The Study of Consumer’s Post-Purchase Evaluation toward Brand Equity of Five Stars Hotels in Thailand

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Abstract

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Research Problem: What are the characteristics of brand equity of five star luxury hotels in Thailand and which components of brand equity are the majority concerns from customers’ evaluation?
Purpose: The study aims to investigate and analyze the interrelationship of brand equity of five stars hotels in Bangkok, Thailand and post-purchase evaluation in order to provide valuable information on how five stars luxury hotels in Thailand can successfully and appropriately exploit the hotel brand equity so as to create the branding strategy and to create a competitive advantage in the long run.
Method: Qualitative approach was used to observe the data in the form of content analysis. While, the quantitative approach is employed in order to summarize the finding result. The data collection, the secondary source is the heart of this research such as hotel reviews, brand equity books and related articles.
Conclusion: The empirical findings from hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation reveal the most significant components of brand equity for five stars Thai hotel industry which are perceived quality and brand loyalty. Whereas, brand awareness and brand association are considered the least significant of all brand equity components from customer’s perception.
Keywords: Brand equity, Brand loyalty, Brand awareness, Perceived quality, Brand association, Five Stars Hotel in Thailand, Thai Hotels Industry
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Chonnikarn Dejsiriphun & Kritsana Suviratvithayakit
1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Nowadays, the world becomes globalized which means distance is no longer a barrier for communication and it convergences the world as a whole (Scheuerman, 2010). The advantage of world globalization is not only shredded the light on telecommunication but also in the tourism and hospitality industry. Therefore, the more convergence the world is, the more conveniences on transportation and traveling are.

As Thailand is considered to be one of the top tourist destinations, it can be the evidences that the country is able to facilitate those basic requirements when one considers traveling to another place. Those country facilities such as the sufficient infrastructure, the accessible of communication systems, the convenient transportation, the variety of accommodation selections, as well as other country attractiveness can be the important elements that most people usually concern when traveling. Consequently, it is not surprising that tourism and hospitality industry in Thailand is growing consecutively from year 2001 to 2009, according to the national income report (see also Appendix 1). Furthermore, the Thai government realized the importance of tourism and hospitality sector that generates country revenue over 400,000 million baht a year and plays a significant role in the economic development of Thailand, regarding to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2011). Thereby, tourism and hospitality actors have put an effort to develop themselves which leads to the higher competition among the marketplace.

However, the study mainly contributes to hospitality industry especially for the five stars luxury hotel section. It is crucial for the hotel business operators to determine the elements that can affect its business competition. Among the competitive environment, brand equity is considered to be one of the important assets to create value to both customer and the firm. For value created to customer, brand equity can help the customers to interpret, process, and memorize brands and products information that finally enhances their confidences on purchase decision. While, value created to the firm is to generate higher profit, attract new customer, remain loyalty customer, as well as, enhance competitive advantage (Aaker, 1991, p. 16-18).
Consequently, the study on brand equity of five stars luxury hotels\(^1\) in Thailand and the relationship of brand equity and consumers’ post-purchase evaluation is carried out. Since brand equity is defined as one element of brand assets, the study provides the more comprehension of brand equity. The study on hotel brand equity will be conducted by conducting content analysis on customers’ post-purchase evaluation. The implication of customers’ post-purchase evaluations or the hotel guest comments are used in the study because it reveals customers’ expression and perception on their experienced stays. In other words, those hotel guest comments imply and reflect the majority concerns of brand equity when staying at five stars luxury hotels.

Therefore, the result of this study provides the insight of each brand equity component, the brand equity characteristics and practical contribution in hotel industry for brand marketers, hotel executive committees, sales & marketing managers, and other related service fields. Those people who play a significant role on developing an appropriate marketing strategy and employing the suitable brand management to exploit its brand equity for competitive advantage in the long run.

1.2 Problem Statement

According to Ghauri and Cateora (2010, p. 286-297), brand is considered to be one of the company assets that can add value to the company itself because brand contains company marketing strategy and position in the market. While, brand equity represents the incremental utility to the brand which composes of brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association. For hotel industry, the better value added to the brand toward consumer perception, the more possibility of making profit the hotel is.

In addition, the theoretical contributions on brand equity from previous studies are more related to the physical products rather than the service industry. Consequently, the study on brand equity especially in service industry is relatively limited. Therefore, the authors are interested in

\(^1\) Five stars hotel is defined as one of the hotel classifications. The five stars classifications are denoted for the highest standard according to the assessment and certification of an individual hotel. The standard requirements are composed of physical aspects such as location, construction aspects such as physical structure of the hotel, facilities for hotel guests’ aspect, quality of service and the ability to maintain quality aspect, and the maintenance of the hotel and facilities, according to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT, 2011).
studying brand equity with the focus on hotel industry.

As mention earlier, hospitality industry in Thailand is continuously growing. Hence, the high competition among hotel business operator is more and more concentrated. The growth of tourism industry is from the support of the government in all activities related to the tourism industry. One example of government supports is the attempt to enhance the city’s reputation as a leading MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and events) destination of Asia in 2005 (Hospitalitynet, 2004). The steadily growing rate of Thai tourism industry itself and the other driving forces leads to the condensed of hotel competitions. The competitions are especially intense in the province with greater amount of tourists such as Bangkok. The attractiveness of Bangkok is the combination of contemporary life, cultural heritage, shopping destination, financial district location, and transportation center to other parts of country (MOTS, 2009).

Furthermore, the intense in business competitions especially for five stars luxury hotels are higher than other hotel with fewer stars rating. Normally, the higher stars rating hotel such as five stars luxury hotel comes with the higher price of the offering. However, the competition is not only based on the price and promotion concern but also the uniqueness of the hotel brand. In addition, the emerging of new comer hotels in Bangkok area can also be the supporting evidence, for example Starwood’ St. Regis, W hotel, Four Points by Sheraton (Starwood, 2010).

Therefore, if the hotel brand is looking to increase the profitability in the long run, the hotel brand will need to totally understand the importance of brand equity. In order to have clearer picture of brand equity, it is important to study the characteristics of brand equity that is connected to the hotel brands. This study is focus only at five stars hotel in Bangkok area. The study bases on the hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluations or comments to show the connection with each element of brand equity. In addition, the hotel marketer also needs to consider which components of brand equity are more or less important to customers’ viewpoint so as to develop the appropriate branding strategy.

1.3 Purpose of Study

Firstly, the purpose of this research is to examine brand equity and its characteristics of five stars luxury hotels in Bangkok, Thailand based on customers’ post purchase evaluation. Secondly, the study aims to find the interrelationship of brand equity and post-purchase evaluation by analyzing the content of hotel guest comments. Furthermore, the purpose of this
research is to provide the practical implication of brand equity. Lastly, the authors aim to propose the formulated hypotheses of hotel brand equity for future research at the end of the research.

1.4 Strategic Question
The strategic question for this study is how five stars luxury hotels in Thailand can successfully and appropriately exploit the hotel brand equity so as to create the branding strategy and to create competitive advantage in the long run.

1.5 Research Questions
In order to fulfill the purpose of the study, the research questions have been formulated based on the topic background and problem statement as the following:
1. What are the characteristics of brand equity of five star luxury hotels in Thailand?
2. Which components of brand equity are the majority concerns from customers’ evaluation?

1.6 Thesis Outline
In the first chapter, the research begins with the background of research topic on brand equity and tourism and hospitality industry in Thailand. Then, the authors generate the problem statement and research questions to indicate the direction of the research on how the authors are going to study with the focus on Bangkok area.

In the second chapter, the literature review is done by investigating what knowledge had been studied. The literature review begins with the discussion on the characteristics of brand equity to provide the general concept of brand equity, brand equity in service industry, brand equity and Thai hotel industry, post purchase evaluation, and hotel branding strategy. In addition, the conceptual framework which considers the crucial part of this research is developed. For this research paper, conceptual framework is composed of the concept of brand equity, post-purchase evaluation, and branding strategy.

In the third chapter, the research method begins by explaining how the research topic is selected. Then, the authors discuss on what approaches are appropriately used in the research design section. Qualitative approach is done by performing content analysis as well as employing
the set of measurement. While, the quantitative approach is employed in order to summarize the finding result. About the data collection, the source of secondary data, such as hotel reviews, brand equity books and related articles, are discussed in this section. Next, the authors explain more on the sampling design in terms of population and period of the observation. The methodology part ends with the discussion on the research validity and reliability.

