CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

A Study on Factors Affecting the Brand

Equity of Primary Healthcare Service

Companies in Hong Kong

影響香港基層醫療服務公司品牌價值的因

素之研究

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Abstract

Healthcare is conceived as one of the world's most promising and fast-growing industries due to an ageing population and infrastructural squeeze of the public sector. As the first point of contact in the healthcare delivery process, primary care service providers tend to have prior advantage over providers of other healthcare categories in capturing the increasing demand. To be successful in the rising market, it is important for primary care providers to understand the key factors affecting patients when choosing branded medical centres. However, relatively little research is found on the area of brand building for the healthcare industry and none focuses on primary care. Moreover, most of the existing brand models still remain at the stage of theory induction without much empirical research.

The objective of this research is to develop a patient-based brand equity model for primary care in Hong Kong by investigating how word of mouth, outlet structure and perceived service quality respectively affect brand image pertaining to primary care. In particular, this study aims to discover how the clinic-based culture moderates the relationships between brand image and brand equity if patients have a strong preference for visiting particular family doctors.

This research adopts a concurrent triangulation strategy by conducting a 3-study process to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. All the three studies intend to investigate the possible factors involved in a brand model for primary care but from different perspectives. Study 1 aims at the industry level through understanding patients' expectation of primary care service. Study 2 pertains to patients' evaluation of primary care service at medical centre level. Study 3 is a case study at a firm level by investigating what the case company has done to attract a strong patient base.

The empirical findings from this research support the causal relations among the constructs in the proposed brand model. The three independent variables of word of mouth, outlet structure and perceived service quality exhibit a positive influence on brand equity, and the mediator brand image in this study is perceived as playing an important link between the three independent variables and brand equity. This research also corroborates the moderating role of clinic-based culture in the brand model by demonstrating how this contextual cultural element weakens the relationship between brand image and brand equity.

This research is one of the first to explore, identify and measure the key factors influencing brand equity for primary healthcare service providers in Hong Kong. Specifically, this research proposes and extends a concept of brand equity to be incorporated into primary healthcare service providers' unique set of resources and service capability, brand image and clinic-based culture. The research findings inform a new chapter in the existing brand equity literature. Firstly, it demonstrates that a service provider's capabilities of word of mouth, outlet structure and perceived service quality in the eyes of patients could leverage brand image and brand equity. Secondly, a cultivation of a clinic-based culture of patients' preference to visit a particular doctor weakens the influence of perceived values in corporate brand image on brand equity. In addition to filling the blank in the branding literature, this research is one of considerable interest to practitioners who endeavour to build a strong brand in the primary care industry. The results of this research may help them find an alternative solution to enhance brand equity according to the independent variables of word of mouth, outlet structure and perceived service quality.