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How Great Thy Brand: the Impact of Church Branding on Perceived Benefits

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There are mixed opinions in the literature in regards of the appropriateness, relevance, and significance of church branding in the context of church participation. This study applied the 'perceived brand orientation' construct in church context and examines its impact on perceived benefits associated with church services among regular and non-regular church goers. The results indicate that perceived brand orientation is significantly related to perceived spiritual, social, and purpose-in-life benefits in both sample groups. A multi-group analysis also found that perceived brand orientation has a stronger effect on perceived benefits among non-regular church goers. This study highlights the importance of being brand-oriented in order to attract members' participation. Relevant implications for church leaders and managers of non-profit organisations are also identified.

Keywords:

Church branding, perceived benefits, church marketing, structural equation modeling

Introduction

Although there are conflicting opinions about the application of branding in the church context, some authors have supported the notion of a church as a 'brand'. Djupe (2000) went so far as to propose that there is a resemblance between religion and products, and thus used the term 'religious brand loyalty' to refer to denominational loyalty. It has been stated that given that brands contain meaning for our lives and that products become part of our identities, it is easy to see why religious organisations see the value in inventing their products and services as 'brands' (Einstein, 2008).

According to Stevens et al. (1996), a church with a 'good name' in the community (that is, positive 'brand image') is likely to have more committed members and will not suffer from as much member-switching behaviour as other churches that are less well regarded. A positive image is also a key component of effective positioning and targeting strategy. As

Shawchuck et al. (1992, p.205) observed: "a responsive church will actively take steps to develop its image and position because this determines the target publics it will attract". These statements underline the importance of branding for religious organisations to attract attendance.

Review of the literature revealed that, despite the increasing number of church-related studies in the marketing domain, there are several gaps of research that the present study aims to address. In particular, although the implementation of branding techniques in the church context has been discussed in the literature, there has been little examination of the effectiveness of the techniques in encouraging church attendance. The majority of previous studies have focused on the application of branding within the church context, rather than its *impact* on church participation (Abreu, 2006; Webb, Joseph, Schimmel, & Moberg, 1998).

The present study has two main objectives. First, this study examines whether church members' perception of the organisational brand orientation ('perceived brand orientation') significantly affects their perception of the benefits associated with the church's offerings in terms of spiritual, social, and purpose-in-life benefits. The second objective of this study relates to the research context under examination. Whereas previous studies have examined the impact of branding on regular church goers' perceived benefits (Mulyanegara, 2011b), this study examines the impact of branding on both regular and non-regular church goers to compare the significance of branding in both sample groups.

Theoretical Perspectives
Perceived Brand Orientation

The term 'perceived brand orientation' (PBO) was first coined by Mulyanegara (2011a,2011b) to refer to the examination of brand orientation from customer/member perspectives. Mulyanegara (2011b) examined the role of PBO in church context and found that PBO was significantly related to perceived benefits and participation in church related activities. Until recently, the topic of brand orientation is still at its infancy (O'Cass & Ngo, 2009) and thus no other studies have been done to examine the construct of brand orientation from customer perspectives.

The present study adopted the PBO scale of Mulyanegara (2011b) which captures the themes of the NBO scale items of Ewing and Napoli (2005) to examine students' perception of the university's brand orientation based on the following three dimensions:

Uniqueness (BR2): Respondents' perception of the church's distinctive characteristics which makes it stands out from other churches (Leslie de Chernatony, 1993)

Reputation (BR3; BR4): Respondents' perception of the church's image in the community in the forms of awareness, associations, and loyalty (Urde, 1999)

Orchestration (BR6; BR7; BR8): Respondents' perception of the church's integrated marketing activities that deliver consistent brand messages to internal and external stakeholders (Ewing & Napoli, 2005).

