
Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2011.590724

Copyright © 2011 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is the author’s version of the work, posted here with the permission of the publisher for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted. You may also be able to access the published version from your library. The definitive version is available at http://www.tandfonline.com.
The Role of Brand Orientation in Church Participation: An Empirical Examination

**Dr. Riza Casidy Mulyanegara [Corresponding Author]**

Lecturer in Marketing
Faculty of Higher Education Lilydale
Swinburne University of Technology
Room LD 130
Locked Bag 218 Lilydale
VIC 3140 Australia
Ph: +61392157243
Fax: +61392157070
Rmulyanegara@swin.edu.au
The Role of Brand Orientation in Church Participation: An Empirical Examination

Although a large amount of research has been undertaken into the application of marketing techniques in church organizations, few studies have provided empirical evidence on the effects of brand orientation on church participation. This empirical study sought to contribute to the body of literature via a survey of 344 church attendees of a particular church denomination in Australia. The conceptual model hypothesizes brand orientation as performing direct and indirect effects on church participation through ‘perceived benefits’ as the mediating variables. A person’s perception of the extent to which a church engages in brand-oriented activities and behaviour is significantly related with his or her perception of the benefits associated with church activities, which then leads to higher level of church participation. The results reveal that brand orientation is significantly related with perceived benefits and church participation.

KEYWORDS. Brand orientation, perceived benefits, church participation, church marketing
INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, an extensive number of studies have examined the application of marketing techniques in churches within the realm of non-profit (Santos and Mathews, 2001, Sargeant, 2005, Abreu, 2006) and services marketing literature (Rodrigue, 2002, Sherman and Devlin, 2000, Webb et al., 1998). Studies in this area have focused on the application of concepts such as marketing communication (Vokurka et al., 2002, Alan, 2000, William and Alan, 2002); brand image (Abreu, 2006); service quality (Santos and Mathews, 2001); strategy (Rodrigue, 2002, Coleman, 2002, Keyt, 2001); and market orientation (White and Simas, 2008, Mulyanegara et al., 2010) in churches.

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’. Abreu (2006) argued that a church is perceived by its members as a brand which constitutes a set of inter-related elements including its message, ministers/volunteers, venue of the service, and the programs/activities it offers. 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. More recently, Einstein (2008) has asserted that given that brands contain meaning for our lives and that products become part of our identities, it is easy to see why religious organizations see the value in positioning their products and services as ‘brands’.

According to Stevens et al. (2005), 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 by Stevens et al. (2005) and Shawchuck et al. (1992, p.205) underline the importance of branding for religious organizations to attract attendance.

It would seem that Abreu’s (2006) work on the brand positioning and image of a religious shrine is apparently the only empirical study of church branding in the literature. The study also found that the ‘brand image’ of the shrine did not coincide with the ‘brand position’ as determined by the church, which suggested a need for brand re-positioning (Abreu, 2006). Other articles on church branding are mostly conceptual and thus far there is lack of empirical evidence to support the links between church branding and church participation.

THE PRESENT STUDY

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 (Webb et al., 1998, Abreu, 2006). As a consequence, previous studies in this area have failed to
contribute to a theoretical understanding of how branding can be used to motivate church attendance. It is thus apparent that there is a need for more research into consumer behavior in this area to examine individual motives for participation in church activities, and to ascertain the potential role of branding in affecting church participation (Webb et al., 1998).

The main objective of this study is to investigate the role of brand orientation in encouraging church participation. More specifically, this article examines whether church members’ perception of the organizational brand orientation (‘perceived brand orientation’) significantly affects: (i) their perception of the benefits associated with the church’s offerings (‘perceived benefits’) and (ii) the extent of their participation in the church activities (‘church participation’). Furthermore, the paper develops a theoretical framework to empirically test the relationships among ‘perceived brand orientation’, ‘perceived benefits’, and ‘church participation’.

