

A Study on the Relationship between External Marketing and Service Value for Kindergartens: Relationship Bonds with Parents as Mediation Effect

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to study the relationship between the external marketing and service values of kindergartens in Tainan City, Taiwan. In order to provide practical suggestions to kindergarten operators, the relationship bonds with parents was used as the mediation effect to discover the outcomes of the kindergartens' practices of building relationship bonds. To achieve this goal, questionnaires were distributed to parents of kindergarten children from private kindergartens in Tainan County Taiwan. Among those 485 questionnaires delivered, 453 were valid. After performing a regression analysis on those collected data, the main findings were as following: (1) the external marketing of kindergartens showed positive significance on relationship bonds with parents; (2) the external marketing of kindergartens presented positive significance on parents' perceptions of service value; (3) the relationship bonds between the kindergartens and parents demonstrated positive significance on the parents' perceptions of service value toward the kindergartens and (4) the relationship bonds exhibited partial mediation between external marketing and service value.

1. Introduction

The economical structure of Taiwan has transformed with the advent of the 21st century, which in turn, has changed the nation's demographical structure. Apart from the ever-decreasing birth rate, the recent financial storm, which plunged the economies of several countries, also obscured the outlook of Taiwan's economy. With various industries severely impacted, numerous enterprises and businesses collapsed and shut-down, which in turn brought about a high unemployment rate. The impact of disemployed parents has resulted in an immediate effect of sudden slash in kindergartens' admission rate. Owing to the gloomy outlook for the nation's economy and their own careers, couples dare not to give births, making the kindergarten sector more difficult to attract such customers, whose number has been in decrease year by year and thus creating a fierce competitive atmosphere for this sector. In the face of such harsh situations, simply converting the business model from producer-driven to customer-oriented is not practical enough to enhance admission. Kindergartens nowadays

have to proactively find out both the needs of parents and kids to provide satisfactory service to further promote parents' perception of service value in order to gain the competitive edge. In order to help the parents efficiently choose kindergartens which can satisfy their needs, it was deemed necessary to investigate how external marketing would affect parents' decision-making process. Meanwhile, in light of the fierce competition of the kindergarten sector in Taiwan, it was considered essential to discover whether the service value provided by kindergartens would influence parents' decisions. Finally, based upon the above inquiries, it was suspected that how the implementation of external marketing strategies would affect parents' perceptions of kindergartens' service value and their relationship bonds with the kindergartens. Consequently, the purposes of this study were to (1) understand how external marketing of kindergartens would affect parents' perceptions of service value; (2) explore how parents' relationship bonds would affect the external marketing and service value of the kindergartens as the mediation effect, and (3) offer suggestions based on the results as a reference for further research and practical strategy planning in the area of early childhood education.

2. Definitions of terms

2.1. External marketing

Huang [9] pointed out that a school's external marketing activities include: teacher-student product strategy, image promotion strategy, cost value strategy and channel planning strategy, while Hsu [6] indicated five practical ways of applying marketing strategies to kindergartens: (1) product strategy – such as providing quality learning environments; (2) price strategy – such as establishing funds to facilitate children with difficulties for preschool educations; (3) promotion strategy – such as increasing a kindergarten's identity through commercials; (4) place strategy – such as serving and satisfying customers' needs with multi-facet operations and (5) personnel strategy – such as encouraging parents to participate in kindergartens' affairs. Accordingly, it is believed that apart from serving and satisfying the existing customers' needs, external marketing also helps to explore and attract new customers as well as unifying the visions of the kindergartens, thus fully upgrading the educational quality and enhancing kindergartens' competitiveness.

