Conceptualising consumer-based service brand equity (CBSBE) and direct service experience in the airline sector

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ABSTRACT
The intense competition taking place in the airline sector requires a concurrently suitable branding strategy. Although contemporary brand equity models have been acknowledged and tested in the service branding context, they are not quite adaptable to the airline sector. These models are more appropriate for product-dominant brands, as they ignore the crucial roles of direct service experience and brand consistency in creating airline brand equity. Therefore, through a systematic and critical review of the literature, we propose a conceptualisation of consumer-based service brand equity (CBSBE) model by emphasising the importance of direct service experience and brand consistency that will equip airline marketing/brand managers to design effective branding strategies.

1. Introduction

Air transport service is one of the key aspects of the travel and tourism industry. With more than 4 billion travellers globally in 2017 (Statista, 2018), the airline industry is widely considered as one of the largest and growing sectors (Deloitte, 2018). During 2016, the industry contributed about 732 billion US dollars to the global GDP and triggered economic growth worldwide (IATA, 2017). However, despite this development, the industry has been facing stiff competitive challenges which are prompting consolidations/mergers or even shut downs (Hussain, 2016; Wang, 2014). Accordingly, these scenarios signal the need for airline companies to rethink their strategies in order to gain competitive advantage and secure stronger brand positions (Adapa & Roy, 2017). In the services marketing literature, branding has been acknowledged to account for a great number of successes of service organisations (Berry, 2000; Jara & Cliquet, 2012; McDonald, de Chernatony, & Harris, 2001). Moreover, successful brands survive amidst the competition, gain long-term financial stability, and ensure consumer trust (Jeng, 2016). Therefore, implementing an effective branding strategy is imperative for airline marketers to withstand the intense competition.

As extant literature shows that consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) models are narrowly focused on brand equity constructs while ignoring the service experience components, their adaptability to the context of service-dominant brands becomes questionable (Çifci et al., 2016). Berry (2016) remarks that the intangible nature of services is the main hurdle of branding and it should undergo more research to refine the CBBE model for services. He further emphasises that direct experience with the services is the dominant aspect of building a service brand which differs from branding a product. Hence, there is reason to believe that the existing brand equity models are not quite suitable for a services context like airline. The need for a proper conceptualisation of CBBE model in the airline industry is also evident in Chen and Tseng (2010), Chen and Chang (2008) and Uslu, Durmuş, and Kolivar (2013). They note that despite managerial efforts to measure airline brand equity in practice, a widely accepted CBBE model for airline service in particular is still sparse. Although they developed a brand equity model for airline, their approach offers little guidance for practitioners. There is no clear mention of how the components of airline service experience affect airline brand awareness, brand image, and perceived quality. Rather, their research only suggests how airline brand equity can be created through brand equity constructs.

Previous literature also acknowledged that contemporary studies on airline service are more about passenger travel satisfaction/disatisfaction, service quality (Bubalo & Gaggero, 2015; Chen, 2008; Han & Hwang, 2017; Hussain, 2016; Kefallonitis, 2015; Lim & Tkaczynski, 2017; Park, Robertson, & Wu, 2006; Percin, 2018), airline brand credibility, brand image, and/or brand personality (Cervera-Taulet, Schlesinger, & Yagüe-Guillen, 2013; Dirsehan & Kurtuluş, 2018; Jeng, 2016; Kotsi & Slak Valek, 2017), brand loyalty (Dolnicar, Grabler, Grün, & Kulnič, 2011; Hwang & Hyun, 2017; Mikulić, Šerić, & Matas Milković, 2017), airline alliances (Casanueva, Gallego, Castro, &
Sancho, 2014; Chen & Ren, 2007; Douglas & Tan, 2017), and low-cost airline service (Akamavi, Mohamed, Pellmann, & Xu, 2015; Coles, Fenclova, & Dinan, 2011; Graham, 2013; Morrison & Mason, 2016; Soyk, Ringbeck, & Spinler, 2018). Although three studies are relevant to airline brand (see Chen & Chang, 2008; Chen & Tseng, 2010; Uslu et al., 2013), they seem to ignore the importance of direct service experience in their models. For instance, Chen and Chang (2008) indicate the effect of brand equity on brand preference and purchase intention while Chen and Tseng (2010) and Uslu et al. (2013) adapt Aaker’s brand equity constructs and conceptualise the relationships based on Konečnik and Gartner (2007). However, the effect of service experience touchpoints on brand equity constructs are ignored. In other words, it can be argued that the need to develop a more adaptable consumer-based service brand equity model for airline is largely disregarded. Therefore, there is a need for a systematic and critical review of the literature to demonstrate the extent to which current brand equity models are adaptable to service branding. This preliminary study aims at mitigating these gaps by conceptualising a consumer-based service brand equity (CBSBE) model that would be adaptable to airline service.