Perceived Benefits

Studies on church participation over the past two decades have been dominated by the 'rational choice theory'. The theory of has its roots in the classical economic theory of Adam Smith which assumes that people approach religion in the same way that they approach other objects of choice - that is, by evaluating costs and benefits, and then acting to maximise the potential benefits (Iannacone, 1992). The theory thus views the individual as a rational actor who makes the best choice based on an evaluation of net benefits. The theory thus suggests that a person's decision to join a church is determined by a rational evaluation of the potential *costs* associated with participation (financial, time, effort) and the potential *benefits* associated with it (spiritual, social, intellectual, entertainment) (Christiano et al., 2008). Moreover, according to this theory, people might subsequently modify their religious behaviour (varying their level of participation and/or switching denominations or religions) on the basis of their ongoing evaluation of anticipated costs and benefits (Iannaccone, 1995).

Following an overview of the literature, the following perceived benefits are identified as the antecedents of church participation.

Search for the sacred: spiritual benefits

'Personal relationship with God' has been cited as one of the major drivers of church participation in previous studies (R Hoge & Carroll, 1978; R. Hoge et al., 1993; R. Hoge & Polk, 1980). The terms 'intrinsic religiosity' and 'extrinsic religiosity' were coined by Allport and Ross (1967) as part of their study of the relationship between religious orientation and prejudice. Gorsuch (1994, p.317) described 'intrinsic religiosity' as the motivation to experience religion "for the sake of the faith itself". Intrinsically-oriented individuals participate in church-related activities to search for personal relationship with God. The heightened spiritual experiences have long been an integral part of the Church. Each denomination holds beliefs of experiencing the presence of God in a variety of ways. A theme of the present charismatic movement and Pentecostal churches has been the experiential dimension. In Australia, while the percentage of people often having any given spiritual experience is highest among Pentecostal attendees, significant numbers of attendees in other denominations also identify important religious experiences (Kaldor et al., 1999).

Search for belonging: social benefits

Studies in the past have found that the church provides an important sense of community and belonging for the society in general and immigrants in particular, as they seek for a community to belong that share similar cultural and religious values (Hurh & Kim, 1990; Kim & Pyle, 2004). To a large extent, Christian faith is developed through involvement with a community of faith and nurtured within a network of relationships with other believers. NCLS (2001) found that both regular and non-regular church goers see the church as a place where a warm sense of community can be found.

Search for significance: purpose-in-life benefits

Eight out of ten Australians feel their life has a sense of purpose; in response to the question 'I feel my life has a sense of purpose', 38% of Australians agreed strongly, 43% agreed, 13% were unsure, 5% disagreed and 2% disagreed strongly (Francis & Kaldor, 2001). Francis and Kaldor (2001) found that church attendance, belief in God, personal prayer, and friends in church community has a significant positive relationship to the sense of life purpose. Consistent with previous studies on Australian spirituality (Bouma, 2006; Bouma & Lennon,

2003), the research work by Francis and Kaldor (2001) confirmed that for many Australians, religious faith is an important factor in their sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Perceived Brand Orientation – Perceived Benefits

The literature has suggested the importance of having a strong brand orientation for organisations to continue delivering superior value to its stakeholders. Within the commercial branding literature, corporate brands are seen as a guarantee of quality or insurance against poor performance or financial risk (Balmer & Gray, 2003). In a similar accord, it can be argued that churches with strong brand orientation are more likely to be perceived as having superior quality as compared to other religious organisations. 'Poor performance' within the church context can be regarded as the church's inability to satisfy its members needs through relevant services and activities. A strong church brand does not only provide an insurance against poor performance but also a guarantee of quality. That is, an assurance of the church's ability to deliver benefits relevant to its members' needs and expectation.

A study by Mulyanegara (2011b) has found a positive, significant relationship between perceived brand orientation and perceived benefits among regular church goers sample groups. The study, however, did not examine the effects of perceived brand orientation on each specific type of perceived benefits as the 'perceived benefits' construct in the study was treated as a latent construct consisting of spiritual and social benefits. The present study aims to examine the 'corollary' effects of perceived brand orientation by linking the construct with each dimension of perceived benefits to see which type of perceived benefits is most affected by perceived brand orientation.

