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Studying the antecedents of Egyptian consumers brand preferences: An experiential view

Abstract

Consumers brand preferences represent a fundamental step in understanding consumer choices. A deeper understanding of such preference dynamics can help marketing mangers' better design marketing program and build a long term relationship with consumers. Despite the existence of some studies investigating how brand preference is built and changed, most of them focus on examining factors from consumer behavior perspective or advertising perspective. Also most of the studies have been applied on American and European consumers with a severe paucity of studies in Middle-East, Arab and developing countries. This paper aims to build a conceptual framework of brand preferences from a new perspective, the consumer's experiential view. And it will be held in Egypt one of the developing representing the Arab and Muslim context.

Keywords: Branding, consumer preference, brand experience, brand associations, brand personality.

1. Introduction

There is a long standing interest from marketers to understand how consumers form their preferences toward a specific brand (Mathur et al, 2008). Brand preferences are closely related to brand choice (Banks, 1950), it facilitate consumer decision making (Bahn, 1986) and activate brand purchase (Florack and Scarabis, 2006). Consumers are heterogeneous in their preferences, uncovering how consumers construct their preferences will result in better understanding about the choice heterogeneity leading to better managerial decisions. (Horsky et al, 2006). Even more, it is more efficient to develop market segmentation strategies based on consumer's preferences (O'Connor and Sullivan, 1995). Knowing the pattern of consumer preferences across the population is a critical input for designing and developing innovative marketing strategies (Russell and Kamakura, 1997). The main theme of this thesis is: "building a conceptual framework of brand preferences from the consumer's experiential view".

The research objectives are listed as follows:
- Design a conceptual framework of brand preferences from the consumer's experiential view.
- Investigate the impact of brand experience on brand preferences with an emphasis on understanding the linking role played by brand associations and brand personality. Empirically assess the significance of the impact of brand experience on the hypothesized model.
- Describe the implications that emerge from the research for understanding how consumers build their preferences.
- Determine the dimensions of brand preferences.

This paper is organized in the following sequence: first the research background, followed by identifying the gaps in the literature, and lastly is the research propositions and conceptual model.

2. Research Background
2.1 Brand Preference

Brand preference is defined as the behavioral tendencies and how consumer will act toward the preferred brand (Zajonc and Markus, 1982). Representing the consumer's predisposition (D'Souza and Rao, 1995) and the extent to which the consumer favors a particular brand in comparison to another (Hellier et al, 2003), i.e. the consumer's biasness toward the brand (Chang and Liu, 2009). Sometimes it refers to brand preferences as the ranking or the order of brands according to consumer's preference or liking (e.g. Fry, 1971; Stafford, 1966; Niedrich and Swain, 2003).

Preferences are almost identical to purchases intention (Banks, 1950) and are used as choice motivators. Consumer's choices aim to satisfy his preferences that maximize the utility (Rizvi, 2001). Moreover, the attitudinal loyalty refers to the degree of expressed preference consumers need to have before repeating their purchases (Wu, 2001). Consequently rand preference is closely related to brand loyalty.

2.2 Brand Preference models

Brand preference is explained by multi-attribute models such as Fishbein model (1965), Rosenberg, (1959), or the vector model (Ahtola, 1975). Explaining brand preferences by individual's perceptions of and values for product attributes (Bass and Talarzyk, 1972).

- Fishbein Model

Among the consumer behavior models the traditional Fishbein model (1965) was the conceptual foundation for marketing studies (Ahtola, 1975). According to this model preference is measured by beliefs about specific attributes of brands and the weight or importance of each attribute (Bass and Talarzyk, 1972). This model was then modified were it consider only the weight of most important attribute representing the choice criteria. However, this theory was criticized for not taking into consideration the impact of social factors on choices made. And a modified version of this model was developed, theory of reasoned actions (Hansen and Christensen, 2007). This theory suggests that consumer's choice is a function of his preferences toward the product which is influenced by beliefs, subjective norms and social influences (Kinnucan and Clary, 1998). Also another criticism directed to Fishbein model is that it doesn't consider the strength of beliefs in measuring preferences. Therefore, Ahtola (1975) proposes the vector model of preferences as an alternative to Fishbein model. It is argued that in Fishbein model the belief toward brand attribute doesn't discriminate between what the individual beliefs and how strongly he believes. That is it doesn't differentiate between different levels of beliefs (ahtola, 1975).