2. Approach to select the publications

To fulfil our objective of conceptualising a CBSBE model for airline, we undertook a critical literature review approach and selection of articles in Baron, Warnaby, and Hunter-Jones (2014). All publications related to CBBE in the area of general marketing and services marketing were identified from Web of Science (WoS), Science Direct, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar being the most popular academic databases and online search engines (Babalis & Law, 2008). Our search in the area of Business Management, Economics, and Social Science began in September 2017. In order to derive all the possible materials to review, we intentionally did not specify any year of publication. As a result, articles, conference papers and books related to CBBE and branding of airline service were critically reviewed. Although the conceptual notion of creating a brand does not vary much between a product and a service, both still differ in terms of strategy execution (Giffi et al., 2016; de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999). Hence, we followed the keywords that were commonly mentioned in brand equity related publications. Table 1 outlines the search results of words mentioned in the title, abstract, and keywords of the databases. Although our results were grouped based on different keywords and databases, a substantial amount of articles overlapped between the keywords as well as between the databases. The majority of the articles were published with the keywords: “Brand equity”, “Service branding”, “Branding services”, “Customer-based brand equity”, “CBBE”, whereas the total number of publications specific to “Customer-based brand equity model” “Service branding model, and/or “Branding airline service” were very few. As our study focuses on conceptualising a service brand equity model for airline, we only examined publications addressing this theme.

After four weeks of search, we initially identified 163 articles/publications relevant to our study scope. During this process, we reviewed the title, abstract and contribution of the publications, and checked the ranking of the journals against the list in WoS, Scopus, the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), and Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) (Gómez, Pratt, & Molina, 2018) as well as the Chartered Association of Business Schools (Chartered ABS) UK (Tadajewski, 2016). Based on this initial screening, we retained 66 publications found to be relevant. Ninety-seven other publications were discarded as they were not listed in the mentioned indexed databases and/or duplication. The 66 publications were then grouped into three categories, namely: 1) conceptualisation of CBBE, 2) operationalisation and application of CBBE model, and 3) airline service branding model. In order to ensure that the selected publications represent our study scope and objective, all information was independently reviewed by the authors, and a consensus was reached to confirm the three categorisations (Kim & Law, 2015).

From the 66 articles, eight were found to conceptualise the CBBE model (i.e., Aaker (1991, 1996); Berry (2000); Blackston (1992); Burmann, Jost-Benz, and Riley (2009); de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998); Kapferer (2008); Keller (1993); Sharp (1996)). Among these publications, the models of Aaker and Keller were found to be the most referenced. Other publications, with an exception of Berry’s, were not considered as they conceptualise brand equity either as a combination of firm and customer-based or a relationship equity. For example, de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998) and Kapferer (2008) conceptualise brand equity model as the integration of firm and customer-based, while others focus on relationship equity. Furthermore, their definition of brand equity differs from that of Aaker, Keller, and Berry. Aaker (1991) defines CBBE as a set of assets and liability associated with the brand, whereas both Keller (1993) and Berry (2000) define CBBE as the differential effect of consumer response. These definitions of brand equity are widely accepted when conceptualised from a consumer perspective. Hence, of the eight publications, five were discarded.

Focusing more on branding services, it is worth indicating here that the service branding model was conceptualised by Berry (2000) and is consistently the most cited related work. However, from the 58 remaining articles, Cifi et al.’s (2016) CBBE model emerged in this process because the authors argued that their model is adaptable to service brands, hence was included in our consideration. In another vein, Chen and Tseng (2010) and Uslu et al. (2013) developed a brand equity model for airline. However, they adopted the same constructs as Aaker’s; therefore, these articles were not considered separately. Brodie, Whittome, and Brush (2009) also examined service brand, however, they developed the model based on customer value perspective only. The other 54 articles were kept aside as they either operationalise the existing models or validate the relationships among the CBBE constructs. For example, Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000), Šerić, Gil-Saura, and Mikulić (2016a), Šerić, Mikulić, and Gil-Saura (2016b), and Christodoulides, Cadogan, and Veloutsou (2015) operationalised the CBBE model based on the conceptualisation of Aaker or Keller. Table 2 contains a summary of 56 publications that have adopted one or more of the five CBBE constructs namely: brand awareness, brand association, brand image, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity across different products and services. Here, overall brand equity is considered as a dependent variable that determines behavioural response toward a brand. Although a few studies (i.e., Atilgan, Akinci, Aksoy, & Kaynak, 2009; Šerić et al., 2016a; Šerić et al., 2016b) have introduced a variable called brand trust, it is, in fact, a dominant perception of a brand that signifies the brand meaning/image (García, Gómez, & Molina, 2012). Therefore, those studies that mentioned brand trust as a CBBE construct were also considered as similar to Aaker’s or Keller’s CBBE model.