In the forth chapter, the empirical finding presents the collection of data from Trip Advisor website for the hotel guest’s comment. The main focus is the interpretation of those comments and categorized according to the set of measurement for brand equity. The finding result is summarized as the quantitative approach to present the percentage of each category and subcategory on each brand equity component.

In the fifth chapter, the analysis is carried out by discussing the finding result in comparison to the previous studies on brand equity and hotel industry. At the end, the authors conclude each brand equity component analysis and propose the hypotheses on hotel brand equity.

In the sixth chapter, the research conclusion drawn from the analysis section is presented. The research questions are also answered in this section. For example, which component of brand equity is considered the most significant?

In the last chapter, the authors give the recommendation on the practical implication of the research result of brand equity. Furthermore, the authors provide the suggestion on potential direction for future research based on the propose hypotheses.
2. Literature Review

2.1 The Characteristics of Brand Equity

Before directly looking to brand equity in service industry, it is important to understand the general concept of brand equity. Aaker describes brand equity as following statement: “Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (1991, p. 15). For customer aspect, it helps to interpret, process, and store amount of information about the products and brands. For the firm perspective, brand equity helps to generate marginal cash flow by enhancing programs to attract new customers and keep old customers, enhancing brand loyalty, allowing higher margin, being a platform for growth, influencing distribution channel, and being a competitive advantage at the end (Aaker, 1991, p. 16-18), (Ghauri & Cateora 2010, p. 297-298).

Aaker (1991, p. 16) categorizes brand equity into five components which are brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and other proprietary brand assets (patents, trademark, channel relationship, etc). However, the concept of brand equity in this research will focus only on four major components.

The first component is brand loyalty. Aaker (1991, p. 39-45) defines it as the measurement of customer’s attachment to a brand. The high level of customer satisfaction leads to the higher degree of brand loyalty. The customer satisfaction also reflects how willingness the customers are stuck to the brand (Aaker, 1996, p. 322). In addition, according to Evans et al. (2009, p. 369), the loyal customers potentially spread the positive word of mouth.

The second component is brand awareness. Aaker (1991, p. 19) refers it to the customers’ familiarity to particular brand. While, Keller (2008, p. 54) defines brand awareness as the ability to recognize and recall the brand when the product category is given.

The following component is perceived quality. It defines as a perception and a judgment of customers toward overall quality of product or service which depends on the particular purpose. In other word, it refers to the overall feeling about the brand (Aaker, 1991, p. 85-86).

The last component is brand association. Aaker (1991, p. 109) and Chernatony & McDonald (2000, p. 406) share the same thought on brand association as “anything linked in memory to a brand”. In the mean time, brand association is stored to customer’s memory by both
direct and indirect ways (Aperia & Back, 2004, p. 48). According to Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995), it refers to thoughts, symbols, or images that come to mind when mentioning the brand.

Upshaw (1995, p. 14-18) defines brand equity as the total accumulated value of brand in both tangible and intangible assets as well as contributes to the corporate parent. However, Upshaw has divided brand equity into two broad aspects. Brand valuation is the first one which relates to the bearing value of the brand including its financial worth of the company. Brand identity is another aspect which refers to how the brand is viewed by its current and potential purchasers since it is the bonding of brand positioning and personality.

According to Feldwick (2002, p. 171-176), brand equity is viewed as: “It represents a long overdue shift in business and advertising thinking: from focus on making a sale, to creating and keeping a customer; from a purely short-term perspective to one that includes the longer-term profitability of the business; away from volume alone to recognize the important of price and loyalty”.

Regarding Aperia and Back (2004, p. 40-43) and Ghauri and Cateora (2010, p. 297-298), brand equity is brand’s capital which relates to the incremental utility or value of the brand. They mainly focus on two aspects which are the marketing aspect and the financial aspect. For marketing aspect, brand equity aims to build and direct the brands assets by maintaining existing and attracting new customers. For financial aspect, brand equity becomes valuable when it come to brand buying and selling process. However, the differentiation of the company or product itself can lead to the competitive advantage based on non-price competition.

The authors found that Aaker’s concept had been widely studied by many researchers. Therefore, the conceptual framework of brand equity is mainly developed from the contribution of Aaker (1991) and further supported by Aperia and Back (2004), and Ghauri and Cateora (2010).

2.2 Brand Equity in Service Industry

The theoretical contribution from previous studies of brand equity of general product is found to be widely studied but the studies of brand equity in relation with the service industry are relatively limited. However, there are some articles that contributed to the study of brand equity in service industry.
According to Kayaman and Arasli (2007), they explore the positive interrelations of brand equity in hotel industry by a variety of reasons. From customer perspective, it reduces perceived risks and search cost. For hotel brand, it enhances the possibility to charge higher price, to get more market share, and to keep customers with brand loyalty. In addition, it also mentions about other previous research on “Luxury hotels and chain restaurants examines the customer based brand equity and its effects on firm performance” that the strong brand equity significantly increases the company profitability and the lack of brand equity potentially reduces the cash flow. However, the research result indicates that brand awareness is least importance for brand equity in hotel industry.

According to Kim et al. (2003), they argue in some points about the brand awareness. The conclusion is that hotel’s financial performance depends on brand awareness, image, and loyalty. However, the conclusion shows some commonality with Kayaman and Arasli (2007) that the strong brand equity can increase more sales revenues but the absent of brand equity can reduce sales flow.

In addition to two above studies, the study of brand equity is done by relating brand equity to hotel experience. According to Xu & Chan (2010), they emphasize brand loyalty as the most significant element among four elements of brand equity. The hotel experience derives into two forms which are direct and indirect experiences. The experiences can enhance hotel brand equity by the use of advertising, word of mouth, and service performance. Lastly, the hotel can use the synthesis of those customers’ direct and indirect experiences to develop an appropriate branding strategy (Xu & Chan, 2010).

2.2.1 Brand Loyalty and Service Industry

For hotel business, customer loyalty refers to the positive experience of customer during the stay at the hotel. In other words, it refers to the relationship of the hotel performance and the customer perception which might be at the critical, satisfiers, dissatisfies, or neutrals (Ramanathan & Ramanathan, 2011). The satisfaction hotel stay is considered one of consumer behavior reaction after experiencing the product or service (Evans et al., 2010, p. 129). However, in the research paper of Söderlund (1998), it studies on the impact of different levels of satisfaction on word-of-mouth, feedback to the supplier and loyalty. The study reveals that the hotel poor service recovery creates a stronger response than the hotel good service recovery in
the case of word-of-mouth and feedback. In other words, it means the negative bias has stronger influence than the positive bias. In addition, regarding Torres and Kline (2006), state that only the guest satisfaction is not strong enough to retain the customer loyalty but the delighting customer is tend to tightly stick to the hotel brand. Therefore, the hotel needs to go after and beyond to satisfy the guests and ensure the guest pleasurable experience enough to reach the emotion of delight such as having the adequate facility and well-trained employees.

Mostly, the factors that contribute to brand loyalty are awareness, reputation, image, promotion, perceived quality, innovation, brand extension, satisfaction, and customer background (Tepeci, 1999). Furthermore, there are a lot of membership programs especially in the airline, hotel, and credit card industry. The advantage of the membership program is to minimize the communication cost. In addition, the hotel industry also exploits the membership programs by using the data-driven techniques to personalize rewards for particular customer segment (Capizzi & Ferguson, 2005). These membership programs enable the service firms to build the relationship with their customers, for example the hotel firms can provide better service by understanding and anticipating their customers’ needs (Tepeci, 1999).

However, the previous study that emphasizes on the building the relationship with customer is in contrast to Osman et al. (2009) who study on the hotel customer loyalty in the United Kingdom. According to Osman et al. (2009), the study reveals that although transactional approach is the short term relationship and does not emphasize on the interaction with the customer, this approach can help promoting customer loyalty to the hotels.

2.2.2 Brand Awareness and Service Industry

According to Prasad and Dev (2000), the study classifies the brand into four types based on the hotel brand awareness and the hotel performance which are brand champions, rising brands, troubled brands, and weak brands. Brand champion is the best one that is able to command a better room rates and higher hotel occupancy because the customer is able to recall the brand and rates hotel performance better than the others. In contrast, the weak brand is the worst one that has little or no differentiation from other hotels in customers’ mind, poor level of service, and inappropriate branding strategy.

