CHINESE CONSUMERS' BRAND LOYALTY FOR CONSUMER PRODUCTS: IMPORTANCE OF BRAND PERSONALITY AS MAJOR ANTECEDENT OF BRAND LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

Brand personality has been viewed as an efficient means of distinguishing a brand from its competitors, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of advertising and marketing communications. Given the high potential usability of this method for marketers and brand managers, the current study investigates the determinant roles of brand personality on Chinese consumers' brand preferences. This study conceptualises and investigates the impact of brand personality on Brand Trust, Brand Affect, and Brand Loyalty. The overall findings indicate that different brand personality dimensions influence Brand Trust and Brand Affect in different ways, which in turn may increase the level of Brand Loyalty. The Sincerity dimension of brand personality was found to have a greater impact on the level of Brand Trust than on Brand Affect, while the other four dimensions (Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness) of brand personality were found to have a greater influence on Brand Affect. In addition, Brand Affect was found to have a substantially greater effect on Brand Loyalty than Brand Trust across all five Brand Personality dimensions.

Keywords: Brand personality, Brand Trust, Brand Affect, Brand Loyalty, Chinese consumers

INTRODUCTION

Brand has become an important element in developing firms' competitive advantages, and brand-based differentiation is increasingly considered to be a necessary strategic tool. Globalisation and increasing international trade have intensified competitive pressure in the market, and consumers have become desensitised to products that offer generic and commoditised values. In this environment, it has become difficult for marketers and global brand managers to differentiate between brands primarily based upon the functional attributes of product and brand. Consequently, many marketers are shifting away from mass marketing and designing one-to-one marketing programs (Barwise & Farley, 2005) in order to have a more personalised, interactive and immediate

relationship with consumers. Advancements in information and communication technologies with the rise of the Internet have facilitated such changes in the market, and relationship marketing has emerged as a major strategic concept.

In particular, brand personality plays an important role in differentiating the brand image of a product from that of competing products and in creating a distinctive personal relationship with a consumer, and it is considered to be a core component of brand image (Aaker 1996; Keller, 1993). Brand personality can be defined as the personality traits that are used to design and communicate brand positioning and can be readily translated into appealing communication (Rekom, Jacobs, Verlegh, & Podnar, 2006). Thus, brand personality can be seen as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997), which are connected to numerous other brand features in a consumer's memory (Freling & Forbes, 2005). Brand personality can have a significant influence on consumers' thoughts and behaviours and therefore can have strategic implications from the firm's perspective. Brand personality is an integral component of brand image and brand equity, and it has a function of differentiating a brand from its competing products. Blackston (1992; 2000) conceptualises the brand as a person with whom the consumer may choose to have a relationship. Thus, when consumers perceive brand personality traits to which they can relate, they may develop a personal relationship that is reflected as brand loyalty. In this case, a brand may be considered to be 'humanised' or 'anthropomorphised' to certain extent. A well-established brand personality influences consumer preferences and patronage (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982) and fosters stronger emotional ties (Biel, 1993), trust and attachment between consumers and the brand (Fournier, 1998).

Assessment of brand personality in the context of marketing communications campaigns helps determine how the brand is differentiated at the symbolic level from its competitors and whether communication efforts to position the brand have been successful (Sung & Kim, 2010). Many previous studies focused on the structures and scales associated with brand personality dimensions (Aaker, 1997; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001; Sung & Tinkham, 2005), but limited empirical research has investigated the determinant roles of brand personality on actual consumer behaviours. Although research suggests that brand personality can serve as a good basis for consumer preference and usage (Sirgy, 1982), evokes relevant emotions in consumers (Biel, 1993), and may be linked to increased levels of trust and loyalty (Aaker, 1997; Fetscherin & Toncar, 2009), little research has tested these assertions empirically (Sung & Kim, 2010). Sung and Kim (2010) empirically investigated the impact of brand personality on two key dependent variables—brand trust and brand affect—by deriving a brand affect-trust-loyalty model with addition of Aaker's (1997) five brand personality dimensions. The purpose of this study is to develop a consumer-based brand loyalty model with brand personality as a major determinant affecting repeat

purchase intention and brand loyalty in Chinese consumer data. The target consumer group was selected from major Chinese cities to test this relationship empirically and to examine the brand personality construct in the Chinese context using a comprehensive predictive model. This study represents a first attempt to adapt Sung and Kim's (2010) model to Chinese culture.