The following hypotheses are thus proposed:

> *H1* Perceived brand orientation is positively associated with perceived spiritual benefits
> *H2* Perceived brand orientation is positively associated with perceived social benefits
> *H3* Perceived brand orientation is positively associated with perceived purpose-in-life benefits

An overview of church participation theories in psychology literature indicates that the motivation of church attendance differs between intrinsically-oriented and extrinsically-oriented individuals. Based on the classification proposed by Donahue (1985) and Hood, et.al (1996), regular church goers is regarded as intrinsically oriented whereas non-regular church goers is regarded as extrinsically oriented based on their frequency of church attendance. Intrinsically oriented individuals engage in religious behaviour for the sake of religion itself whereas extrinsically-oriented individuals use religion for instrumental purposes to gain certain benefits such as social relationships, comfort, security and protection (Allport & Ross, 1967). In light of the intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientation concepts, the present study hypothesises that extrinsically oriented individuals (NCGs) are more affected by perceived brand orientation than intrinsically oriented individuals (CGs). Regular church goers' perception of participating in church-related factors may be driven by internal factors such as their spirituality or religiosity and thus may be less affected by external factors such as church brand orientation. Consequently, perceived brand orientation may hold more importance in affecting the perceived benefits of non-regular church goers than regular church goers. The following hypothesis is thus proposed:

> *H4: The relationship between perceived brand orientation and perceived benefits is stronger among non-regular church goers than regular church goers*

Methodology

Sample

In this research, the sampling frame consists of regular church goers (CGs) and non-regular church goers (NCGs) in Australia. For the purpose of this study, regular church goers (CGs) are defined as those who attend Christian church services of worship at least once a month whereas non-regular church goers (NCGs) are defined as those who consider themselves as belonging to Christian faith but who attend church services of worship less than once a month. This definition of NCGs is consistent with the term *nominal Christians* used by Bentley, et.al (1992).

Non-probability sampling technique using self-administered survey method was employed in the study. To recruit CGs respondents, the researcher approached a district leader in a major Christian denomination in Victoria to send an invitation to participate in the study to church leaders throughout Melbourne metropolitan and suburban area. The data was then collected from two churches with an average weekly attendance of 300 people. The NCGs respondents were recruited through an advertisement on the 'voluntary' section of the community newspapers in Melbourne suburban and metropolitan area. In the advertisement, the researcher invited people who used to attend church regularly at some stages of their life, but do not attend regularly anymore (less than once a month) to participate in the study.

Measures

Perceived brand orientation. This study adopted Mulyanegara (2011b) construct of 'perceived brand orientation'. Although the PBO construct in this study is unidimensional in nature, the items were designed to reflect three brand orientation themes which include uniqueness, reputation, and orchestration (Aaker, 1991; Leslie de Chernatony & Riley, 1998; Keller 2000).

Perceived Benefits. This research utilised Emmons *et al.* (1998) instruments of personal goals, which have been extensively used in literature pertaining to the psychology of religion (Hill & Hood, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1999), to measure 'spiritual' and 'social' benefits. The scales were designed to examine the extent to which respondents believe that church participation can help them to achieve relevant spiritual and social benefits.

Results

Scale validity and reliability

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) procedure was implemented to refine the constructs and to assess the convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was established using two approaches. First, the t-values from the CFA were examined for each item, and all were found to be statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Second, the average variance extracted for each construct was examined, and all exceeded 0.50, lending further support to convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed by constraining the correlation between PBO and 'perceived benefits' to 1.0, and then observing the chi-square differences between the constrained and unconstrained models (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The unconstrained model has a significantly lower chi-square (χ^2= 244.04, df=168) than the constrained model (χ^2= 311.85, df=174), thus demonstrating that the two constructs are not perfectly correlated and that discriminant validity is established (Bagozzi & Phillips, 1982). The discriminant validity was further assessed through an examination of the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE), which is calculated as the total of all squared standardised factor loadings divided by the number of items (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in table 3, the AVE for PBO and perceived benefits is greater than the correlation between the two constructs, thus indicating discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The reliability of the constructs, on the other hand, was measured using Cronbach's (1951) alpha and composite reliability (C.R) suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). As shown in table 2, the Cronbach's alpha and of all constructs are above 0.7, indicating good construct reliability.