Therefore, spending heavily on media advertising sustains high awareness and the well designed guest recognition program helps improving the brand awareness in customer’s mind. In
addition, raising higher brand awareness in customers’ minds can be done by adopting the expansion strategy and using extensive marketing program (Watkins, 1991).

2.2.3 Perceived Quality and Service Industry

Since the quality of hotel industry is based on the service performance which cannot observe as normal physic product that comes with the quality specification. Service providers have to ensure the quality of the service exceeded customer’s expectation (Lewis, 1989). In other words, service quality refers to how well the service delivery matches with customers’ expectation (Lewis, 1989). In order to provide excellence service quality, service providers firstly have to understand the customer’s expectation (Narangajavana, 2007).

However, Claver et al. (2006) states the advantage of service quality as internal and external impacts. For internal impact, quality can enhance the hotel competitiveness, profitability via standardization, waste reduction, less error and more effective services. For external impact, quality can increase sales and market share, keep customer relationship, finding new potential customers, and improve brand image. The study also suggests that the quality of service can be improved by employee training and customer information. In other words, the hotel performance has to be improved both tangible such as hotel facility and intangible assets such as employee’s competency (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008).

Furthermore, the different types of guests have different preference and perceive hotel quality in the different way. For business traveler, cleanliness and hotel physical location are important. On the other hand, leisure guest pay an important to security, personal interaction, and room rate (Ramanathan & Ramanathan, 2011).

2.2.4 Brand Association and Service Industry

Regarding the study of Osman et al. (2009), building strong brand image in the customer’s minds, it helps to differentiate the hotel itself and distinguish the hotel from other hotel competitors within the same market category. In addition, hotel is like other physical products that sell both the product and the image to the customer, therefore it is important to understand who, where, what, and how the customer segment is. The right product and hotel design for particular image need to take into consideration (West & Purvis, 1992).
Referring to Rotfeld (2008), the study on brand image reveals that customer can perceive the brand value associated with the hotel brands which belong to the same company, although the brand name and image are different. For example, the Marriott hotel chain has plenty of sub-hotel brands such as Marriott, Renaissance, and Courtyard by Marriott. Even though the sub-hotel brands are named differently, the customers can perceived the Marriott’s brand value.

However, the literatures discussed above are considered to be great contribution for the authors to develop the set of brand equity measurement for this research paper.

2.3 Brand Equity and Thai Hotel Industry

Because the study of brand equity in Thai hotel industry is very limited, there are only a few literatures that are relevant and useful for this research study.

Regarding the previous study of Kinpakorn and Tocquer (2010), they identify factors predict customers’ brand relationship (brand loyalty) in customer perspective to measure the brand equity of service firms in Thailand. They divide brand equity into six dimensions which are brand awareness, perceive quality, brand differentiation, brand associations, brand trust, and brand relationships. They argue that even hotel in the same category have different brand equity. After study brand equity in each dimension of luxury hotels in Thailand, they concluded that brand differentiation and brand trust are the most powerful variables that influence on customer brand relationships. While, perceived service quality and brand associations are not related to brand relationships, even they are the hotel core services (Kinpakorn & Tocquer, 2010).

Furthermore, there is a study about the relationship of service quality, consumer decision factors and brand equity of Thai hotel industry. The study claims that perceive quality is an indirect affect to customer satisfaction via customer equity and value perceptions. The true customer satisfaction, customer’s emotion and overall service experience encourage customers to repeat their brand choices. This study also found that the effect of brand awareness and brand meaning are accumulating the company with positive brand equity which leads to the marketing advantage (Vatjanasaregagul, 2007).

2.4 Post-Purchase Evaluation

After purchasing process, customer will evaluate their level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction on the product. Hoyer and MacInnis stated that consumers can experience
dissonance or regret after purchase (2007, p. 272-273). The post-purchase dissonance likely to occur with different reasons, such as the purchase that involved a difficult choice between two or more alternatives, the irrevocable purchase, and the purchase that important to consumer (Hawkins et al., 2001, p. 652).

However, Hoyer and MacInnis (2007, p. 272) mention that the information searching can reduce consumer dissonance. As well as Hawkins et al. (2001, p. 630), stated that the internal reevaluations, such as searching for additional external information in order to support their confidence in the purchase decision, can reduce the post-purchase dissonance.

According to Zeithaml et al. (2009, p. 65), they indicate that post-purchase and post-experience evaluation in service industry are usually the most importance process when considering the subsequence consumer behavior and repurchase intention.

2.5 Branding Strategy in Service Industry

Generally, branding refers to developing and generating the reputation of a brand name. In order to build and develop the brand, it is done by creating a brand from the understanding of the customer segments' needs and wants and then communicating through advertising and other means (Ghauri & Cateora, 2010, p.286-288).

According to Keller (2008, p. 15-16), marketing services are way more challenging than the products as they are less tangible. Branding in service industries are considered important because it is a way to address intangibility and variability problems. Moreover, especially when the firms has designed a particular service offering that is special and deserving of its name, branding a service is an effective way to signal to consumers. Therefore, the better equity builds into the name of the brand, the more the success of branding is (Cai & Hobson, 2004). However, Cai and Hobson (2004) suggest that being different is not a new idea in the marketplace. The competitors are also able to adapt and do the same, hence differentiating strategy have been short-lived. To build and nurture the brand with the understanding on its aim and effectively communicate to the target market in a consistency manner will help hotel achieve the branding strategy on creating the successful brand.

Therefore, the right branding strategy for hotel business can assist to reinforce hotel attributes, decrease customer’s risk for purchasing intangible hotel services, gain the higher level of repeat customer, and position in the competitive among other hotel rivals (Connell, 1992).
However, West and Purvis (1992) reminds one thing about the hotel branding that should avoid building the brand purely on the service aspect since it is mainly based on the human or staff personal interaction. Therefore, emphasizing on training the staff can be costly to the hotel management and sometimes is annoying the guests who prefers privacy.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

After the authors review the existing literatures from several related sources, the authors have drawn the conceptual framework to represent concepts related to the study on brand equity of five stars hotel in Thailand. For this research, the theoretical concept of brand equity and the post-purchase evaluation stage which are two focal points of the research is combined.

![Figure 1: The Study Model on Brand Equity of Five Stars Hotel in Thailand](image)

Source: Own illustration

Regarding the study model illustrated in figure 1, there are three major elements in this research model which are brand equity, post-purchase evaluation, and branding strategy.
The first element is the concept of brand equity. Brand equity refers to the value added to the brand which is composed of four major components: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association.

The second element is the post-purchase evaluation process which refers to one of a sequence of activities in the consumer decision making process (Hawkins et al., 2001, p. 475). In this research, post post-purchase evaluation or hotel guest comments is used in order to reflect how customer feel about the hotel and what do they perceive after their stay. Therefore, the connection between the first element and the second element reflects the relationship of brand equity and post-purchase evaluation. The relationship is studied by using the set of measurement and content analysis approach which the authors discuss later in the methodology section.

The third element is the branding strategy. Once the finding results indicate which elements of brand equity are the more or less significant from customer’s perception, it is used to implement and develop the appropriate and efficient branding strategy that hotel marketer should carefully take into consideration. At the end, the ultimate outcome from developing the right branding strategy will reversibly strengthen brand equity once again.
3. Methodology

3.1 Topic Selection

The primary reason of studying five stars luxury hotel is from the authors’ personal interest since the authors have gained working experience for several years in hospitality industry from both in Thailand and aboard. Secondly, the authors realize the growing rate of hotel industry in Thailand because of the presence of many new hotels’ construction sites in Bangkok area, the authors’ hometown. Thirdly, the high-competition environment to gain most possible market share among hotels becomes the interesting points as being a part of hoteliers. Furthermore, due to the accommodation selection in Bangkok is available in wide range from five stars hotel to guest house to service apartment, it is better for the authors to choose the specific category. In this research, the authors choose to study on five stars hotel section because of authors’ working experience and the intense in business competition mentioned earlier in problem statement section. Finally, the authors concern the importance of brand equity as company asset that can gain profitability to the company in the long run. Then, the deep understanding of brand equity probably helps to exploit brand equity to create competitive advantage to the firm, especially during this high competition environment.