As a result, we identified four publications related to our study objective from top-ranked journals listed in WoS (see Table 3). Therefore, we accounted for these publications only and analysed the critical aspects of the existing CBBE models while conceptualising a CBSBE model for airline service. Fig. 1 outlines the flowchart of publication.
Table 2
Operationalisation of existing CBBE model across products and services context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Awareness/Brand Association/Brand Image/Brand Loyalty/Overall Brand Equity</td>
<td>Retail/Company</td>
<td>Arnett, Laverie, and Mei once (2003); Asamoah (2014); Atilgan et al. (2009); Davis, Golicic, and Marquardt (2009); El Hedhili and Chebat (2009); Girard, Trapp, Pinar, Gulsony, and Boyt (2017); Ha, Janda, and Muthaly (2010); Jara and Cluet (2013); Juntunen, Juntunen, and Juga (2011); Kim, Kim, and Jeong (2005); Kajh and Ozseri (2006); Wang, Hsu, and Fang (2009); Chang and Liu (2009); Christodoulides et al. (2015); Krishnan and Hartline (2001); Liu, Liu, and Lin (2015); Pinar, Girard, Trapp, and Eser (2016); Tsai, Lo, and Cheung (2013); Berry (2000); Krystallis &amp; Chrysochou, 2014; Nysveen, Pedersen, &amp; Skard, 2013).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecom/Financial Service/Service/Museum/Internet brands/Casino/Movie theatre</td>
<td>Hotel/Tourism channels</td>
<td>Bailey and Ball (2006); Bian and Liu (2011); Cobb-Walgren, Robb, and Donthu (1995); Hsu, Hung, and Tang (2012); Kayaman and Aradi (2007); Kim and Kim (2005); Kim, Jin-Sun, and Kim (2008); Sierie et al. (2016a); Sierie et al. (2016b); Shen, Yuan, Zhang, and Zhao (2014); Woodward (2000); Xu and Chan (2010); Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt (2005); Bodet and Chavavi (2010); Bianchi, Pike, and Lings (2014); Boo, Busser, and Baloglu (2009); Im, Kim, Elliot, and Han (2012); Pike and Bianchi (2016); San Martin, Herrero, and Garcia de los Salones (2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports team</td>
<td>Destination</td>
<td>Fischer and Lilonge (2014); Boo, Busser, and Baloglu (2009); Im, Kim, Elliot, and Han (2012); Pike and Bianchi (2016); San Martin, Herrero, and Garcia de los Salones (2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports team</td>
<td>Sports team</td>
<td>Buil, de Chernatony, and Martinez (2008); Buil, Martinez, and de Chernatony (2013a); Eda, Safak, and Serkan (2005); Jung and Sung (2008); Lassar, Mittal, and Sharma (1995); Lee, Lee, and Wu (2011); Oliveira-Castro et al. (2008); Pappo, Quenter, and Cooksey (2005, 2006); Tong and Hawley (2009); Vukasovic (2016); Wang and Finn (2014); Washburn and Plank (2002); Yoo and Donthu (2001); Yoo et al. (2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare/Hospital service</td>
<td>Airline brand equity</td>
<td>Chahal and Bala (2010); Wang, Hsu, Hsu, and Hsieh (2011); Chen and Tseng (2010); Uzo et al. (2013).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Discussion and analysis

3.1. Operationalisation of existing CBBE models in the service context

There are several CBBE models in the marketing literature that have been developed to explain how consumers evaluate and behave toward brands (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Aaker & Keller, 1990; Berry, 2000; Blackston, 1992; Burmann et al., 2009; de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 1993; Sharp, 1996). Among others, Aaker’s (1991) and Keller’s (1993) conceptualisations are the most referenced and operationalised (Bull et al., 2013a; Christodoulides et al., 2015; Çifci et al., 2016). Although these models are operationalised in both products and services contexts, the service experience components are absent with regard to service-dominant brands. Scholars also support the operationalisation of these two models to be more appropriate for product/goods-dominant brands (Christodoulides et al., 2015; Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014; Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, 2013). Hence, these may not be suitable or applicable directly to service-dominant brands like airline service.

