

Brand Experience as a Contemporary Source of Brand Equity in 21st Century: Evidence from the Chinese Consumer Market

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Abstracts

This study aimed to investigate the impact of brand experience on brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) in consumer brand category. Non probability sampling technique was applied. The primary data were collected from 135 shoppers (n = 135) living in Wuhan and Beijing, China. The proposed theoretical model was tested using structural equation modeling in Smart PLS. Results showed that brand experience has significant positive relationship with brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Practical implications for the effect of brand experience on brand equity dimensions are discussed.

Key words: Brand experience, brand equity, Smart PLS.

Introduction

Research on branding emphasized on building strong brands by providing holistic brand experience to consumers (Rossiter, 2002), today's savvy consumers are well informed due to internet and smart phones technology. The upsurge of information technology enables consumers to constantly shift to competing brands. Today consumers not only want to buy the products but also want to acquire the wonderful and rich brand experiences (Ekström & Brembeck, 2004). Moreover, marketers conventionally focus on the attributes of brand such as quality, price, and technology as main criteria to build brand image (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004), however, in today's highly competitive market place marketers tackle the challenges of finding new ways to differentiate themselves from the competitors and to build brand equity. Therefore, the concept of brand experience has emerged as new phenomena to capture market shares (Ind & Bjerke, 2007; Leventhal, Mascarenhas, Kesavan, & Bernacchi, 2006).

In a similar vein, brand experience raises the question against hegemony of the traditional marketing which is based on the functional attributes of the products. Traditional marketing viewed the consumers as a rational decision makers who search for optimal choice to fulfill their needs and wants (Morris & Elizabeth, 1982). According to the experience economy, the highest economic offering will no longer be the product or service rather it will be the experience based on entertainment, feelings, fantasies, and fun. Experiential marketing emerged due to fact that with the omnipresence of internet technology, increased competition among brands, supremacy of the brands, ubiquity of communications, and entertainment shift the mode of marketing from benefits or features based marketing to experiential based marketing. In experience economy consumers would have functions and features of products as taken by granted what they really want is a compelling brand experiences, a product and marketing communications that captures senses, touch their sentiments, and stimulates their cognitive ability that relates their lifestyles (Schmitt, 1999).

Moreover in the new millennium, information technology dominated every sector of the economy. Today every business is digitalized and almost every product or service is available online. Majority of the new online brands are entertainment brands even they are educational in nature such as YouTube, Google, Wikipedia. Now people are connected worldwide through those online brands on social media (Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarantonello, 2014).

Furthermore, research on experiential marketing focuses on creating unique brand experiences in a variety of situations where consumers have opportunity to interact with products directly (Hoch, 2002), as well as indirectly (Kerin, Jain, & Howard, 1992), and consumption experience when consumers actually consume the products (Morris & Elizabeth, 1982). Research implied the role of brand experience in event marketing where consumers can directly encounter with the brands as compared to other marketing communications (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). Research implied that attending event can positively influence the brand experience which in turn influences the brand equity. A study conducted by Zarantonello & Schmitt, (2013) concluded that brand experience is more imperative for building strong brand equity than brand attitude. A study conducted by Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, (2013) explored four experience dimensions in the service sector and suggested consumer's process experiential attributes of products and environment where it is sold. Thus, extant literature implied that experience triggered by experiential products effect the consumers preferences positively (Josko Brakus, Schmitt, & Zhang, 2008).

Keeping in view the above literature, there is quite considerable research gap exist which need to be filled by investigating the relationship between brand experience and brand equity dimensions. So far no study has explored the role of brand experience in brand equity formation. This is the first study which has examined how brand experience is essential to build brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty in the consumer's products category.

Theoretical Framework

Brand Experience

Brand experience is conceptualized as subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) as well as behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brands design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments (Brakus et al., 2009). This definition presented a new role for the brand for instance, on one hand, it aids as identifier (to create image or memory trace in people's mind linked to a name and messages) to a provider of experiences. On the other hand, it is implied for future research on the efficient management of those brand related stimuli, such as brand name, slogans, graphic identity in colors, shapes, symbols, brand characters, visual, and otherwise sensory stimuli (Schmitt, 2014).