2.2. Relationship bonds

According to Turner [15], bonds refer to the economical, psychological or physical dependencies among the connections established through associating and interacting, and the exchange of relations would bring the members closer to each other. Han [5] and Wilson [16] also concluded that structural and social bonds would intensify the interactions among correlative members. Various studies also confirmed the interactive effects of functional bonds [13], [17], [20], [10]. According to Wilson [16], social bonding refers to “the degree of mutual personal friendship and liking shared by the buyer and seller”, while Smith [13] defined structural bonds as restraining connections concerning structure, managerial arrangement/regulation and institutionalization. Turner [15] indicates that functional bonds are economic, strategic and technical benefits derived from the exchange of relationships; such bonds are created through product-or service-related benefits. Yu, Liu & Huang's study implied that as long as the relationship-exchanging members can produce substantial economical or other forms of benefits through the existing relationship, there is a functional bond between them [17]. Thus, this study attempted to use the social, structural and functional bonds as the measuring dimensions for relationship bonds to explore the related factors.

2.3. Service value

Thaler [14] suggested that service value consists of acquisition utility and transaction utility, while the former comes from the comparison between customers' perceived benefits and actual monetary loss and the latter derives from customers' comparison between assumed referential monetary loss and actual monetary loss. A company's image and staff's devotion to work would affect customers' perceptions of service value. Great service value helps produce higher customer satisfaction while great customer satisfaction is the key to excellent service value [2]. Service quality, service value and customer satisfaction had been critical to customer behavior [3].

3. Research hypotheses

As service industry keeps developing, it is conceived that among those predicting factors influencing consumer behavior, the establishment and improvement of service value should not be overlooked by enterprises. When facing significant loss of student population, remote schools have needed to communicate their features and operational philosophy to parents and the society to retain local students for sustainability and even attracting more students [9].

Accordingly, the study proposed hypothesis one (H1): the external marketing of kindergartens would have positive significance on the relationship bonds with parents.

According to Zeithaml [19], customers may not have chosen the best quality product or service because when choosing the product(s) or services of higher quality, he/she may not have perceived the benefits differentiated from those of inferior products/services due to information asymmetry or lack of sufficient money. Thus, it is highly suspected that whether the external marketing would affect customers' perceptions of service value, and therefore deciding their purchasing will. Therefore, the second hypothesis (H2) of this study was: kindergartens' external marketing would have positive significance on parents' perceptions towards service value.

Kotler [12] expanded the marketing concept into NGO, and noted as long as an exchange relation exists between an organization and those who accept its services or services from its supporters/sponsors, it can boost its service results through marketing concepts and skills. The operation of businesses is a process of satisfying customers rather than producing products. Thus, marketers cannot redeem themselves as producers but as organizations which create values and satisfy customers' needs so as to make their organizations sustainable and stay competitive [8]. This study thus attempted to discover whether the close connection between parents and the kindergartens will affect parents' perceptions of service value and hence proposed hypothesis three (H3): the relationship bonds between kindergartens and parents would have positive significance on the perception of service value.

This study tried to use relationship bonds as mediation to investigate the correlation between external marketing of the kindergartens and service value. Combining the above mentioned hypotheses, the relations of “external marketing, relationship bonds, service value” were to be explored to discover whether relationship bonds have any mediation effect between external marketing and service value to further examine whether the relationship between external marketing and service value has the mediation influence on the relationship bonds for both sides. Thus, the fourth hypothesis (H4) of this study was: relationship bonds would have significant mediation effect on external marketing and service value.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research sample

Among the 453 valid samples returned, mothers represented the highest proportion (67.2%) of child carers, implying that of those families surveyed, fathers are mainly responsible for the living of the family, thus

resulting in a higher proportion for mothers to interact or communicate with kindergarten teachers. The parents' ages are mainly 30 to less than 35 years old (36.1%), suggesting that most parents of such age range have kids qualified for kindergarten admission. The educational backgrounds of the parents are mainly senior high school/vocational school (36.5%), implying that both fathers and mothers of such educational backgrounds may start working at the same time, thus having to send their kids to kindergartens for care and education and this figure also indicated that this group represented the greatest need of sending kids to kindergartens. A great proportion of the surveyed parents have been working in the service sector (28.4%); this might result from the long working hours of such sector and therefore creating a higher need for kindergarten caring. The years of studying of the children were mostly 2 years to less than 3 years (28.5%), suggesting huge demands for the preschool market from the parents. This may be due to the trend of double income family. Lastly, most kids were studying in the Middle Class (36.0%), indicating that most parents might think that kids approaching the Middle Class age need to go to the kindergarten. The backgrounds of the subjects were summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Research sample

