

# Building Consumer–Brand Relationship: A Cross-Cultural Experiential View

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## ABSTRACT

**This research aims to develop a framework of consumer–brand relationship by taking an experiential view. In this article, the authors report a cross-cultural comparative study that was conducted on a sample of real consumers at coffee chain stores in Shanghai, China, and Taipei, Taiwan. The findings reveal that individual as well as shared experiences work through brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image to shape a consumer–brand relationship. © 2006 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.**

The development of consumer–brand relationship has been a focus of branding theory (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Franzen, 1999) in recent years. Through brand-related communications, the brand acts as a mechanism in engaging both buyer and seller in a long-term consumer–brand relationship (e.g., Davis, Oliver, & Brodie, 2000; Fournier, 1998; Keller, 1993, 1998; Rao & Ruekert, 1994). This relationship does not only occupy a critical position in the mental stage of a brand (e.g., Dyson, Farr, & Hollis, 1996; Keller, 2001), but it also engenders the state of greater sales, less price susceptibility, better loyalty, and higher margin (e.g., D. A. Aaker

& Joachimsthaler, 2000; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Franzen, 1999). Relationship marketing has prompted brand managers to seek innovative ways to create mutually beneficial relationships with consumers (Mitchell & Orwig, 2002). Previous studies on consumer–brand relationships were mainly focused on the relationship formulation (e.g., Bagozzi, 1995; Duncan & Moriarty, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Peterson, 1995), relationship development (e.g., Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Franzen, 1999), relationship pattern (e.g., D. A. Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Kaltcheva & Weitz, 1999), relationship scheme (e.g., Blackston, 1992; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Fournier, 1994; Franzen, 1999; Hess, 1998; Martin, 1998), and the response effects of brand relationship (e.g., Kaltcheva & Weitz, 1999; Park & Kim, 2001). Although academicians recognize the importance of consumer–brand relationship, existing empirical evidences do not actually address the process of building a relationship with a brand (Park & Kim, 2001).

The traditional method of brand marketing mostly appeals to functional links with consumers, but consumers now wish for a more compelling experience (Schmitt, 1999). A survey on experiential communication was conducted with a group of marketing executives, and two-thirds of the survey participants believed that spending on experiential communication will increase over the next five to ten years (Schmitt, 1999). Schmitt (1999) indicated that experiential marketing has proven itself to be a good starting point for studies on consumer–brand relationship. Franzen (1999) stated that the consumer–brand relationship is in the final stages of the mental brand responses. He also claimed that the consumer–brand relationship is formed by consumer experience and brand knowledge (or brand meanings). Meanwhile, Keller (2001) laid out a series of steps for building brand equity, also suggesting consumer–brand relationship as the final step. The consumer–brand relationship depends largely on the successful establishment of the brand meanings (i.e., brand personality, brand association, brand attitude, and brand image) in the minds of consumers. These brand meanings can be formed directly from a consumer's experience. As the experience economy unfolds in the 21st century, brand marketers must bond with consumers by staging holistic brand experiences (e.g., Schmitt, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Furthermore, brand meanings are becoming crucial mediators between brand experience and consumer–brand relationship.

The present study differs from previous studies in three ways. First, whereas previous studies have focused more on emotional experience (e.g., Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Richins, 1997; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991; C. Yoo, Park, & MacInnis, 1998) or relate experience (e.g., Muniz & Guinn, 2001), the present study includes not only the emotional experience but also the sense, think, act, and relate experiences. Moreover, to the author's best knowledge, this work is the first empirical study focusing on building consumer–brand relationship from the consumer's experiential view.

Second, although brand meanings (i.e., brand personality, brand association, brand attitude, and brand image) are known to be important mediators between brand experience and consumer–brand relationship, very few studies have explored the effects of their contexts. The present study attempts to clarify these causal relationships among them.

Third, there is a severe paucity of brand experience-related studies in countries other than the United States. The present study addresses this lacuna by choosing study sites in China and Taiwan. Most noteworthy is the fact that despite China's astronomical economic growth in the last 10 years, very few brand studies have been conducted therein. With upcoming world events like the 2008 Olympics and the 2010 World Exposition in Beijing and Shanghai, respectively, economic and business opportunities in China will surely escalate to the next level (Wu, 2002). Furthermore, after a decade of economic reforms, the people in China have begun to desire more consumer products, as well as newer and more famous brands from all over the world. A growing trend among the white-collar population can certainly help to further exemplify the craze and addiction to foreign brands like Starbucks, an American coffee brand symbolizing a leisurely lifestyle. This phenomenon can also be exemplified by the recent boom in cellular phone usage. Chinese cellular phone users have reached a whopping 120 million by 2002, representing the largest cellular phone market in the world. PCs and VCDs have also yielded strong sales growth in Chinese market. Schmitt (1999) stated that consumers in emerging markets are becoming more and more sophisticated. Watson (1997) concluded that people in China who patronize McDonald's do so mainly for the experience, not for the product. The present study chooses these two cities as the study cities for the reasons stated above.

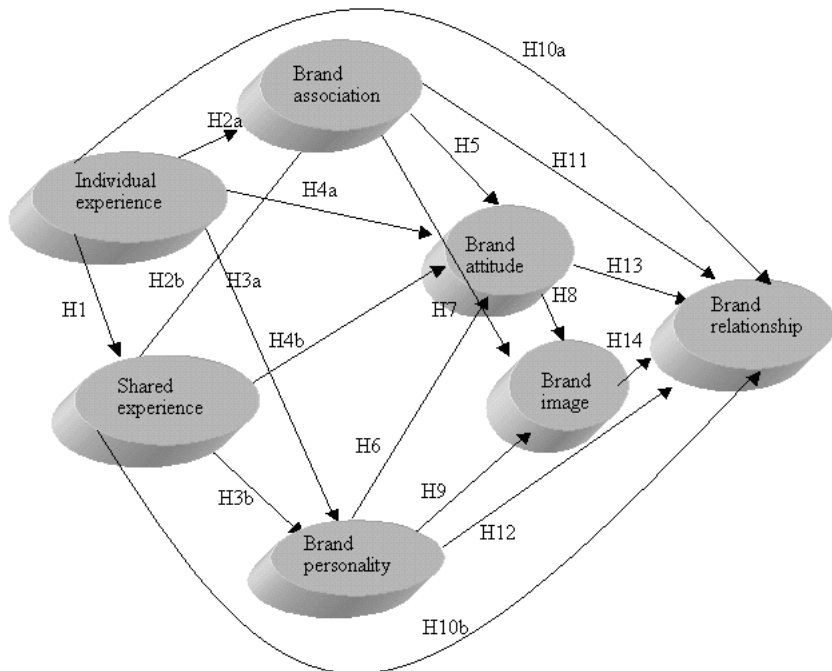
The main aim of the present study was to test a general framework for building a consumer–brand relationship from an experiential view. In addressing this issue, the present study attempted to perform a test on research hypotheses by empirically cross validating the proposed conceptual model in a cross-country context. In other words, the research hypotheses in this study were primarily focused on the causal paths among brand mental variables that finally influence the consumer–brand relationship.