3.1.1. Aaker’s (1991) CBBE model

Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol (Aaker, 1991). Aaker conceptualises five dimensions of CBBE, namely: a) brand loyalty, b) perceived quality, c) brand associations, d) brand awareness, and e) other proprietary brand assets (comprising patents, trademarks, and channel relationships). Yoo and Donthu (2001) later operationalised these dimensions through a consumer survey and substantiated CBBE as the perceptual and behavioural aspect of a brand. For this reason, the fifth dimension (i.e. other proprietary brand assets) in Aaker is not relevant to consumer aspect of brand equity (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). They also suggest another construct in the model called overall brand equity (OBE) which in the end comprises of: (a) brand loyalty, (b) perceived quality, (c) brand awareness/associations, and (d) overall brand equity. However, Yoo and Donthu’s (2001) measures have two major limitations. Firstly, the conceptualisation of brand awareness/associations as a unidimensional measure fails to achieve the discriminant validity between awareness and association (Washburn & Plank, 2002; Çifci et al., 2016). Secondly, the measures (or items) in brand loyalty and overall brand equity seem alike since both explain the consumer’s intended action toward the brand (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). The authors also argue that the items which are loaded in brand loyalty and overall brand equity are the same, hence should be considered as one construct. Additionally, loyalty is the outcome of consumer response through time and frequency of purchase and/or commitment, and preferences toward the brand (Oliver, 1999). Chen and Tseng (2010) further explain that the first three components of CBBE (awareness, association, and quality) are conceptualised as perceptual components of brand equity which influence brand loyalty as a behavioural domain. Few studies have also proven it as the behavioural outcome of a successful brand (Adam, Susan, & Donna, 2011; Na, Marshall, & Keller, 1999).

3.1.2. Keller’s (1993) CBBE model

Keller (1993) defines brand equity as how customers react and

**Table 3**
The authors’ number of citation, type of publication, name of journal, and ranking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>No. of Citation</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Ranking (WoS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keller (1993)</td>
<td>15,887</td>
<td>Conceptualisation of the model</td>
<td>Journal of Marketing</td>
<td>Q1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaker (1991)</td>
<td>14,050</td>
<td>Conceptualisation of the model</td>
<td>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</td>
<td>Q1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berry (2000)</td>
<td>2214</td>
<td>Conceptualisation of the model</td>
<td>Journal of Business Research</td>
<td>Q1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Çifci et al. (2016)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Conceptualisation and validation of the model</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Aaker (1991) is a book publication.

Based on the Web of Science citation index, journals are ranked according to Q1, Q2, Q3, & Q4 in each discipline such as Science, Social Science etc. Q1 refers to the top-ranked journals in the Social Science category.
differentiate their response to the different marketing mix elements of the named and unnamed versions of products or services. He proposes two dimensions that affect brand equity: a) brand awareness, and b) brand image. Furthermore, Keller (1993) deconstructed CBBE as associative network memory model that consists of nodes and its connecting links, in which nodes represent stored information or concepts, while links represent the strength of association between the nodes. Nodes help to retain information from memory which is strongly associated with other internal information. Thus, the consumer's understanding of the marketing efforts (as nodes) is vital to elicit positive response toward that brand. Based on this conceptualisation, Keller explains that brand equity arises when consumers are aware of the brand and hold some favourable, strong, and unique brand associations in their memory. However, the linear relationship between the CBBE constructs might fail to explain the causal complexity of brand equity phenomenon. Chatzipanagiotou, Veloutsou, and Christodoulides (2016) commented that Keller's brand equity model leans towards distinctive and static explanation of relevant interrelationship among the constructs. Thus, it ignores the causal complication, asymmetry and multiple pathways that define CBBE.

Furthermore, both models (Aaker's & Keller's) ignore the effect of various touchpoints to the brand equity constructs. It is evident that consumer's understanding, feelings, and perception of the brand arise when they come across various experience points (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). For example, passengers experience the airline service when they come across various stimuli such as airline ticket booking, airport service, in-flight services (i.e., food, basic amenities, entertainment, atmosphere, physical layout of airline cabin, cleanliness), employee interactions throughout the journey, website information, price and deals etc. These are also regarded as the airline service attributes offered to the customers by airline companies (Chen, Peng, & Hackley, 2008; Kim, Kim, & Hyun, 2016; Mikulić & Prebežac, 2011). Yet, previous research operationalises the interrelationship of brand equity models only between the equity constructs and overall brand equity. Consumer aspects of experiences such as purchase decision, delivery process, employee service, consumption etc., are not included in existing CBBE models, and thus are not generalisable across the services context.