- Congruence model

Another proposed model to measure brand preferences is the congruence model (Stanto and Lowenhar, 1974). This theory predict brand preferences based on individual's needs. That is brand preferences is function to the interaction between individuals' needs and ability of the chosen product attributes to satisfy those needs. Providing a deeper understanding of which personal needs underlie consumer perceptions of specific needs.

This congruence model is very much related to Howard and Sheth, theory of buyer behavior (1969), that the brand choice is based on matching between buyer's motives (needs) and different brand alternatives. And similarly, strong brand preferences are created for the brands that have the ability to satisfy buyer's needs. In this matching process the buyer depend on extensive information processing and on his experiences based on the physical attributes of

the alternatives brands. The buyer attains a concept of each brand in a particular class from past experiences (Howard and Sheth, 1969). Consistent with EKB model that the consumer depends on past experience stored in memory to evaluate different brands alternatives and form their predisposition toward certain brand (Kollat et al, 1970).

However, all of these models were criticized as being cognitive models neglecting the affective elements (Hansen and Christensen, 2007) or the traditional views of consumer behavior (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). And suggest the shift from this traditional view to experiential view focusing on other responses to consumption such as the emotional, symbolic. The following table illustrates the difference between the traditional view and the experiential view.

Point of Comparison	Traditional View	Experiential View
Product evaluation	Utilitarian function based on objective features	Utilitarian, hedonic and symbolic meanings.
Stimulus properties	Verbal product attributes	Verbal to nonverbal sensory cues
Communication content	Semantic aspects; drawing inferences about the source of a message than on explaining its effects.	Focus on effects attributable to syntactic aspects of massage contents that exert direct effect on hedonic responses.
Resources	Monetary income constraints and price.	Maximizing overall utility even in terms of time as a valuable resource.
Task definition	Consumer is a problem solver (search for information-retrieve data- weight evidence- careful judgment evaluation)	Emphasizes the importance of primary process thinking with the pleasure principle.
Type of involvement (cognitive/affective responses)	Cognitive	Cognitive and affective
Search activity	Information acquisition	Exploratory behavior
Individual differences	Consumer characteristics such as demographics and psychographics and socio-economic status.	Consider the revival of personality and allied variables such as personality sensation seeking, creativity.
Cognition	Beliefs based on memory schemas	Subconscious, fantasies, free associations, pictorial image.
Affect	One aspect of hedonic response, like or dislike of a particular brand.	All Hedonic aspects including emotions and feelings
Behavior	The purchasing decision is the main outcome	Consumption experience
Output	Functional results	Fun, enjoyment and pleasure
Learning	Satisfaction with purchases	Contiguity or associations hierarchies

Table 2: Comparison between the traditional and experiential view (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982)

2.3 The Shift from Traditional to Experiential Marketing

Schmitt (1999) claimed that companies have moved away from traditional marketing to experiential marketing. The experiential marketing is distinct from the traditional in three ways:

First the traditional marketing focus on the functional features and benefits, in contrast to this narrow focus the experiential marketing focuses on consumer experiences; the sensory, emotional, cognitive, social, behavioral values.

Second for traditional marketer, competition occurs primarily within brands defined in the same product categories, while the experiential marketers focus on consumption as a holistic experience. Broaden the marketing thinking about the concept of a category and thus redefine competitors.

Third traditional marketers viewed customer as rational decision makers, for an experiential marketers customers are emotionally as well as rationally driven.

That is traditionally marketing activities have focused on success in the product marketplace development by examining the physical aspects of products and services such as quantity, functionality, availability, accessibility, delivery, price and customer support. More recently marketing managers have shifted their emphasis to creating value for their customers. And the current trend in marketing is to create engaging and lasting experiences for the customers (Mascarenhas et al, 2006).

Moreover, the experiential marketing experts are repeating an important mantra that the brand is the experience. It implies that what the consumer knows and understands about the brand is heavily influenced by this direct experience with brand (Crosby and Lunde, 2008). However, this contradict the value relationship suggested by Carbone (2004, 45) that experience and brand are not one and the same. The brand is how you feel about the company while the experience is how you feel yourself as a result of using the brand. Smith and Wheeler (2002) add that great brands are experience providers, consumers are paying for the experience. The very essence of the brand is a rich source of sensory, affective, and cognitive associations that result in memorable and rewarding brand experience (Schmitt, 1999). The growing recognition of the importance of experience led some to attempt to bridge the brand/experience gap by slapping a convenient label on the effort "branded experience" or "experiencing the brand" (Carbone, 2004).