## **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

Brand knowledge (or brand meaning) is always linked to brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand attitude, brand personality, and brand image (e.g., D. A. Aaker, 1991; Franzen, 1999; Keller, 1993, 1998). Although academicians proposed various constructs of brand association, they did not reach any consensus. Some academicians focused mainly on product associations (e.g., Farquhar & Herr, 1993; Keller, 1993), and others concentrated more on organization associations (e.g., Brown & Dacin, 1997). D. A. Aaker (1996b) proposed four brand associative types: product associations, organization associations, brand personality,

and symbol associations. Symbol associations aim to gain brand awareness. This study assumed that brand awareness holds constant, and that consumers are already aware of the brands. Thus, this study did not put the constructs of both symbol associations and brand awareness into discussion, but assumed that corporate and product associations representing different meanings combine to describe brand associations (e.g., D. A. Aaker, 1996b; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Chen, 2001; Dacin & Smith, 1994). The perceived quality is categorized into brand association (e.g., D. A. Aaker & Jacobson, 2001; Chen, 2001). Consistent with D. A. Aaker's (1996b) work, this study discussed brand personality separately from brand associations. Moreover, the brand power model of Na, Marshall, and Keller (1999) demonstrated that brand attitude and brand association combine to formulate the brand image. Keller (2003) proposed multiple dimensions of brand knowledge, and stated that brand attitude, brand association, and brand image all hold different information that would link to a brand. In sum, this study focused on brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image, and considered these four variables as the mediators between brand experiences and consumer-brand relationships. The present study's conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

However, even though the consumer-brand relationship is influenced not only by consumer experiences but also by other factors, including environmental, communicative, consumer-induced (e.g., change in personality or needs), and competitive factors (e.g., Fournier, 1998), this



**Figure 1.** Hypothetical model.

study focused exclusively on the consumer experience in building the consumer–brand relationship, withholding the assumption that those exogenous factors remained unchanged during a certain period of time.

## Brand Experience

Experiences are private events that occur in response to stimulation and often result from direct observation and/or participation in events, whether real, virtual, or in dreams (Schmitt, 1999). The experiential states may be categorized into rational activities (cognitive), emotional responses (affective), and behavioral intentions (conation) (e.g., Daugherty, 2001; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Padgett & Allen, 1997). Brand experiences are thus created in response to brand-related stimuli during the encounter (e.g., Davis et al., 2000; Padgett & Allen, 1997). Previous studies proposed numerous patterns of experiential classification (e.g., Ellwood, 2000; Evard & Aurier, 1996; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). This study is based on the work of Schmitt (1999), in which brand experiences are divided into two categories: individual and shared experiences. Sense, feel, and think experiences are considered as individual experiences. In contrast, act and relate experiences are regarded as shared experiences. According to Schmitt (1999), sense marketing appeals to the senses; feel marketing appeals to the inner feelings and emotions of consumers; think marketing appeals to consumer creativity; act experience appeals to affect bodily experience, lifestyle, and interactions of consumers; and relate marketing appeals to other people or cultures.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) proposed the experiential aspects of consumption: fantasies, feelings, and fun. They further stated that cognition experience (fantasies) influences the affect experience (feelings) and ultimately, they influence behavior experience (fun). Schmitt (1999) also claimed that the development of experiential types resembled the AIDA model in consumer research and the hierarchy-of-effects model in advertising research. It implies that cognitive and affective effects influence behavioral effects. Holbrook (2000) concluded that fantasies include all aspects of experientially oriented cognitions, which would encompass what Schmitt (1999) called the *sense and think experience*. Feelings emphasize the various consumption-related affects; Schmitt analyzed these as the feel experience. Moreover, fun refers to the leisure-oriented aspects of behavior, and Schmitt analyzed fun as an act experience.

Based on the classification of Schmitt (1999), it is stated that the individual experience (i.e., sense, feel, and think experiences) influences the shared experience (i.e., act and relate experiences), which leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1:** Individual experience significantly and positively influences shared experience.

## Brand Association

This study defines brand associations (product and organization associations) as the information linked to the node in memory. This information yields an association in the mind of the consumer (e.g., D. A. Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Krishnan, 1996). The brand association or link is reinforced when it is derived from brand experiences and when it is exposed to brand communications (e.g., Henderson, Iacobucci, & Calder, 1998; Keller, 1993). Each experience can enhance brand associations stored in terms of sensory and mental impressions (Fiske & Taylor, 1995). Supphellen (2000) found that a large number of visual and sensory impressions are stored in the brand-associated network. The sensory and emotional experiences help create and reinforce brand associations (e.g., D. A. Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Brown & Dacin, 1997). Brand associations are also the results of thoughts experience (e.g., Franzen, 1999).

Brand associations are not only formed by individual experience, but are also shaped directly from the act experience of the consumer (e.g., Keller, 2001; Petromilli & Michalczyk, 1999). Berry (2000) reported that the social experience (relate experience) helps create brand associations. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H2(a):** Individual experience significantly and positively influences brand associations.

**H2(b):** Shared experience significantly and positively influences brand associations.

## Brand Personality

This study defines brand personality as the set of human characteristics (e.g., D. A. Aaker, 1996b; Keller, 1998; Petromilli & Michalczyk, 1999) and quasi-human traits that are associated with a given brand (e.g., Keller, 1998; Upshaw, 1995). Brand personality traits are formed from consumer experience and any direct/indirect contact between the consumer and the brand (e.g., J. Aaker, 1997; Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993; Plummer, 1985). From the aspect of individual experience, not only can multi-sensory experiences help formulate brand personality (e.g., J. Aaker, 1997; Ellwood, 2000; Keller, 1993), but they can also help the emotional experience of a brand to play a significant role in the definition and development of a brand personality (e.g., J. Aaker, 1997; Berry, 2000; Keller, 1993, 1998). From the aspect of shared experience, Upshaw (1995) indicated that the act experience is essential in identifying brand personality. Thus, the following hypotheses are presented:

**H3(a):** Individual experience significantly and positively influences brand personality.

**H3(b):** Shared experience significantly and positively influences brand personality.

## **Brand Attitude**

This study describes brand attitude as a consumer's overall positive or negative evaluation of a given brand (e.g., Farquhar, 1990; Franzen, 1999). From the aspect of individual experience, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) implied that emotional experience can create positive or negative beliefs that further influence consumer brand attitude. Additionally, Dick and Basu (1994) proposed a conceptual model and demonstrated that the emotion construct is an affective antecedent of brand attitude. Similarly, Yoo et al. (1998) showed that emotional experience mediates store characteristics and store attitude at the retail level. From the aspect of shared experience, usage experience (act experience) is particularly important in brand attitude formation (e.g., D. A. Aaker, 1991; Franzen, 1999). These are summarized in the following hypotheses:

**H4(a):** Individual experience significantly and positively influences brand attitude.

**H4(b):** Shared experience significantly and positively influences brand attitude.

D. A. Aaker (1991) indicated that brand associations create positive brand attitude among consumers. The empirical result of Madrigal (2000), as well as the Brown and Dacin (1997) study, revealed that corporate association positively influences new company and product evaluations (brand attitude). D. A. Aaker and Jacobson (2001) noted that positive product association (new product launch) and negative product association (product problem) drive changes in brand attitude. The empirical result of the Gill and Dube (1998) study demonstrated that brand associations are important in new product evaluation. Farquhar (1990) observed that brand attitude includes automatic projection and control projection. The magnitude of automatic projection depends crucially on the strength of brand association. Brand association plays an important role in consumers' brand evaluations (e.g., Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001; Pullig, 2000). It is shown that brand marketers attempt to develop brand associations to create a positive brand attitude (e.g., Franzen, 1999; Low & Lamb, 2000). Keller (1998) proposed that brand attitude can be considered as a function of brand attributes and benefit associations. Moreover, Dillon, Madden, and Mukherjee (2001) noted that brand association can be used to examine brand rating in shaping a global brand attitude. Based on these evidences, this study investigates the following hypothesis:

**H5:** Brand association significantly and positively influences brand attitude.

The empirical study of Supphellen and Gronhaug (2003) showed that the brand personality of Western brands can also influence the brand attitude of non-Western consumers. J. Aaker (1997) noted that brand personality information, used as a heuristic cue, can influence consumer attitude toward a brand. Keller (1998) found that consumer brand attitude generally depends on the attributes and benefits of the brand. Nevertheless, brand personality is a type of brand attribute. Based on the expectancy-value model, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) recognized that attributes can also depend on consumers' beliefs. It is implied that brand personality influences the benefits of consumer attributes and further stimulates brand attitude. Therefore, a general attitude of overall satisfaction/liking toward the brand may be derived from relevant brand personality dimensions (Pullig, 2000). Consequently, the following hypothesis is investigated:

**H6:** Brand personality significantly and positively influences brand attitude.

## **Brand Image**

This study defines brand image as a subjective, perceptual phenomenon of brand that is reflected by a network of associations in the memory of the consumers (e.g., D. A. Aaker, 1991; Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Keller, 1998; Okada & Reibstein, 1998). Brand image is generally considered as the sum of brand associations (e.g., Biel, 1992a) or consumer perceptions of the tangible and intangible associations of the brand (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993). Na et al. (1999) developed a brand-image power model and demonstrated that the antecedent factors of brand image should be arranged in the levels of abstraction from very concrete attributes to more ephemeral perceptions of benefits and value. Brand image is built not only on brand attitude but also on brand association. Hsieh's (2002) empirical study noted that brand associations lead to the formulation of a distinct image in the minds of consumers. Pitta and Katsanis (1995) reported that creating a set of positive brand associations is the essence of creating a positive brand image. Meanwhile, brand image has two components: the associations that consumers ascribe to the brand and the brand personality (e.g., Batra, Lehmann, & Singh, 1993; Biel, 1992b; Davis, Oliver, & Brodie, 2000). Most important, brand associations are critical components in developing a brand image (e.g., Farquhar & Herr, 1993; Henderson et al., 1998; Keller, 1993). Hence, improvements on the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations will enhance the brand image (e.g., Keller, 1998; Na et al., 1999). This study then hypothesizes that brand association should be a strong precursor for brand image. Therefore, the following is suggested:



**H7:** Brand association significantly and positively influences brand image.

Keller (1993, 1998) noted that attributes, benefits, and overall brand attitude comprise the brand image. He conceptualized brand attitude as a part of brand image. Faircloth, Capella, and Alford (2001) developed a conceptual model on the impact of brand image and brand attitude on brand equity. It was shown that different combinations of brand attributes formulate a brand attitude that leads to positive brand images. Brand marketers should create a positive brand attitude for a better brand image (e.g., Blackston, 1995; Keller, 1993, 1998; Kirmani & Zeithaml, 1993; Na et al., 1999; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Thus, for the reasons mentioned above, the following hypothesis is derived:

**H8:** Brand attitude significantly and positively influences brand image.

Plummer (1985, 2000) indicated that brand image is composed of three components: product attributes, consumer benefit, and brand personality. This is consistent with the idea of Keller (1993, 1998) in which he conceived brand personality as an aspect of brand image. Moreover, O’Cass and Lim (2001) focused on nonproduct brand associations and tested their effects on brand preferences. The results indicated that brand personality positively and significantly influences brand image. Other academicians suggested that brand image is formed or reflected by a brand personality that tends to fulfill a symbolic or self-expressive function (e.g., Biel, 1992a; Davis et al., 2000; Keller, 1993, 1998). Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Guido (2001) suggested that brand personality may be a viable metaphor in understanding brand image. From the above evidence, this study comes up with the following hypothesis:

**H9:** Brand personality significantly and positively influences brand image.

### **Consumer–Brand Relationship**

This study defines consumer–brand relationship as the tie between a person and a brand that is voluntary or is enforced interdependently between the person and the brand (e.g., Blackston, 1992, 1995, 2000; Fournier, 1994). A relationship between the brand and the consumer results from the accumulation of consumption experience (Evard & Aurier, 1996). Martin (1998) showed that consumer–brand relationship increases with a positive sensory experience. Additionally, Fournier (1998) indicated that emotional experience can strengthen consumer–brand relationship. Ellwood (2000) stated that an escape from daily life, such as playing a computer game, is a form of think experience that has allowed the brand to bond with consumers. Schau (2000) suggested that using sociocultural consumer notions and the application theories of imagination

can yield a critical link to consumer self-expression, and thus self-expression becomes an aspect of the consumer–brand relationship (e.g., Fournier, 1994, 1998). Accordingly, the following is suggested:

**H10(a):** Individual experience significantly and positively influences consumer–brand relationship.

Fournier (1994) noted that brand actions (act experience) have clear implications for the consumer–brand relationship. Lau and Lee (1999) suggested that brand experience, particularly in the area of usage (act experience), positively influences consumers' trust relationship with the brand. Schmitt (1999) found that relate experience can go beyond social categorization to take true possession of a brand by establishing brand relationships similar to human intimate relationships. Thus, the following hypothesis is presented:

**H10(b):** Shared experience significantly and positively influences consumer–brand relationship.

Dyson et al. (1996, 1997) indicated that a successful brand forges a special relationship with consumers through its unique combination of product-attribute association. Similarly, Wyner (1999) reported that product association helps shape the brand relationship. Nevertheless, D. A. Aaker (1996b) suggested that organization associations can also provide a self-expressive benefit, which is a type of relationship benefit. Brown and Dacin (1997) reported that consumers utilize organization associations to identify brand relationship. Aside from organization association, consumers can also utilize product association to define their relationship with the brand (e.g., Pullig, 2000). On these grounds, this study suggests the following:

**H11:** Brand association significantly and positively influences consumer–brand relationship.

Brand relationship is a logical extension of brand personality (Blackston, 1992, 2000). Fournier (1994) stated that brand personality systematically influences the strength of a relationship. Meanwhile, D. A. Aaker (1996b) observed that brand personality can be linked with a brand's emotional and self-expressive benefits. Brand personality then yields a basis for the consumer–brand relationship. Furthermore, D. A. Aaker (1996) stated that brand personality adds depth, feeling, and liking to the relationship. Upshaw (1995) reported that a lack of personality makes it difficult to establish a closer relationship with consumers. D. A. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) further noted that a brand personality helps form the customer relationship and make the relationship development clearer. As a result, this study presents the following hypothesis:

**H12:** Brand personality significantly and positively influences consumer–brand relationship.

Blackston (1992) stated that understanding the relationship between the brand and the consumer requires observing two things: the consumer attitude toward the brand and the brand attitude toward the consumer. It is indicated that the development of a successful consumer–brand relationship is crucially dependent on the consumer perception of the brand attitude. Blackston (1995) further indicated that management attitude is vital to brand-relationship development and maintenance. Franzen (1999) stated that the mutual relationship between a consumer and a brand includes both components of interaction and attitude between a consumer and a brand. Finally, Keller (2001) suggested that brand judgment (brand attitude) creates an intensive and active consumer–brand relationship. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is investigated:

**H13:** Brand attitude significantly and positively influences consumer–brand relationship.

D. A. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) developed a consumer relationship model and suggested that brand image helps in developing deep relationships with consumers. Farquhar (1990) found that a consistent brand image can create a positive consumer–brand relationship. Moreover, Blackston (1995) suggested that proper management of brand image and brand attitude will strengthen the brand relationship. Additionally, Davis et al. (2000) stated that the consumer trust is created by leveraging the strong indigenous brand image. Finally, Fournier (1998) stated that brand image serves to legitimize the brand as an active relationship partner. Hence, this study offers the following hypothesis:

**H14:** Brand image significantly and positively influences consumer–brand relationship.

## METHOD

### Setting

This study focused mainly on brand experience and the consumer–brand relationship. Thus, the appropriate measurement of these two constructs was the focus of this research. Referring to the literature on brand experience, Dea and Hemerling (1998) reported that experiential branding focuses on consumer interactions with a company's product and services, making it ideal for application to the service industry. Meanwhile, experiential branding is possible when a company has frequent consumer contacts. It is especially powerful

when the company demonstrates consistent treatment across a wide range of interactions, which can help influence customers' experiences across multiple channels. Ellwood (2000) claimed that retail sites provide one of the best opportunities for developing such brand experiences, because they offer a carefully organized experience in a deliberately controlled environment. As for the literature on brand relationship, Franzen (1999) noted that close ties can exist between a consumer and a brand in the service sector. Randall (1997) showed that all brands aim to build an enduring relationship with their consumers, particularly in the service sector. Summarizing these academicians' views, the service sector is suitable for this study.

In more emotionally or culturally significant products, consumers are likely to indulge in brand experiences (P. Cooper, 1999). Academicians frequently used Starbucks as a fine example in experiential marketing (e.g., Schmitt, 1999; Zarem, 2000). Hence, this study employed coffee chain stores as the product stimuli. Sample data from both Taipei and Shanghai were collected to facilitate a cross-cultural study.

## MEASUREMENT DEVELOPMENT

Based on items used in the literature and the definitions previously given, this study generated a pool of sample measures. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, which was used to relieve the burden of informants and to reduce possible response errors from the large number of items used for this study. To enhance face validity, this study employed a group of experts to assess the initial pool of items qualitatively. Finally, 10 undergraduate students from Chiao-Tung University in Shanghai and another 10 undergraduate students from Cheng-Chi University in Taipei were instructed to pretest the questionnaires.

- **Brand experience:** As discussed previously, this study recognizes two major types of brand experience, namely, individual and shared experiences. In line with the scale developed by Schmitt (1999), this study developed nine items in the former type and six items in the latter type.
- **Brand association:** Although a qualitative study using free association can grasp the substantial meaning of the brand (Keller, 1998), this study examined the causal effect of the brand knowledge construct by utilizing the direct method. The product association construct was assessed by four items developed for this study based on the work of D. A. Aaker (1996b). Moreover, four different items were developed for the assessment of organization association construct, based on the work of Brown and Dacin (1997), and Chen (2001). Product association and organization association were summed up to measure the overall brand association.

- Brand personality: D. A. Aaker (1996b) developed and tested the Brand Personality Scale (BPS). BPS includes five personality factors: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Specifically, D. A. Aaker (1996b) stated that excitement is a personality trait that has worked in the coffee context. Consequently, this study only employed the excitement dimension to measure brand personality. Thus, according to the excitement dimension of D. A. Aaker (1996b), four items were developed to measure brand personality in this research.
- Brand attitude: Six items were developed for this study from the work of Mattila (2001), Auty (1992), and Lewis (1981). These items include product, service, and store atmosphere attitude.
- Brand image: Four items based on the work of Roth (1995) were developed for this study. These items contain two factors: functional/sensory and social image.
- Consumer–brand relationship: Eighteen items were developed for this research based on the work of Fournier (1994) and Hess (1998). These items were ascribed to six relationship dimensions: functional exchange, love, commitment, attachment, self-concept connection, and partner quality. According to Fournier (1994), the brand relationship quality model suggests that the relationship among these dimensions is additive. Therefore, this study is the summation of these six dimensions for the measurement of consumer–brand relationship.

Although brand experience, brand association, brand attitude, brand image, and consumer–brand relationship are composed of several dimensions, the present study employed methods of computing factor-based scores and assigning equal weight to individual items to assess these constructs. Because of the cross-cultural study, the equivalence for all items was sought through character transformation (simple-to-complex Chinese).

## Samples

Information was collected from real consumers. Due to the lack of population information, this study employed purposive sampling to improve the precision of the estimates (D. R. Cooper & Schindler, 1998). To control the sample distribution, this study specified three control dimensions, time intervals (morning, afternoon, and night), operation types (low/middle price and premium price), and geographic area coverage to reduce consumption pattern biases. Table 1 lists the detailed sample design profile.

Using the sample design stated above, questionnaires were administered at five different coffee chain stores (Starbucks, Kohikan, Shangdau, CoffeeLox, and Bonomi) in Shanghai, and six different coffee chain stores

**Table 1. Sampling Design.**

	Number of Coffee Brands	Number of Branch Stores	Time Interval	Operation Type	District Coverage
Shanghai	5	46	Morning/ afternoon/ night	Middle price/ premium price	9
Taipei	6	46	Morning/ afternoon/ night	Middle price/ premium price	10

(Starbucks, Kohikan, Seattle, Ikari, IS, and Doutor) in Taipei. A total of 690 questionnaires were distributed to consumers in each region. Invalid samples were eliminated, leading to a final survey size of 611 samples for Shanghai and 622 samples for Taipei. The demographic profiles of the respondents' characteristics were also depicted for the two regions. The demographic characteristics of Shanghai samples are as follows: gender (male: 47.8%, female: 52.2%), age (20–30 years: 55.3%, 31–40 years: 29.8%), and occupation (student: 13.1%, office worker: 68.1%). On the other hand, the Taipei samples have the following demographic characteristics: gender (male: 38.6%, female: 61.4%), age (20–30 years: 52.4%, 31–40 years: 23.1%), and occupation (student: 29.4%, office worker: 51.9%). Relatively speaking, the respondent profiles revealed that male office workers were among the majority of coffee consumers in Shanghai, and young female students were among the majority consumers in Taipei.

## RESULTS

The study followed a two-step approach as recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). The first step in this approach is to develop an acceptable measurement model before building on this model to predict causal relationships among the study variables.

### Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model used three methods to select and assess the final items that would be used for further hypotheses testing:

1. Reliability check: Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was used for the items of each construct. Notably, Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) suggested that 0.7 should be used as the cutoff point for reliability with items that did not significantly contribute to the reliability (item to total coefficient  $< 0.5$ ) being deleted for the purpose of parsimony. As a result, 43 and 49 items were retained for seven variables in Shanghai and Taipei, respectively. Table 2 lists the outcome.