3.1.3. Berry (2000) service branding model

The service branding model by Berry (2000) is well suited for branding of services and/or service brands with regards to Vargo and Lusch's (2004) Service-Dominant Logic (S-DL) perspective (Brodie, 2009; Brodie, Glynn, & Little, 2006). S-DL philosophy involves reorienting the definition of services as the outcome of value co-creating activities of both providers and beneficiaries, and is relevant to any kinds of market offerings including tangible products. Vargo and Lusch (2004) explain "services as the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself" (p. 2). Hence, the core benefits derived from the value co-creation activities (market offering and consumption experience) are services applicable not only to intangible outputs (service), but also tangible goods. The S-DL's view of branding also explicates a collaborative, value co-creation activities of all the stakeholders in the entire marketing system.

In this model, Berry (2000) explains that brand awareness and brand meaning disproportionately influence brand equity despite the variation between product and service brands. These service brand equity components (brand awareness and brand meaning) and brand equity are similar to the Keller's (1993) model. "Brand awareness refers to the consumer's ability to recognise and recall a brand" whereas brand meaning is defined as "the customer's dominant perceptions of the brand. It is the customer's snapshot impression of the brand and its associations" (Berry, 2000, p. 129). Brand equity is also defined as the response variable, which is the outcome of brand equity components (Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993). Berry also proposes three additional service brand dimensions, such as consumer direct experience with service brand, presented brand (namely visual stimuli like name, terms, and packaging in advertisements), and uncontrolled communication by publicity and word-of-mouth communication with other consumers. He further notes that consumer experience with the service is the primary determinant of brand meaning. Besides, tangible and intangible stimuli during service consumption contribute more to create brand meaning for the experienced consumers. In a similar vein, communication plays the most influential role to the new consumers who have little or no direct service consumption experience to form their opinion. Further, it plays a secondary role to create the brand meaning to them, since presented brand through controlled communication (advertising, promotions) and uncontrolled communication (publicity and word-of-mouth communication) are the only evidence of what the service stands for (Berry, 2000).

Nonetheless, the interrelationship among the constructs of this model was not empirically tested. Although some studies have tested the inter-construct relationships by only modelling the presented brand construct with other brand equity components with quantitative data (see García et al., 2012; So & King, 2010), scholars argue that existing service branding models require extensive empirical testing (Kim & Kim, 2005; Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014; Pinar et al., 2016). Thus, the validation of a consumer-based
service brand equity model is still at its infancy stage.

3.1.4. Çifci et al.'s (2016) validation of CBBE model for service brands

Regarding the validation of a CBBE model for service brands, Çifci et al.'s (2016) effort of adding brand awareness to Nam, Ekinci, and Whyatt's (2011) model is not without some drawbacks. Çifci et al. (2016) postulate that: a) brand awareness, b) physical quality, c) staff behaviours, d) ideal self-congruence, e) brand identification, f) lifestyle congruence affect, g) brand satisfaction, all contribute to, h) brand loyalty. Although they deconstruct the CBBE model with eight variables, some of the dimensions (e.g., brand awareness, ideal self-congruence, lifestyle congruence) are the cognitive/afffective components of brand equity which evolve when consumers come in contact with brand touchpoints. Therefore, the interrelationship among the variables might ignore a logical causal relationship. Besides, Çifci et al. (2016) validated this model by conducting empirical tests in the context of global fashion brands in Turkey and private label brands in Spain, and argued that the model is applicable to service brands setting; yet, it lacks the generalisability to apply in other services context. Moreover, all services are not equal in the degree of their attributes. For example, retail shopping experience and airline travel experience differ in terms of the degree of tangibility, human touch, processing and delivery. Thus, this CBBE model may also not be suitable to be adopted in the airline service brand setting.

3.2. Theoretical gap

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that Berry's (2000) service branding model is more adaptable to the services setting. He conceptualises that the inter-construct relationships are disproportionate to the experienced/inexperienced consumers. This model also complies with the S-DL view of marketing (Brodie et al., 2006). For example, customer experience with the company varies between service brands and product brands. Thus, the conceptualisation of this construct will depend on various experience dimensions across the service/product-dominant brands of services marketing. Berry (2000), in this regard, mentions that companies represent the primary brand of service organisation while the product is the primary brand that consumers experience.