China recently emerged as a major trading nation with significant purchasing power. Rapidly rising per capita income in China has enabled consumers to seek high quality consumer products, which has created important market opportunities for multinational enterprises with global brand power. Marketers are eager to establish a strong, unique and distinctive global brand image for their products by introducing standardised brand logos, brand names and advertising programs across countries, including China, and aim to be simultaneously accepted by local consumers in China and elsewhere. With highly intensified market competition, it is imperative that marketers develop a strong relationship with Chinese consumers, and brand personality may play an important role in achieving this objective. Previous literature suggests that consumers often use brands to create, reinforce and communicate their self-concepts (Sirgy, 1982; Belk 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2003); consumers tend to select a certain brand they like, often because they feel that the chosen brand appears to be consistent with their self-image and personality (Heath & Scott, 1998). Previous studies have found that European (i.e. Spanish) brand personality dimensions differ from those in America and Asia (i.e. Japan); these studies also suggest that perceptions of brand personality may be country specific (Chan, Saunders, Taylor, & Souchon, 2003; Shengbing & Taihong, 2003; Wang & Yang, 2008). Chinese brand personality structure is claimed to exhibit a combination of both western modernism and Chinese traditionalism (Chu & Sung, 2011). D'Astous and Li (2009) suggest that Chinese consumers are able to refer to personality traits when they consider foreign countries, which may have an impact on their evaluation of foreign products and brands. Thus, studying the brand personalities of Chinese consumers could help both market researchers and producers of global brands to better understand Chinese consumers who express themselves through the commercial brands they purchase and use.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research objective was to empirically assess the determinant role of brand personality on brand trust and brand affect, which are two major constructs for brand loyalty formation. Aaker (1997) developed a 42-item Brand Personality Scale (BPS) to structure and measure the brand personality of any brand across five key dimensions, which were tested across many product categories in different countries. This BPS has been used in various product categories and

consumer segments (Digman, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). The five BPS dimensions include: (1) brand sincerity, (2) brand excitement, (3) brand competence, (4) brand sophistication, and (5) brand ruggedness, and these constructs were applied in the present study as the determinants that are hypothesised to have impacts on consumers' brand loyalty formation.

Our conceptual framework follows Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) study and Sung and Kim's study (2010), which approximate the brand personality constructs as independent variables affecting brand affect and brand trust, leading to formation of consumers' brand loyalty. Brand loyal consumers may be willing to pay more for a brand or to repeat purchase because they perceive some unique value in that brand that no alternative brand can provide (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Pessemier, 1959; Reichheld, 1996). Greater brand loyalty leads to superior brand performance, such as greater market share and premium prices.

Brand trust appears to serve as a key determinant of brand loyalty or brand commitment, which is consistent with the concept of one-to-one marketing relationships, as trust creates exchange relationships that are highly valued (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In addition, emotional determinants (i.e. brand affect) are important in maintaining brand relationships, as commitment is associated with positive affect, thereby preventing the exploration of other alternatives in the short run (Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1997). Thus, brand loyalty is derived from greater trust in the reliability of a brand or from more favourable affect when customers use a particular brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Chaudhuri and Holbrook also found that antecedents of brand trust and brand affect are different, and they stated that functional brand-choice risk determines brand trust, whereas emotional brand-choice risk determines brand affect. Aaker, Fournier and Brasel (2004) conducted a longitudinal field experiment and reported that brand personality has significant effects on the evolution of consumer-brand relationships. Sung and Kim (2010) expanded this model and included Aaker's five personality constructs as antecedents of brand affect and brand trust to empirically test their relevance. They proposed that brand personality is created and maintained in the mind of the consumer as a reflection of the perception of the brand and that brand personality has a meaningful and significant impact on both brand trust and brand affect. In our study, we implemented Sung and Kim's approach and applied it to the Chinese consumers' context to determine whether brand personality plays an important antecedent role in the formation of brand loyalty by Chinese consumers.