Variables	Categories	Percent -ages
Child Carer	Father	27.8%
	Mother	67.2%
	Relative(s)	5.0%
Age	Under 25 years old	1.8%
	25-less than 30 years old	13.3%
	30-less than 35 years old	36.1%
	35-less than 40 years old	29.2%
	40-less than 45 years old	12.8%
	Over 45 years old	6.9%
Degree of Education	Senior High & Below	9.6%
	Senior High/Vocational	36.5%
	Junior College	20.9%
	College/University	26.5%
	Graduate School & Above	6.5%

Vocations	Military/Police/Public servant/Teacher	13.4%	
	Manufacturing Service	17.3%	
	Agricultural, Forestry, Fishery and Husbandry	28.4%	
	Freelancer	3.2%	
	Professional (lawyer, doctor, architect)	12.2%	
	Other	3.7%	
	Studying Period	Less than 6 months	21.7%
		6 months - less than 1 year	16.9%
		1 year - less than 2 years	27.4%
		2 years - less than 3 years	28.5%
Over 3 years		20.0%	
Classes	Toddler Class	7.1%	
	Junior Class	22.4%	
	Middle Class	36.0%	
	Senior Class	34.4%	

4.2. Instrumentation

The instrumentation of this study was designed and created on the basis of various references [13], [14], [15], [16], [19]. Chen, Farh & MacMillan [4] pointed out the importance of having opinions from different professions has been to enhance the reliability and validity of the questionnaire to ensure the subjects understand the meaning of each item and to facilitate their response. Therefore, two kindergarten principals (with over 20 years of service), two directors (with over 15 years of service), six pre-school teachers (with over 10 years of service) and five parents were invited to discuss the content of the questionnaire. Rectifications and supplements were made accordingly. Before the formal questionnaires were distributed, a pilot study was implemented on 50 parents of certain kindergartens in Tainan City, Taiwan. Questionnaire items were presented with five-point Likert scale; the bigger the number, the more extent the subjects agree. Within 48 questionnaires returned in the pilot study, the Cronbach's α coefficients of the variables were between 0.771 and 0.894 - higher than 0.7. Therefore, after improving the vagueness of questionnaire items in the pilot study, formal questionnaire survey was implemented. Each dimensional variable's measurement and operational definitions were summarized in Table 2:

Table 2. Operational definitions of each dimension

Dimensions	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition
External Marketing	Marketing programs targeted at external customers by the kindergartens to attract enrollment	1.Course features 2.Event Planning 3.Price Incentive 4.School Performance 5.Staff Dedication
Service Value	Parents' evaluation of the kindergarten after comparison of total perceptions of acquisition and pay-out.	1.Fast Service 2.Price Evaluation 3.Ample Resources 4.Satisfying Service 5.Value Recognition
Relationship Bond	Kindergarten maintains the relationship with parents through social, structural and functional bonds.	1.Parent-Teacher Communication 2.Experience Sharing 3.Parent-Teacher Friendship 4.Reasonable Tuition 5.Information Provision

4.3. Formal collection of questionnaires

In order to reflect the realistic situation of kindergartens, pre-tests were conducted and reliability analysis was executed before the distribution of formal questionnaires. Research data were collected through questionnaire surveys. Phone calls were made to the concerning kindergarten principals, explaining the purpose of the study and asking for help distributing the questionnaire. Questionnaire copies were distributed after consents were obtained by these principals. The total number of questionnaires distributed was 485, among which 464 copies were returned. After eliminating 11 incomplete and invalid ones, 453 questionnaire copies were valid.