From the reasons stated above, the authors chose brand equity of five stars hotels in Bangkok, Thailand as research topic which is in accordance with Fisher (2007, p. 25) criteria of choosing research topic. The chosen topic has to be interesting enough for researcher so as to maintain the motivation to complete the research, as well as to be interesting for an external reader.

3.2 Research Approach

For this research paper, the authors decide to acquire two approaches for collecting and presenting the research result which are qualitative and quantitative approach. First of all, for data collection design, the authors consider taking qualitative approach because the collected data or hotel guest comments from chosen website are interpreted by the set of measurement. At this stage, the authors perform content analysis that bases on the set of measurement on brand equity. This selected approach on data collection as qualitative is in accordance with Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 731) that refers qualitative approach as emphasizing words rather than the quantification in collecting and analyzing data. In addition, it is also in congruent with Ghauri
and Gronhaug (2010, p. 105) that refer qualitative research as: “a mixture of rational, explorative, and intuitive where the skills and experience of the researcher play an important role in the analysis of data”.

For presenting the interpreted data, the authors consider using quantitative approach since the authors summarize the interpreted data by using the statistical tool such as Microsoft Excel, and presenting the result in the forms of tables and charts. According to Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 154), the quantitative research is more about statistical analysis and is mostly expressed, presented, or measured in number. Therefore, the use of statistical method in this research is more efficient way to present the result in the understandable manner (Fisher, 2007, p.179).

In brief, the combination of two selected approach from authors’ viewpoint is considered the most appropriate approach rather than acquiring only particular approach. Because, the key important of this research like post-purchase evaluation of hotel guest comment is done by using the content analysis. Therefore, this research design is well supported by Fisher (2007, p. 157) that mentions “the content analysis helps to add quantitative element to the analysis of qualitative materials”.

### 3.3 Research Method

The research begins with the collection of post-purchase evaluation or guest comments from selected five stars hotels in Bangkok on Trip Advisor website. After all necessary information is completely gathered, the authors perform content analysis and categorized each comment into the set of brand equity measurement (see also appendix 2). According to Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 726), content analysis refers to the analysis of documents and texts in order to justify those messages into the predetermined categories. In addition, the critical importance of content analysis is that it is able to provide the new insights and add up the researcher’s understanding of particular circumstance or event (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18-19).

After the hotel guest comments are analyzed and categorized into the predetermined set of measurement, the finding result indicates which elements of brand equity are important toward consumer’s perception. In the next stage, the summary result from empirical finding is used in the analysis part. The discussion also relates the empirical finding with previous literatures (refer to literature review section). Lastly, the authors provide the recommendation on
the most appropriate branding strategy that five star luxury hotels in Thailand should carefully
take into consideration.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Primary Data

Since this research studies the relationship of post-purchase evaluation and hotel brand
equity, the information used to represent post-purchase evaluation considers not appropriate to
be gathered by the authors themselves due to the ability to personally access to those selected
hotel experienced guests. However, the appropriation of using hotel guests’ comment from
secondary data is discussed more in the secondary data section.

3.4.2 Secondary Data

The secondary data is considered to be most important information needed for this
research because the research method is mainly focused on the secondary analysis of qualitative
data. According to Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 599-600), the secondary analysis of qualitative
data becomes more acceptable and prominent than in the past. This can be used to prove the
possibility of using the secondary data.

In this research, the secondary data is gathered from various sources and it is used to gain
initial insight into the research problem. The collection of secondary data is mainly from Trip
Advisor website, Mälardalen University’s library database, and Thai organizations’ official
website.

In connection with the hotel guests’ comments, it is considered to be the most important
information that the research cannot be carried out without it. All hotels’ guest comments are
collected from Trip Advisor website. However, it is worth that the authors discuss the validity of
information from this website by following reasons. Firstly, the most important reason is that
Trip Advisor is the comment from customer's perspective which is match with the conceptual
framework (post-purchase evaluation). Secondly, Trip Advisor is the world's largest travel
advisor that offers trusted advice from real experienced travelers so that the comments are not
made up for special purpose because the comments can only post by the members. In this case, if
the comments are for promoting purpose, it can catch the fake review. Thirdly, this website is
more reliable to use in comparison to the reviews gathered directly from hotel official website which are probably excluded negative comments for business purposes and business advantages. Fourthly, Trip Advisor website does not link to any hotel booking tools so that the comments do not relate to the commercial purpose. Therefore, the comments are available both positive and negative comments and the authors can be ensured that the comments are not made up for the intended purpose. Lastly, the comment’ length for each comment is relatively long, approximately around one to two paragraphs which contains a lot of opinion message about hotel experience. Therefore, it is better to categorize those observed messages into the set of measurements so as to analyze and interpret in the systematical and unbiased manner.

In conjunction to Mälardalen University’s library database, most of the academic articles and research papers are derived from Emerald and ABI Inform. In addition, Mälardalen University’s library also provides sources as textbooks to support the theoretical framework. The keywords used in the searching for the information are as the following; Brand Equity, Consumer Decision Making Process, Post-Purchase Evaluation, Thai Hotel Industry, Brand Equity and Hospitality Industry. This kind of data is considered to be from the reliable resource for academic purpose which is the university library database. Therefore, these academic books provide the authors the necessary theoretical knowledge for the research concept and model, while the articles provide the information on previous study related to the research topic.

In addition, the Thai organizations’ websites in related to the research area, such as Tourism Authority of Thailand official website and Ministry of Tourism and Sports official website, are used as reliable statistical information about the tourism and hotel industry of Thailand.

3.5 Limitation of Study

Performing the content analysis of brand equity for all hotels in Thailand would be too much of information and time consuming in comparison to the research time limitation and resources. Therefore, the authors scope the focus on brand equity to only five stars hotel category and focus observation location to only Bangkok area so that the authors will be able to provide more concreted result on the study of brand equity in five stars hotels in Bangkok, Thailand.

In addition to the time critique, the authors also face with the limitation of the previous studies on brand equity in related to service industry in Thailand. This limited literature is
considered to be another obstacle while doing the discussion on the research result in comparison to previous study in the analysis section.

3.6 Sampling Design

3.6.1 Sampling Group

For the sampling group, the authors choose to study on the comments of 8 selected five stars hotels only in Bangkok area because of following reason. Firstly, Bangkok is the capital city where is the center both for financial, cultural tourist attraction, and transportation to other parts of country. In addition, due to the time constraint, the study focus only in Bangkok area is more reasonable than covering all tourist destinations.

In connection with the selected hotels, the authors consider perform the review observation for 8 hotels from the total 36 five stars hotel throughout Bangkok area (TAT, 2011). The selected hotels are The Mandarin Oriental Bangkok, The Peninsula Hotel Bangkok, Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok, Grand Hyatt Erawan, The Sukhothai Hotel, Intercontinental Hotel Bangkok, Plaza Athenee Bangkok, and Sheraton Grand Sukhumvit. The authors choose these 8 hotels from different international brand chain as the representative of five stars hotels in Bangkok (See also appendix 3). Because the authors realize it is the best way to study the similarity on brand equity that all five stars hotels share in common. In addition, since this research is about hotel brand equity, it is better to select the hotels that operate internationally so as to avoid the lack of previous knowledge about the brand which is brand awareness.

For the amount of observed reviews, the hotel guests’ comments covering one year are counted to 642 comments which appropriate to time limitation. Although the total international tourists’ arrival to Thailand is at 15.8 million people according to the Department of Tourism (2010), it is considered to be appropriate to have limited amount of comments used in the content analysis method.

For the period of observation, the authors indicate the period of comments gathered from Trip Advisor website from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010. The reason why the authors choose the year-round period is due to the fact that the different seasons during a year round have various amounts of tourists. Basically, the level of hotel occupancy is higher during the festive seasons than normal period. Another reason for using the data from year 2010 is to
acquire most updated information.

3.6.2 The Set of Measurement

When it comes to the measurement, the authors had structured the set of measurement for performing content analysis on gathered hotel guest comments. The set of measurement is composed of four major parts as following.