The paper is organized as follows: First, we review a number of theoretical viewpoints that offer conceptual support for the relationship between perceived brand orientation, perceived benefits and church participation. Due to the limited number of brand orientation literature in the church context, general concepts of brand orientation are used to enrich the understanding of the relationships. Second, we develop hypotheses and a conceptual framework for the study which is then empirically tested. The results are presented followed by discussion, the implications of the study and its limitations.
Context of study

The non-profit sector is an important part of the Australian economy, contributing $38 billion (3.4%) to the GDP, which is equivalent to that of the government administration and defense industry (ABS, 2008). The sector’s contribution to employment is relatively similar to that of the United States and the United Kingdom, and relatively larger than that of Canada and most other European countries (Salamon and Helmut, 1999). Lyons and Passey (2005) estimated that over 86% of the adult population in Australia belongs to at least one non-profit organization, further highlighting the central role of the non-profit sector in Australia.

Religious organizations account for 5% of total employment in the non-profit sector and generated almost $23 billion in 2004 (Anonymous, 2005). Churches are considered large providers of community services in Australia through their engagement in health, social welfare, aged care, and education (Kaldor, 1987, Bellamy and Castle, 2004). Because churches lack support from government and the private sector, they are totally dependent on their members, which means that they require a high level of members’ participation in the forms of financial contributions (Sargeant, 2005) and volunteering (Self et al., 1988). This makes churches an attractive research context for an examination of consumer participation behaviour in the non-profit sector. For the purpose of this study, the term ‘church participation’ refers to people’s participation in churches affiliated with mainstream Christian denominations. That is, those that continue to adhere to the Nicene Creed in their statements of faith (NCLS, 2001).
BRAND ORIENTATION

Although the brand concept and its implementation have been well established in the commercial sector for more than a century (Low and Fullerton, 1994), it is only recently that researchers have begun to examine the relevance of brands within the non-profit sector. As with the application of market orientation in the non-profit sector, there is some controversy regarding the applicability of a commercial brand orientation to non-profit organizations. Some authors have asserted that there are many opportunities for non-profit organizations to use commercial branding practices in the development of non-profit brands (Roberts-Wray, 1994, Tapp, 1996, Mort et al., 2007). Aaker, et.al (2010) suggested that non-profit organizations should develop strong brands to convey competence in delivering quality products and services. Despite these conflicting views, there is general agreement that branding has an important role in engendering trust among donors as the environment for non-profit organizations becomes increasingly competitive (Hankinson, 2000). In this regard, research efforts have focused on the development of frameworks for building successful non-profit brands.

Within the non-profit sector, Hankinson (2001a, p.231) defined brand orientation as:

... the extent to which charity organizations regard themselves as brands, an indication of how much (or how little) organizations accept the theory and practice of branding.

In a subsequent study, Hankinson (2001) examined the impact of brand orientation on the practices of charity managers. A comparison of strongly brand-oriented managers and those with a lower level of brand orientation revealed that the former were: (i) better able to influence others in adopting a brand focus; (ii) more skilful at translating this commitment to the brand into
managerial practice; and (iii) better able to raise voluntary income. These findings are consistent with those of other studies in this area, which have proposed that a strong brand can: (i) enhance an organization’s ability to communicate its values to stakeholders (Tapp, 1996); (ii) change public opinion (Lindsay and Murphy, 1996); (iii) build loyalty (Ritchie et al., 1999); (iv) achieve short-term and long-term objectives (Hankinson, 2002, Simoes and Dibb, 2001); and (v) attract a greater proportion of voluntary income (Hankinson, 2001). Despite these apparent benefits, brands are still largely under-utilised as a strategic asset in the non-profit sector. As Stride and Lee (2007, p.114) observed in a qualitative study of non-profit directors: “… whilst respondents talked enthusiastically about branding, it was rarely discussed in terms of it being an important strategic tool in its own right”.

Although Hankinson (2002, 2001, 2000) has made significant contribution to the literature on non-profit brand orientation, the reliability and validity of her measure have not been demonstrated and her research was confined to only one (charity) sector. Responding to this limitation, Ewing and Napoli (2005) developed a psychometrically robust and generalisable measure of non-profit brand orientation (NBO), which was tested across 12 categories of non-profit organizations. Ewing and Napoli’s (2005) work on the construct of non-profit brand orientation is of significance to the present study in view of the otherwise limited research into the measurement of brand orientation in the non-profit sector.