**Table 2. Measure of Reliability.**

Factor	Dimension	Measures	ITT < .5		CB's $\alpha$	
			SH	TP	SH	TP
Individual experience	Sense	This coffee store is focused on experience sensory appeal.			.85	.92
	Sense	This coffee store does not try to engage my senses.	*			
	Sense	This coffee store tries to excite my senses.				
	Feel	This coffee store tries to put me in a certain mood.				
	Feel	This coffee store tries to be emotional.				
	Feel	This coffee store tries to be affective.				
	Think	This coffee store tries to intrigue me.				
Shared experience	Think	This coffee store tries to stimulate my curiosity.	*			
	Think	This coffee store appeals to my creative thinking.	*			
	Act	This coffee store tries to make me think about lifestyle.			.84	.87
	Act	This coffee store tries to remind me of activities I can do.				
	Act	This coffee store gets me to think about my behavior.				
	Relate	This coffee store tries to make me think about bonds.				
	Relate	I can relate to other people through this coffee store.				
Brand association	Relate	This coffee store tries to get me to think about relations.				
	Product	Stability of coffee quality			.78	.79
	Product	Freshness of coffee beans				
	Product	Coffee flavor				
	Product	Coffee brewing method	*	*		
	Organization	Care about consumers				
	Organization	Innovative ability				
Brand personality	Organization	Professional and well trained staff				
	Organization	Interaction with community	*	*		
	Excitement	Up-to-date	*	*	.76	.86
	Excitement	Spirited				
	Excitement	Daring				
	Excitement	Imaginative				
	Brand attitude	Product	Flavor			.71
Product		Varieties	*	*		
Service		Service attitude				
Service		Knowledge	*			
Atmosphere		In-store decoration				
Atmosphere		Comfort				
Brand image	Function	This coffee store focuses on coffee quality.			.70	.79
	Function	This coffee store satisfies my desire to drink coffee.				
	Sense/social	This coffee store meets my sensory enjoyment.				
	Sense/social	This coffee store offers me a sense of group belonging.				
Brand relationship	Functional	This coffee store meets my functional needs.	*		.91	.94
	Functional	I value the functional benefits of this coffee store.				
	Functional	The coffee store's coffee is good value for the money.				
	Love	I really love this coffee store.		*		
	Love	I am addicted to this coffee store in some way.				
	Love	I have feeling for this coffee store.				
	Commitment	I'll stay with this coffee store through good times or bad.				
	Commitment	I have a lot of faith in my future with this coffee store.	*	*		
	Commitment	I feel very loyal to this coffee store.				
	Attachment	No other coffee store can take the place of this store.				
	Attachment	This coffee store plays an important role in my life.				
	Attachment	I feel missing if I haven't gone to the store for a while.				
	Connection	This coffee store reminds me of who I am.	*			
Connection	The coffee store's image and my self image are similar.					
Connection	This coffee store and I have a lot in common.					
Partner quality	This coffee store takes good care of me.					
Partner quality	This coffee store is reliable and dependable.	*				
Partner quality	This coffee store treats me an important customer.					

Note: ITT: Item-to-total coefficient; CB's: Cronbach's; SH: Shanghai; TP: Taipei; \* ITT < 0.5.

2. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA): EFA was then performed to examine whether individual items were loaded on corresponding factors as intended. This study conducted an oblique rotation on all measured items. The resultant factor structure showed that a number of items were not identical to the corresponding factors, and that several factor loadings of items below 0.4 were deleted in this step. As a result, 35 and 38 items were retained in Shanghai and Taipei, respectively.
3. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA): Based on the covariance matrix of the items, CFA was used to assess the items of the research construct.

### **Fit Indices Selection**

Garver and Mentzer (1999) suggested two strategies which may be used to evaluate the overall model fit: (a) selecting fit indices that represent different families of fit indices, and (b) specifying a stringent set of criteria and selecting fit indices that best represent these criteria. Although numerous fit indices are available, this study applied the second strategy. Marsh, Balla, and McDonald (1988) noted that the criteria for ideal fit indices are the following: (a) relative independence of the sample size, (b) accuracy and consistency with which to assess different models, and (c) ease of interpretation, which is aided by a well-defined continuum or a preset range. As recommended, this study used a pattern of four indices.

The first and second indices used were the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and the relative noncentrality index (RNI). The TLI and RNI were used to assess the goodness of fit of the models because these two indices appear to be among the most stable and useful indicators of goodness of fit. Likewise, evidence suggests that measures of fit are unbiased and relatively independent of sample size (e.g., Bentler, 1990; Hu & Bentler, 1998; Marsh, Balla, & Hau, 1996). Additionally, the difference between TLI and RNI is that the TLI penalizes model complexity and appropriately rewards model parsimony, whereas RNI does not penalize model complexity. A fit statistic of 0.9 or higher is considered good, and fit levels of around 0.8 are considered acceptable (Gerbing & Anderson, 1992).

The third index was CFI. CFI is the norm version of the RNI. It is also not systematically related to sample size, and it is a pure measure of model fit in the sense that model parsimony is not taken into account (Marsh, Balla, & Hau, 1996). The fourth fit index was the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). Unlike the other indices, RMSEA does not require a null model in its calculation and does not conflict with the requirement for parsimony (e.g., Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996). Ideally, RMSEA values of less than 0.05 and 0.08 are taken to reflect a close fit and a reasonable fit, respectively. Additionally, this study added an index of the mean ratio of chi-square to the degrees of freedom for purposes of comparison.



Table 3 lists the values of the fit statistics. The ratios of the chi-square to the degrees of freedom were between 2.53 and 2.85, which mean that both were within the acceptable range of 2 to 5 (Marsh & Hovecar, 1985). Moreover, the values of TLI, RNI, and CFI were between 0.91 and 0.92, which were all within the good level, and the values of RMSEA were 0.051–0.055 in both countries, which indicated a close fit to the 0.05 standard.

The fact that the overall goodness-of-fit indices were good, that the model had a firm theoretical basis, and that there was a good level of consistency in the countries enabled this study to proceed with evaluating the measurement model and structural models. This study assessed the quality of the measurement models by investigating unidimensionality, composite reliability, variance-extracted estimates, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Table 3 shows that the overall goodness of fit supports unidimensionality (Steenkamp & van Trijp, 1991). For a construct to have a good reliability, its composite reliability should be between 0.60 and 0.80, and the variance-extracted estimates should exceed 0.50 (e.g., Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 4 shows that all scales demonstrate good reliability. Convergent validity is assessed by reviewing the *T* tests for the factor loadings. The *t* values for the factor loading ranged from 14.77 to 24.81 and from 13.76 to 24.75 for the Shanghai and Taipei samples, respectively. The fact that all *t* tests were significant ( $p < .05$ ) demonstrates that the convergent validity is adequate. To assess the discriminant validity, this study performed two procedures

**Table 3. Overall Model Fit of Measurement Model.**

Fit Statistics	Shanghai, China	Taipei, Taiwan
Chi-square/dof	2.53	2.85
TLI	0.91	0.92
RNI	0.91	0.92
CFI	0.91	0.92
RMSEA	0.051	0.055

**Table 4. Measurement Model.**

Construct	Composite Reliability		Variance Extracted	
	Shanghai, China	Taipei, Taiwan	Shanghai, China	Taipei, Taiwan
Individual experience	0.79	0.90	0.52	0.56
Shared experience	0.83	0.86	0.55	0.52
Brand association	0.79	0.78	0.52	0.51
Brand personality	0.77	0.74	0.57	0.60
Brand attitude	0.73	0.74	0.53	0.60
Brand image	0.70	0.70	0.51	0.54
Brand relationship	0.90	0.91	0.57	0.59

(Hatcher, 1998). First, a chi-square difference test was performed. The resultant chi-square differences (48.6 and 52.1) were significant for the model comparisons ( $p < .001$ ) in both the Shanghai and Taipei samples. To summarize, this test supported discriminant validity.

