source: Analysis results from the SEM testing.

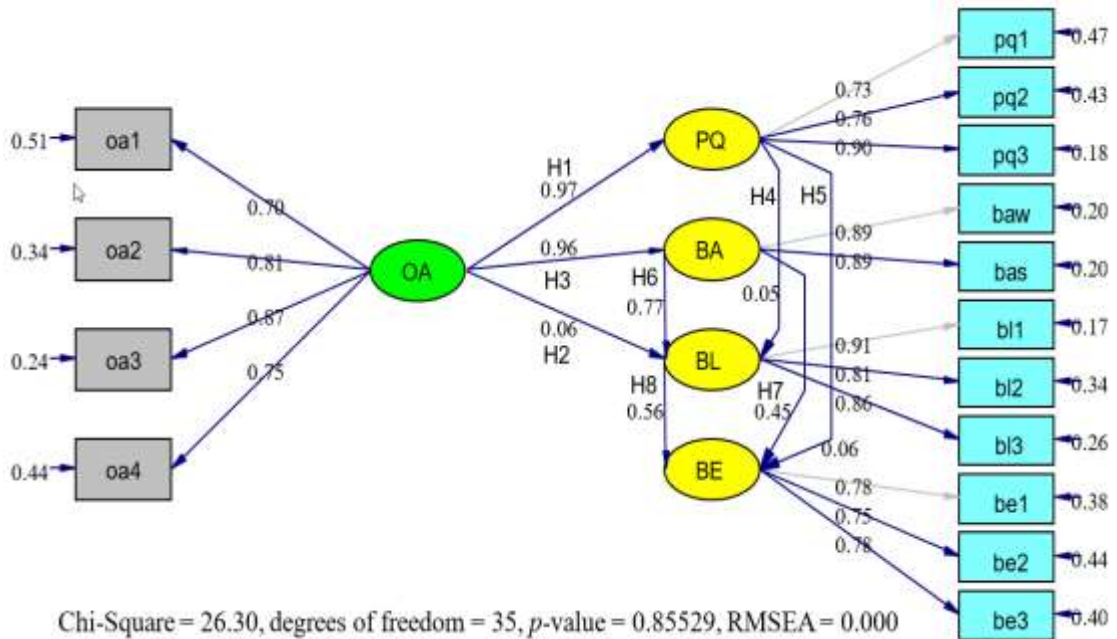
Final testing results supporting reliability and internal consistency showed all factors met established criteria of  $\geq 0.70$  as CR values were 0.81 to 0.90 (Table 6) (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995; Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2013). Furthermore, the correlation matrix latent variable analysis under the **bold** diagonal numbers of **1.00** show the correlation coefficients (*r*) of the variable pairs (Phadungjit, Sornsaruht, & Pimdee, 2020). The greatest pair relationships are shown to exist between OA and PQ (.86) and between PQ and BA (.86), with the weakest correlation between OA and BL (.74). Finally, the results from the analysis for the average variance extracted (AVE) and the  $\sqrt{AVE}$  are also detailed, with all variables meeting the suggested cutoff of  $\geq 0.5$  (Nunnally, 1978). In Figure 2 we also see the details from the final SEM testing, with Table 7 detailing the final hypotheses testing results.

**Table 6. Correlation matrix latent variable analysis influencing BE**

Constructs	OA	PQ	BA	BL	BE
OA	<b>1.00</b>				
PQ	.86**	<b>1.00</b>			
BA	.83**	.86**	<b>1.00</b>		
BL	.74**	.76**	.80**	<b>1.00</b>	
BE	.75**	.76**	.82**	.81**	<b>1.00</b>
AVE – average variance extracted	0.62	0.64	0.79	0.74	0.59
Construct Reliability (CR)	0.86	0.84	0.88	0.90	0.81
$\sqrt{AVE}$	0.79	0.80	0.89	0.86	0.77

Source: Authors' SEM analysis, \*\*Sig.  $\leq .01$ .





**Figure 2.** Final Model of Factors Influencing a Thai Select Unique Restaurant BE  
 Source: Authors' analysis results from the final SEM testing.

Table 7. Final hypotheses testing results.

