

Innovate, Love, evangelize: Exploring Customer Perceived Innovativeness and Brand Evangelism in Malaysia's Fast-Food Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI) plays a vital role in how consumers evaluate, engage with, and advocate for restaurant brands. In the competitive Malaysian fast-food industry, understanding how customers perceive innovation can help operators strengthen brand loyalty and inspire evangelistic behaviors. This study investigates the influence of CPI dimensions—menu, technology-based service, experiential, and promotional innovativeness—on brand evangelism, with brand love serving as a mediating factor. Using a quantitative approach, data were gathered from 265 fast-food customers in the Klang Valley through structured questionnaires. Statistical analyses using SPSS and PROCESS macro revealed that menu and promotional innovativeness significantly influenced brand evangelism. Brand love partially mediated the relationship between CPI and brand evangelism. The findings emphasize that customers who perceive fast-food brands as innovative are more likely to develop emotional attachment and advocate for the brand. The study contributes practical insights for restaurant operators on how innovation in offerings, technology, experience, and marketing can build stronger customer relationships and drive voluntary brand promotion.

Keywords: Customer Perceived Innovativeness, Brand Love, Brand Evangelism, Fast-Food, Klang Valley, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The fast-food industry has evolved into one of the most dynamic segments of the global foodservice market. Known for its affordability, accessibility, and speed, fast food has become a staple in urban lifestyles, particularly among young and working adults (Mohiuddin, 2020). In Malaysia, economic development, urbanization, and changing work patterns—especially the rising participation of women in the workforce—have increased demand for convenient dining options (Singh et al., 2023). This shift has positioned fast-food restaurants as preferred destinations not only for quick meals but also for social gatherings and family interactions.

In the Klang Valley, the hub of Malaysia's commercial and cultural activity, consumers are increasingly seeking dining experiences that combine convenience with novelty and engagement. Brands such as McDonald's, KFC, Burger King, and Marrybrown continuously introduce innovative menu items, digital

ordering systems, and marketing campaigns to remain competitive. However, innovation is not limited to product development. It also encompasses technology-driven service improvements, creative promotions, and experiential designs that make dining more enjoyable and memorable (Ismail et al., 2019; Kim & Lee, 2018).

Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI) reflects how consumers view a brand's ability to offer new ideas, services, and experiences (Kim et al., 2019). When customers perceive a brand as innovative, they tend to form stronger emotional connections—often described as brand love—and become more willing to advocate for it, a behavior known as brand evangelism (Tarakçı & Göktaş, 2020). In this context, CPI is not merely a measure of novelty but a driver of emotional and behavioral loyalty.

Despite the growing attention to innovation in foodservice, most existing studies have examined it from the firm's perspective, focusing on operational or product innovation. There remains a gap in understanding innovation from the customer's viewpoint—particularly within fast-food restaurants in Malaysia's Klang Valley. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding how consumers interpret, value, and respond to innovative efforts by restaurant brands.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

Determine the relationship between Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI) and brand evangelism in fast-food restaurants in the Klang Valley.

Examine the influence of CPI on brand love.

Identify the relationship between brand love and brand evangelism.

Investigate the mediating role of brand love between CPI and brand evangelism.

Significance of the Study

From an academic standpoint, this research extends the understanding of CPI by examining its multidimensional structure and its emotional and behavioral consequences. From a managerial perspective, it provides insights for fast-food operators on how innovation strategies—ranging from menu diversification to digital transformation—can enhance brand love and drive organic customer advocacy. By focusing on Klang Valley, the findings also offer context-specific implications for urban restaurant markets in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fast-Food Industry Overview

Fast-food restaurants are typically characterized by their quick service, standardized menus, and affordability (Dighikar & Singh, 2021). These establishments have become a central part of modern urban life, catering to consumers who value convenience, taste, and efficiency. In Malaysia, the growth of fast-food chains has been influenced by economic development, lifestyle shifts, and the increased participation of women in the workforce, which has reduced time available for home cooking (Singh et al., 2023).

The Klang Valley, encompassing Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding areas, is particularly notable for its diverse and competitive fast-food landscape. Major international brands such as McDonald's, KFC, and Burger King, along with local chains like Marrybrown, compete to capture the attention of Malaysia's tech-savvy and trend-conscious consumers. To sustain consumer interest, these brands rely on continuous innovation—introducing new menu offerings, integrating digital technologies, and creating immersive customer experiences (Ismail et al., 2019).