Previous research by Brakus et al, (2009) suggested that brand experience is conceptually interrelated but in different from, the other branding concepts such as brand attitude, brand attachment, brand personality, brand involvement, and customer delight. Moreover, Brakus et al, (2009) reported the four dimensions of the brand experience such as sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral. Considerable literature suggested that strong brand experience is predictive of favorable brand outcomes such as customer satisfaction and loyalty (B. Schmitt, 1999). Only few studies have explored the role of brand experience on different outcomes. Brand experience can be transpired in a variety of settings for instance, It can arise as direct interaction with the brand (Hoch, 2002). Extant literature suggested that brand experience can also be transpired as an indirect way such as when consumers search and shop for the brand, they can encounter with the brand related stimuli, environment, and staff where it is sold (J Joško Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Other brand related stimuli which triggers brand experience are traditional communication such as advertising, below the line tools, public relations, and event marketing practices. Considerable literature suggested that event marketing has positive influence on brand experience which in turn influences the brand equity (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013).

Studies conducted by Frow & Payne, (2007); Grace & O'Cass, (2004) specified that brand experience has direct impact on brand attitude and brand choice for future purchase intention as well as indirect impact on brand equity and brand meaning (Berry, 2000; Michell, King, & Reast, 2001). Previous research showed the potential role of brand experience in developing brand equity. A Study conducted by Lane, (2003) suggested that strength of any brand lies what customer have learnt about the brand as a result of brand experience. Thus, we proposed the following relationships

Hypothesis 1. Brand experience is positively related to brand awareness.

Hypothesis 2. Brand experience is positively related to brand association.

Hypothesis 3. Brand experience is positively related to perceived quality.

Hypothesis 4. Brand experience is positively related to brand loyalty.

Brand Equity

Brand equity plays an important role for firm's success in a highly competitive business environment. Specifically customers give favorable responses to the brand extension and willing to pay price premium which lead to high business revenue (Ailawadi, Lehmann, & Neslin, 2003). The brand equity model conveys that the power of brand lies in what customer have learned, observed, heard, felt, and seen about the brand over the period of time. The power of brand depends firmly on what resides in consumers mind about the brand. Hence, creating a brand with strong brand equity provide enormous benefits to firms such as larger customer loyalty, protecting brand from vulnerability of competitor's marketing actions, provide high profit margin, favorable consumer response to increase or decrease the prices, marketing communication effectiveness and brand extension opportunities (Keller, 2001).

The classical definition developed by Aaker & Equity, (1991) defined brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and or to that firm's customers. This definition emphasizes customers' brand knowledge as an essential of brand equity. Keller (2003) postulated brand equity as "the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response towards marketing of that brand". On the basis of this customer based brand equity conceptualization, the fundamental dimensions of brand equity are brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker & Equity, 1991). Brand awareness specifies customer's ability to recall or recognize a brand (Aaker & Equity, 1991). Brand association depicts image dimensions that are favorable, positive, and exclusive to a brand (Aaker, 1996; Lane, 2003). Similarly, perceived quality shows the customer's insight of the overall quality or supremacy of a product with respect to its intentional purpose, relative to alternative brands in the market (Aaker & Equity, 1991). Brand loyalty indicates the customer's attachment to a particular brand (Aaker & Equity, 1991).

Brand equity model suggested important building blocks in which each step is connected with effectively establishment of the previous step. Given that, the first step focuses on creating strong brand identification and association. Next step involves creating the brand meaning. Third step involves extracting adequate consumer responses for intended brand meaning & brand identity that consequently create strong brand loyalty and favorable brand relationship (Keller, 2001). Aaker (1996); Lane (2003) pointed out that the applicability of a brand equity varies across different sector including B2C and B2B markets. Extant literature on B2B markets suggested that the brand equity as value added sources and benefits. Moreover, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and willingness to recommend is also additional dimension of the brand equity (Davis, Golicic, & Marquardt, 2008;

Van Riel, de Mortanges, & Streukens, 2005) along with brand awareness and brand image (Van Riel et al., 2005). Specifically in B2C context, study conducted by (Taylor, Hunter, & Lindberg, 2007) reported the significant indirect effect of perceived quality on brand equity and brand loyalty.