Brand Selection and Survey Data Collection

In the preliminary interview, Chinese consumers were found to be familiar with apparel and mobile phones with global brand names and appeared to have reasonable knowledge of these brand products. To conduct an effective survey, it was critical that the selected product categories and brand names for this study were widely recognised and relevant to the participants. Furthermore, to prevent gender bias, the chosen product categories could not be gender specific. In this study, product categories and brands were selected in two stages. In the first stage, 40 participants (50% female, age $M = 21$) were asked to list all product categories that they were likely to purchase or use in various social settings in order to identify easily accessible product categories for the participants. The participants chose self-expressive product categories that were considered to have different brand personalities. Among these categories, two (apparel and mobile phone) were selected for this study, as they were the product categories most frequently mentioned by the participants. In the second stage, participants' level of brand knowledge of the selected product categories was tested, as it was a prerequisite for the participants to understand and differentiate selected brands in order to express their brand loyalty. Fifty participants (54% female, age $M = 22$) were asked to list brand names for two product categories (apparel and mobile phone), and the following brand names were selected based on this test (Table 1).

Table 1
Selected brands for two product categories

Apparel	Mobile
Giordano	Lenovo
Esprit	Apple
Metersbonwe	Samsung
Levi's	Nokia

To empirically evaluate the impact of brand personality on Chinese consumers' brand loyalty for the selected ten brands, Aaker's five BPS dimensions were implemented as explanatory constructs: Sincerity (SI), Excitement (EX), Competence (CO), Sophistication (SO), and Ruggedness (RU). These dimensions were measured on the five-point Likert scale used in Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) study (ranging from 1 = "does not at all describe" to 5 = "perfectly describes"). Measurement scales for brand trust, brand affect and brand loyalty also followed the items used by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) (Table 2). The survey questionnaire was developed by including questions on each of the identified measurement items. The original questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Chinese. It was pre-tested by Chinese students at

Hanyang Business School and revised to improve readability. Survey data were collected in Shanghai, China, in 2011. In total, 896 questionnaires were collected, which were screened ($n = 805$) for data analysis. Many studies have used student samples for empirical analysis, but the validity and generalisability of student samples have been questioned because the student population does not represent the general population or "real people" (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000).

Table 2

Constructs of Brand Personality, Brand Affect, Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty*

Variables	No. of Items	Measurement Items	Previous Study
Brand Personality Sincerity Competence Excitement Sophistication Ruggedness	16	Wholesome, Cheerful, Honest, Down-to-earth Reliable, Successful, Intelligent Up-to-date, Spirited, Daring, Imaginative Charming, Upper class Outdoorsy, Rugged	Batra, Lehmann, & Singh (1993), J. Aaker (1997)
Brand Trust	2	I trust this brand. This brand is safe. This is an honest brand. I rely on this brand.	Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)
Brand Affect	2	This brand gives me pleasure. This brand makes me happy. I feel good when I use this brand.	
Brand Loyalty	2	I would be willing to pay a higher price for this brand over other brands. I intend to keep purchasing this brand. I am committed to this brand. I will buy this brand the next time I buy this product.	Wilkie (1994)

* Measurement Items from Sung and Kim (2010); Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001); Aaker (1997).

DATA ANALYSIS

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) was used to assess reliability and to select the final items in the model. The results showed good internal consistency among the items in each construct, as the alpha values were higher than 0.7 (Table 3).

Table 3
Reliability analysis: Sample statistics for identified constructs

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Sincerity	3.58	0.76	0.78
Competence	3.64	0.58	0.82
Excitement	3.68	0.98	0.85
Sophistication	3.40	0.76	0.84
Ruggedness	3.51	0.84	0.77
Brand Trust	3.68	0.95	0.87
Brand Affect	3.39	0.89	0.79
Brand Loyalty	3.35	0.92	0.85

The validity of the empirical model was evaluated with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in this study by identifying and eliminating poorly performing items in order to improve model fitness. A CFA of the full measurement model with all eight constructs was conducted initially. Convergent validity was assessed by determining whether each observed variable's estimated maximum likelihood factor loading on its latent construct was significant (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The empirical models were found to be valid with the factor loadings in a reasonable range (Table 4).