Beyond convenience, consumers today view dining as a social and experiential activity. Many fast-food outlets have evolved into lifestyle spaces where people meet friends, study, or relax. These shifts highlight that

innovation in the fast-food context extends beyond product offerings; it also involves service design, ambiance, and the emotional experience attached to the brand (Kim & Lee, 2018).

Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI)

Customer Perceived Innovativeness refers to how consumers perceive a company's ability to introduce new ideas, products, or services that improve their overall experience (Kim et al., 2019). It differs from firm innovativeness—which measures innovation capability from a managerial or organizational standpoint—because CPI is rooted in the customer's perspective. When consumers recognize a brand as creative, forward-thinking, or responsive to trends, they tend to associate it with higher value and satisfaction (Clauss et al., 2019).

In the fast-food industry, CPI encompasses several dimensions that shape how customers interpret a brand's innovative efforts:

Menu Innovativeness

Technology-Based Service Innovativeness

Experiential Innovativeness

Promotional Innovativeness

Each dimension contributes differently to consumer perceptions and emotional attachment to the brand.

Menu Innovativeness

Menu innovativeness refers to the introduction of new food products, flavors, combinations, and presentations that excite and satisfy changing customer tastes (Teng & Chen, 2023). In Malaysia, fast-food brands often incorporate local culinary elements into their offerings to appeal to cultural preferences—such as spicy flavors, seasonal items, or menu adaptations for festive occasions. For instance, brands frequently introduce limited-time items inspired by local dishes, creating a sense of novelty and anticipation.

Research shows that menu innovation positively influences brand image and consumer satisfaction because it signals creativity and responsiveness (Battisti & Stoneman, 2019). When customers perceive that a restaurant consistently offers something new, they are more likely to remain loyal and recommend it to others. This behavioral outcome forms the basis of brand evangelism, where satisfied customers voluntarily promote the brand to peers.

Technology-Based Service Innovativeness

Technology-based innovativeness involves using digital tools and systems to enhance the customer experience. This may include self-ordering kiosks, mobile applications, delivery integrations, or AI-assisted recommendations. In Malaysia, fast-food brands have widely adopted these technologies to streamline operations and improve service speed (Kee et al., 2021).

Digital ordering apps, self-service kiosks, and contactless payments are now common features that reduce waiting time and empower customers to personalize their orders. These innovations increase perceived convenience and efficiency, which strengthen satisfaction and loyalty. Studies show that customers who appreciate technological convenience tend to associate the brand with modernity and progressiveness (Jeon et al., 2020).

At the same time, successful implementation requires balancing innovation with human interaction. Some customers still value personal service, so maintaining a mix of technology and hospitality remains crucial (Nilsson et al., 2021).

Experiential Innovativeness

Experiential innovativeness relates to how restaurants design unique experiences that go beyond food consumption. It involves creating an atmosphere, service style, or environment that engages customers emotionally and socially (Milwood & Hartman-Caverly, 2022).

In the fast-food context, experiential innovation can take the form of modern interior design, family-friendly play zones, music, and comfortable seating arrangements that encourage customers to linger. Partnerships with delivery platforms and loyalty apps also expand the experiential aspect, allowing customers to enjoy the brand both in-store and at home (Ahmad et al., 2024).

When customers find dining enjoyable and memorable, they are more likely to form emotional bonds with the brand. This attachment—termed brand love—often translates into repeat visits and advocacy behaviors.

Promotional Innovativeness

Promotional innovativeness involves the creative use of media, campaigns, and digital engagement to communicate brand messages effectively. In an era dominated by social media, innovative promotions such as augmented reality games, influencer collaborations, and personalized discounts can significantly enhance customer engagement (Omar et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, fast-food chains often employ playful digital campaigns that encourage customers to participate in interactive activities through mobile apps or social platforms. These strategies not only attract attention but also stimulate emotional connection and word-of-mouth promotion. Studies indicate that innovative promotional efforts positively affect brand loyalty and perceived value (Mulyana et al., 2020).

Brand Love

Brand love describes a deep emotional connection between consumers and a brand, characterized by affection, attachment, and commitment (Rahman et al., 2021). Customers who experience brand love are more likely to forgive service failures, pay premium prices, and promote the brand voluntarily (Ahuvia et al., 2020).

In the fast-food industry, brand love can develop through consistent positive experiences, enjoyable flavors, strong brand identity, and engagement via digital media (Gill et al., 2021). Social media plays a growing role in nurturing these emotional bonds, allowing brands to maintain interaction and build communities among loyal customers.