An assessment of measurement model fit showed the model fit the data rather well. An observation of the GOF indices suggests that the measurement model is statistically significant and possesses construct validity. Although the Chi-Square was found to be statistically significant (χ^2= 244.041, df=168, p=0.000), the Normed Chi-Square (1.453), RMSEA (0.028), TLI (0.983), NFI (0.958), and CFI (0.987) are within the recommended fit level.

Measurement invariance

Measurement invariance tests were conducted to examine whether the two groups of respondents (CGs and NCGs) interpreted and used the scales in the same way. In this study, the tests were conducted in three stages: the configural invariance model, metric invariance model, and scalar invariance model.

Configural invariance (baseline) model

The configural invariance model serves as a benchmark against which the fit of more restricted models is compared. In essence, it is a baseline model in which the values in all model matrices are freely estimated for each group. The 'baseline model' had acceptable fit

with the data as reflected in the following: χ^2 (102) = 211.796 (p = 0.000), Normed Chi-Square (2.076), RMSEA (0.044), TLI (0.950), CFI (0.961), and NFI (0.929).

Metric invariance model

Metric invariance test was employed through constraining the matrix of loadings between the measured variables and latent variables to be equal across two groups. The 'metric model' had acceptable fit with the data as reflected in the fit indices including χ^2 (111) = 265.488 (p = 0.000), NC (2.392), RMSEA (0.050), TLI (0.935), CFI (0.945), and NFI (0.910). Subsequent to the assessment of the model fit, the appropriate test was conducted by nesting the model in the configural model and test for chi-square difference. The results, $\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf) = 53.692 (9), $p < 0.001$ suggests that metric invariance was not supported since the differences between the two groups are significant at .001 level.

Tests for partial invariance

Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) suggested that full measurement invariance of a given type (metric or scalar) is frequently not satisfied in practice. As full measurement invariance frequently does not hold, several scholars proposed the tests for partial measurement invariance, which is a 'compromise' between full measurement invariance and complete lack of invariance (Byrne et al., 1989; Cheung & Rensvold, 1999).

Whereas full metric invariance requires all loading estimates to be equal across all groups, partial metric invariance only requires at least two factor loading estimates to be equal (Hair et al., 2006). An observation reveals that 'perceived spiritual benefits' (0.62/0.83) are the loadings showing the greatest differences across the two groups. This implies that full measurement invariance may not exist due to the substantial differences shared between the two sample groups in these two variables. Subsequently, the two non-invariant items are retained, but their loadings are left unconstrained to equality when analysing group differences, whereas all other loading estimates are held equal across groups. Partial metric invariance was then tested by running the model and observing the Chi-Square differences between 'partial metric model' and the configural (baseline) model. The 'partial metric model' had good fit with the data as reflected in the fit indices including χ^2 (109) = 225.882 (p = 0.000), NC (2.072), RMSEA (0.044), TLI (0.950), CFI (0.959), and NFI (0.924). The

$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf) between 'partial metric model' and the baseline model is 14.086 (7) which is below the critical values of Chi-Square in .05 level. The results imply that partial metric invariance exists since respondents' interpretation of the scales is not significantly different at 0.05 level. The existence of partial metric invariance in this study lends support for valid comparisons of inter-construct relationship between groups. This means that there is 'partial' evidence that the CGs and NCGs respondents interpret and use the scales in the same way. Consequently, there is enough evidence for the present study to conduct valid comparisons of the strength and nature of relationship between constructs in the two groups of respondents.