**Perceived Brand Orientation**

Because research into brand orientation in general is still at its infancy, it is not surprising that little attention has been paid to the specific question of brand orientation from a *customer*
Whereas the ‘perceived market orientation’ construct (Baker et al., 1999, Corbitt et al., 2003, Gounaris et al., 2003) was developed to measure market orientation from a customer perspective, a similar measure (from the perspective of the customer) has not been developed for brand orientation. Given these circumstances, the present study seeks to contribute to the body of literature by developing brand orientation construct from the perspective of the customer – ‘perceived brand orientation’ (PBO), which refers to respondents’ perception of the extent to which an organization engages in brand-oriented activities and behaviour.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Overview of the Model

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of the present study. The PBO construct is hypothesized to perform direct and indirect effects on ‘church participation’. We develop and test a structural model in which ‘spiritual benefits’ (PBSPI) and ‘social benefits’ (PBSOC act as mediators between PBO and ‘church participation’. The rationale behind the model is discussed in the following section.

Insert Figure 1 here

Brand orientation and church participation

Within the church marketing literature, researchers have argued that positive church image is linked with stronger members’ commitment (Stevens et al., 2005). The strategic importance that

---

1 There are conflicting arguments in the literature in regards of the use of the term ‘consumers/customers’ to refer to church members. For the purpose of this study, the word ‘customers’ and ‘consumers’ are used interchangeably to refer to existing and prospective church members/attendees.
a church places on its branding is also conceptually linked with the church’s ability to attract prospective members and enhance the participation of its existing members (Shawchuck et al., 1992).

In the mainstream marketing literature, strong organizational/corporate brands have been significantly related with repeat purchases (Porter and Claycomb 1997) and customer loyalty (Keller 2003, Ailwadi and Keller 2004), as well as increased monetary contributions in the charity sector (Webb et al., 2000). Although the terms ‘repeat purchase’ and ‘customer loyalty’ are generally applied in the commercial sector, it can be argued that respondents’ extent of participation in church-related activities reflects the notion of ‘repeat purchase’ and ‘customer loyalty’ as applied in the church context, as church attendance reflects members’ commitment and loyalty to the church organisation. A church with a strong brand is likely to be perceived as being able to deliver superior values to the congregation which in turns positively affects members’ participation in the programs/activities that the church offers. Therefore it is hypothesized that church members’ perception of the extent to which a church engages in brand-oriented activities and behaviour (‘perceived brand orientation’) is positively related with their extent of participation in church-related activities.

H1: Perceived brand orientation is significantly related with church participation.

Perceived benefits and church participation

The ‘perceived benefits’ construct in the present study refer to the benefits anticipated from participating in church-related activities. Siegel and Scrimshaw (2002) found that people engage
in religious activities such as prayer and meditation to gain spiritual support through a personal relationship with God (spiritual benefits) as well as social support gained through their interactions with other members/attendees (social benefits). Further to Siegel and Scrimshaw’s (2002) findings, the inclusion of ‘spiritual benefits’ and ‘social benefits’ as the antecedents of church participation in the present study is also consistent with the ‘intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity’ concept of Allport and Ross (1967). On the basis of intrinsic-extrinsic religious orientation, Attaway et al (1995) argued that intrinsically-oriented individuals’ participation in religious activities are driven by ‘spiritual motives’, whereas extrinsically-oriented individuals are driven by ‘social motives’. In essence, the scholars argued that people participate in religious activities to satisfy their spiritual and social needs (Attaway et al., 1995).

In congruence with previous studies in this area, the following hypotheses are proposed:

\( H2a: \) Perceived spiritual benefits are significantly related with church participation.

\( H2b: \) Perceived social benefits are significantly related with church participation.