Firstly, the measurement for brand loyalty is set to measure the customers’ attachment to a brand. Once hotel guest comments reveal or imply the statement about returning back for next visit, satisfaction for the visit, recommendation to others, being regular visits, and the first choice of hotel to select. Those comments are counted and categorized into brand loyalty.

Secondly, the measurement for brand awareness is set to reflect the customers’ familiarity with the brand by showing their ability to recognize and recall the brand. The statements that can imply to their aware of brand name are about the recognition to the hotel, having heard about the brand before, the first choice in customers’ mind when think of this product category. Those comments within this area are categorized to brand awareness.

Thirdly, the measurement of perceived quality is set to measure the overall quality of the service or the brand they perceived and judged. The statements that can imply to perceived quality are about the level of satisfaction on hotel facility, service staff, service quality, food quality, room quality, physically location, and the value of money. Those comments within the mentioned area are counted and categorized to perceived quality.

Lastly, the measurement of brand association is set to measure the brand characteristics that customers perceived and stored in their memory. Then, the customers link those characteristics or images to the brand. Therefore, the statements that can imply to brand association are about the brand image they perceived such as being luxury and excellence service. The comments in the mentioned area are categorized to brand association.

However, it is also worth to notify that during the content analysis stage, each comment can possibly be identified to many categories and subcategories depending on the important key message within the comment. For example, there are two statements within a comment that can categorize to brand loyalty and perceived quality. Therefore, one statement will be counted for brand loyalty and another will be counted for perceived quality.
3.7 Validity and Reliability of Measurement

In connection to the validity of measurement concept, Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 165) state “validity refers to the issue of whether or not an indicator (or set of indicators) that is devised to gauge a concept really measures that concept”. For this research, the authors apply the construct validity to the concept of brand equity. However, the brand equity concept is considered too abstract to observe the behaviors. Therefore, the authors have to firstly express those concepts in the form of observable behaviors and measure it with the proposed measurements respectively. By referring to the set of measurement described in earlier section, the authors express what kind of messages is suitable to allocate to which categories and subcategories. This practice is supported by Krippendorff (2004, p. 315) who admits that some of the concepts are too abstract and cannot be directly observed.

Regarding the reliability of measurement, it refers to the measurement concept used in the research has to be stable. In other words, the consistency of a measurement concept has to take into the researcher account (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 731). For this research, the authors decide to adopt the inter-rater reliability techniques when performing content analysis according to the recommendation of Bryman & Bell (2007, p. 163) and Fisher (2004, p. 158). Since the content analysis which is the key method of this research paper is purely done based on the judgment of researcher and it is possible that it might be the lack of consistency in the researcher’s decision. Therefore, the inter-rater or inter-coder reliability technique refers to the practice that the authors have to ask several persons to help allocating some of hotel guest’s comments to particular category once the authors cannot confidently and precisely make the judgment.
4. Empirical Findings

4.1 The Summary of Brand Equity Finding Results

The finding result in this section gives the overview on the different proportion of brand equity. As mentioned earlier in the set of measurement section, each comment can possibly be identified to many categories and subcategories depending on the important key message within the comment.

Referring to figure 2, perceived quality dominates the highest number of 2,342 statements. Then, brand loyalty is the second highest with the total number of 642 statements. Brand awareness is at 84 statements. The least mention by hotel guests is the brand association at 31 statements.

![Figure 2: The Finding Result of Brand Equity Divided by Four Components](image-url)

Source: Own illustration
From the summary of total comments dominated for each component, it can be summarized into percentage proportion as illustrated in figure 3. Perceived quality is the most significant aspects that hotel guests mostly mention with 74%. Brand loyalty is the second aspect that shows the high percentage at 22%. The following aspect is brand awareness at 3%. The least aspect that hotel guests mention about is brand association with accounted for only 1%.

4.2 The Finding Result of Each Brand Equity Component

As mentioned earlier that within the set of measurement, there are four major categories and each category is consisted of subcategories (see also Appendix 2). For the result of each brand equity component, the finding detail describes as following.

4.2.1 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is the first component in the set of brand equity measurement. Within the brand loyalty, the authors divide brand loyalty category into five subcategories which are returning next visit, satisfaction the visit, recommendation to others, first choice to pick, and returning guest. However, the finding result shows the various proportions of each brand loyalty subcategory and the number of statements dominated for each subcategory is shown in figure 4.
The finding results from 642 hotels guest comments interpretation reveals that satisfaction the stay is considered the most significant aspect with accounted for 37%. The following aspect of brand loyalty from customer expression are recommendation to others with 22%, returning next visit with 18%, returning guest 16%, and first choice to pick with 7% respectively.

First of all, returning next visit is the first subcategory of brand loyalty. The comments that reflect or show the statement of planning to visit or accommodate the hotel in the future are counted into this category. The example of returning next visit’s statements is as following: “Right now I am planning to stay there in April for a short and wonderful vacation”, “Should we
go back to Bangkok we would definitely stay here again”, and “I am only a short while back home and I have already booked my next stay”.

Secondly, satisfaction the visit is the next one. The comments that represent the positive feedback or positive statement about the hotel stay are calculated into this component. The example of satisfaction the visit’s statements is as following: “Peninsula made sure that we had an unforgettable experience from the time of check-in to the minute we left Bangkok. This was absolutely the best city hotel we’ve ever stayed in”, “Everything at this hotel is impeccable and gorgeous, from the lobby to the pool, to the restaurant on the river”, and “A fantastic hotel! From the moment we were greeted till the time we left, we experienced nothing but excellence”.

Thirdly, recommendation to others is the third category of brand loyalty. The comments that indicate or state the recommendation of the hotel to other potential guest are added into this category. The example of recommendation to others’ statement is shown as following sentences: “I would highly recommend The Four Seasons for a breakaway from the real world”, “One of the best hotels in the world. I encourage everyone to visit. If it’s too expensive, save your money and come when you can”, “I strongly recommend this hotel to anyone who wants a local feel and who isn’t looking for anything too pretentious”, and “If you plan on going to Bangkok, don’t hesitate to book a room at this hotel. I’d recommend a room with a view over the river. You won’t be sorry”.

Fourthly, first choice to pick is the next brand loyalty’s category. The comments that imply the statement of the hotel as the first choice for customers to select the hotel are identified into this category. The example of statement for this category is presented as following: “This is the only hotel to stay at in Bangkok”, “We would not want to stay anywhere else but the Four Seasons if we returned to Bangkok”, “But to resume, this is the only hotel where I want to stay in Bangkok…”, and “We did enjoy it a lot and we might go back on Spring and without a doubt will use the same hotel”.

Finally, returning guest is the last brand loyalty’s category. The comments that state their returning to the hotel property or visiting the hotel on the regular basis are counted into returning guest category. The example of returning guest’s statement is illustrated as following sentences: “I have stayed at the Mandarin Oriental Bangkok many times over the last three years...”, “I have stayed at the Sheraton many times over the last several years and it is always a pleasure”, and “I love the Peninsular and have just come back from our 6th visit”.
4.2.2 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is the second component in the set of brand equity measurement. Within the brand loyalty, the authors divide brand awareness into three subcategories which are brand as first choice in customer’s mind, hotel recognition, and having heard about the brand.

For the finding result of brand awareness, the figure 5 demonstrates the different proportion of each subcategory. The comment regarding having heard about the brand has the highest number which is 49 statements, and followed by hotel recognition at 28 statements. The lowest number of comments dominating for brand awareness is brand as first choice in customer’s mind which is at 7 statements.

![Figure 5: The Finding Result of Brand Awareness Divided into Subcategories](source)

Table 2: The Finding Result of Brand Awareness by Percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Awareness</th>
<th>Number of Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand as first choice in customer’s mind in hotel category</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel recognition</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having heard about the brand</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The Finding Result of Brand Awareness by Percentage

Source: Own illustration
From the interpretation of finding result in above table, it presents the proportion of three subcategories with the percentage. Having heard about the brand is considered the most significant aspects with accounted for 58%. The following aspects of brand awareness from customer expression are hotel recognition with 34%, and brand as first choice in customer’s mind with 8% respectively.

First of all, brand as first choice in customer’s mind is the first subcategory of brand awareness. The comments that reflect or show the statement of customers’ favor of the brand as the first choice in their minds are counted into this category. The example of statements for this subcategory is presented as following sentences: “I had always wanted to stay at the Mandarin Oriental”, “Having stayed at 5-Star properties around the world, I must admit that I truly like the Four Seasons”, and “We are planning a trip to Hong Kong and will most definitely be checking in to the Peninsula!”.