2.2 Gaps in Brand Preference literature Review

Understand how consumers form their preferences is not an easy task (Bass and Talarzyk, 1972). And most of the previous studies on brand preference have focused on examining the impact of consumer behavior factors such as social and cultural influences (e.g. Keillor et al, 1996; Stafford, 1966) or the role of product specifications and advertising on brand preferences (Hsee et al, 2009; Woodside and Wilson (1985). Moreover very little attempts to depict a conceptual of brand preference have been made

Also most of the early models focused on brand attributes in preference construction (e.g. Ahtola, 1975; Bass and Wilkie, 1973; Stanton and Lowenhar, 1974). Although brand attributes are important in preference formation but it is not the sole source of preference. However, Chernev, (2001) demonstrated that consumers can have an already established preferences and refer to the brand attributes that confirm their preferences. Moreover, the traditional view that deemed consumer as rational decision making had been changed to the experiential view; looking at the emotional, irrational and other rational sides of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Also, nowadays companies are building their competitive advantages and create values to consumer selling memorable experiences to consumers as being hard to be matched(Gentile et al, 2007).

Consumer preferences are more influenced by the subconscious sensory and emotional elements than by the functional attributes of the products derived by the total experience (Zaltman,1997; cited in Berry et al, 2002). Brand experience is holistic in nature and involves cognitive, emotional, sensory, social, behavioral responses to the brand (Brakus et al, 2009; Schmitt, 1999, Verhoef et al, 2009). These experiential clues evoke values to consumers and determine their preferences (Haeckel et al, 2003). Although experience plays a fundamental role in determining consumer's preference (Gentile et al, 2007) and there is an increasing interest in understanding how brand experiences influence brand preferences. Such knowledge will help marketing managers better design marketing programs that and guarantee lifetime value for consumers (Heilman et al, 2000). However few studies have considered the consumers' experiential view in building their preferences and examined the impact of brand experiences in building brand preferences.

Even more, most of the studies have been applied on American and European consumers. Although, most recent researchers have been directed toward South East Asian countries,

there is still a sever paucity of studies in Middle East countries. However, European and US consumer goods makers are confronted with the slow growth at home. On the other hand, there is a fast growing in African, Asian and Latin American markets. In 2002 twenty of the top consumer goods companies spent more than ten billion dollars to expand their shares in these markets (Duarte et al, 2003). This study focuses on Egypt one of the Middle East, Muslim and developing countries. Egypt is one of top importer countries, the estimated value of import till the end of first half of year 2010 is 136.434 LE and population reaches 79,018,115 million (www.msrintranet.capmas.gov.eg). Fully one-third of the population is 14 years of age or younger, while more than 60% of Egyptians are under the age of 30. While generally lagging their older countrymen in terms of income, young consumers are far more likely to seek out new, foreign brands, while operators who can successfully reach the youngest consumers will likely find themselves with lifelong customers (www.marketresearchworld.net). Moreover, Egyptian consumers are western- oriented and the European lifestyles have been introduced to Egypt since the middle of 19th century (Abaza, 2001). Therefore, this research attempts to bridge these potential gaps in the literature by understanding consumer's brand preferences from an experiential view and addressing Egypt as the research context. The following table summarizes gaps in the literature:

Source	Focus	Gap	How to overcome the gap?
Brand Preference previous studies	Focus on the impact of consumer behavior factors and other marketing mix elements.	Didn't examine the impact of consumer's experiences in building brand preferences and very little attempts to design a conceptual model for brand preferences.	The current study will design a conceptual framework for brand preferences based on the consumer's experiential view.
Brand preference models	Measure brand preference as a function of beliefs about brand attribute and the relative importance of each brand attribute.	Focus on the cognitive dimensions of the brand by measuring the tangible product-related attributes and neglect the hedonic or symbolic dimensions.	The current study will examine the impact of brand experience multi-dimensions (sensory, cognitive, social, behavioral) mediated by brand associations (product and non-product attributes) and brand personality (symbolic associations).
Research context	Most of the studies applied on American or European consumers	Severe paucity in Middle-East, developing, African, Muslim countries.	The current study will be applied on Egypt one of the Middle-East countries.