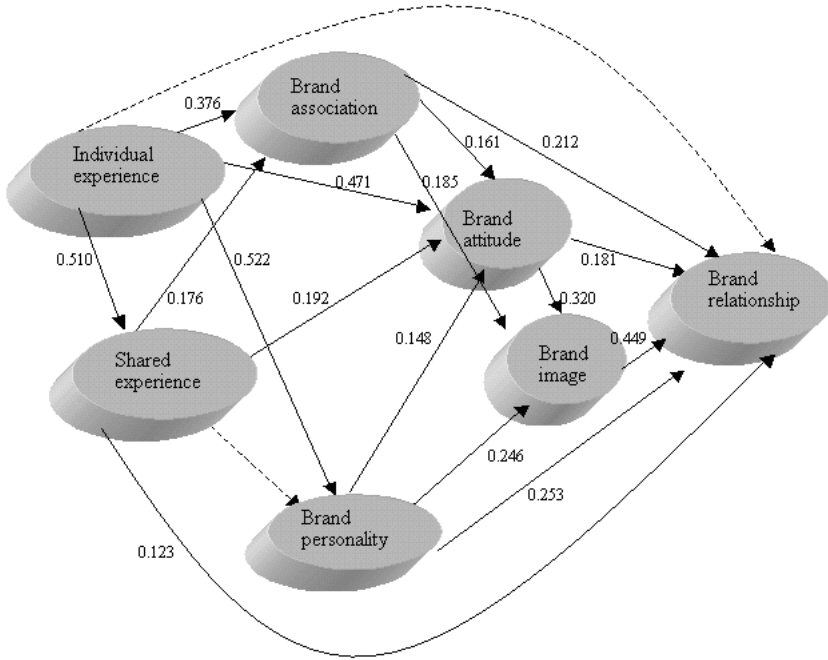
A confidence-interval test was performed to assess the discriminant validity of seven factors. The confidence interval of the two regions does not include the value of 1.0 (0.64–0.79 and 0.65–0.75 in the Shanghai and Taipei samples, respectively). These findings also support the discriminant validity of the measures. In summary, the measurement models indicated good quality of unidimensionality reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, which enabled this study to conduct the structural model evaluation.

### Structural Model Evaluation

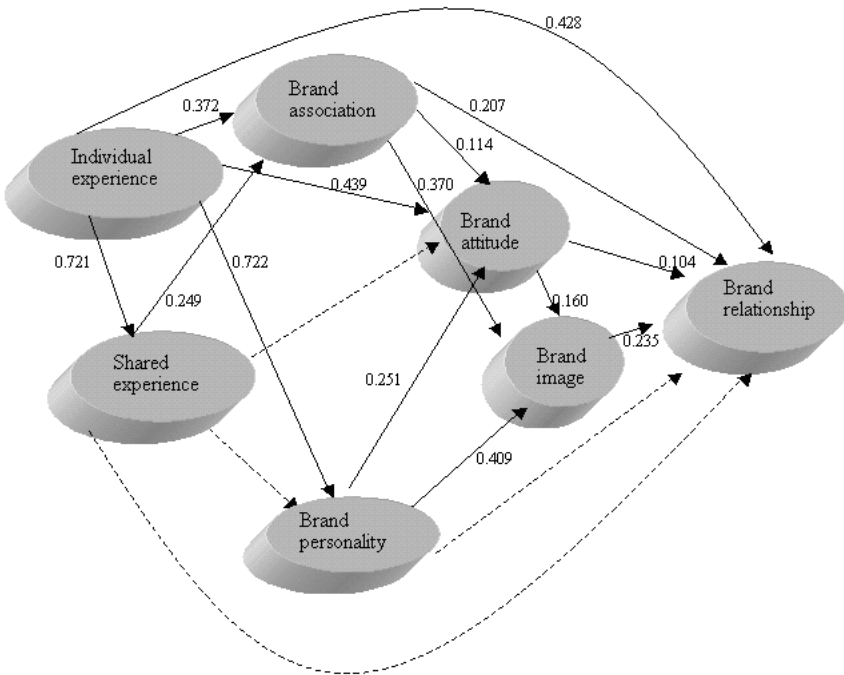
For the final model (standardized path coefficient) shown in Figures 2 and 3, the structural model specified individual experience as the only exogenous construct. Shared experience, brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, brand image, and brand relationship were specified as the endogenous constructs. The model was defined by 33 and 34 items that identified the seven factors in China and Taiwan, respectively.

The variance/covariance matrix among the variables was used to test the model. Table 5 reveals the acceptable goodness-of-fit statistics, indicating the overall acceptability of the structural model analyzed. RNI, TLI, and CFI (0.91 and 0.92 in the Shanghai and Taipei samples, respectively) were accepted within the thresholds for indicating a good fit, and RMSEA (0.05 in both samples) was well within the thresholds for indicating a good fit. To supplement these findings, the chi-square ratio index (2.53 and 2.82 in the Shanghai and Taipei samples, respectively) was also examined and was found to match the requirements set by academicians (e.g., Carmines & McIver, 1981; Marsh & Hovecar, 1985). Furthermore, most path coefficients (unstandardized) were significant ( $P < .05$ ). The  $p$  values of the estimates for hypothesis testing were determined by means of a one-tailed  $t$  test.

One important finding was that all of the causal relationships among brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image are significant in both countries. This finding provides strong empirical evidence for H5–H9. In addition, the positive paths from individual experience to shared experience, brand association, brand personality, and brand attitude are confirmed for both of the samples. Consequently, the empirical findings support H1, H2(a), H3(a), and H4(a). Table 5 also indicates that brand association, brand attitude, and brand image positively influence brand relationship in both the Shanghai and Taipei samples. Hence, these results support H11, H13, and H14. In contrast, no positively significant effects were found between shared experience and brand personality in the two regions. Therefore, H3(b) is rejected. Besides the above hypothesis testing, the data provide mixed evidence. Specifically, the