Brand Evangelism

Brand evangelism refers to the active promotion of a brand by passionate customers who advocate for it through word-of-mouth, social media, and personal recommendations (Tarakçı & Göktaş, 2020). Unlike traditional loyalty, evangelism reflects emotional enthusiasm and voluntary advocacy. In Malaysia, where online communities and social media platforms shape purchasing trends, brand evangelism can significantly enhance a fast-food brand's reputation and market reach.

Studies have shown that brand love often acts as a precursor to brand evangelism—when customers emotionally connect with a brand, they naturally become its advocates (Mishra et al., 2021).

Mediating Role of Brand Love

Brand love frequently mediates the relationship between CPI and brand evangelism. When customers perceive a brand as innovative, they experience excitement, satisfaction, and trust, which can evolve into emotional attachment. This attachment then drives evangelistic behavior (Junaid et al., 2020).

Thus, innovation serves as the catalyst, brand love as the emotional bridge, and evangelism as the behavioral outcome. This sequence highlights the strategic importance of investing in customer-centered innovation to foster stronger, more loyal relationships.

Summary

The reviewed literature establishes that Customer Perceived Innovativeness has multiple dimensions—menu, technology, experiential, and promotional—that shape customers' emotional and behavioral responses. These dimensions collectively influence how customers perceive value and form attachments to brands. When combined with brand love as a mediating factor, CPI can effectively lead to brand evangelism.

In summary, the theoretical foundation suggests that innovative experiences not only attract customers but also transform them into advocates. The next section outlines the methodology used to empirically test these relationships within the context of fast-food restaurants in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI), brand love, and brand evangelism among fast-food consumers in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The quantitative approach was selected because it allows for systematic data collection and statistical analysis to test hypothesized relationships objectively.

A cross-sectional survey method was employed, as it enabled the collection of data from a large number of respondents at a single point in time. This design was suitable for measuring customer perceptions and behaviors regarding fast-food restaurant innovativeness, emotional attachment, and advocacy intentions.

A structured self-administered questionnaire was used as the main data collection instrument. Respondents were asked to evaluate their experiences and perceptions of innovativeness, emotional connection, and advocacy toward the fast-food brands they frequently patronized.

Population and Sampling

The study focused on consumers who regularly visit fast-food restaurants in Klang Valley, including Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam, and surrounding districts. Klang Valley was chosen because it represents Malaysia's most urbanized region, with diverse demographics and high restaurant density.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, purposive sampling was adopted to target respondents who had prior experience dining at fast-food outlets such as McDonald's, KFC, Burger King, Marrybrown, and Texas Chicken. These participants were deemed "information-rich" because they could provide meaningful feedback on restaurant innovativeness.

The minimum required sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1 software, based on multiple regression with five predictors, a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), $\alpha = 0.05$, and a desired power of 0.80. The analysis indicated a minimum of 138 respondents. To improve reliability and reduce sampling error, the researcher collected responses from 265 consumers, which exceeded the minimum requirement.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire comprised five sections covering screening questions, CPI dimensions, brand love, brand evangelism, and demographic information.

Section A: Screening questions confirmed that respondents had visited a fast-food restaurant recently and identified their preferred brands.

Section B: Measured Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI) across four dimensions—menu, technology-based service, experiential, and promotional innovativeness—using 20 items adapted from Hussain et al. (2023) and Helal (2023).

Section C: Measured Brand Evangelism using five items focusing on purchase intention, recommendation, and advocacy behavior (adapted from Hussain et al., 2023).

Section D: Measured Brand Love using five items capturing emotional attachment and affection (adapted from Rahman et al., 2021).

Section E: Collected demographic data including gender, age, occupation, and income level.

All items in Sections B–D were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The questionnaire was available in both English and Bahasa Malaysia to ensure better comprehension and accuracy of responses.

Pilot Study and Reliability

A **pilot test** was conducted with 30 respondents to ensure the clarity, reliability, and validity of the questionnaire. Based on pilot feedback, minor revisions were made to simplify item wording and improve readability.

Internal consistency was assessed using **Cronbach's Alpha**, where coefficients above 0.70 were considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2021). The pilot results indicated high reliability across all constructs:

CPI = 0.91

Brand Love = 0.89

Brand Evangelism = 0.88

These results confirmed that the measurement items were consistent and suitable for full data collection.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over four weeks using both **online (Google Forms)** and **physical distribution** at selected fast-food outlets in Klang Valley. Participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and informed that participation was voluntary. Only respondents aged 18 years and above were included.

Ethical compliance was maintained throughout the study. Respondents provided informed consent, and all data were treated anonymously.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 26) and the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) to test mediation effects. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic data and mean responses for each variable.