Table 1: Gaps in the Literature

3. Research Propositions and Conceptual model

 In the marketing literature, the main drivers of brand preferences are brand knowledge (Keller, 1993) and brand experiences (Sheth, 1968). However, there is a great concern on understanding the role of experience in building brand preferences. A deeper understanding can help managers in designing marketing programs and ensure the lifetime value of consumers (Heilman et al, 2000). Delivering experience is now the key differentiator between competitors and thus, the valuable source of companies for building their competitive advantage (Shwa and Ivens, 2002).

Brand knowledge affects brand preferences through its' two main components of brand knowledge are brand awareness and brand image (Keller, 1993). However, brand awareness plays an important role in brand choice among inexperienced consumers and its role declines with consumer's experience (Hoyer and Brown, 1990). Here we assume that consumers have brand experience that is they are aware of the product. On the other hand, the role of brand image as a direct antecedent of brand preference is highlighted in the elaboration likelihood advertising model (Hansen, 1997) (Hansen and Chritensen, 2007). Brand image is defined as perceptions about a brand (Biel, 1992; Keller, 1998) given its two main components are brand personality and brand associations (Batra et al, 1993; Chang and Chieng, 2006). In addition, Fishbein model (1975) proposed that the brand preference is a function of consumers perceptions and beliefs about associated attributes (Bass and Talarzyk, 1972). However, creating a brand image means giving life to the brand while connecting to the consumers (Duncan, 2005). Brand image and brand personality can be used interchangeably (Batra et al, 1992), since brand personality is the viable metaphor of brand image (Caprara et al, 2001).

Moreover, brand personality is more advantageous in building consumer-brand relationship for two reasons (Biel, 1992). First, the brand personality provides stable and durable value. Second, engage consumers in as active process thus linking the brand with more personally meanings. Although, brand personality refers to the symbolic meaning of brand associations (Aker, 1991; Keller, 1993), however, it has an essential role in building consumer's preferences toward certain brands (Aaker, 1997; Swaminathan et al, 2009). Consequently this study will focus on examining the role of brand experience on brand preference mediating by brand knowledge factors (brand associations and brand personality). The proposed model is depicted in the following figure:
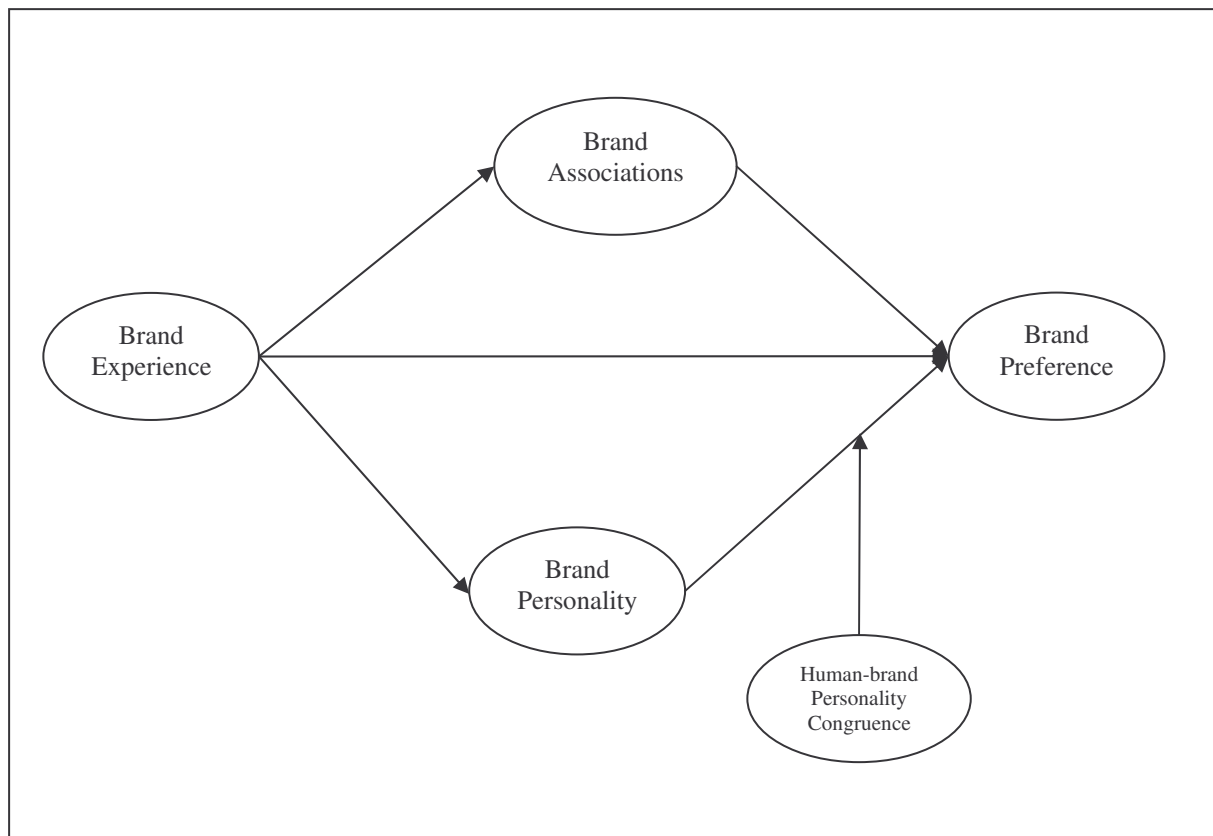
Figure 1: Research Conceptual Model