4.4. Dimensional analysis

The focus of this stage was to examine the scales of each dimension and to revise and question wordings without internal consistency to build up the reliability of measurement tools. Confirmatory factor analysis was then executed to ensure the questions reflect the dimensionalities of the three dimensions investigated in this study. The reliability of each variable as well as the results of dimensionality examinations are as follows:

4.4.1. External marketing. After factor analysis and based upon the factor loadings of the factor matrix and taking the question item's meaning of the factor into consideration, the dimension of external marketing of this study was divided into five items: 1. course features, 2. event planning, 3. price incentive, 4. school performance and 5. staff dedication. The Cronbach's α value of external marketing was 0.837 after internal consistency test, while the α value with each item deleted was above 0.780 – exhibiting high internal consistency. Therefore, the reliability is highly ensured.

4.4.2. Relationship bonds. Likewise, after factor analysis and based upon the factor loadings of the factor matrix, and taking the question item's meaning of the factor into consideration, the dimension of relationship bonds of this study was divided into five items: 1. parent-teacher communication, 2. experience sharing, 3. parent-teacher friendship, 4. reasonable tuition and 5. information provision. The Cronbach's α value of relationship bonds was 0.881 after internal consistency test, while the α value with each item deleted was above 0.844 – representing high internal consistency. Consequently, the reliability is highly guaranteed.

4.4.3. Service value. After factor analysis and based upon the factor loadings of the factor matrix, and taking the question item's meaning of the factor into consideration, the dimension of service value of this study was divided into five items: 1. fast service, 2. price evaluation, 3. ample resources, 4. satisfying service and 5. value recognition. The Cronbach's α value of relationship bonds was 0.871 after internal consistency test, while the α value with each item deleted was above 0.835 – demonstrating high internal consistency. Accordingly, the reliability is highly assured.

4.5. Validity and Reliability Analysis

Huang and Lin [7] noted that content validity means the content of questionnaire has possessed extreme representation, i.e. including items of measured dimensions. If the content is based on theories and literature, referring to similar contents by previous scholars and discussed with academic or practical experts, it can be regarded of great content validity. This study collected data through structural questionnaires while the measurement items of the questionnaire were based upon relevant literature, and were discussed and revised by pre-school teachers and academic experts with over 10 years of service. Thus, the instrumentation which this study adopted met the requirement of content validity. To verify the construct validity, the principal component analysis and Direct Oblimin of factor analysis were used and research

variables with eigenvalues more than 1 were remained while factors with common factor coefficients (degree of validity) greater than 0.5 were extracted according to Kaiser's rule. The correlation coefficients of individual item and total scores were taken, and measurement items without significant relations were eliminated. The result showed that the correlation coefficients of each measurement variable and total scores were at least above 0.5, indicating the measurement variables of this study all conformed to the construct validity test.

Huang & Lin [7] also pointed out that reliability refers to the consistency of results measured repeatedly against the same or similar population. Generally, Cronbach's α value is most frequently used to measure the consistency of each item under the same construct. Furthermore, Wortzel [18] believed that any α value between 0.70 and 0.98 is considered of high reliability, whereas those below 0.35 should be excluded. The reliability values of each dimension measured in this study were 0.837, 0.871 and 0.881 respectively – all above 0.80. As a result, it well proved the excellent reliability of the questionnaires of this study.

5. Results

5.1. External marketing and relationship bonds

The results showed that every dimension of external marketing has positive correlation with relationship bonds. Model 1 of Table 3 sees the following regression coefficients: 1. Course Features (0.738, $p<0.001$); 2. Event Planning (0.460, $p<0.01$); 3. Price Incentive (0.514, $p<0.001$); 4. School Performance (0.424, $p<0.05$), and (5) Staff Dedication (2.157, $p<0.001$). It can be resolved that when parents perceive more about the kindergarten's external marketing behavior, the closer their relationship bonds become. Therefore, H1: "kindergartens' external marketing will have positive significance on their relationship bonds with parents" was verified.

5.2. External marketing and service value

The results demonstrated positive correlations between each item of external marketing and service value and Model 2 in Table 3 presents the following regression coefficients: 1. Course Features (0.717, $p<0.001$); 2. Event Planning (0.410, $p<0.01$); 3. Price Incentive (0.725, $p<0.001$); 4. School Performance (0.945, $p<0.001$), and 5. Staff Dedication (1.649, $p<0.001$). It can be concluded that the external marketing does have positive significance on the parents' perceptions of service value. Thus, H2: "kindergartens' external marketing would have positive

significance on parents' perceptions towards service value" was confirmed.