Secondly, hotel recognition is the next brand awareness’s subcategory. The comments that represent the previous knowledge about the hotel such as the reputation are calculated into this component. The example of hotel recognition’s statement is illustrated as following: “We wanted to stay not only for convenience, but because of the legendary service that is associated with this hotel”, “The Peninsula Bangkok had frequently been voted one of the best hotels in the world, and it’s easy to see why…”, and “Hotel otherwise was nice, elegant and friendly although obviously not to the standard it must have been famous in the past”.

Lastly, having heard about the brand is the third category of brand awareness. The comments that indicate or state the notification about the hotel brand such as mention the same brand with different destinations or properties are added into this category. The example of having heard about the brand’ statement is shown as following: “I had heard so much about the Oriental and my expectations were fulfilled”, “It needs a major facelift if it is to justify its prices - -it certainly downgrades the Four Seasons brand”, “…I can’t believe this is Starwood luxury collection hotel…and I love my Starwood hotels”, and “This is the best Mandarin hotel in Asia Pacific”.

4.2.3 Perceived Quality

Perceive quality is the third component in the set of brand equity measurement. The authors divide perceived quality category into seven subcategories which are hotel facility, staff
service quality, service quality, food quality, room quality, physical location, and value of money. However, the proportion of each subcategory is various and the number of statements dominated for each subcategory is illustrated in figure 6.

![Figure 6: The Finding Result of Perceive Quality Divided into Subcategories](image)

Source: Own illustration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Quality</th>
<th>Number of Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotel facility</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff service quality</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service quality</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food quality</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room quality</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical location</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of money</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: The Finding Result of Perceive Quality by Percentage

Source: Own illustration

The finding results from 642 hotels guest comments interpretation reveals that room quality is considered the most significant aspect accounted for 18%. The following aspects of perceived quality from customer expression are hotel facility and staff service quality with 16%,
service quality and food quality with 15%, physical location with 13%, and value of money with 7% respectively.

Hotel facility is the first subcategory of perceived quality. The comments that reflect or show the statement in regard to any hotel facilities, such as swimming pool, internet, gym, business center, and so on, are counted into this category. The example of hotel facility’s statements is presented as following: “Everywhere is free wireless internet, which is great”, “The roof side pool is fairly small and the offerings at the executive club are fairly limited”, “The hotel boat ride there is short, very frequent and pretty much on demand”, and “Business center was awfully expensive compared with anywhere else and swimming pool was OK”.

Secondly, staff service quality is the next one. The comments that relate to staff in any aspects, such as interaction with guest, friendliness, service performance, guest recognition, and the impressive on staff service, are calculated into this component. The example of staff service quality’s statement is illustrated as following: “Our first impression was how polite and professional the staffs were”, “The Peninsula Bangkok staff needs to more strictly enforce the hotel rules and also not lower rates to the point of attracting poor mannered guests”, “The check-in staff were very unfriendly and gave us the impression that we should be happy to being ‘allowed’ to stay in the hotel”, and “The Golden Keys Concierge Atiphol. Atiphol is amazingly knowledgeable, pro-active, very warm and approachable”.

Thirdly, service quality is the third category of perceive quality. The comments that indicate or state about the hotel overall service, such as impeccable service, slow service, having wait for the long queue, and special attention to particular guest for special occasion, are added into this category. The example of guests’ perception on quality statement is shown as following sentences: “Since it was our honeymoon, the hotel gave us champagne and chocolates, which was a really nice touch”, “The check-in process was overall pretty slow”, “The service throughout the hotel is exemplary”, and “The service is impeccable and efficient”.

Fourthly, food quality is the next perceive quality’s category. The comments that imply the statement about the quality of hotel food, such as the variety of selection, the freshness of food, and the taste, are identified into this category. The example of statement for this category is presented as following: “The food was great; breakfast selections were abundant (the eggs Benedict were scrumptious)”, “Meals were carefully prepared and presented, and the Nicoise
salad was the best I’ve had anywhere, France included”, “There is a great menu throughout the hotel and everything is delicious”, and “The food variety and quality was fantastic”.

In addition, room quality is another category of the perceive quality. The comments that state their concern about the room quality, such as the room size, the decoration, the room view, the room amenity, and the bathroom, are counted into this category. The example of room quality statement is illustrated as following sentences: “The room amenities were very comfortable and also spotless and clean”, “Walls are thin and I can hear plumbing at night”, “The room are plush, homey and romantic and it was really nice to have a separate area to keep our luggage so it didn’t clutter up the room”, and “The rooms were spacious, with nice classic furniture, separate bath and shower”.

Next, the physical location is considered as one of perceive quality's category. The comments on the statement about the hotel location, such as the convenient access to the city center and tourist attraction, are identified into this category. The example of statement for this category is presented as following: “The hotel is in the center of the city along with a very dense cluster of other hotels”, “Sukhothai is really a great property, not only is it located near Silom (skytrain a few minutes away) but the hotel is surrounded by a garden which gives you a very quiet feeling”, “Location is the most central in Bangkok, with countless shopping opportunities within walking distance, and a small but popular shrine infront”, and “Skytrain station is right in front and connected to the hotel”.

Lastly, value of money is the seventh category of perceive quality. The comments that indicate or state the notification about the value of money spending at the hotel, such as the comparison between the price they paid and the service they received, are added into this category. The example of value of money statement is shown as following sentences: “Everything here is expensive. Definitely the most expensive hotel I’ve ever stayed at but it’s worth every penny”, “There are much better rooms available for much lower prices in Bangkok”, “Terribly expensive, but it does deliver an exceptional experience”, and “Pricey, but well worth the money”.

4.2.4 Brand Association

The last component is brand association. The comments that state about brand image or the image of the hotel they perceive while they stay at the hotel are categorized to this
component. The example of comments dominating for brand association is as following: “Elegance, high living, sophistication and class - Sheraton is all these and much more.”, “It may not be the newest hotel, but it has character, charm, and impeccable service, and that to me, is worth much more”, “...but I am missing the charm and even the grandness of what its name implies”, “If you are looking to be pampered with over the top service and luxury, this is the place to go”, “There is an elegance that comes with this hotel well deserved”, and “What can we say – the Oriental is the Oriental – perfection and elegance”.

Regarding the finding result of brand association, the authors did not divide brand association into subcategories like other components. Therefore, the finding for brand association is presented in the total number of statements instead of chart and percentage form as in previous section. The comments related to brand association is accounted for 31 statements. In other words, the proportion of brand association is only accounted for 1% from the total 642 comments.
5. Analysis

5.1 The Discussion on Brand Equity of Five Stars Hotels in Thailand

The summary of finding result in chapter 4 illustrates the proportion of each component on brand equity to which the hotel guests most likely pay an attention to. Therefore, the discussion is based on the results of brand equity’s previous study discussed earlier in literature review section and the result from the empirical finding. In addition, the authors specifically discuss about each element of brand equity in more details.

5.1.1 Brand Loyalty

According to the finding result, brand loyalty is the second significant aspect which is accounted for 22% of the total comments. It is considered to be one of the key important of brand equity which this result is also in congruence with the previous study of Kim et al. (2003). Although Kim et al.’s study is focusing on the advantage of brand equity toward hotel’s financial performance; its conclusion admits that brand loyalty is one of an important element for the hotel’s success. However, the study result is in contrast to the conclusion of Xu and Chan (2010) that emphasize brand loyalty as the most significant aspect of all four brand equity components.

However, most of the comments on brand loyalty states about the satisfaction hotel stay with 37% (see also table 1) which is considered one of consumer behavior reaction after experiencing the product or service, according to Evans et al. (2010). The satisfaction ranks highest proportion because it is the primary stage of becoming loyalty to the brand. Once the customer satisfaction exists or the guest’s expectation exceeds, the recommendation to others and the repurchasing in the future will follow respectively. Referring to the finding result, most of the satisfied guest’s stays are probably take another step to recommend the hotel to other potential guests based on the delighted experience with 22% of total brand loyalty comments. In addition to the recommendation to others, Aaker (1996) and Vatjanasaregagul (2007) stated that the level of satisfaction relates to the customer’s willingness to stick to the particular brand. Their statements are in accordance with the finding result which devotes 18% of total brand loyalty indicating the willingness to return to the hotels with previous good experience.