3.1 Brand experience and brand preference

Brand experience is the subjective internal consumer responses and behavioral evoked by brand related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications and environments (Brakus et al, 2009, p.55). And in order to have brand preference consumers must learn about the brand (Sheth, 1968). Consumers learn about different brands from their experiences with brands (Erdem, 1998). Learning from experience is more seductive (Hoch, 2002). And consumers grant their experiences (Hoch and Deighton, 1989), because first when consumers learn from their experiences they tend to be highly motivated and involved and select the exposures. Second consumers have control over the flow of information and promote better memory with vivid and concrete information (Paivio, 1991). Lastly, experience provides consumers with information that can direct and influence their behaviours (Fazio and Zanna, 1961; Smith and Swinyard, 1962). Thus consumers' experience is the best teacher (Hoch and Deighton, 1989). Also brand experience gives a complete picture of a brand without filtration or summarization, experience allows the consumer to unfold and recall communication feelings and context related to their experiences (Aaker, 1991).

There are two ways by which consumers can acquire or learn through experience either through passive observation where the consumers do not interact with the products and active observation which require interaction with the product (Hoch and Deighton, 1989). Or what Hamilton and Thompson (2007) as direct and indirect experience determined by the level of interaction between the consumer and the product.

Direct experience requires full interaction with the product, can be acquired by product usage or trial. While the indirect doesn't require full interaction with the product, occurs when consumers are exposed to the products through marketing communication tools such as advertisement, WOM, and magazines or even read a product description (Hamilton and Thompson, 2007).). Both types of experience provide consumer with information; primarily the visual and nonverbal information are conveyed by direct experience and the visual and verbal information are conveyed through indirect experience (Paivio, 1991). Brand experiences occur when consumers shop or consume the products. Therefore both types of experience are imparted by brand experience (Brakus et al, 2009). In addition all the thoughts, emotions, activities, and appraisals that occur during an event are of the characteristics of brand experience (Goode et al, 2010).

Preferences evolve through time and people buyer's preferences are formed from product trials, usage reflecting prior experience (Carpenter and Nakamoto, 1989) and repeated choices (Carpenter and Nakamoto, 1994; Hoeffler and Ariely, 1999). Choice is one of experience dimensions (Hoeffler and Ariely, 1999) conceptualized as a process by which preferences are consolidated to arrive at a resolution for choice task (Beach, 1993). The choice difficulty is an important factor in preference formation. That is preference fluency is "the subjective feelings of ease or difficulty of making decision" may also affect preference stability (Novemsky et al, 2007, p.347).

Moreover, repeated choices result in experience reducing the cognitive efforts of product related-tasks (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987) and increasing consumer's confidence with the products. Thus facilitating learning of subjective values and enhances preference stability (Hoeffler and Ariely, 1999). In similar vein, the inference induced from experiences is another source of learning that can develop preferences (Amir and Levav, 2008).