However, causal relationships among the variables in Berry's model might be considered further. For instance, the interrelationship of customer experience is conceptualised only with brand meaning in his model. Although brand awareness is defined as the degree to which brand is recalled and recognised (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), the relationship between the experience components and brand awareness is ignored in the model. Selective-retention theory in consumer behaviour postulates that people tend to retain and recall the part of the information which they have experienced directly or indirectly that supports their beliefs (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Therefore, all the direct and indirect experience components of services may have an impact on both brand awareness and brand meaning. Additionally, current literature further indicate two important brand equity components which are also ignored in Berry's (2000) model. First, Keller (1993) highlights that consistency among the multiple means of brand touchpoints (brand consistency) is necessary because the messages may be focused on a host of different tangible or intangible aspects of the brand itself. Brand consistency is defined as the sharing of common brand meaning and content among multiple means of brand touchpoints (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Keller, 1993). Erdem and Swait (1998) conceive it as the degree to which each mix component or decision reflects the intended whole. The current study conceptualises it in a similar way as Erdem and Swait (1998) and Keller (1993). Çifci et al.'s (2016) also mention two variables in their model which are: ideal self-congruence and lifestyle congruence. However, our conceptualisation of brand consistency differs from Çifci et al.'s (2016) ideal self-congruence and lifestyle congruence. While brand consistency in this study refers to the consumers' perception on the extent to which experience touchpoints/brand touchpoints provide similar messages/clues about the brand, Çifci et al. (2016) define “ideal self-congruence as the degree to which brand image coincides with the consumer’s ideal self-concept” and “lifestyle congruence as the degree to which brand consumption supports the consumers' unique pattern of living as expressed by activities, interests, and opinions” (p. 3741). Although, brand consistency is conceptualised as one of the important constructs of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Cooper, Merrilees, & Miller, 2015; de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Keller, 1993; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009), there is little empirical evidence available with regard to developing a brand equity model. Second, perceived value is often seen as one of the prominent CBBE constructs (i.e., Brodie et al., 2009; Lassar et al., 1995; Liu et al., 2015), yet previous studies e.g., Buil et al. (2013a); Chen and Tseng (2010); Hyun (2009) may have either overlooked it or found mixed causal relationship amongst its components. Perceived value is defined as the consumer cognitive/afffective evaluation of a brand based on what is received (perception about the utility of service features) and what is sacrificed (perception about monetary and non-monetary costs) (Zeithaml, 1988).

3.3. The proposed conceptual model

The current study acknowledges Berry's (2000) service branding model in understanding airline service experience and its impact on service brand equity. Specifically, our research aims at developing a CBBSBE model based on airline service direct experience. Berry's model encompasses both indirect (presented brand and uncontrolled communication) and direct experience. However, our research considers only the direct experience dimension associated with airline service. The effect of communication experience on branding is well recognised among scholars and its effect on brand equity has also been found to be symmetrical across the product and service categories (Buil, de Chernatony, & Martinez, 2013b; Cervera-Tauler et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2016; Yoo et al., 2000). This study also acknowledges the effect of communication experience on brand equity as uniform in relation to product and service brands and narrows the scope only to the direct service experience. Besides, the study of direct service experience with brand equity is scarce even in the context of airline service. Hence, our effort to conceptualise a CBBSBE model based on direct service experience would advance the existing brand equity literature while providing insightful information to practitioners, especially in the airline industry.

Meyer and Schwager (2007) offer a holistic view of customer experience that includes direct contact (direct experience) with providers when the consumer initiates the purchase process (direct experience) and indirect contact (indirect experience) through unplanned encounters (p. 117). Due to the study scope, only direct experience of airline service is selected following the conceptualisation of direct contact in Meyer and Schwager (2007). Airline passengers go through different stages of direct experience before reaching their destinations. For example, their direct contact with an airline company begins with searching for travel-related information, continues with booking the tickets and the actual travels, and eventually ends with reaching the destination airport. During these episodes, passengers experience various direct services such as employee service, ticket purchase, check-in counters, on-board flight experience (i.e., seats, meals, layout, atmosphere), and other passengers (Grønroos, 1984; Mikulic & Prebežac, 2011). Besides, airline passengers also pass through indirect experience points which include advertisements, publicity, reviews, criticisms, word-of-mouth from physical and digital sources etc. Existing literature reveals that consumers evaluate the services based on the various clues rooted in service performance rather than objects (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). Hence, it is assumed that consumers do not deduce any differences between products and services through indirect experiences, as the purposes of marketing communications are to promote, inform
and persuade the consumers (Belch & Belch, 2018). For example, dramatisation, slice-of-life, fear, and humour are being adopted as communication appeals for both products and services and are executed through the same media (print, broadcast, social media). The consumer only receives various types of information out of the indirect touchpoints which evoke similar experiences across the products/services. Therefore, the current study focuses only on the direct experience dimensions of airline service along with other brand equity components. Brand consistency and perceived value are adopted based on the theoretical gap indicated in the previous section. Besides, brand awareness, brand meaning, and service brand equity are derived from Berry (2000). The proposed model in Fig. 2 is conceptualised based on Berry’s service branding model along with stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) in consumer behaviour (Jacoby, 2002; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