The inferential analysis involved:

Multiple Linear Regression – to test the relationships between CPI dimensions and brand love, as well as CPI and brand evangelism.

Mediation Analysis – to examine whether brand love mediates the relationship between CPI and brand evangelism.

Assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were checked before conducting regression analysis.

Summary

The methodological design provided a robust framework for examining the effects of perceived innovativeness on emotional and behavioral brand outcomes among fast-food consumers in Klang Valley. The next section presents the results and discussion derived from statistical analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile

A total of 265 valid responses were collected from fast-food customers in Klang Valley. The summary of the demographic profile of respondents are as follows:-

- Gender: 57% female, 43% male.
- Age: Majority (48%) aged 21–30 years, followed by 31–40 years (27%), under 20 (15%), and above 40 (10%).
- Occupation: 41% students, 36% employed in the private sector, and 23% self-employed or others.
- Monthly Income: Most respondents earned below RM4,000, indicating a youthful and mid-income consumer base typical of fast-food customers.

These characteristics align with the demographics of fast-food consumers in urban Malaysia—young, busy, and digitally engaged (Ismail et al., 2019).

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for key variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Menu Innovativeness	4.11	0.63	High
Technology-Based Service Innovativeness	4.08	0.59	High
Experiential Innovativeness	3.97	0.65	Moderate-High
Promotional Innovativeness	4.21	0.61	High
Brand Love	4.02	0.60	High
Brand Evangelism	4.09	0.64	High

Table 1: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations For Key Variables

All variables scored above 3.90, indicating that respondents generally perceived their preferred fast-food brands as innovative and engaging. The highest mean was for promotional innovativeness, suggesting that creative marketing and digital campaigns have a strong influence on consumers in Klang Valley.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation results showed significant positive relationships among all major variables ($p < 0.01$).

- CPI dimensions were positively correlated with brand love ($r = 0.62$) and brand evangelism ($r = 0.58$).
- Brand love and brand evangelism were strongly correlated ($r = 0.74$), indicating that emotional attachment encourages active advocacy.

These results support prior studies (e.g., Tarakçı & Göktaş, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021) that link innovation and emotional connection to customer advocacy behaviors.

Regression Analysis

Effect of CPI on Brand Love

Multiple regression results indicated that Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI) had a significant positive effect on brand love ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$). Among the four dimensions, Menu Innovativeness ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$) and Promotional Innovativeness ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$) emerged as the strongest predictors of brand love.

This suggests that customers develop emotional attachment when they perceive a brand as creative in both product offerings and promotional efforts. On the other hand, technology-based and experiential innovativeness showed positive but weaker effects ($\beta = 0.18$ and 0.15 , respectively).

These findings align with prior literature indicating that menu novelty and engaging marketing experiences are critical in shaping customer emotions (Teng & Chen, 2023; Mulyana et al., 2020).

Effect of CPI on Brand Evangelism

Regression analysis also revealed that CPI significantly influenced brand evangelism ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$).

Again, menu and promotional innovativeness were the most significant contributors, followed by technology and experience-related innovation. This means that customers who perceive a brand as continuously innovating—through new menu introductions or creative promotions—are more inclined to advocate for it voluntarily.

These results are consistent with the view that innovation creates a positive image and enhances customer pride in being associated with a brand (Jeon et al., 2020).

Relationship between Brand Love and Brand Evangelism

The regression model demonstrated that brand love had a significant effect on brand evangelism ($\beta = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that customers who emotionally connect with a fast-food brand are more likely to recommend it to others, defend it online, and express loyalty publicly.

This strong relationship underscores the importance of emotional branding strategies in foodservice. When customers “love” a brand, they become its advocates—not merely repeat buyers (Ahuvia et al., 2020).

Mediation Analysis

Using Hayes’ PROCESS macro (Model 4), brand love was found to partially mediate the relationship between CPI and brand evangelism. The indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.42]).

This result suggests that while CPI directly influences brand evangelism, part of the effect occurs indirectly through emotional attachment. In other words, innovation stimulates excitement and admiration, which develop into love, and eventually translate into advocacy behavior.

This finding supports Junaid et al. (2020), who emphasized that emotional responses are central to transforming innovative experiences into brand evangelism.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results highlight several key insights relevant to the fast-food sector in Klang Valley:

1. Innovation drives emotional connection.

When consumers perceive continuous innovation—especially in menu and promotional activities—they form stronger emotional ties to the brand. This emotional link fosters a sense of belonging and pride.

2. Emotional bonds translate into advocacy.

Customers who love a brand naturally become vocal supporters, sharing experiences on social media and recommending the brand to friends and family.