5.3. Relationship bonds and service value

The results showed that each item of relationship bonds has positive correlation with service value and Model 3 of Table 3 shows the following regression coefficient: 1. Parent-Teacher Communication (0.682, $p<0.001$); 2. Experience Sharing (0.264, $p>0.05$); 3. Parent-Teacher Friendship (0.716, $p<0.001$); 4. Reasonable Tuition (1.377, $p<0.001$), and 5. Information Provision (0.855, $p<0.001$). From the above regression coefficients, parent-teacher experience sharing does not have vital impact on service value. This may be because parents may regard child-raising experiences as daily conversation, therefore not affecting parents' evaluation toward the kindergarten. Other items suggest that the relationship bonds between the kindergartens and parents have positive significance on the perception of service value. Thus, H3: "the relationship bonds between kindergartens and parents would have positive significance on the perception of service value" was certified.

Table 3. Summary of regression analysis for external marketing, relationship bonds and service value (n = 453)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Dependent	Relationship Bonds	Service Value	Service Value	Service Value
Independent				
Course Feature	0.738***	0.717***		0.334*
Event Planning	0.460**	0.410**		0.204
Price Incentive	0.514***	0.725***		0.429***
School Performance	0.424*	0.945***		0.719***
Staff Dedication	2.157***	1.649***		0.481***
Parent-Teacher Communication			0.682***	0.477***
Experience Sharing			0.264	0.045
Parent-Teacher Friendship			0.716***	0.576***
Reasonable Tuition			1.377***	0.961***
Information Provision			0.855***	0.316*
R ²	0.618	0.676	0.705	0.786
Adjusted R ²	0.614	0.673	0.702	0.781
F Value	142.967***	183.776***	210.233***	158.601***

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

5.4. Mediation effect analysis of relationship bonds

As Baron and Kenny [1] suggested, hierarchical regression analysis was used to verify mediation: Firstly, independent variable (external marketing) and mediation variable (relationship bonds) respectively displays noticeable correlation (Model 2 and 3 in Table

3) with the dependent variable (service value). Independent variable (external marketing) and mediation variable (relationship bonds) also present remarkable correlation (Model 1 in Table 3). Finally, after placing the independent and mediation variables simultaneously, the relationship of the independent variable and dependent variable should be weaker than without mediation variable. With the mediation variable being controlled, if the influence of independent variable toward dependent variable disappears, there will be total mediation. If the independent variable has less influence on the dependent variable than without the mediation variable yet still presents great significance, then it is called partial mediation. Model 4 (Table 3) shows that the values of regression coefficient β of external marketing against service value respectively decline from 0.717 to 0.334, from 0.410 to 0.204, from 0.725 to 0.429, from 0.945 to 0.719 and from 1.649 to 0.481, which demonstrated partial mediation. This means remarkable partial mediation exists between the relationship bonds of external marketing and service value. Thus, H4: "relationship bonds would have significant mediation effect on external marketing and service value" was validated.

6. Conclusions

6.1. External marketing's impacts on relationship bonds

According to hypothesis 1 (H1) of this study, the result indicated that when parents perceived more about the kindergarten's external marketing behavior, the closer their relationships bonds became. Therefore, if a kindergarten would offer differentiated course features, favorable price incentive and outstanding school performance, it would receive higher appreciation and recognition from parents. Furthermore, when parents are satisfied about the tuition and learning outcomes, pleasant parent-teacher communication, delightful parent-teacher friendship and timely provision of pre-school information would help strengthen the relationship bonds between parents and the kindergartens.

6.2. External marketing's impacts on service value

Following hypothesis 2 (H2) of this study, the result revealed that when parents perceive more about the kindergartens' external marketing, they will appreciate more about the kindergartens' service value, suggesting that when parents present more support and recognition about the course features, tuition, school performance and teaching quality, their recognition of service value

will increase.