Service experience is the key determinant of creating service brand equity (Berry, 2000); therefore, the airline service direct experience will certainly have an impact on the various components of brand equity. In the model, Berry (2000) suggests that direct service experience is only associated with brand meaning. However, brand awareness is not only affected by the indirect experience components (communications), but is also governed by consumer direct experience (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012; Lassar et al., 1995; Yoo et al., 2000). Service experience is the key determinant of creating service brand equity (Berry, 2000); therefore, the airline service direct experience will certainly have an impact on the various components of brand equity. In the model, Berry (2000) suggests that direct service experience is only associated with brand meaning. However, brand awareness is not only affected by the indirect experience components (communications), but is also governed by consumer direct experience (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2012; Lassar et al., 1995; Yoo et al., 2000). Based on this evidence, our study also proposes the direct relationship between direct service experience and brand equity components (brand awareness, brand meaning, and perceived value). The relationship between brand consistency and brand equity components is also supported by Keller (1993); he defines congruence as “the extent to which a brand association shares content and meaning with another brand association. The congruence of brand associations should affect, (1) how easily an existing association can be recalled (brand awareness), and (2) how easily additional associations can become linked to the brand node in memory (brand meaning)” (p. 7). Erdem and Swait (1998) also suggest the direct relationship between brand consistency and brand equity components. Hence, we propose a direct effect of brand consistency on brand equity components. Besides, previous studies also suggest the effect of brand equity components on overall brand equity (i.e., Berry, 2000; Boo et al., 2009; Lasser et al., 1995; Yoo et al., 2000). Service brand equity is abstracted as a behavioural outcome (response) which is defined as the incremental effect of consumer response with regard to marketing activities (Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993). Response can be in the form of physical (actual buying/avoidance behaviour, communicating positive/negative feelings etc.) or psychological (future intention to buy/avoid, loyalty/switching intention etc.) (Jacoby, 2002). Previous research of Yoo et al. (2000), Konencnik and Gartner (2007), and Chen and Tseng (2010) construe brand equity as the intention to buy a brand. Aligned with these studies, brand awareness, brand meaning and perceived value are argued to have a strong association with service brand equity.

The relationships among the service experience drivers and brand equity components are emphasised further based on S-O-R paradigm and Theory of Cognitive Consistency. Consumer experience and its concurrent evaluation of external touchpoints of objects are the stimuli which affect organismic components, and in turn, organism drives response (Jacoby, 2002; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Jacoby (2002) also stresses that the stimuli are either situational or a combination of objects that are held temporarily in consumers’ memory until it is lost or stored in long-term memory. In our proposed model, service experience components are external to the consumers which are the input of consumer assessment about a brand. Whereas, brand consistency is the concurrent evaluation of experience touchpoints which is an implicit learning of a person that holds for a short time in the consumer memory before being stored into long-term memory. Jacoby (2002) revisits the S-O-R paradigm and explicates that although “implicit learning and learning without awareness” is internal to a person, it is the stimuli for the long-term evaluation of an object which are also affected by external objects (stimuli) (p. 54). It suggests that external stimuli form the meaning of internal stimuli. Moreover, Srull and Wyer (1989) postulate that consistency is perceived through the series of interactions with the objects. Therefore, service experience components and brand consistency are both the stimuli of a consumer’s long-term evaluation of brands (organism). Aligned with this theory, brand consistency is internal to the consumer’s short-term evaluation of a brand which is guided by the external stimuli (service experience). Thus, service experience components are argued to have a strong association with brand consistency. Aronson (1969) asserts that an individual holds distorted perceptions and beliefs about an object when inconsistencies across the touchpoints are experienced. As brand awareness, brand meaning and perceived value are the long-term evaluation of airline brand equity (organismic components), consistency among the experience touchpoints (short-term evaluation) will connect between direct service experience and brand equity components. S-O-R paradigm also indicates that the outcomes of organismic element of brand equity will either be acceptance or avoidance response with regard to future buying intention or actual buying behaviour towards the brand (Jacoby, 2002). This response is conceived as service brand equity in the proposed model.