Model Estimation

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed to formulate the empirical models (i.e. path diagram) using SAS 9.1 software. Five independent models, pertaining to each BPS as the initial exogenous variables, were estimated using a maximum likelihood function. Separate estimations of five BPS constructs were performed to facilitate noise-free setting for the assessment of each BPS dimension. Sung and Tinkham (2005) state that Aaker's BPS may not be perfectly orthogonal and may have a high chance of multicollinearity; thus, the SEM method would have difficulty computing separate regression weights for the two paths from the highly correlated variables to the endogenous variables. Each of the five empirical models includes four latent variables: one of the five BPS, Brand trust, Brand affect and Brand loyalty. Figure 1 shows the first model, which included Sincerity as the BPS construct. This construct was hypothesised to have explanatory power on brand trust, brand affect and brand loyalty.

Table 4
Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

		Latent Variables	Standardised Estimates
Observable Variables*		Latent Variables	*p*
I trust this brand	←	Brand Trust	1.00 -
This is an honest brand	←	Brand Trust	0.86 **
This brand gives me pleasure	←	Brand Affect	1.00 -
This brand makes me happy	←	Brand Affect	0.99 **
I would be willing to pay a higher price for this brand	←	Brand Loyalty	1.00 -
I intend to keep purchasing this brand	←	Brand Loyalty	0.88 **
Honest	←	Sincerity	1.00 -
Down-to-earth	←	Sincerity	0.88 **
Reliable	←	Competence	1.00 -
Technical	←	Competence	1.20 **
Up-to-date	←	Excitement	1.00 -
Young	←	Excitement	0.83 **
Daring	←	Excitement	0.97 **
Unique	←	Excitement	1.06 **
Charming	←	Sophistication	1.00 -
Upper class	←	Sophistication	0.91 **
Masculine	←	Ruggedness	1.00 -
Rugged	←	Ruggedness	0.79 **

* Measurement Items from Sung and Kim (2010); Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001); Aaker (1997). ****** $p < 0.01$

Table 5
Goodness of fit statistics: Five models of Brand Personality Scale (BPS) as the antecedents

Models	RMR	NFI	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Sincerity model	0.54	0.89	0.87	0.92	0.04
Competence model	0.58	0.88	0.90	0.93	0.04
Excitement model	0.61	0.92	0.94	0.91	0.06
Sophistication model	0.51	0.90	0.96	0.94	0.11
Ruggedness model	0.53	0.89	0.88	0.93	0.09