Hypotheses testing

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The structural model above was employed to test the first three hypotheses. An examination of the standardised regression weights and Critical Ratio indicates that PBO is positively associated with 'perceived spiritual benefits' ($\beta = 0.30$(CGs) / 0.52(NCGs), $p < 0.001$), 'perceived social benefits ($\beta = 0.36$(CGs) / 0.48(NCGs), $p < .001$), and perceived purpose-in-life benefits ($\beta = 0.34$(CGs) / 0.45(NCGs), $p < 0.001$), thus lending support to H1, H2, and H3 respectively.

Multigroup Analysis

To assess whether there are significant differences in the inter-construct relationships between CGs and NCGs respondents, a structural model was run using multigroup technique in AMOS 18.0. The structural equation models presented in this section were employed using two groups of data. Initially, the two group model (CGs and NCGs) was tested to allow hypothesised relationships to be estimated freely in both groups. Subsequently, a second model is tested adding a constraint fixing the relationship between the predictor and dependent variable to be equal in both groups.

An examination of the fit indices indicated that the model had good fit with the data. Although the Chi-Square was found to be statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 473.614$, df= 174, p= 0.000), other indicators such as NC (2.722), RMSEA (0.055), TLI (0.936), NFI (0.919), and CFI (0.947) are within the recommended fit level.

The effect on fit was then estimated through an examination of the $\Delta\chi^2$ between the unconstrained and constrained model. The χ^2 of the unconstrained model is 244.041 (df=168) whereas the constrained model χ^2 is 473.614 (df=174). The $\Delta\chi^2$ is 229.5 which is significant at 0.001 level. From the observation of the figure, it can be observed that the standardised regression weight in the NCGs group is stronger than the CGs group, hence giving support to H4. This suggests that the relationship between PBO and 'perceived benefits' is significantly stronger in the NCGs sample group than the CGs sample group.

Discussion

This study contributes to a better understanding of the role of brand orientation in the church context. The topic of brand orientation is still at its infancy and thus only few studies have been done to examine the construct from the perspective of the customers/organisational members (Mulyanegara, 2011a, 2011b). This study attempts to fill this gap by assessing the brand orientation construct from the perspective of the customers/members ('perceived brand orientation') and examine its impact on perceived benefits associated with church participation among regular and non-regular church goers.

The analysis found a significant association between perceived brand orientation and perceived benefits among regular and non-regular church goers. This implies that *the more positive image people have about a particular church, the more they perceive church participation as relevant in delivering significant spiritual, social, and purpose-in-life benefits.* This is consistent with the Balmer and Gray's (2003) argument which suggests that positive organisation image is an insurance against poor performance as well as a guarantee of quality.

The measurement invariance test has revealed that regular and non-regular church goers used the constructs in a similar manner and thus allowing a valid comparison between the two sample groups. The analysis found that perceived brand orientation has the strongest effects on perceived social benefits among regular church goers and on perceived spiritual benefits among non-regular church goers. This suggests that the church's engagement in brand-oriented activities and behaviour is viewed positively by both regular and non-regular church goers as this could lead to stronger perceived benefits associated with church participation.

This study has provided a number of theoretical implications. First, in view of the limited number of studies in the area of perceived brand orientation, this study extended the application of Mulyanegara (2011b) PBO construct in non-regular church goers sample group. Second, this study has provided a further empirical support to the rational choice theory (Iannacone, 1992) and the intrinsic-extrinsic orientation (Allport & Ross, 1967) in the context of church branding and perceived benefits. The analysis found that perceived brand orientation performs a stronger effect on perceived benefits among non-regular church goers, which is consistent with the argument that extrinsically oriented individuals view themselves as 'consumers' of religion and therefore place more importance on external factors such as church brand orientation.