**Brand orientation and perceived benefits**

The literature has suggested the importance of having a strong brand orientation for organizations 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 and Gray, 2003, Balmer, 2001, Da Silva and Syed Aiwi, 2008). 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 organizations.
‘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. In light of these arguments, it is hypothesized that positive perceptions of a church’s brand orientation will lead to a greater level of perceived benefits.

H3a Perceived brand orientation is significantly related with perceived spiritual benefits.

H3b Perceived brand orientation is significantly related with perceived social benefits.

**Perceived benefits as a mediating variable**

The conceptual model proposes ‘spiritual benefits’ and ‘social benefits’ as the mediating variable between PBO and ‘church participation’. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a variable performs a mediating role if it accounts for the relationship between the antecedents and the results. Accordingly, we contend that although church members may have positive evaluation of a church’s brand orientation, their decision to participate in church-related activities are eventually driven by the amount of benefits they anticipate from participating in those activities. Churches with strong brand are perceived as being able to design services that are relevant to the needs and expectation of the members. Consequently, those who perceive the organization as highly brand-oriented are likely to associate significant benefits related to church participation. In turns, these members are likely to be actively involved in the programs/activities offered by the church as they consider these activities as relevant in helping them to gain relevant benefits. On the basis of this rationale, the following hypotheses are proposed:
**H4a:** Perceived spiritual benefits mediate the relationship between PBO and church participation.

**H4b:** Perceived social benefits mediate the relationship between PBO and church participation.

**METHOD**

**Sample Selection and Data Collection**

The choice of respondents for this study was considered in relation to the knowledge required on the particular issues under examination. Since the study incorporates sections on people’s perception of the brand orientation of the church, the respondents must have substantial exposure to the church organization based on their church-going experiences. Consequently, we employed a convenience sampling technique to recruit respondents. The researchers approached a district leader of Assemblies of God (AOG) in Melbourne, Australia, to send an invitation to participate in the study to AOG-affiliated church leaders throughout the Melbourne metropolitan and suburban areas. Thirteen church leaders, of the 40 invited, responded positively to the invitation and agreed to allow the researcher to approach their congregation for data collection. 1085 questionnaires were distributed in thirteen churches that participated in the study. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are described in Table 1.

______________________________

Insert Table 1 here

______________________________
Measures

*Perceived brand orientation.* The author initially attempted to adapt the Non-profit Brand Orientation (NBO) measure (Ewing & Napoli, 2005) in developing the ‘perceived brand orientation’ (PBO) construct in this study. However, the adaptation of NBO construct based on customer/members’ perspective is a rather complex issue because the assessment of the importance of branding in an organization’s strategy is typically assessed by top managers (Urde, 1999). Akin to Baker, et.al (1999)’s approach in the development process of PMO construct, the development process for the PBO construct in this study involves consultation with experts in the area and in-depth interview participants. A pilot study involving members of a particular church organization reveals that a number of statements in the NBO construct were not applicable to customers/members as these are not experience-related but rather a strategic issue.

Following the complexities involved in the adaptation of existing brand orientation scale, the author self-developed the PBO construct which reflects the three *brand orientation themes* used by Ewing and Napoli (2005) in their development of the NBO scale. 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, de Chernatony and Riley, 1998, Keller 2000). The refined 6-items PBO constructs in this study (as depicted in Table 3) reflect the following three themes:

*Uniqueness (BR2):* Respondents’ perception of the church’s distinctive characteristics which makes it stands out from other churches (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 and Napoli, 2005).

Perceived Benefits. Whereas numerous work has been done in the conceptualization of perceived benefits construct in marketing literature (Forsythe et al., 2006, Kinard and Capella, 2006, Shoham, 2000), the research context of the present study necessitates the adoption of scales relevant to church-related benefits. This research utilized Emmons et al. (1998) instruments of personal goals, which have been extensively used in literature pertaining to the psychology of religion (Hill and 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.