Furthermore, previous research reported brand awareness and brand loyalty as important sources of brand equity. Brand awareness positively effects brand association which in turn effects brand loyalty (Gordon et al., 1993). Brand awareness establishes a memory node which results strong and unique association in consumer's memory (Keller, 1993).

Brand awareness plays an important role not only in differentiating the alternative brands, but also creates positive brand image which consequently result in strong brand association (Kuhn, Alpert, & Pope, 2008; Van Riel et al., 2005). The strong, unique, and favorable brand association creates the differential effects which helps in consumer decision making and positively influences consumer's perception of a brand and its quality (Leone et al., 2006; Aaker & Equity, 1991). Similarly, perceived quality is also considered as an imperative source of brand equity (Michell et al., 2001).

Based on previous studies on B2B and B2C market and Aaker's (1991) model of brand equity, this study measures the effect of brand experience on brand equity. Specifically, this study proposes that the brand equity can be elicited through brand experience which in turn effects brand association, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Given that we propose the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 5. Brand awareness is positively related to brand association.

Hypothesis 6. Brand association is positively related to perceived quality.

Hypothesis 7. Perceived quality is positively related to brand loyalty.

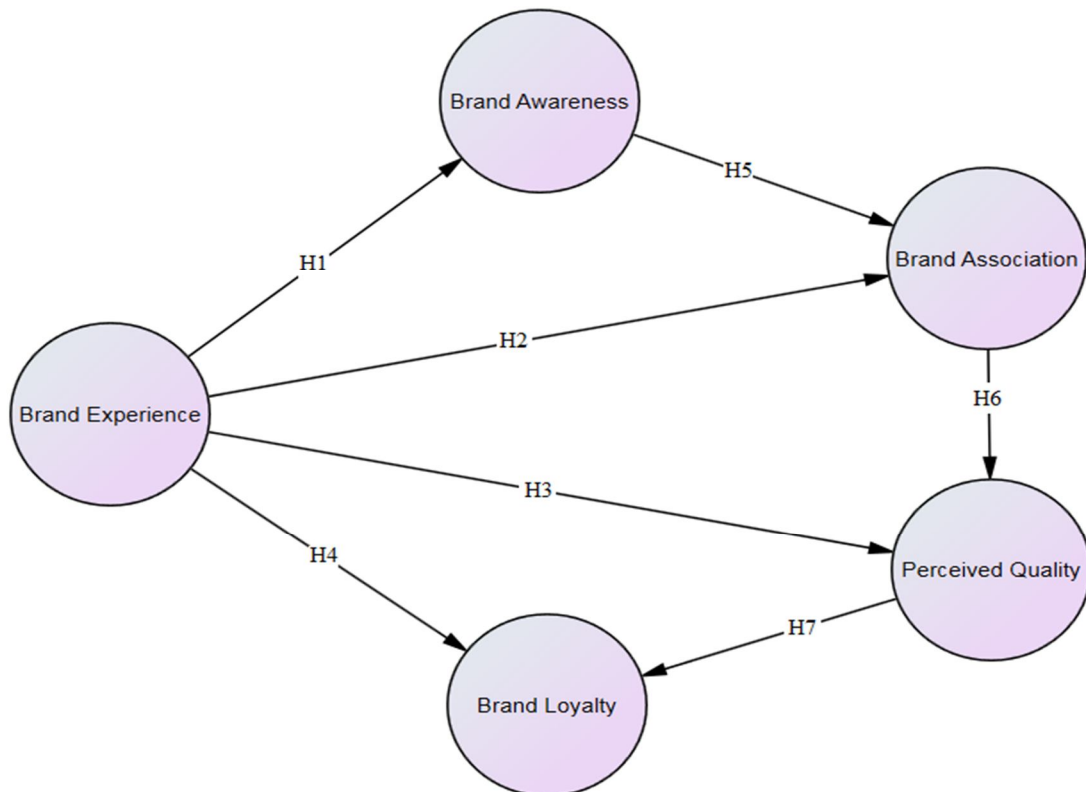


Fig 1 Hypothesized Theoretical Model

Research Methodology

The survey questionnaire for this study was consisted of two parts. First part of the questionnaire comprised of five variables including brand experience, brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and brand perceived quality. The brand experience instrument was taken from the study of Brakus (2009), which consisted of sensory, behavioral, affective, and intellectual dimension of the brand experience. Brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and brand perceived quality variables were based on Aaker's brand equity model (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Equity, 1991). The individual responses were measured on 5 point likert scale ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Second part of the questionnaire consisted of shoppers' demography including income, age, marital status, occupation, and gender.