Moreover, some authors suggest that only satisfaction is not strong enough to keep the customer loyalty but the delighting. According to Torres and Kline (2006), the example practices that the hotel should pay an attention to reach the guest’s emotion of delighting such as having
the adequate facility and well-trained employees. However, the authors agree with the practices but it has to come along with the improvement of hotel brand’s perceived quality because having adequate facility and well-trained staffs are considered a part of perceived quality. This is also in accordance with Tepeci (1999) that states the factors contribute to brand loyalty are composed of perceived quality as well.

Therefore, it is also important to ensure that every guest stays end up with the memorable and pleasant experience. According to the study of Söderlund (1998) that states that the negative bias has stronger influence than the positive bias. For example, if the guests feel or leave the hotel properties with such an unpleasant feeling, they will be more likely spread the negative expression by personal connection of word-of-mouth or by online community. This is supported by the empirical findings as the finding from hotel guest’s comments on Trip Advisor website finds both positive and negative comments.

In brief, the important aspect of brand loyalty that the hotels should take into consideration on exploiting the advantage of brand equity is to ensure every guest’s stay meet or exceed expectation so as to keep the customers with the brand and to costless promote the brand via customers’ word of mouth.

Based on the above analysis on brand loyalty of five stars hotel in Thailand, the authors proposes the following hypothesis: “There is significant relationship between brand loyalty and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation”.

5.1.2 Brand Awareness

In connection with the finding result with 3% in total brand equity, brand awareness is not considered to be the important element of brand equity. The outcome shows the less importance of brand awareness in comparison to other brand equity’s elements is also in accordance with the previous study of Kayaman & Arasli (2007) on customer based brand equity’s from hotel industry.

Although brand awareness is not the significant aspect based on the finding result, it is also worth to discuss. Most of the comments on brand awareness states about having heard about the brand for 58% which is considered the interesting point. The high proportion of having heard about the brand raises the awareness that most of five stars hotels in Thailand are international hotel chains. It is probably true that the customers might potentially notice the same brand in
their own countries. Therefore, the brand recognition from hotels guest comments is relatively high.

In addition, some of the comments also mention about the hotel recognition with accounted for 34%. When the authors carefully went through the message, it shows that the hotel recognition mostly relates to the previous experience with the hotel itself, the recommendation from other guests, and the research about the hotel prior to the physical stay.

In summary, the interesting point of brand awareness is the ability to exploit the familiarity of the hotel brands by using the international and famous hotel chains to enhance customers’ recognition to the brand. For hotel recognition, it is mostly based on the other elements of brand equity, such as brand loyalty. For example, guests recognize the particular hotel from own previous experience, friend referring, or own information searching prior to the physical stay.

From the above discussion on brand awareness of five stars hotel in Thailand, the authors proposes the following hypothesis: “There is no significant relationship between brand awareness and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation”.

5.1.3 Perceive Quality

According to the finding result, perceived quality is the most significant aspect which is accounted for 74% of the total comments. It is considered to be the most important element of brand equity. However, the finding result is in contrast with the previous study of Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2010). The conclusion from Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2010) rejects the importance of perceived quality on brand relationship, even though perceived quality directly relates to hotel core’s service.

When it comes to the specific details on perceived quality, most of the comments on perceived quality mentions about the room quality for 18%. The key message regarding room quality mostly concerns about the room size, the decoration, furniture, the bathroom, room view, and other room amenities. The content analysis from those comments reveals the higher expectation of room quality usually comes with five stars hotels. Once the guests are disappointed with the room, they always use metaphor as if they are in lower star rating hotel. From the content analysis, the expectation is probably high especially the guests who have experienced same hotel brand elsewhere.
Moreover, referring to the finding result, other important aspects of perceived quality are hotel facility (account for 16%) and staff service quality (account for 16%). In connection to hotel facility, the content analysis reveals the different purpose of visit has an effect on the different requirement of hotel facility. For example, the guests who indicate their stays as business trip are probably emphasized on business center or free internet connection. In contrast, the guests who devote their stays as leisure usually use other hotel facilities such as gym, swimming pool, restaurant, and spa. This research finding is supported by the study of Ramanathan and Ramanathan (2011) that states the different type of guest has different preference and perceives hotel quality in the different way.

When it comes to the staff service quality, most messages relate to staff issue pay an attention to staff performance on providing prompt service, the attention to details, guest recognition, the ability to communicate with guest through the appropriate language, and the friendliness interaction. However, both hotel facility and staff service quality are equally accounted for 16% of total comments which is in accordance with the suggestion of Narangajavana and Hu (2008) and Claver et al. (2006) that the hotel performance has to be improved both the tangible assets such as hotel facility and the intangible assets such as employee’s performance.

To sum up, the important aspects of perceived quality that hotels should take into consideration on exploiting the advantage of brand equity are to ensure that all guest rooms are in accordance with the brand standard and well-maintenance so the guests who had previous experienced with the hotel brand elsewhere cannot compare and complaint about the room. In addition, all hotel facilities are available so that it can help enhancing good experience while staying at the hotel. Furthermore, the staffs go out on their ways above and beyond making sure every guest’ needs are well taken care of. From the finding result, perceived quality is considered to be the most possible way that customers can physically and directly experience the brand among other elements of brand equity which is the same as recommendation from Kayaman & Arasli (2007). They suggest that in order to exploit brand equity especially for service industry, the right strategy should turn the intangible service to be the tangible one.

Based on the above analysis on perceived quality of five stars hotel in Thailand, the authors proposes the following hypothesis: “There is significant relationship between perceived quality and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation”.
5.1.4 Brand Association

According to the finding result with 1% of total brand equity, brand association is not considered to be the important element of brand equity. The outcome shows the least importance of brand association is in contrast to the previous study of Kim et al. (2003) on customer-based brand equity on firms’ financial performance. Kim et al. (2003) concludes that perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand image (brand association) are the essential ingredients for maximizing hotel financial performance. The explanation for the very small proportion of brand association from the finding result is probably because the authors study post-purchase evaluation. Therefore, most of guest expressions are related to what they perceive and experience during the stay which is more about the justification of overall hotel experience rather than about the brand image.

Although the brand association is not the significant elements as other elements on brand equity, it is also worth to acknowledge what is the commonality of hotel image in customers’ mind so as to ensure the hotel remains the image by adopting appropriate branding strategy. Referring to the empirical finding, most of the comments dominating for brand association relate the five stars hotel brand with the luxury image and impeccable service. This is also in accordance with West and Purvis (1992) that state the right hotel design need to be related to what, who, where, and how the customer segment is. In this case, five stars hotels provide high quality of service and elegance and comfort accommodation for customers who are willing to pay more money. Therefore, the luxury image and excellence of service are two things that customers associated with five stars hotel.

From the above discussion on brand association of five stars hotel in Thailand, the authors proposes the following hypothesis: “There is no significant relationship between brand association and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation”.

6. Conclusion

This research is probably beneficial to five stars hotels brand marketers especially in Thailand to get to know their consumers orientation toward brand equity. The finding result of this research gives the insight of hotel brand equity and customers’ expression. Based on the result of this study and the discussion from the earlier section, the authors are able to provide the answer to two research questions as following.

As the purpose of study is to examine brand equity, the first research question asks about what the characteristics of brand equity of five star luxury hotels in Bangkok are. As brand equity is composed of four major components, it is better to draw the conclusion by each component. For brand loyalty, most of the hotel guests are considered that the stage of satisfaction is the most significant practice of becoming loyalty customer. Most of the satisfied guest’s are usually take another step to recommend the hotel to other potential guests based on the delighted experience, as well as indicating the willingness to return to the hotels.

For brand awareness, most of the comments on brand awareness are about having heard about the brand and followed by the hotel recognition. The interesting point of brand awareness that five stars hotels share in common is the ability to exploit the familiarity of the hotel brands by using the international and famous hotel chains to enhance customers’ recognition to the brand. For hotel recognition, it is mostly based on the other elements of brand equity, such as brand loyalty. For example, guests recognize the particular hotel from own previous experience, from friend reference, or from own information searching prior to the physical stay.