Church participation For the purpose of this research, ‘church participation’ is defined as the extent to which respondents participate in programs offered by the church including worship services, fundraising events, special events with guest speakers, and social activities. We developed the scales in this section based on a summary of the ‘most common’ type of activities shared by the thirteen churches participating in this study. The newly developed scales were pre-tested in pilot studies involving church members from a particular AOG church. Modifications to the items were made based on the comments of the participants in the pilot studies. In the
analyses, one factor was extracted from the church participation construct. Two items were eliminated because their factor loadings were less than 0.5. The Cronbach’s Alpha of the final construct was larger than 0.7 indicating good reliability.

Insert table 2 here

THE MEASUREMENT MODEL

The measurement model was tested using the incremental modification approach of Segars & Grover (1993), and Cheng (2001). The model was revised by deleting some indicators with low factor loadings, squared multiple correlations, and those that attempted to load on more than one dimension as reflected by high modification indexes (Cheng, 2001). The deletion of the variables was also done one by one as the elimination of one variable in the model may concurrently affect other parts of the model (Kline, 2005). Both the measurement and structural models were analyzed through the application of AMOS 17.

Table 2 shows means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of all of the measurement variables. As depicted in the table, the AVE for each construct is greater than all related correlations, thus indicating discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The final measurement model demonstrated good fit with the data as reflected in the fit indices including $\chi^2 (100) = 230.874 \ (p = .000)$, NC (2.309), RMSEA (.062), TLI (.944), CFI (.953), and NFI (.921).
**Sample bias**

The validity of research findings can be compromised if there is a sample bias in terms of key variables. Therefore, patterns of mean, median, skewness, and kurtosis were analyzed to assess any violations against assumptions. The results found no threat to validity as most of the skewness and kurtosis values shown are generally close to zero.

**Scale validity and reliability**

Discriminant validity was established through an examination of the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) and correlation between constructs. The reliability of the constructs was measured using ‘composite reliability’ (C.R) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 3, the C.R value of all constructs is above 0.7, indicating good construct reliability.

Insert table 3 here

**ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURAL MODEL**

A full structural model was employed to examine the relevant hypotheses under examination. In this structural model, perceived spiritual benefits (PBSPI) and perceived social benefits (PBSOC) were incorporated as the mediating variables. An observation of the GOF indices suggests that the structural model is statistically significant and possesses construct validity. Although the Chi-Square was found to be statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 199.734$, df=99, p=.00), the Normed Chi-Square (2.018) is within the recommended range. Other indicators including RMSEA (0.054), GFI (.936), AGFI (.912), TLI (.957), NFI (.932), and CFI (.964) are all above
the recommended fit level. The bootstrapping method was used to estimate the standard error. The effects were calculated at a confidence level of 95% and the bootstrap was set to equal to 500.

**Test of the mediating effects**

Our conceptual model specifies that perceived benefits mediate the effects of perceived brand orientation on church participation. In order to examine the two mediation hypotheses, we followed Baron and Kenny’s (1986) criteria to establish whether the conditions for mediation exist. First, we ran a structural model to determine that there is a relationship between the antecedents (PBO) and the outcome variable (church participation). As can be seen in Table 4 under: ‘Mediation test stage I: independent to dependent variable’, PBO was found to have a statistically significant relationship with church participation (β = .25, p < .01). Thus, support was found for the first hypothesis and the first condition of mediation is fulfilled.

Next, we ran a structural model to establish that there is a relationship between the independent variable (PBO) and the mediator variable (Perceived Benefits). PBO was found to have a significant relationship with both perceived spiritual benefits (β = .32, p < .01) and perceived social benefits (β = .37, p < .01). Thus, Baron and Kenny’s (1986) second condition of mediation is met and support was found for H3a and H3b respectively.

The third condition of mediation specifies that the mediator must have significant relationship with the dependent variable. We ran another structural model to examine the relationship
between perceived benefits and church participation. The results suggest that there is a significant relationship between perceived spiritual benefits – participation ($\beta = .27, p < .01$) as well as perceived social benefits – participation ($\beta = .33, p < .01$). It can be observed that the results found in the sub-structural models (Table 4) are consistent with the results found in the full structural model (Figure 2).