Based on focus group, five brands were chosen from Electronic Industry (Apple, Samsung, Nokia, Motorola, and Sony Ericson), whereas, three consumer brands (McDonalds, KFC, and Coco Cola) were chosen from Fast Food Industry. The survey was conducted in two metropolitan cities of China including Wuhan and Beijing. The respondents were approached in universities and shopping malls and they were asked to choose one brand they have experienced with and they found that brand/brands as a most experiential. Total 150 shoppers were approached, 15 questionnaires were found to be incomplete. The final sample size comprised of 135 (n = 135) respondents. Finally, data were analyzed in Smart PLS 3 and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique was performed to validate the proposed model and test research hypotheses.

Results

Basically, this study adopted Anderson & Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach (measurement model and structural model) to test the hypothesized model depicted in figure 1. First, measurement model was tested and confirmed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and then we performed structural equation modeling based on the measurement to estimate the interrelationship between brand experience, brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and brand perceived quality through path analysis in Smart PLS. The proposed structure equation model depicted in the figure 1 has total five variables: (1) brand experience (2) brand awareness, (3) brand association, (4) brand loyalty, and (5) brand perceived quality.

In order to confirm the validity of the proposed model, several analysis criterions were kept into consideration; particularly the internal consistency and reliability of the constructs. The results showed that the constructs exhibit good reliability which exceeds the threshold level of 0.70, suggesting that each construct is equally reliable. Brand awareness and brand quality accounted for 0.90 and 0.80 reliability coefficients respectively. The composite reliability of the constructs also showed that each construct's composite reliability exceeds to minimum threshold level of 0.70 (Table 4 displays the results).

In order to measure the convergent validity of measures of the same construct, the inner and outer loadings of the constructs along with AVE were calculated (Hair Jr, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2013). The inner and outer loadings of the brand association, brand quality, and brand loyalty were exceeded the minimum level. The loadings for the brand experience construct were found 0.581 to 0.676 (Table 1 displays the results). These items were retained as per rule of thumb (Hair Jr et al., 2013).

Table 1
Inner and Outer Regression Weights for the Path Model

Constructs	Standardized Regression Loadings
Sen1 – Sen	0.608**
Sen2 – Sen	0.585**
Afe1 – Afe	0.664**
Bhr1 – Bhr	0.576**
Bhr2 – Bhr	0.529**
Int1 – Int	0.671**
Int3 – Int	0.676**
Aw1 – Aw	1.000**
Assc1 – Assc	0.554**
Assc2 – Assc	0.883**
Assc3 – Assc	0.743**
Assc4 – Assc	0.774**
Q1 – Q1	0.953**
Q2 – Q1	0.945**
Loy1 – Loy	0.764**
Loy2 – Loy	0.772**
Loy3 – Loy	0.813**
Loy4 – Loy	0.825**

Notes: * p , 0.1; ** p , 0.01

Another criterion to check the convergent validity is to check the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of the constructs. The AVE of the all constructs were found to be significant as all constructs score exceeding greater than 0.50 (Hair Jr et al., 2013). Finally, as shown in the Table 4, the discriminant validity of the constructs were checked using Fornell Lacker Criterion (1981) (Hair Jr et al., 2013) and proved highly significant (see Table 3).