For perceived quality, most of the comments on perceived quality mentions about the room quality. The key message regarding room quality mostly concerns about the room size, the decoration, furniture, the bathroom, room view, and other room amenities. The expectation is probably high especially for five stars hotel and the guests who have experienced same hotel brand elsewhere. Other important aspects of perceived quality are hotel facility and staff service quality. The different purpose of visit has different preference and perceives hotel quality in the different way. Most messages related to staff issues pay an attention to staff performance on providing prompt service, the attention to details, guest recognition, the ability to communicate with guest through the appropriate language, and the friendliness interaction.

For brand association, the outcome shows the very small proportion of brand association from the empirical finding is probably because the authors study post-purchase evaluation.
Therefore, most of guest expressions are related to what they perceive and experience during the stay. However, referring to the finding, most hotel guests relate five stars hotel brand with the luxury image and impeccable service.

The second research question asks about the majority concerns of all brand equity components from customer’s evaluation. From the finding result, the authors propose the research hypothesis at same time with the discussion. There is a big difference of result of four brand equity components. The authors found that perceived quality ranks the most significant result and followed by brand loyalty. As the research purpose is also to propose hypotheses of hotel brand equity for future research at the end of the research, therefore these two hypotheses propose as following: “There is significant relationship between brand loyalty and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation” and “There is significant relationship between perceived quality and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation”.

However, the least significant result dominates for brand awareness and brand association respectively. Therefore, the authors propose another two hypotheses as following: “There is no significant relationship between brand awareness and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation” and “There is no significant relationship between brand association and hotel guest’s post-purchase evaluation”. However, it is inevitable that the hotel branding strategy should also take the important of brand awareness and brand association into consideration, although the relationship of brand awareness and brand association are not significant to customer’s perception.
7. Recommendation

7.1 Practical Implication

Based on the research result that indicates the significant importance of perceived quality and brand loyalty through customer’s perception on five stars hotels in Thailand, it can be used as an implication when the hotels are considered creating or implementing the branding strategy. In other words, the hotel guest’s expressions are mostly related to perceived quality of the hotel brand. Therefore, the most appropriate branding strategy that is easier to catch customer’s attention and get into customer’s perception should concentrate and emphasize on the hotel core service attributes of perceived quality such as hotel facility, staff service, service quality, room quality, food quality, physically location, and value of money. The hotel has to come up with the uniqueness of the hotel itself that can create competitive advantage. For example, most of the hotel guests are business travelers, therefore the hotel marketer should raise the most competitive hotel attributes in accordance with these customers’ demand such as the competitive physically location for convenient transportation, the accessibility of internet connection, the fully equipped business center, and the availability of the conference or meeting room facility. This recommendation is also supported by Lewis (1989) and Narangajavana (2007) that state service providers have to firstly understand customers’ expectation and well match the hotel service with these customers’ expectation.

Regarding the importance of brand loyalty, the hotel marketer should also take an advantage of having loyalty customers in order to spread the hotel reputation and to recommend the hotel to other potential customers. In addition, keeping these loyalty customers are also an essential task for the hotel marketer. Therefore, the marketing program and hotel branding strategy have to pay an attention to this group of people as well. Although some of the five stars hotels being observed in this study did not engage with any kind of membership programs, they still have their own ways to keep tracking on their loyalty customers such as utilizing the hotel guest profiles to record the guest preferences. In this way, the hotel can categorize the guests who share the same preferences and interests within the same type of marketing communication. However, this practice of employing loyalty program and utilizing customer’s profile are also supported by Capizzi and Ferguson (2005) that it is another way to enhance customer loyalty.

In relation to the other two components of brand equity, it is also inevitable to absolutely reject the importance of brand awareness and brand association. Although the study results
reflect the very low percentage on brand awareness and brand association, apart from emphasizing on the perceived quality and brand loyalty, the branding strategy also needs to take brand awareness and brand association into consideration. For example, the branding strategy for five stars hotel emphasizes on the advantage of location in the heart of the city which is perceived quality but also has to remain on the hotel image as a luxury five stars hotel which is brand association.

7.2 Suggestion for future research

Referring to the propose hypotheses, it can be used to implement for future research. In addition, since this research is concentrated on the relationship of brand equity and post-purchase evaluation on five stars hotel in Bangkok, Thailand, the future research might continue from this research study but focusing more on the country level rather than only in Bangkok area. In addition, it might also be possible to study brand equity of hotels with the other stars rating hotel or hotels with fewer stars. Furthermore, the future research might also be able to study the relationship of hotel brand equity with other consumer decision making process such as information search and purchase and implementation process. As mentioned earlier, this study focuses on the post-purchase evaluation which is one of consumer decision making process.
Reference List


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Appendix 1: National Income of Thailand by Industrial Origins: Hotels and Restaurants

Source: Prime Minister’s Office, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Million Baht</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>284,459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>304,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>293,743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>327,256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>339,959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>378,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>408,253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>430,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>431,562</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2: The Sample of Observational Categories

Source: Own illustration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Guest Comment / person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Brand Loyalty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 statement about returning next visit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 statement about satisfaction the visit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 statement about recommendation to others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 statement about the first choice to pick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 statement about regular visit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Brand Awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 statement about brand as first choice in customer’s mind when thinking of hotel category</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 statement about hotel recognition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 statement about having heard about the brand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Perceived Quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 statement about hotel facility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 statement about staff service quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 statement about service quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 statement about food quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 statement about room quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 statement about physical location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 statement about value of money</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Brand Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 statement about brand image they perceived such as being luxury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Hotel Chain Information: 8 Selected Five Stars Hotels

Source: Own illustration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hotel</th>
<th>Hotel Chain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Mandarin Oriental Bangkok</td>
<td>Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Peninsula Hotel Bangkok</td>
<td>The Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels, Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Seasons Hotel Bangkok</td>
<td>Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Hyatt Erawan</td>
<td>Hyatt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sukhothai Hotel</td>
<td>HKR Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercontinental Hotel Bangkok</td>
<td>InterContinental Hotels Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaza Athenee Bangkok</td>
<td>Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheraton Grand Sukhumvit</td>
<td>Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firstly, Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group is an international hotel investment and management group targeting on deluxe and first class hotels, resorts and residences in desirable destination around the world. There are 41 hotels in 26 countries which now operate and are under development (Mandarin Oriental, 2011).

Secondly, Hong Kong and Shanghai Hotels, Ltd (HSH) is an investment holding company. The company business operates in form of ownership, management and operation of hotels which is the Peninsula, commercial properties, clubs and other kind of business services in Asia, USA and Europe (HSH, 2011).

Thirdly, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts is a global luxury hotel management brand. The company has grown from one hotel to 84 in 34 countries. In addition, Four Seasons also own the Private Residences, Residence Clubs and other branded residential offerings. The strength of the brand had become a promise of a quality of life with the integrated between urban and resort location (Four Seasons, 2011).

Fourthly, Hyatt is a global hospitality company. It is one of an industry leading brands with widely recognized from its fifty-year history. Hyatt business operation is to manage, franchise, own and develop Hyatt branded hotels, resorts and residential, including vacation ownership properties around the world. In March 2011, the company's worldwide portfolio is consisted of 451 properties in total (Hyatt, 2011).
Fifthly, HKR Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd. is an investment holding company which operates The Sukhothai, Bangkok and Sentosa Resort & Spa, Singapore (Bloomberg, 2011) and (The Sentosa, 2008). Even HKR Asia-Pacific is not a big company when compare to another international hotel chain. However, The Sukhothai, Bangkok is one of the famous five stars luxury hotel in Thailand.

Next, InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) is one of the international hotel companies. IHG operates in 100 countries and territories with total 4,422 hotel properties globally. The IHG well-known brands are composed of 7 hotel brands which are InterContinental, Crowne Plaza, Hotel Indigo, Holiday Inn, Holiday Inn Express, Staybridge Suites and Candlewood Suites (IHG, 2011).

Lastly, Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide is considered to be one of the world leading hotel company with 1,051 hotel properties in over 100 countries. The international well-known brands of Starwood are St. Regis, The Luxury Collection, W Hotel, Westin, Le Méridien, Sheraton, Four Points by Sheraton, Aloft, and Element (Starwood, 2011).