In addition, the experiential aspects focus on the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). That is when consumer experiences a brand she/he responds to the cognitive, affective and behavioral stimuli related to the brand (Brakus et al, 2009; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999). Zajonc and Markus (1982) emphasised that the antecedents of preferences can be cognitive or affective factors or a combination of both. With a special concern on the affective dimension always accompany all cognitions, feelings is always a companion to thoughts, whereas the converse not always holds true (Zajonc, 1980). Mano and Oliver (1993) illustrate that both pleasure and arousal are of the important features of brand experience. Therefore, the hedonic dimension of preference measured by liking or enjoyment (Hsee et al, 2009) can be stimulated by the emotional dimensions of brand experience. Therefore, it is argued that all aspects of brand experience pave the way and play a fundamental role in determining and building consumer's brand preference (Carbone, 2004; Gentile et al, 2007; Kim et al, 2009). Consumers prefer products that provide meaningful experience (Goode et al, 2010).

The role of experience in building preference is more obvious for consumers new to a market. New consumers to a market with no information show little evidence of loyalty and choose big brand names at first. As experience in the category increases, information search plateaus and declines. Consumer preferences' are evolved for the brands that provide greatest utility and consequently become loyal. This supports the theory that preferences for consumer new to market vary with purchasing experience (Heilman et al, 2000).

That is the experience that drive preference is the experience that moves consumers from the commodity zone with neutral position to the preference zone that engenders long-term loyalty and turns consumers to advocates (Carbone, 2004). After experience consumers can certainly determine their preferences (Hoch and Deighton, 1989). Based on the previous discussion and consumer's brand preferences literature (Zajonc and Markus, 1982, p.125) that organism will develop preferences for objects with which it has repeated experiences. And that preferences will change by changing experience the following can be proposed:

P1: Brand experience is directly related to brand preference.

3.2 Brand Associations

Brand associations are the information, such as brand attributes and benefits linked to the node in memory (Keller, 1998). Memory consists of a network of nodes and the linkages between these nodes, which is consistent with the associations networks (Anderson, 1983) used to explain the key concepts relating to consumer associations (Krishnan, 1996). It is crucial for marketing mangers to understand the nature and structure of associations for their brands (Henderson et al, 1998). Where brand associations is a common dimension of brand equity (e.g Aaker, 1991; Xu and Chan, 2010; Yoo et al, 2000) and a key component of brand equity, brand image, and brand knowledge (Keller, 1993, 1998).

The brand associations are dual in structure; non-directional association and directional associations. The non-directional neither the brand nor the attribute dominate over each other and directional (Farquhar and Herr, 1992) or bi-directional consumer can associate the brand to attribute or associate the attribute to a brand (Torres and Bijomolt, 2009). In addition, brand association ranged from brand attributes and benefits to non product attributes However, understanding various associations provide a complete picture of how consumer perceives the brand. Sources of brand associations represent consumer's experience with the brand (Kirshamn, 1996). Brand associations can be verbal description of the brand (Supphellen, 2000), or nonverbal, visual with no corresponding verbal descriptions (Zaltman, 1997). It is important to understand how consumers learn about brand associations to understand how consumers evaluate brands and make choices (Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001).

According to the human associative theory (HAM) (Anderson, 1983) brand associations can be formed through direct and indirect experiences. The direct experience enhances the desirability of the product whereas the indirect enhances its' feasibility (Hamilton and Thompson, 2007). Thus, brand experience can be considered a crucial source of brand associations for both product and organization associations (Chang and Chieng, 2006). Experiences add information to the product attributes. Consumer evaluates the product specifications by referring to prior experience (Hsee et al. 2009). Brand associations can be stored in memory in the form of sensory impressions derived from the psychological experiences such as the taste or the smell of the product (Marks, 1996). Or emotional impressions, the nonverbal or the affective experiences related to the brand (Fiske and Taylor, 1995). Other associations can be derived from the intellectual experience "how the brand makes you think" (Franzen, 1999) and behavioral "action" (Keller, 1998). Engaging a lot in a

physical interaction with the brand and many exposures to communications strengthen the brand associations (Aaker, 1991; Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Keller, 1993).

The strength of associations linked to nodes is a function to the amount or quantity and the nature or quality of processing the information receives at encoding (Keller, 1993). Consumers evaluate brand attributes based on what is stored in memory, the retrieval of brand-related information from memory depend on brand-related experience. Experience provides consumers with great knowledge and information about the brand creating strong link between brand nodes and attribute nodes (Dillon et al, 2001). Experience provides consumers with more precise information about the product attribute levels (Erdem et al, 2004).