**Indirect Effects**

Based on the approach suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation effects were assessed through an examination of the size and significance of the indirect effects. The indirect effects on the structural model were measured as the product of the structure coefficients involved (Kline, 2005). As shown in Table 4, PBO was found to have significant indirect effects on ‘church participation’ ($\beta = .21, p < .01$) through perceived benefits as the mediating variables, thereby lending support to H4.

**Total Effects**

An examination of the total effects suggests that PBO has a significant relationship with ‘church participation’ ($\beta = .27, p < .01$) through the mediating effect of ‘perceived spiritual benefits’ and ‘perceived social benefits’.

In order to determine the extent of mediation (full or partial), we examined the relationship between PBO and church participation before the mediators (PB SPI and PB SOC) are included.
in the analysis. For full mediation to occur, the direct paths from the independent variable to dependent variable should be non-significant when the mediating variables are included in the model (Baron and Kenny, 1986). An observation of the sub-structural model (PBO – participation only) model and the full structural model reveals that the direct effects between PBO and church participation ($\beta = .25, p < .01$) became non-significant ($\beta = .06, p > .05$) after the mediating variables are included in the model, thus lending support to full mediation effects.

We further assess the strength of the mediating effects of perceived spiritual benefits and perceived social benefits by running two separate models. An observation of the separate structural models reveals that the indirect effects of PBO on participation are stronger with perceived social benefits ($\beta = .148, p < .01$) as the mediator than perceived spiritual benefits ($\beta = .115, p < .01$). The results lend further support to H4a and H4b respectively, and suggest that perceived social benefits may be perceived by the respondents as being more important than spiritual benefits in affecting their church participation.

**DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to a better understanding of the role of brand orientation in affecting church participation by analyzing the relationship between ‘perceived brand orientation’, ‘perceived benefits’, and ‘church participation’. The topic of brand orientation is still at its infancy and thus no studies have been done to examine the construct from the perspective of the customers/organizational members (O'Cass and Ngo, 2009). 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 and church participation.

The PBO construct in this study is a unidimensional measure which reflects three brand orientation themes: ‘uniqueness’, ‘reputation’, and ‘orchestration’. The unidimensional nature of the PBO construct in this study is consistent with Hankinson’s (2001b) brand orientation construct. It implies that the three themes are inter-dependent in a sense that those that perceive the church as being ‘unique’ are also likely to perceive the church as being reputable and consistent in delivering their message.

Through the use of Structural Equation Modeling, the analysis addressed the research hypotheses relating to the role of PBO in the conceptual framework. First, it was found that PBO is significantly related with ‘church participation’. This implies that church members’ positive evaluation of the church’s brand leads to higher extent of participation in church-related activities, thereby providing an empirical support on the link between church branding and church participation as proposed in the literature (Stevens et al., 2005, Shawchuck et al., 1992).

Second, the analysis found a significant association between PBO and ‘perceived benefits’. 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 and social benefits in life. This is consistent with the ‘insurance’ proposition of Balmer and Gray (2003), which suggests that positive organization image is an insurance against poor performance as well as a guarantee of quality. The present study provides empirical evidence to suggest that strong church
brand is an indicator of the church’s ability in providing relevant benefits to existing and prospective members.

The positive association between ‘perceived brand orientation’, ‘perceived benefits’, and ‘church participation’ found in the present study further highlights the importance of customer perception of the brand orientation level of an organization. In terms of managerial implications, the results suggest that managers of non-profit organizations should ensure that their organizations are perceived by their members as performing well in the respective dimensions of brand orientation, as this is likely to lead to: (i) positive perception of the benefits associated with an organization’s offering, and (ii) active participation in the programs/activities offered by the organization. The ‘uniqueness’ dimension implies the need for a church organization to establish distinctive characteristics which makes it stands out from other churches. The church also needs to maintain a good reputation among the community, as it was evident that church’s reputation is positively related to participation. Any negative publicity associated with the church (such as ministers’ scandals and the misuse of funds) may have adverse effects on church participation. Finally, the ‘orchestration’ dimension requires church leaders to implement effective integrated marketing activities that deliver consistent brand messages to internal and external stakeholders of the church.