3. Promotional creativity is a powerful trigger.

The high influence of promotional innovativeness indicates that Malaysian consumers are highly responsive to creative campaigns and digital engagement. Brands that use humor, interactivity, and local cultural cues are more likely to capture attention and affection.

4. Technology enhances, but does not replace, human touch.

While technology-based innovations are appreciated for convenience, customers still value human warmth and friendliness during service interactions. A balanced approach combining digital and personal service may yield stronger loyalty outcomes.

Implications of the Findings

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that fast-food operators should invest in ongoing innovation not only in products but also in how experiences and communications are designed. For Klang Valley's competitive market, innovation must be customer-centered, data-driven, and emotionally engaging.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the mediating role of brand love between innovation and evangelism, offering empirical support to emotional-branding models within hospitality and foodservice literature.

Summary

In summary, the findings demonstrate that customer perceptions of innovativeness significantly affect both emotional and behavioral brand outcomes. Menu and promotional innovation emerged as the most influential dimensions, while brand love served as a crucial emotional pathway to brand evangelism.

The next section presents the conclusion, managerial recommendations, and directions for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the relationship between Customer Perceived Innovativeness (CPI) and brand evangelism, with brand love as a mediating variable, in the context of fast-food restaurants in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Using data from 265 consumers, the results demonstrated that customers who perceive fast-food brands as innovative are more likely to form emotional attachments and actively promote those brands to others.

Among the four CPI dimensions—menu, technology-based, experiential, and promotional innovativeness—menu and promotional innovativeness had the strongest influence on both brand love and evangelism. This finding reflects the Malaysian fast-food culture, where consumers appreciate creative menus that localize global flavors and respond well to engaging, culturally relevant promotional campaigns.

Brand love was found to partially mediate the relationship between CPI and brand evangelism. This indicates that while innovation can directly inspire advocacy, emotional attachment strengthens and sustains that behavior. Customers who “love” a brand are more likely to share positive experiences, defend it against criticism, and recommend it to peers.

Overall, the findings confirm that innovation not only attracts attention but also nurtures emotional and behavioral loyalty. In fast-moving markets like Klang Valley, where consumer expectations evolve rapidly, maintaining a reputation for innovation is vital to sustaining brand relevance and customer advocacy.

Managerial Implications

The results of this study provide several practical insights for fast-food operators and marketers:

1. Focus on Continuous Menu Innovation.

Regularly updating menu offerings with local flavors, seasonal ingredients, and limited-time specials can enhance customer excitement and perceived freshness of the brand.

2. Enhance Promotional Creativity.

Engaging digital campaigns, influencer collaborations, and interactive social media content can deepen brand connection and encourage customers to share their experiences.

3. Balance Technology with Personal Touch.

While digital innovations such as self-ordering kiosks and mobile apps improve efficiency, human warmth in service remains essential for fostering emotional bonds.

4. Leverage Brand Love as a Strategic Asset.

Emotionally connected customers are more forgiving and more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth. Companies should nurture this attachment through consistent service quality and storytelling.

By implementing these strategies, fast-food operators can strengthen customer loyalty and transform satisfied customers into brand evangelists who voluntarily promote the brand without incentives.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to hospitality and marketing literature in several ways:

- It extends the understanding of Customer Perceived Innovativeness by examining its multidimensional nature in the fast-food context.
- It empirically validates the mediating role of brand love, offering insights into how emotional responses translate innovation into advocacy.
- It adds a context-specific perspective from Klang Valley, Malaysia—a rapidly urbanizing region that reflects emerging-market consumer dynamics.

Limitations

As with most studies, several limitations should be acknowledged.

1. The sample was limited to Klang Valley, which may not fully represent rural or other Malaysian regions where dining habits differ.

2. The study used a cross-sectional design, capturing perceptions at one point in time; thus, it cannot infer causality.
3. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias, as respondents might overstate their brand attachment or advocacy.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a reliable foundation for understanding the emotional and behavioral consequences of perceived innovativeness in the fast-food sector.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could:

1. Expand the geographical scope to include other Malaysian states or Southeast Asian cities for comparative analysis.
2. Adopt a longitudinal design to explore how customer perceptions of innovativeness evolve over time.
3. Examine additional mediators or moderators such as customer trust, satisfaction, or brand experience to deepen understanding of the CPI–evangelism link.
4. Incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to capture richer insights into emotional responses toward innovation.

These directions could provide more comprehensive insights into how innovation shapes long-term customer relationships and advocacy behaviors.

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