On the other hand, brand associations provide buyers with reasons to buy and create value for the brand. They help consumers to process and retrieve information and evoke positive affect and cognitive considerations of benefits (Henderson et al, 1998). Moreover, the effect of brand associations can be extended to other brands in the same group, the degree of associations may favour the transferability of impressions from the source to the target. The degree of associations between brands in a group can positively affect consumer reactions and build trust toward new brands to that group (Delgando-Ballester and Hernandez-Espallardo, 2008). Brand associations are positively related to the size of the network in consumer memory, the key performance areas of brand share, brand preference (Romaniuk and Gaillard, 2007) consumers' product evaluations and choices (Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001), consumer-brand relationship (Chang and Chieng, 2006) and brand loyalty (Kaynak et al, 2008).

In market literature brand equity is considered to be an important antecedent of brand preference (Chang and Liu, 2009; Chen and Chang, 2008; Cobb-Walgren et al, 1995). And most of the behavioral models of brand equity (e.g. Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1998) emphasis the importance of brand associations in building brand equity. Brand associations provide consumers with information why they prefer one brand over another (Dillon et al, 2001).

In addition, Hsee et al, (2009) specifies that the product quantifiable specifications are directly related to preference but their impact is stronger on revealed preference than on hedonic preference. However, O'Cass and Lim (2001) contend that brand preference and purchase intentions are related to non-product brand associations with an emphasis of the

influence of price perception. In Consistent Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995) evident that price and brand name are more important than other attributes in determining brand preferences. Where, the brand name associations contribute to consumer perception and evaluation of the brand and the product category (Gill and Dube', 1998). Even more Lowrey and Shrum (2007) indicated that the brand name preference is more for brand names that is related to product attributes and the positive-sounding brand name than the negative sounding brand name.

According to Fishbein (1965) brand preference is measured by the perceptions and beliefs of brand attributes and benefits (Bass and Talarzyk, 1972). Beliefs are the descriptive or abstract associations consumers have about the brand extracted from prior experience or other marketing communications such as advertising or word of mouth (NG and Houston, 2006). And brand associations provide consumers with clear perceptions and beliefs about the brand attributes (Henderson et al, 1998). In summary, brand experience is a key source of consumers of the information about the brand linked in memory forming the brand related associations, which in turn will form brand preferences. Therefore, the following can be propsed:

P2: Brand experience is directly related to brand associations.
P3: Brand associations are directly related to brand preferences.

3.3 Brand Personality

Brand personality is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997). That is, it is about humanizing the brand (Swaminathan et al, 2009). It is very much related to brand associations but it refers to the symbolic meaning of brand associations (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Consumer perceptions of a brand personality are formed and influenced by all the direct and indirect contacts the consumer has with the brand (Aaker, 1997; Heding et al. 2009). The direct sources of brand personality are: the set of human characteristics associated with the stereotypical brand user, company employees, the CEO, brand endorsers and the indirect sources include the physical, functional and tangible aspects that can be experienced by the consumers (Heding et al. 2009, p.141). A useful input in this inference is likely to be brand experience (Brakus et al, 2009). The brand personality is created and developed by the direct or indirect brand contact that the consumer experiences

(Plummer, 2000). Morover, consumer's experiences enhance the perception and evaluation of brand personality as authentic and true to its own nature (Aaker, 1997; Heding et al. 2009).

Not every brand has a personality (Plummer, 2000). However, the personal experience with the brand is an obvious source of image (Biel, 1992). Through experience consumers can develop their perceptions about the brand and associate personality characteristics with it. Therefore, it can be argued that brand experience creates brand personality that in turn provides self-expressive or symbolic benefit to the consumer (Sung and Kim, 2010; Sung and Tinkham, 2005). For example Tesco is a store brand with no personality, but through one's shopping experience in Tesco, it can be claimed that Tesco can be described as ruggedness.

More to the point, the symbolic consumption is related to hedonic experiences. The hedonic consumption is related to the multisensory fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Also, brand experiences include emotional responses (Brakus et al, 2009; Schmitt, 1999). And the brand personality is reflected from the symbolic values and emotional responses to the brand (Heding et al, 2009). The behavioral, intellectual, affective and sensory responses experienced by the consumer facilitate the trait judgment about a brand personality dimensions (Brakus et al, 2009). In similar manner, Markus and Kunda (1986) argue that experiences activate the traits and make it more accessible. Moreover, the roots of theoretical cognitive perspective of brand personality are inspired from consumer experiences (Freling and Forbes, 2005).