An example is presented here to help visualise the relationships in the model. Passengers will start evaluating the airline once they experience the services (i.e., website information, airport counter service, on-board service, employee service, consistency of services) (stimuli). Some stimuli are external (provided services) to the passengers while some are internal (perception about how similar the various airline services are across the service touchpoints). These implicit learning processes about the airline service form the cognitive or affective meaning which is stored in the consumer’s long-term memory (brand awareness, brand meaning, and perceived value). The long-term memory is considered as the organism of their airline service

![Fig. 2. A consumer-based service brand equity (CBSBE) model based on direct service experience.](Image)
experiences and this evaluation induces the airline passengers to respond accordingly. The proposed model explains that direct experience of service consumption is key to creating service brand equity for airline companies. Three brand equity components namely, brand awareness, brand meaning, and perceived value would be greatly influenced by the type of direct experience an airline passenger has, while the perception about the various airline services with regard to consistency will strengthen the brand equity components. Besides, service experience components are the input of assessing brand consistency. It is also assumed that brand consistency would facilitate the relationship between direct service experience and brand equity components. Finally, the level of service brand equity depends on the degree to which brand awareness, brand meaning and perceived value are present.

4. Implications and conclusion

This paper has assessed the current literature, and has attempted to conceptualise a CBSBE model based on direct service experience of airline service. Our discussion and analysis reveal that contemporary CBBE models are not quite suitable for branding services while the need for an adaptable service branding model is obvious. Thus, this investigation mitigates this problem by proposing a CBSBE model. The proposed model is expected to be adaptable to airline service contexts, as according to Shostack (1982), airline is an intangible-dominant service based on the tangibility and intangibility continuum of value creation. Besides, consumer evaluation of perceived differences among the airline brands are high and they are highly involved in the purchasing process; hence, direct experience is the key component for airline service (Chen et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2015; Mikulic & Prebecac, 2011). It is hoped that our conceptualisation will shed light on airline service branding by clearly indicating the role and importance of direct service experience and its effect on other brand equity components. Our effort to operationalise this model is now underway. However, as our conceptualisation focuses only on direct service experience, we recommend future research to include the components of indirect service experience in an effort to develop an integrated service brand equity model.

Our model also contributes to the service branding theory by extending Berry’s (2000) model through brand consistency and perceived value. Although current literature indicate the importance of these two variables in the branding context, little evidence has, however, been added to demonstrate the presence of these two variables in the contemporary service branding model. Keller (1993) and Kapferer (2008) opine that the degree of brand consistency would significantly affect the level of brand awareness, and brand meaning, which in turn, affect overall brand equity. Besides, perceived value is also accounted as one of the important components of brand equity and the antecedent of consumer response (Lam, Ahearn, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010). Therefore, the inclusion of these two variables would enhance the theoretical foundation of the service brand equity model. With this theoretical significance, the proposed model would also mitigate the managerial difficulties by looking at airline service branding strategy from an “inside-out view” (organisation perspective) and “outside-in view” (consumer perspective). Specifically, marketing and/or brand managers of airline companies may benefit from understanding the direct service experience dimensions and its relationship with other brand equity components. Services offered to the passengers include ticketing via online and physical agents [convenience/place], airport counter service (i.e., check-in, luggage handling) [process], employee service [people], onboard services (meals, seats, cleanliness, atmosphere, entertainment materials) [core service], physical layout of airplane cabin and waiting lounge [physical evidence], price deals [price] etc. Passengers usually evaluate the airline service based on the nature of services offered, hence, our CBSBE model would assist these managers in designing their airline service elements. Furthermore, it would provide a new understanding of how consistency among the various touchpoints (brand consistency) plays a salient role when implementing a branding strategy for airline service. In fact, our study will help managers to identify the incremental effect of airline passengers’ response to service offerings. This incremental response would be considered as a source of customer loyalty for airline companies. Finally, we also argue that our model would be applicable to other service contexts only if the components of direct service experience are tailored to the specific service category. Hence, future research should validate this model in other service contexts using quantitative data.

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