The results of the proposed structural equation model are presented in the Table 2. Out of 7 research hypotheses, 4 hypotheses were found to be statistically significant at $P < 0.001$ Level. The hypotheses for proposed model were tested by analyzing the significance of the standardized path coefficients. Hypothesis 1, which says that brand experience, is positively related to brand awareness. Our results supported this view ($\beta = .348$, $t(135) = 3.41$, $p < 0.05$). The path between brand experience and brand association was found to be significant ($\beta = .446$, $t(135) = 5.41$, $p < 0.00$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported that brand experience significantly influences brand association in creating symbol of brand in consumer's mind. Similarly, Hypothesis 3 states that brand experience is positively related to perceived quality. Our results supported this view ($\beta = .392$, $t(135) = 4.33$, $p < 0.00$). The Hypothesis 4, which proposes that brand experience is positively related to brand loyalty ($\beta = .427$, $t(135) = 3.51$, $p < 0.00$), our results also supported this view which suggested that brand experience has significant positive effect on brand loyalty. Hypothesis 5, which argues that brand awareness is positively related to brand association was found to be insignificant ($\beta = .152$, $t(135) = 1.38$, $p > 0.05$). Hypothesis 6 says that brand association is positively related to brand perceived quality was also found to be statistically insignificant ($\beta = .168$, $t(135) = 1.39$, $p > 0.05$). Finally, results do not support the Hypothesis 7 contention that brand association is positively related to brand loyalty ($\beta = .172$, $t(135) = 1.26$, $p > 0.05$).

Moreover, the larger total effect size was found between brand experience and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.509$, $p < 0.00$) and between brand experience and brand association ($\beta = 0.400$, $p < 0.00$). The

direct effects between the paths were also examined which showed that brand awareness directly effects brand loyalty and perceived quality (0.004 and 0.025 respectively).

Table 2
Structural Equation Model Fit indices

Hypothesis	Effects between Constructs	Standardized β	Conclusion
H1	Brand Experience \rightarrow Brand Awareness	0.348 (P < 0.000)	Accepted
H2	Brand Experience \rightarrow Brand Association	0.446 (P < 0.000)	Accepted
H3	Brand Experience \rightarrow Perceived Quality	0.392 (P < 0.000)	Accepted
H4	Brand Experience \rightarrow Brand Loyalty	0.427 (P < 0.000)	Accepted
H5	Brand Awareness \rightarrow Brand Association	0.152 (P = 0.196)	Not Supported
H6	Brand Association \rightarrow Perceived Quality	0.168 (P = 0.192)	Not Supported
H7	Perceived Quality \rightarrow Brand Loyalty	0.172 (P = 0.130)	Not Supported

Finally, the indirect effect between brand experience on brand association, brand loyalty, and brand perceived quality were also examined ($\beta = 0.053$, $\beta = 0.082$ and $\beta = 0.084$ respectively) and found that brand experience has stronger significantly direct effect on brand equity dimensions (awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality) than indirect effects.

Table 3
Discriminant Validity: Fornell Lacker Criterion

Constructs	Brand Association	Brand Awareness	Brand Experience	Brand Loyalty	Perceived Quality
Brand Association	0.725				
Brand Awareness	0.307	1.000			
Brand Experience	0.499	0.348	0.615		
Brand Loyalty	0.350	0.394	0.509	0.794	
Brand Quality	0.364	0.271	0.476	0.376	0.949