The fact that perceived benefits perform full mediation effects on the relationship between perceived brand orientation and church participation is also of significant importance for non-profit managers and church leaders alike. The results of the analysis found that the more people perceive the church as delivering relevant benefits, the higher their extent of participation in the programs/activities offered by the organization. In this context, perceived social benefits were
found to perform stronger mediating effect on the relationship between ‘perceived brand orientation’ and ‘church participation’. This indicates that people not only seek to attain personal spiritual benefits when it comes to church attendance, but also the spiritual support and sense of belonging they get from connecting with other church members.

Consequently, non-profit managers and church leaders alike should ensure that the various programs implemented by the organization are perceived by its members/customers as delivering relevant benefits. This requires a continuous monitoring of members’ satisfaction through surveys in which members can inform the organization of the existing benefits they receive from participating, as well as the additional benefits they would like to get from the organization. The feedback gained from the surveys can help the organization to improve its current programs/activities or adding new ones to improve the participation of its existing members and attract new members. Further, since ‘perceived social benefits’ was found as the most significant predictor of church participation, church leaders should therefore focus on social activities to attract prospective church members.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In terms of theoretical contributions, the present study extends understanding of the role of brand orientation in the non-profit sector, specifically within the context of church participation. The contribution is significant due to the absence of empirical evidence on the link between brand orientation and church participation in the literature (Stride and Lee, 2007).
Review of the literature indicates that the examination of brand orientation construct from the customers/members’ perspective in the non-profit sector is almost non-existent. This study contributes to the theory by providing empirical support for the relationship between ‘perceived brand orientation’, ‘perceived benefits’, and ‘church participation’. Consequently, future research should investigate the effects of PBO on other aspects of consumer behavior that are relevant to the non-profit sector such as volunteering and giving donations. There are also opportunities to further explore the significance of PBO in other non-profit contexts such as sports clubs and museums where participation is critical for the survival and growth of the organizations.

Two main limitations of the study are identified. First, the use of convenience sampling to recruit the respondents possesses 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. There is also unequal distribution in terms of gender, as the majority of respondents are female. This is consistent with NCLS (2001) findings which suggested that male represent 39% of church attendees in Australia.

The second limitation relates to the research context. Although churches represent a suitable context within which to examine the effects of perceived brand orientation on customers/members’ participation, there are other factors which may affect people’s decision to engage in church-related activities which are not taken into consideration in this study, such as...
religious and cultural background. Respondents who were brought up in strongly religious families or cultures might be less affected by brand orientation and perceived benefits as their participation might be the result of habitual behavior rather than rational decision. People with work commitments on the weekend may find it difficult to actively participate in church-related activities despite their positive evaluation of the church’s brand orientation. On the other hand, those who disagree with the doctrinal position of the church (intellectual dissent) may be less affected by the predictor constructs used in the present study as their lack of participation is due to doctrinal issues rather than the church’s performance in the respective themes of brand orientation. There is also a possibility that respondents of the study who are active participants/volunteers of the church might have different perceptions of brand orientation as compared to the passive participants. Future studies can therefore look to compare the perceptual differences of brand orientation from the perspective of church volunteers (strategic brand orientation) and church attendees (perceived brand orientation), and how these affect church attendance and commitment. The sampling frame of this study is also confined to one particular denomination, which is the Assemblies of God in Australia. Consequently, a replication of this study in other organizational and denominational contexts provides an opportunity for future research.

**CONCLUSION**

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 non-profit researchers and church leaders alike in terms of enhancing the participation of
customers/members in non-profit environment. Consistent with the results of this study, church leaders should strive to engage in brand-oriented activities to develop a strong church brand with relevant appeals to its existing and prospective target audience. Positive evaluation of the church’s brand orientation as well as spiritual and social benefits associated with the church’s programs is likely to lead to active participation in church activities. It is expected that this study would be a catalyst to draw further attention on research in this important topic.

Acknowledgements
The author would like to thank Dr. Yelena Tsarenko and Professor Felix Mavondo who have been an integral part of the research project.

REFERENCES