On a more practical note, the positive association between perceived brand orientation and perceived benefits found in the present study further highlights the importance of customer perception of the brand orientation level of an organisation. Managers of non-profit organisations should ensure that their organisations are perceived by their members as performing well in the respective dimensions of brand orientation, as this is likely to lead to positive perception of the benefits associated with an organisation's offering, and subsequently to active participation in the programs/activities offered by the organisation. There is a need to establish a distinctive characteristic which makes the organisation stands out from others. The organisation also needs to maintain a good reputation among the community. Any negative publicity associated with the organisation may have adverse effects on the participation of its active and non-active members. Finally, the 'orchestration' dimension requires non-profit organisations' managers to implement effective integrated marketing activities that deliver consistent brand messages to internal and external stakeholders of the organisation.

The use of one denomination to recruit the study respondents is a limitation that future studies could address. It will be of significant interests for researchers and church leaders alike to observe the differences in the effects of perceived brand orientation on perceived benefits in various denominations. The use of convenience sampling to recruit the respondents also has some weaknesses. Although the respondents were informed that the survey was anonymous in nature, they were notified that a summary of the study findings would be reported to the church leaders for evaluation purposes. Hence, respondents'

evaluation of the church's brand orientation might be biased towards giving socially desirable responses.

With the declining rate of church attendance in Australia over the past 10 years (NCLS, 2001), this study has provided significant theoretical and managerial implications for nonprofit researchers and church leaders alike in terms of enhancing the participation of customers/members in non-profit environment. Non-profit organisations' managers and church leaders should strive to engage in brand-oriented activities to develop a strong brand with relevant appeals to its existing and prospective target audience. It is expected that this study will bring more attention to the topic of brand orientation and perceived benefits in the non-profit sector.

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Table 1. Socio-Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	CGs (n=344)	NCGs (n=220)
Frequency of church attendance		
Never	-	22%
At least once a year	-	78%
At least once a month	3%	-
Nearly every week	22%	-
Every Week	75%	-
Denomination affiliations		
Catholic	0.9%	29%
Anglican	0.3%	6%
Orthodox	-	9%
Evangelicals	98.5%	13%
Baptist	0.3%	3%
Uniting	-	5%
Others		35%
Age		
Less than 30 years	29%	30%
Between 31 and 40 years	22%	24%
Between 41 and 50 years	17%	24%
Between 51 and 60 years	14%	17%
More than 61 years	18%	5%
Gender		
Male	38%	30%
Female	62%	70%
Marital Status		
Single	33%	30%
Married	58%	46%
De Facto	1%	9%
Divorced	5%	13%
Widowed	3%	2%
Household annual income		
Under $30000	27%	24%
Between $30001 and $60000	31%	30%
Between $60001 and $90000	18%	23%
Between $90001 and $120000	13%	12%
More than $120001	11%	11%

Table 2. Assessment of measurement (combined sample groups)

Construct	Item	Standardised Factor Loadings	t-Value
Perceived Brand Orientation α = .85	People come to the church because of its reputation	0.471	11.367
	Unique values which are transparent to the community	0.631	16.227
	Well known in the surrounding community	0.613	15.623
	Communication sends consistent messages about the church to the community	0.855	24.844
	Strong spiritual appeal	0.864	25.105
	Promotional materials create an image that is well understood by the members	0.807	22.887
Spiritual benefits α = .96	Develop spiritual meaning in life	0.905	42.114
	Bring my life in line with my beliefs	0.965	55.777
	Deepen my spirituality	0.952	52.711
Social benefits α = .93	Meet new people through my present friends	0.881	34.085
	Develop good social relationships	0.912	37.473
	Build network of friends	0.937	40.303
Purpose in life benefits α = .93	Make my life meaningful	0.939	42.453
	Achieve fullness in life	0.933	42.182
	Feel good about myself	0.858	32.638

Table 3. Internal consistency, square roots of average variance extracted, and correlation matrix (combined sample groups)

Construct	C.R	1	2	3	4
1. PBO	0.93	*0.72*			
2. Spiritual benefits	0.96	.516(**)	*0.94*		
3. Social benefits	0.94	.509(**)	.684(**)	*0.91*	
4. Purpose-in-life benefits	0.94	.501(**)	.828(**)	.806(**)	*0.91*