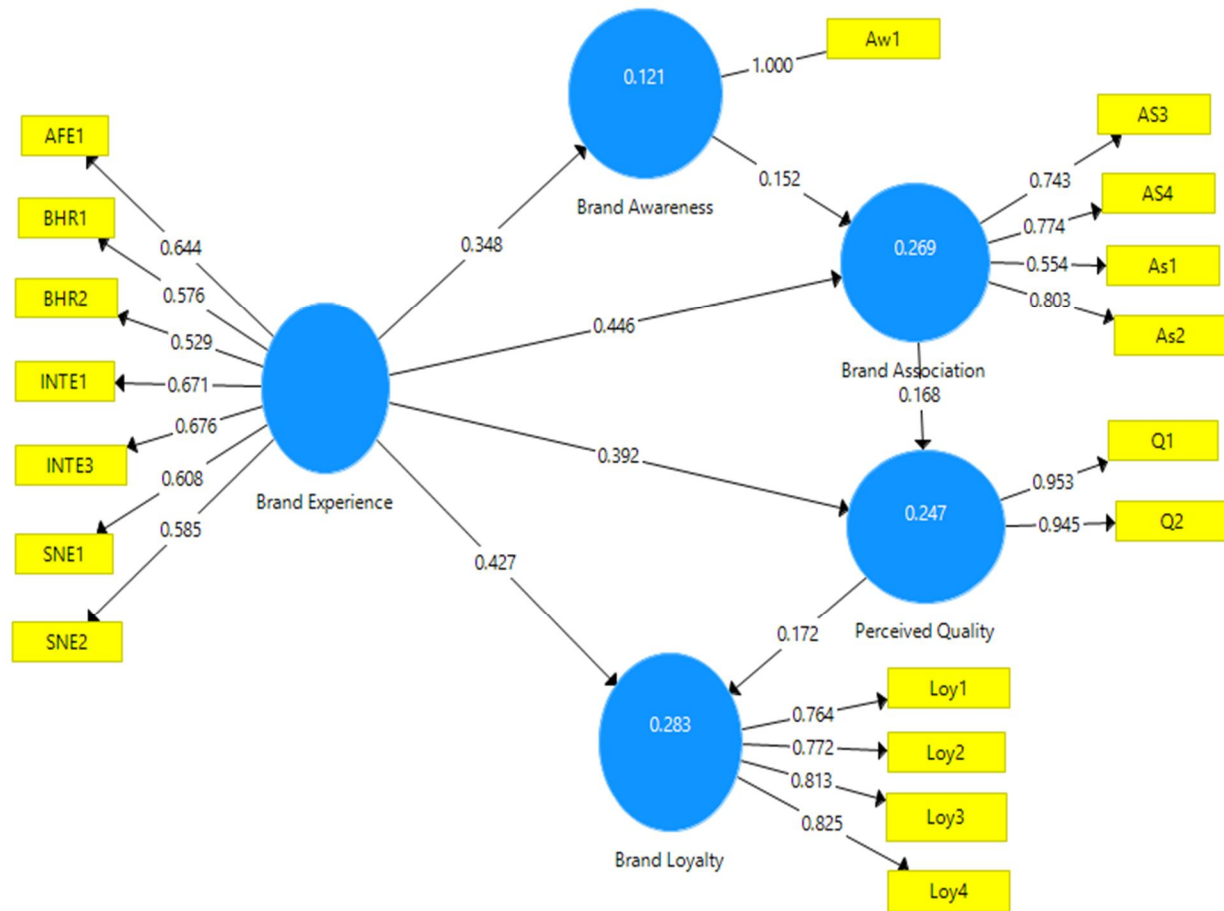


Fig 2 Estimated Theoretical Model

Table 4
Results of Measurement Model Evaluation

Constructs	R Square	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha	AVE
Brand Association	0.269	0.813	0.710	0.526
Brand Awareness	0.121	1.000	1.000	1.000
Brand Experience	0.296	0.809	0.730	0.498
Brand Loyalty	0.283	0.872	0.804	0.630
Brand Quality	0.247	0.948	0.890	0.901

Discussions

This study has contributed to the body of knowledge in a seven distinct ways. Our overall contribution is that, we have built and tested a conceptual model that integrates brand experience research with brand equity theory. First, the Hypothesis 1 which says that brand experience has significant positive effect on brand awareness was supported. This can be true since brand

experiences arise in a wide variety of settings when consumers search for, shop for and consume for brands. If the brand is full of rich and memorable experiences then it may take miniature to obtain prominent brand recall and recognition.

Second, we found support for direct effect of brand experience on brand association, which suggested that the brand experience is positively related to brand association. The more richer and memorable experiences brands have, the deeper will be the associations seated in customer's mind about the brand. Our results are in line with the study conducted by Biedenbach & Marell (2010).

Third, we also found support for Hypothesis 3, which says brand experience has significant positive effect on perceived quality. The rich and memorable brand experience may create long lasting impression in the mind of customers for the brands perceive quality. In order words we can say that when the brands are full of rich experiences, customers view them as unique and symbol of superior quality.

Fourth, we also found support for Hypothesis 4, which proposes that brand experience is positively related to brand loyalty. However, we found that the direct effect of brand experience on brand loyalty is more than the direct effect of brand experience on brand awareness and brand perceived quality. This can be true since when consumers find the brand with full of rich and unforgettable experiences, they would most likely to buy the same brand within a product category. Thus, it is fruitful for marketers to gain brand loyalty by creating their brands highly experiential, to do so marketers will enjoy greater sales, profits, less marketing, and advertising costs. Moreover, brand loyal consumers respond less to competitive moves, remain committed to the brand, and are even willing to pay higher prices for the brands.