6.3. Relationship bonds' impacts on service value

Based on hypothesis 3 (H3) of this study, the result showed that the closer parents bond with the kindergartens, the higher the perceptions of service value they will conceive. This means if kindergartens can keep pleasant interactions with parents through social, structural and functional bonds, parents' satisfaction will increase, thus further promote their perception of service value.

6.4. Mediation effect analysis for Relationship bonds

This study verified the mediation effect for relationship bonds with hierarchical regression according to Baron and Kenny's suggestion [1]. The results demonstrated that there are partial mediation effects between external marketing and service value in parents' relationship bonds, suggesting that the higher the parents recognize the external marketing of the kindergartens, the closer they become. This may influence parents' trust and satisfaction toward the kindergarten as well as their willingness to keep their kids staying in the same kindergarten. Therefore, the parent-teacher relationship should be based on mutual benefits. In order to earn parents' trust and thus attract admission, kindergartens should take it seriously to intensify and enhance the relationship bonds with parents. On top of offering reasonable tuitions which the parents recognize, kindergartens also need to improve the course features, school performances, teaching quality as well as actively response to parents' needs, provide relevant resources and information, facilitate parent-teacher communication and parent-teacher friendship to raise parents' satisfactions, thus reinforcing the relationship bonds between kindergarten and parents to create a win-win situation for families and kindergartens.

The recent tendency of ever-decreasing birth rate has significantly impacted the admission of kindergartens. Under such challenging circumstance, issues concerning relationship bonds between kindergartens and parents would be worth investigating. With the pervasive trend of low fertility around the world, apart from being persistent in creating quality learning environment and dedication to school performance to improve service value so as to effectively enhance the operational efficiency and admission rate, kindergarten operators also need to earn parents' trust and recognition in the kindergarten's service value to create niche of their own. Hence, the bonds between kindergartens and parents play a more important role. In other words, in the ferociously

competed preschool market, to earn the parents' recognition in service value through external marketing strategies may be the fundamental factor for kindergarten managers to maintain the kindergarten's competitive edge. This should be a vital issue for the operators to contemplate. Meanwhile, the conclusions of this study provided certain implications for preschool practices – the relationship bonds between parents and kindergartens did produce mediation effects toward external marketing and service value. Moreover, the study's analysis on the kindergartens' external marketing, relationship bonds and service value also contributed to kindergarten operators' awareness of such issues and helped them to emphasize more on relevant issues of relationship bonds with parents, through which providing the kindergarten operators with valuable insights for practical interactions with parents.

7. Suggestions

7.1. Treating Parents and kids as educational customers.

According to the results of this study, parents found rooms for improvement in some aspects of the external marketing among those kindergartens surveyed, such as activity planning and price incentives. Therefore, the kindergartens should start regarding the parents and kids as their educational customers and strive to create excellent learning environments and to provide quality teaching for the kids. Moreover, kindergartens should educate their staff and make them fully implement the operational philosophy of "treating parents and kids as customers" so as to reinforce the parents' engagement toward the kindergarten and achieve the goals of satisfying parents' needs and mutual development for both the parents and teachers.

7.2. Emphasizing on service value to strengthen the relationship with parents

According to Yu, Liu and Huang [17], parents are external customers of kindergartens; therefore, kindergartens should value parents and establish strong relationship with them, regardless of their social or economical status. After all, the cost for discovering a new customer is higher than that of retaining the old ones. As a result, placing importance on service value and reinforcing the relationship with parents are vital for kindergartens to gain satisfactions and supports from parents.

7.3. Actively establishing good relationship bonds with parents

It is suggested that the kindergartens facilitate

parent-teacher interactions through workshops, parent-child sports games, learning outcome presentations, curriculum illustration meetings, seasonal celebration activities, frequent telephone interviews, regular visits, provision of preschool-related publications and establishing network system and parent database linking. In such way, the relationship bonds between parents and kindergartens will grow stronger gradually.

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