**Figure 2.** Validated structure model (standardized path coefficient: Shanghai, China).



**Figure 3.** Validated structure model (standardized path coefficient: Taipei, Taiwan).

**Table 5. Structural Model Estimates.**

From	Hypothesized Path	To	Path Estimate		T Value		Test Result	
			SH	TP	SH	TP	SH	TP
H1: Individual experience	Shared experience		.679	.758	10.04**	16.14**	Accept	Accept
H2a: Individual experience	Brand association		.403	.318	6.22**	5.60**	Accept	Accept
H2b: Shared experience	Brand association		.142	.202	3.14**	3.79**	Accept	Accept
H3a: Individual experience	Brand personality		.758	.820	8.29**	11.22**	Accept	Accept
H3b: Shared experience	Brand personality		.226	.059	0.37	0.93	Reject	Reject
H4a: Individual experience	Brand attitude		.464	.398	6.90**	4.46**	Accept	Accept
H4b: Shared experience	Brand attitude		.142	.027	3.73**	0.46	Accept	Reject
H5: Brand association	Brand attitude		.148	.121	3.13**	1.99**	Accept	Accept
H6: Brand personality	Brand attitude		.101	.201	2.91**	2.99**	Accept	Accept
H7: Brand association	Brand image		.187	.415	2.79**	6.77**	Accept	Accept
H8: Brand attitude	Brand image		.359	.173	4.20**	2.67**	Accept	Accept
H9: Brand personality	Brand image		.183	.347	3.82**	6.49**	Accept	Accept
H10a: Individual experience	Brand relationship		.006	.508	0.08	5.26**	Reject	Accept
H10b: Shared experience	Brand relationship		.093	.013	2.19**	0.22	Accept	Reject
H11: Brand association	Brand relationship		.263	.288	4.71**	3.75**	Accept	Accept
H12: Brand personality	Brand relationship		.231	.057	5.39**	0.07	Accept	Reject
H13: Brand attitude	Brand relationship		.244	.137	2.54**	1.98**	Accept	Accept
H14: Brand image	Brand relationship		.550	.291	7.24**	3.19**	Accept	Accept
Goodness-of-fit statistics of the model			Shanghai		Taipei			
Chi-square/dof			2.53		2.82			
TLI			0.91		0.92			
RNI			0.91		0.92			
CFI			0.91		0.92			
RMSEA			0.051		0.054			

Note. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; SH: Shanghai; TP: Taipei.

influence of individual experience and shared experience on brand relationship displays an inconsistent effect in the two countries for the two hypotheses. Similarly, shared experience does not demonstrate a consistent significant effect on brand attitude in the two samples. In addition, the brand personality demonstrates different significance effects on the consumer–brand relationship in the two regions. Hence, the results yield mixed support to H10(a), H10(b), H4(b), and H12.

Specifically, it is generally agreed upon that researchers should compare equivalent models and not simply test the performance of a proposed model (e.g., Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Lin & Hau, 1995; MacCallum, Wegener, Uchino, & Fabrigar, 1993; Williams, Bozdogan, & Lynda, 1996). Equivalent models have been defined as follows. For any given model that generates identical estimates of population covariance matrices and fits the observed data equally well, the alternative models will exist. The models are called equivalent when they produce the same set of covariance matrices. Stelzl (1986) developed four rules for generating equivalent models. Moreover, Lee and Hershberger (1990) introduced a simple rule, called the replacing rule, for generating equivalent models. Based on the work of Lee and Hershberger (1990), if endogenous variables have the same exogenous variables point at them, the causal effect between endogenous variables can be reversed or took away the arrow between endogenous variables. Based on the work of Morgan and Hunt (1994), the present hypothesized model was compared with the equivalent models in terms of the following criteria: overall fit and the statistical significance percentage of the parameters of either model. This study examined four equivalent models for both countries. The results revealed that the overall fit (TLI = 0.904–0.905; RNI = 0.904–0.905; CFI = 0.903–0.904) of the equivalent models is lower than that of the hypothesized model (TLI = 0.91–0.92; RNI = 0.91–0.92; CFI = 0.91–0.92). In addition, the percentage of statistically significant parameters (Shanghai: 83–86%; Taipei: 72–76%) of the four equivalent models for both countries is less than that of the hypothesized model (Shanghai: 88%; Taipei: 78%). These evidences support the robustness of the hypothesized model.

### **Importance of the Predictor Variable**

The structural model specified direct and indirect paths between brand experiences and consumer–brand relationships. As previously conceptualized, consumer–brand relationship was directly affected by individual experience as well as by shared experience. On the other hand, the consumer–brand relationship was indirectly affected by the mediators (i.e., brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image). Hence, the effect size of individual experiences and shared experiences on consumer–brand relationship was computed based on the overall causal paths between brand experience and brand relationship. Thus, this study investigated the total causal effects including the direct

**Table 6. Total Path Coefficient (Direct + Indirect) for Proposed Model.**

Construct	Individual Experience		Shared Experience		Brand Association		Brand Personality		Brand Attitude		Brand Image	
	SH	TP	SH	TP	SH	TP	SH	TP	SH	TP	SH	TP
Shared experience	.510	.721										
Brand association	.466	.552	.176	.249								
Brand personality	.533	.726	.021	.055								
Brand attitude	.631	.504	.224	.073	.161	.114	.148	.251				
Brand image	.278	.238	.115	.127	.237	.203	.294	.450	.326	.164		
Brand relationship	.413	.625	.255	.104	.347	.310	.412	.187	.327	.143	.449	.235

*Note.* SH: Shanghai; TP: Taipei. Standardized path coefficient.

and indirect effects of the study variables. The total causal effects are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6 indicates that individual experiences affect the brand relationship more than the shared experiences do for both countries. It also revealed for both countries that brand association and brand image are the most crucial mediators between brand experience and brand relationship, which are followed closely by brand personality and brand attitude.

## DISCUSSION

The sustainability of brand loyalty has become increasingly difficult to obtain. The consumer–brand relationship is critical to the building of brand loyalty (e.g., Fournier, 1994, 1998). Few empirical studies have examined how to establish the consumer–brand relationship. This study takes an experiential view to explore the effects of brand associative network. Previous studies have been limited to certain fields, and this study attempts to contribute to the theory of consumer experience and consumer–brand relationship in three different ways. First, the proposed model contributes to the reinforcement of previous studies by specifying how brand marketers can guide brand associative network variables through individual and shared experiences. Second, this study uses brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image as mediators between brand experience and consumer–brand relationship. Thus, context effects among these mediators are examined. Third, previous studies have paid more attention to investigate the effects of the consumer–brand relationship. However, this article represents the first attempt to focus more on the establishment of a consumer–brand relationship.

This study tested the research hypotheses in a cross-regional context, and assessed the similarities/dissimilarities of the two regions. As a result, the individual experience was found to have significant impact on shared experience in both regions, thereby agreeing with the claim of

Schmitt (1999). Individual and shared experiences were all found to be positive but with different influences on brand associative network.

This study has confirmed for both regions that the individual experience represents a significant impact on brand association, brand personality, and brand attitude. In reference to the effect of shared experience on brand association, this study has also found support in the two regions. Specifically, the effect of shared experience on brand association was lower than that of individual experience. A likely explanation for this finding is that the sense experience appeals to the product-related association, and the shared experience appeals to the product-unrelated association of the lifestyle and social relationships of the tested subjects.

As for the effect of shared experience on brand personality, no significant relationship was found across both samples. A probable explanation for this finding is that shared experience belongs to the group level, and brand personality belongs to the individual level. And the effect of shared experience on brand attitude for Shanghai respondents was that shared experience can positively and significantly influence brand attitude. On the contrary, Taipei respondents have shown the opposite result. A possible reason could be the belief that, by and large, an affluent society tends to nurture individualism (Steenkamp, 2001). Currently, the best available data suggest that in terms of affluence Shanghai ranks lower than Taipei. Further, it should be borne in mind that economic development in China has been led by communist government. The collectivism mirrors a collective perception of a group of people. The collectivism may also result in the shared experience having a more positive influence on brand attitude for Shanghai than it is for Taipei.

A second key purpose of this study was to examine the context effects of brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image, also to assess their mediating effect between brand experience and consumer–brand relationship. It was found that both brand association and brand personality significantly influenced brand attitude and brand image. Brand attitude was also found to affect brand image in both regions.