Fifth, we did not find support for Hypothesis 5 and revealed the insignificant relationship between brand awareness and brand association. This can be true since brand association is anything which is deep seated in customer's mind about the brand, therefore initially advertisement, style, logo, and unique selling proposition may not be enough to capture unique place in consumers mind. Thus, marketers should associate their brands with something (other than style, logo, and unique selling proposition) positive. For instance good sound is associated with Nokia, film stars as with Lux, Blue color with Pepsi, and BMW is associated with sophistication, fun driving, and superior engineering.

Sixth, we did not find support for Hypothesis 6, which argues that brand association is positively related to perceived quality. Our results contradict with the previous studies that reported the positive relationship between brand association and brand perceived quality (Bendixen et al., 2004; Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Gordon et al., 1993).

Finally, our study also did not find support for Hypothesis 7, which says brand perceived quality is positively related to brand loyalty. Our results contradict to the findings of the studies conducted by Biedenbach & Marell (2010); Jayawardhena, Souchon, Farrell, & Glanville, (2007); Rauyruen & Miller, (2007). This may be true since there may be other factors associated with creating the brand loyalty rather than perceived quality in the Chinese cultural context.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to examine the effects of brand experience (sensory, behavioral, affective, and cognitive) on brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, brand association, brand perceived quality, and brand loyalty). Out of 7 research hypotheses, 4 were found to be statistically significant. This study has provided the empirical support that besides traditional way of marketing where everything is sold on the basis of benefits and functional aspects of the brand to create the brand equity, now consumer cannot be treated as computer like decision makers

any more. Today's savvy consumers look for brands which do not only satisfy needs and wants but also provide them unique and memorable experiences. Hence, this study has empirically provided an articulated model, which may help marketers in a variety of brand decision making. We have highlighted the importance of brand experience to get various brand related outcomes and differential positive consumer behavior. This study has empirically supported the brand experience as a valuable strategy to capture hearts and minds of customers. This ultimately results in creating brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality in a today's highly aggressive market place.

Managerial Implications

The study has explored contemporary source of building brand equity by systematically investigating the effect of brand experience on brand equity dimensions in consumer's brand category. Specially, this study emphasized that marketers should reintegrate the marketing efforts to incorporate rich and memorable experiences within the brands to create the brand equity, which is contradict to traditional marketing that only focuses on benefits based marketing to build brand equity. This study implied that the core idea behind brand experience dimensions is to create sensory, behavioral, affective, and cognitive experiences within brands. For instance, marketers need to think about the name, logo, symbol, packaging, marketing communications as well as ambiance where the brands are sold and the service of personnel can be helpful in order to create the differential effects. Affective dimension of brand experience intended to create the positive feelings and emotions when customers look for, shop for, and consume brand. The behavioral dimension of the brand experience can lead customer to finally buy the brand. Similarly, intellectual dimension stimulates the customer's cognitive process that captures the attention and can make customers feel special about the brand.

Consequently, keeping in view the empirical support for brand experience, marketers need to develop the strategies to captures more positive consumer's responses by creating and building highly experiential brand. As the traditional marketing primarily focuses on utilitarian aspects of a brand and others factors that create the brand equity that require more resources and time, the results of our study revealed that brand experience as an important aspect to create brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and ultimately brand equity. Therefore, keeping in view the empirical support of this study, marketers can be cost effective to capture more market shares and create long term success of brands in markets.

Limitations and Future Study

Although we have tested and built theoretical foundation related to experiential view of brand which opens new window of discussions for academicians and practitioners, future studies and limits need to be considered while interpreting the results of the present study. First, the sample size of this study was 135 ($n = 135$), future research can be carried out with more sample size in order to generalize the results of this study. Second, although the conceptual model of our study provides important insight about brand experience and its impact on brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, future research should take into account other variables such as Berry's model of marketing communication to expand present study model by exploring the relationship between brand equity dimensions (Berry, 2000). Third, as present study found lack of significant relationship between brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality, future research should be conducted to understand the underlying factors that lead to create brand awareness and have significantly positive effect on brand equity dimensions.

Fourth, our study primarily focuses on consumer brand category, the results of our study cannot be generalized beyond consumer brand category, thus, future research can be carried out to replicate our model in other service industry type such as B2B or in developed countries context.

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