Overall fit statistics of the measurement models are reported in Table 5. Findings suggest that the first two models appear to have a close fit of the model to the data, while the remaining three models had RMSEA value above 0.05. However, other goodness of fit statistics (i.e. CFI) showed that the models had a reasonable fit of the variables in the model and were statistically significant.
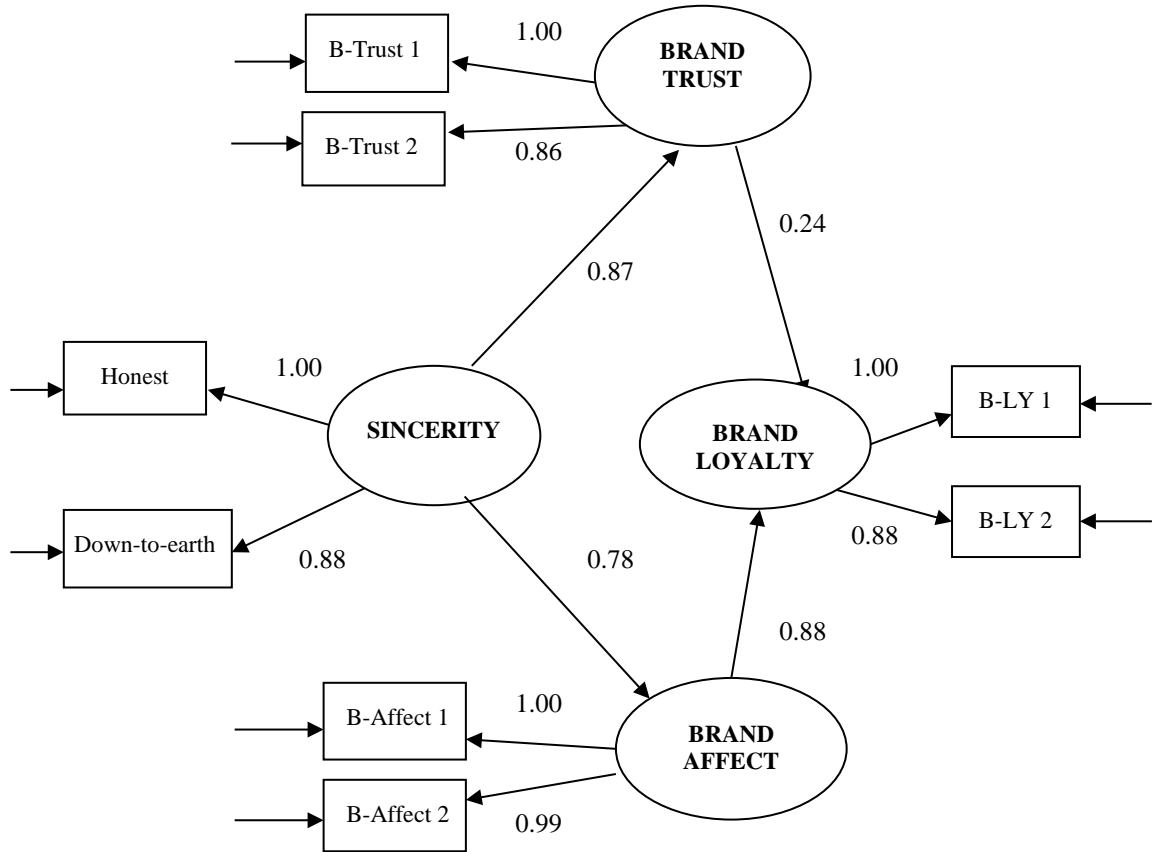

Figure 1. Structural Equation Model (SEM) of sincerity model

Table 6
Standardised path coefficients*

Models	Brand Personality Constructs	To Brand Trust	To Brand Loyalty
Sincerity model	Sincerity	0.87	0.24
Competence model	Competence	0.83	0.24
Excitement model	Excitement	0.76	0.23
Sophistication model	Sophistication	0.83	0.24
Ruggedness model	Ruggedness	0.83	0.24
		To Brand Affect	To Brand Loyalty
Sincerity model	Sincerity	0.78	0.88
Competence model	Competence	0.86	0.88
Excitement model	Excitement	0.85	0.87
Sophistication model	Sophistication	0.86	0.88
Ruggedness model	Ruggedness	0.87	0.87

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to evaluate the significance of Brand Personality Scale (BPS) on consumers' brand loyalty formation by modelling the five constructs of BPS with consumers' brand loyalty constructs and examining the impacts of each individual BPS construct on brand trust and brand affect. The results of the SEM analysis are reported in Table 6 with the standardised path coefficients. The findings suggest that five selected features of brand personality that are perceived by Chinese consumers significantly influence Brand Trust and Brand Affect, which are key determinants of Brand Loyalty.

The Sincerity model included four latent variables: Sincerity, Brand Trust, Brand Affect and Brand Loyalty (Figure 1). The other four models included Brand Trust, Brand Affect and Brand Loyalty as common variables, with the brand personality constructs included separately. Findings suggest that some brand personality dimensions have more connections with brand trust, while other dimensions have a closer link to brand affect. The significance of the difference in path coefficients (Sincerity $\rightarrow$ Brand Trust vs. Sincerity $\rightarrow$ Brand Affect) was examined by comparing the chi-square of the two path coefficients. For the first model (Sincerity model), Sincerity was found to have a stronger effect on Brand Trust (path coefficient = 0.87, $p < 0.01$) than on Brand Affect (path coefficient = 0.78, $p < 0.01$) (Table 6). Brand Trust is defined as "the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated

function" (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23; Sung & Kim, 2010). Thus, a sincere brand that is perceived as being honest and down-to-earth is more likely to be trusted by consumers than other products without such personality features.