Hypothesis statement	Correlation coefficients	t-test values	Validation
H1: QA affects directly PQ	0.97	15.91**	Validated
H2: QA affects directly BL	0.06	0.11	Not Valid
H3: QA affects directly BA	0.96	21.39**	Validated
H4: PQ affects directly BL	0.05	0.16	Not Valid
H5: PQ affects directly BE	0.06	0.38	Not Valid
H6: BA affects directly BL	0.77	2.81*	Validated
H7: BA affects directly BE	0.45	2.58*	Validated
H8: BL affects directly BE	0.56	5.50**	Validated

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Source: Final LISREL 9.1 SEM testing

## Discussion

The study validated the perception of the growing importance of online advertising and the use of SM and digital platforms in increasing brand equity through brand awareness in Thai Select Unique restaurants in Thailand. Furthermore, confirmation of all the model's causal variables having a positive effect on BE can be determined from BE's  $R^2$  calculated as 93% (Table 5). In addition, ranked in importance, all the factors influencing BE were OA, BA, BL, and PQ, with TE values of 0.96, 0.88, 0.56 and 0.09, respectively.

### Online Advertising Strategy (OA)

From the LISREL 9.1 SEM analysis, the results showed that there was a very significant and positive interrelationship in H1 between OA and PQ due to  $r = 0.97$ , the t-test value = 15.91, and  $p \leq 0.01$ . However, the interrelationship from QA to BL was determined to be inconsistent and therefore, the hypothesis was rejected. In addition, there was also a very significant and positive interrelationship in H3 between OA and BA due to  $r = 0.96$ , the t-test value = 21.39, and  $p \leq 0.01$ .

There can be no doubt today as to the critical importance of OA, which has gone far beyond the earlier concepts of the marketing mix 4 Ps (McCarthy, 1997), which was later elaborated on by Kotler and Armstrong (2010). Within the hospitality sector, the original 4P marketing mix has been expanded from the original *product, price, promotion* and *place* to *people, packaging* and *positioning/process* (Singh & Kuma, 2015). Under the 4Ps, promotion was seen as a key element, which is consistent with the results from this study. However, what is significantly different from the definition of promotion in 'then' and 'now', is the nature of technological change, which now includes smartphones, SM, and online ordering and customer personalization processes (Jeon, 2009). According to Diachenko (2018), modern technology advances makes its own impact on the way consumers interact with brands, with restaurants at the top of the list of online consumer search times.

More support for these conclusions come from Jordanian restaurant research by Alnsour and Al Faour (2019) in which it was stated that owners must embrace SM communities if they wish to increase their customer engagement level and better understand their patron's restaurant attitudes and experiences. This is consistent with Ivkov et al. (2016) who also determined due to changes in consumers' behaviours and lifestyles, restaurant entrepreneurs need to adopt innovative concepts, including adopting online sales and marketing channels. Marketing communications in a restaurant's capabilities has become a reoccurring theme throughout the literature, which has always included advertising, news and promotions, support from the sales staff, and public relations and direct marketing (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015).

Today, however, 'selfie-tourism' is becoming a critical element in an entrepreneur's OA mix. There are no better examples of this than recent 'selfies' of world tennis stars Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal with a quokka on Rottnest Island just outside of Perth, Australia. Local tourism officials were quoted as saying the selfies with the friendly animals will boost tourism to Rottnest and create many jobs thanks to the huge reach of the Instagram accounts and their millions of followers, and the viral reactions to the tennis stars' selfie shots ("Nadal copies Federer", 2020). Federer's selfie shot alone appeared in 45 countries worldwide in 13 languages, reaching an estimated 581 million people (Cross, 2018) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Selfies of Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal with a quokka on Rottnest Island  
Source: Cross (2018) and Nadal copies Federer (2020).



### **Perceived Quality (PQ)**

In this study, the direct relationships from PQ to BL (H4) and the direct relationship from PQ to BE (H5) were determined to be unsupported. However, results did show that there was both an indirect and positive influence through BL, which allows each restaurant patron to see the brand value from the Thai Select Unique small business owner. This is consistent with research from Hou and Wonglorsaichon (2011) who also reported that quality perceptions have a direct positive influence on brand loyalty, as well as loyalty having a direct and positive influence on the brand's values.