Further prior studies have addressed the impact of brand experiences on brand personality (Brakus et al. 2009; Chang and Chieng, 2006) illuminating the significant impact of brand experience on brand personality. However, Brakus et al. (2009) did not consider the social dimension of band experience when investigatimgthe relationship between brand experience and brand personality. And Chang and Chieng (2006) found no significant relationship between the shared experiences that is how consumers act and relate to the brands and brand personality, explaining that the shared experience belongs to the group level while the brand personality belongs to the individual level. Although brand personality define the product class (Aaker, 2002) and tends to serve as a self-expressive function (Keller, 1993) whether they are expressing their actual or ideal self to others (Aaker, 2002) and consumers use brands to position themselves in relation to culture, society and other people (Ahuvia, 2005). In other words, brand personality is part of the cultural meaning and consumers use it to

construct and sustain their social self (Aaker, 2002), and facilitate the social interactions (Swaminathan et al, 2009). The reason that Chang and Chieng (2006) did not find a significant relationship between shared brand experience and brand personality might be because they depend on only one dimension of brand personality which is the excitement.

In addition, It is argued also that the assessment of brand personality is linked to the degree to which consumers know the brand (Hayes et al, 2001), i.e. the degree of brand familiarity "accumulated brand experiences" (Alba and Hutchinson, (1987). When Diamantopoulos et al. (2005) examined the impact of brand extensions on brand personality moderated by the brand familiarity, the results revealed a significant relationship between the sincerity brand dimension and brand familiarity.

Practitioners have viewed brand personality primarily as an efficient way to differentiate the brand from other competing brands, thus enhancing the marketing effectiveness (Heding et al, 2009). At the managerial level, brand personality metaphor can help manager gain an in-depth understanding of consumer perceptions and attitudes toward the brand (Aaker, 2002). Aaker (1997) noted that brand personality information used as heuristic cue that can influence consumer attitude toward the brand. At the consumer level, brand personality affects consumer judgments and satisfaction (Biel, 1992), builds brand trust, brand loyalty (Sung and Kim, 2010), and brand equity (Valette-Florence et al, 2009).

Moreover, brand personality can act as a driver of consumer preference (Aaker, 1997; Heding et al, 2009; Sirgy, 1982). Brand personality can influence consumer preferences and choices in various ways (Swaminathan et al, 2009). By humanizing the brand and signaling important attributes. Also brand personality allows brands to be used as a self-expressive tool facilitating social interactions and building interpersonal relationships. In summary, the above discussion argues that consumers' experiences with brand have a significant impact on brand personality. Also in the marketing literature there is an emphasis that brand associations are an important source of brand personality. In turn, the previous studies evident that brand personality is a key driver of brand preference, accordingly it can be assumed that:

P4: Brand experience positively influence brand personality.
P5: Brand associations positively influence brand personality.
P6: Brand personality positively influence brand preference.

3.4 Human-Brand Personality Congruence

In building brand preference, brand personality is very much related to human personality. The brand personality dimensions are very much related and inspired from the personality traits (Aaker, 1997; Batra et al, 1993). And the self-concept is among the building blocks of brand personality (Heding et al, 2009).

Moreover, when consuming a brand with personality, consumers evaluate brands by matching process that is identifying brands that are congruent with their own self-image (Kressmann, 2006). This process is called self-congruity; congruence between consumer's self-concept or self-perception and symbolic brand image (Kassarjian, 1971). It is a cyclic process that can weaken or strengthen the brand, determining on appealing to the right consumers (Heding et al, 2009). Consumers use brand in relation to self to build and enhance their own self-concept (Sirgy, 1982). The development of self-congruence using brand personality is a dynamic process, implying greater probability of positive brand evaluation, consumer satisfaction, greater preference, brand loyalty (Kressmann, 2006; Sirgy, 1982) and build consumer-brand relationship (Huang, 2008).

In addition, prior studies evidenced that the congruence between one's self-image and the brand image is important in building brand preferences. And for the most preferred brand there is greater similarity between one's self-concept and brand image than for least preferred brands (e.g. Dolich, 1969; Hughes, 1976; Kressmann et al. 2006; Ross, 1971; Sirgy, 1982). The brand personality-self-concept congruence enhances the affective, attitudinal and behavioral responses, thus leading to favorable brand attitude strong brand preference over competing brands (Grohmann, 2009). Consequently the following can be assumed:

P7: There is high congruence between the brand personality and human personality for most preferred brand than for least preferred brands.

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