The other four models, which included the Competence, Excitement, Sophistication, and Ruggedness dimensions of brand personality (Model 2, 3, 4 and 5), were found to have a stronger influence on Brand Affect than Brand Trust (Table 6). Excitement, Sophistication and Ruggedness are emotion-related categories in which affective aspects of brand characteristics are reflected. For example, the Excitement dimension indicates up-to-date, young, daring and unique features of a brand, which may be affective in nature. Estimated results showed that these three affective dimensions of brand personality each had a stronger impact on Brand Affect than on Brand Trust. The Sophistication dimension of brand personality had a significant effect on Brand Affect, which may demonstrate distinctive aspects of Chinese culture. Chinese people are considered to be more accepting of social hierarchies and have a more positive attitude toward social class than people of other nationalities. For instance, Power Distance, one of Hofstede's five dimensions, is reported to be substantially high (80) for China (Mooij, 2005). Thus, the 'upper-class' feature of Sophistication in brand personality tends to have a significant impact on Chinese consumers' positive feelings toward brand (i.e. Brand Affect).

However, the Competence dimension of brand personality was found to have a greater impact on Brand Affect (path coefficient = 0.83, $p < 0.01$) than on Brand Trust (path coefficient = 0.86, $p < 0.01$), despite that fact that Competence is widely believed to be more related to consumers' perceptions of brand knowledge, expertise, and ability to complete a job and satisfy the consumers' needs (Coulter & Coulter, 2002). Brands with highly competent personality characteristics, such as reliable, knowledgeable, confident, and hard working, will be more positively associated with level of brand trust than with brand affect (Sung & Kim, 2010). One possible explanation for this result may be that Chinese consumers may not have a sufficient level of trust in the competence of the selected brands.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the importance of brand personality in determining the process of Chinese consumers' brand loyalty formation. Previous studies (i.e. Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Sung & Kim, 2010) discussed the linkage between brand personality and brand affect, brand trust and brand loyalty, and the present study provided empirical support with Chinese perspectives. Brand Affect was

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found to have a substantially greater effect on Brand Loyalty than Brand Trust across all five Brand Personality dimensions. This is an important finding for marketers, as it suggests that emotional aspects of Brand Personality can have an effective role in forming Chinese consumers' brand loyalty. A recent study by Kim, Morris, and Swait (2008) demonstrates that Brand Affect is a stronger antecedent of true Brand Loyalty when compared to brand cognition. The present study empirically supports the recent emphasis on Brand Affect as one of the most effective determinants of brand loyalty.

Consistent with previous studies, some Brand Personality dimensions were found to have a stronger effect on Brand Trust, while other dimensions were found to have a stronger effect on Brand Affect. This information has practical implications for marketers and brand managers as these actors determine how to communicate their brand to Chinese consumers. Brand Personality is considered to be an important instrument in both differentiating a brand from its competitors and enhancing the effectiveness of advertising and marketing communications (Ogilvy, 1983; Plummer, 2000; Biel, 1993). Better understanding of the influences of Brand Personality on Chinese consumers' behaviours can provide guidelines for advertisers and marketing communicators in developing their persuasive strategies and in generating brand trust and brand affect among Chinese consumers. In particular, the Excitement, Sophistication and Ruggedness dimensions of Brand Personality may need to be extensively developed and communicated to Chinese consumers to establish solid brand-consumer relationships through Brand Personality and Brand Affect linkage. The Sincerity aspect of brand personality may also need to be addressed in communicating and advertising name-brand products in China, as this characteristic of Brand Personality effectively creates Brand Trust among Chinese consumers. From a managerial perspective, various activities along the downstream of the supply chain (i.e. advertising, packaging, price, user imagery, symbols and public relation efforts) may need to be effectively coordinated to communicate consistent brand personality messages to end-users and consumers. This coordination may lead to increased Brand Affect and Brand Trust, thereby generating brand equity. However, one should be cautious in taking the aforementioned findings literally by projecting personality traits onto a brand to create a consumer-brand relationship. A brand needs to be an active partner by engaging in branding activities, such as effective brand communications, to create such a partnership (Plummer, 1984; Blackston, 1993).

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