Further speculation as to why these two hypotheses concerning PQ were rejected could possibly lie in the survey statistics in which over 99% of the respondents stated that the decision to come to the TSU restaurant was a group decision and that each respondent had already had a meal at that restaurant before. The authors see a connection with their conceptualization of the importance of 'selfie tourism' and the restaurant's TSU certification. It was felt that the customer's sense of PQ was lowered significantly as the decision to dine there was more related to the group's desire for the social impact of the event and that event's notoriety spread through the use of SM. These factors overrode an individual's diners' awareness or need for 'quality' in both food and service. This result has serious implications for restaurant owners if determined to be valid from further research.

### **Brand Awareness (BA)**

The results also showed that there was a strong and positive interrelationship in H6 between BA and BL due to  $r = 0.77$ , the t-test value = 2.81, and  $p \leq 0.05$ . In addition, the interrelationship in H7 between BA and BE was determined to be moderate and positive due to  $r = 0.45$ , the t-test value = 2.58, and  $p \leq 0.05$ .

This is consistent with Pappu and Quester (2008) who reported that as BA increases, quality perceptions and increased brand association occurs. In Korea, Hyun and Kim (2011) also stated that the foundation of restaurant BE is BA, which necessitates the need for constant promotion, quality assurance and process improvement.

### **Brand Loyalty (BL)**

The results additionally showed that in H8 there was a moderate and positive interrelationship in H8 between BL and BE due to  $r = 0.56$ , the t-test value = 5.50, and  $p \leq 0.01$ .

The positive results for H8 are also supported by research from Alhaddad (2014) who determined that in Syria brand image and BL are the two most important factors in determining BE. This was also consistent Sasmita and Suki (2015) who examined 200 young consumers in Malaysia and determined that as they used SM, BL positively influenced BE.

### **Brand Equity (BE)**

Although BE can be evaluated from two difference aspects (financial or customer perspective), this study focused on the restaurant's customer. Approached from this direction, according to Severi and Ling (2013), BE is approached as the consumer's reaction to a brand, while Nam, Ekincy, and Whyatt (2011) believed that an employee's attitude can be an element of BE.



There is no doubt that BE is a complex idea with many definitions from numerous scholars. However, for the scope of this study, the authors evaluated the strength of the respondents' desire to both visit and keep revisiting their local TSU restaurant. They key in this is the word 'local', as the individuals surveyed were not tourists. Also, 99.52% had frequented the restaurant with a group (96.63%) more than once. They were, therefore, familiar with what they were eating. Could they, however, be choosing this TSU restaurant for other social related reasons?

Therefore, when the study's results are viewed in totality, it seems the diners were overwhelmingly concerned with the OA aspects of the restaurant, including the use of their own SM accounts to 'advertise' their fondness and enjoyment of their experiences. There is growing support for this concept within the hospitality industry for what is being referred to as the 'social value' or 'selfie tourism' of a destination's experience (Bressolles, Durrieu & Senecal, 2014; Cross, 2018; Kuta, 2019; "Nadal copies Federer", 2020; Phromlert, Deebhijarn & Sornsaruht, 2019; Thongnoi, 2019; Voyager HQ., 2019). As such, the authors would like to suggest that although the uniqueness of the cuisine is important, maybe more important is the group photo taken at the table and the uniqueness of the surrounding environment. This aspect might lessen other concerns of the past, such as service quality, food quality, and price.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The study set out to investigate the interrelationship of OA, BA, PQ, and BL and a Thai Select Unique restaurant's BE. Results showed the importance and significance that restaurant patrons are now placing on online channels and SM platforms. An interpretation of this data also suggests that Thai Select Unique restaurant owners and managers need to embrace these technological capabilities to heighten their brand's awareness. This is now becoming crucial to heighten their success and customer satisfaction, which then eventually leads to an increase in each restaurants' BE.

There is also a growing body of scholarship and articles that is starting to show the importance of the 'social value' of a destination's experience. The authors prefer to call this 'selfie tourism' as it is more descriptive. Either way, the implications of this, especially to millennials with their spending strength and suggestive sway over friends and families, has staggering implications in the coming years to tourist destination entrepreneurs.

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