As per the findings, it appears that brand attitude is formed directly by brand association and brand personality. Brand image is directly shaped by brand attitude, brand association, and brand personality. This study also finds that brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image yield to different mediating effects between brand experience and consumer–brand relationship. From the findings of the total effects, it is found that brand association and brand image are more important mediators than the other constructs.

A third objective of this study was to examine the establishment of consumer–brand relationships. This study finds that individual experience can positively and significantly influence consumer–brand relationship for Taipei respondents. On the contrary, shared experience can positively and significantly influence consumer–brand relationship for

Shanghai respondents. It is probable that aspects pertaining to individualism versus collectivism and the UAI (uncertainty avoidance index) could all affect the process of brand-equity formation in various cultures and regions (Yoo & Donthu, 2002). Taiwan's UAI index of 69 as compared to the 30 of China also reveals that the Taiwanese have a higher level of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001), thus requiring a tangible sense experience to form a brand relationship. The effects of brand association, brand attitude, and brand image on brand relationship were confirmed by both Shanghai and Taipei samples.

Notably, there was an unexpected result for the effect of brand personality on consumer–brand relationship. For the Shanghai respondents, brand personality can positively and significantly influence on brand relationship, but the opposite result is drawn for Taipei respondents. A likely explanation may be that the target market of the coffee chain stores in Shanghai is more male-worker focused, whereas Taipei is more female-student focused. Perhaps, China's masculinity index of 66 as compared to the 45 of Taiwan makes the former more masculinity dominant than the latter (Hofstede, 2001). D. A. Aaker (1996b) noted that excitement proves to be the most prominent brand personality associated with coffee consumption. Male workers may enjoy coffee more because of its excitement as compared to female students. For Shanghai respondents, brand personality thus exerts a positive and significant influence on the formation of consumer–brand relationships.

Finally, the effects of antecedents, including shared experience, brand association, brand personality, brand attitude, and brand image, were all found to have a higher impact on consumer–brand relationship for Shanghai respondents than for Taipei respondents (as shown in Table 6). Steenkamp (2001) noted that people tend to lack a sense of commitment to others in a high-autonomy society. As compared to the Taipei respondents, the people in Shanghai tend to have a relatively lower autonomy but a better commitment to the brand. Thus, the effects of brand knowledge on brand relationship are higher in Shanghai samples.

## **Managerial Implications**

Based on the study's findings, the following insights on several brand-management issues are presented.

From a strategic brand development point of view, brand marketers must carefully and aggressively develop an experiential plan in order to create a positive and sophisticated brand relationship. This study used the classification developed by Schmitt (1999) for categorizing brand experience, which was divided into individual experience and shared experience. It is concluded that individual experience does have positive and significant influences on shared experience. Thus, brand managers ought to focus more on designing experiential plans to create the best individual experiences. Specifically, brand marketers need



to pay more attention on sense marketing for better multisensory consumer responses. As for feel marketing, the goal is to create better inner feelings and emotional resonance from the consumers. Think marketing with better creativity will also be reflected on the consumers' reactions. Although shared experience plays a weaker role in establishing consumer–brand relationship, it definitely helps in forming a positive consumer–brand relationship. Therefore, it is important for brand marketers to bond with consumers by staging holistic brand experiences.

The causal effect of brand experience affecting brand relationship is largely achieved through brand personality, brand association, brand attitude, and brand image. Traditionally, practitioners and academicians have considered these four mediators to be identical or highly overlapping. The test of discriminant validity performed in this study found that the four mediators were all independent from each other. Therefore, brand marketers should carefully consider the ramifications of each antecedent. In practice, brand managers always focus on the statement of brand personality, but this study suggests that brand marketers should carefully conduct brand strategies to enhance positive brand association as well as brand image in order to establish a consumer–brand relationship.

Despite the common language and similarity of life in both China and Taiwan, political segregation has created differences in the two countries' cultural, economic, and consumption implications. The differences have led to certain intrinsic disparities in terms of how brand experiences come to affect brand relationship. This study adopts cultural differences taken from three out of five cultural dimensions as proposed by Hofstede (2001), namely, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity. Consequently, despite the Sheth and Parvatiyar (2001) opinion that information technology is poised to create a boundless world, it remains prudent for brand managers to take notice of the subtle differences under varied cultural environments. Among the comparisons made in this study, the Chinese market was found to be more collectivist, requiring a more shared-experience design than the individual-experience design. Meanwhile, the Taiwanese market was found to be more individualistic, which means that individual experience is a crucial factor in the experiential branding design.

This study proposes that a strong consumer–brand relationship can be conceived by a series of steps, in which each step is contingent on the successful achievement of the previous one. The first step is to stage experiences whenever brand marketers engage with consumers (e.g., Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Brand marketers should focus on experiential planning to provide a holistic experience for consumers. The second step is to firmly establish the brand meanings in the minds of consumers, whereby brand meanings can be achieved by strategically linking product and organization associations, as well as brand personality. The third step is to elicit favorable consumer attitudes and apply positive images to the brand mean-

ing. Brand marketers should pay attention to consumers' response to the brand, brand marketing activity, and sources of information regarding the brand (e.g., Keller, 2001). The final step focuses on converting brand attitude and brand image in order to create a closer relationship between consumers and the brand.

Most important, brand marketers should periodically reexamine changes in brand relationship for better insights into brand experiences, which can be incorporated or redesigned to create an optimal brand relationship.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Though this study provides some valuable findings, several potential limitations must be noted. First, this study examined a single industry setting which limited the generalization of the findings. Second, it might have omitted some important variables such as brand awareness and perceived quality. However, this issue does not undermine the contribution of this research. This study employed brand association and brand attitude to evaluate consumers' judgment of the brands. Brand attitude is similar to the construct of perceived quality. In addition, in-store interviews could have probably influenced the measurement of a given brand awareness. Hence, brand awareness was omitted from this study. A third potential shortcoming is the common method bias. Due to the fact that one questionnaire was used to measure all study constructs, the strength of the causal relationships among these constructs may have been inflated. A fourth potential limitation is the reliance on retrospective reports from informants collecting the measures. However, retrospective reports continue to be advocated as a viable research methodology (e.g., Golden, 1997; Hibbard, Kumar, & Stern, 2001; Miller, Cardinal, & Glick, 1997). A fifth limitation is that H8 posits brand attitude to affect brand image, whereas some scholars held a different view and suggested that brand image will also influence brand attitude (e.g., Dillon, Madden, & Mukherjee, 2001; Graeff, 1996, 1997). Thus, brand attitude and brand image present reciprocal causality between each other. A recursive path model flows in only one direction. In contrast, in a nonrecursive path model, causality may flow in more than one direction. Previous empirical studies have adopted the recursive path model owing to the difficulties in interpreting the reciprocal causal effect of the study variables of the nonrecursive model. Thus, the current research followed Keller's (1993, 1998) work, which proposed that brand attitude significantly and positively influences brand image.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study suggest several useful research directions. First, some moderating variables could be added in future studies, such as product involvement and consumer relationship proneness. Second, the level of consumer-brand relationship could be examined by combining different experiential types in the experimental design. Third, the experimental design could be used to control major study vari-

ables such as brand experience and brand relationship in order to prevent the existence of a large number of equivalent models. Finally, researchers may generalize the results by extending them to a cross-product category.

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