A MODEL OF FACTORS' EFFECTS ON BRAND IDENTIFICATION: EVIDENCE FROM IRAN

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ABSTRACT

Social identification is essentially a perception of oneness with a group of persons. This study designs a model that tests and identifies social factors affecting brand identification. A convenience sample of 383 visitors to Ala Eddin Market (Mobile Market in Tehran) was surveyed. A series of linear regressions to test the hypotheses were completed using Path Analysis. The results showed that brand trust and brand attractiveness have positive effects on brand identification. The results also revealed that ideal self-congruity, brand distinctiveness and brand attractiveness have positive effects on brand trust, which in turn indirectly influence brand identification. Ideal self-congruity and brand distinctiveness also positively affect brand attractiveness, which indirectly influence brand identification. However, the findings of the study indicate that actual self-congruity has no significant effect on brand trust and brand attractiveness.

Keywords: identification, trust, attractiveness, self-congruity, distinctiveness, brand

INTRODUCTION

The cell phone industry is currently one of the most important and fast-growing industries in the world. Ben Wood, mobile phone analyst at CCS Insight, said that the mobile phone may be "the most prolific consumer device on the planet" (Wood, 2008). According to Gartner's website, worldwide mobile device sales grew 13.8% in the second quarter of 2010 and 14.6% in the third quarter of 2010 (IDC Worldwide Quarterly Mobile Phone Tracker, 2010; Gartner Inc., 2010). The growth of the number of cell phone users in Iran follows global trends (http://tci.ir/s40/p_3.aspx?lang=Fa). To penetrate this market, we must thoroughly study the relationship between users and current brands. One of the most important concepts in the consumer-brand relationship is brand identification. Social identity theory, which is useful in marketing (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), states that in articulating their sense of self, people typically go beyond their personal identity to develop a social identity (Turner, 1975). People create their social identity by identifying with or categorising themselves in a contextual manner (Kramer, 1991) as members of various social categories (e.g.,

gender, ethnicity, occupation, sports teams and other more short-lived and transient groups).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) added that in the marketing context, customers create their social identity by identifying and associating themselves with brands that reflect and reinforce their self-identities. The social identity concept has been investigated in the sociological and psychological disciplines and, more recently, in organisation behaviour and human resource management (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Social identity has been described as a key concept in organisational behaviour (Gioia et al., 2000). Perceived membership in a social category contributes to one's social identity (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Consumers are drawn to teams that have a strong "similarity" to themselves, and this similarity may be real (i.e., source with actual-self) or inspirational (i.e., source with ideal-self). Identification is a means to acknowledge commonality with the "in-group" while also acknowledging differentiation from an "out-group" (Carlson, Todd, & Cumiskey, 2009).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) argued that in an era of unprecedented corporate influence and consumerism, certain companies represent and offer attractive and meaningful social identities to consumers that help satisfy important self-definitional needs. As a result, such companies constitute valid targets for identification among relevant consumers though they are not formal organisational members.

This view is supported by Scott and Lane (2000), who argued that people can seek identification even when they are not formal organisational members: "to the extent that the group category is psychologically accepted as part of the self, an individual is said to be identified with the group". Hence, it can be said that identification is but a "perceptual constructive construct" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), where the individual is not compelled to expend effort towards group goals. Akerlof and Kranton (2000) applied and acknowledged social identity theory in the context of economics. They indicated that "identity is fundamental to behaviour, choice of identity may be the most important economic decision people make". Individuals categorise themselves and identify with the group with which they share similarities. This social classification of the self can predict group member behaviours (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Turner, 1975; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). However, a review of the literature has revealed that very few studies seem to apply social classification of the self in the context of marketing (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005). Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) criticised past literature for its primary focus on the economic nature of brand relationships and for being applied mostly in the business-to-business context. Previous studies have indicated that factors such as brand personality attractiveness, prestige, distinctiveness, satisfaction, and B2C relationships affect

brand identification (Carlson et al., 2009; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Kim, Han, & Park, 2001). Notably, the notion of Consumer-Company (C-C) identification is conceptually distinct from consumers' identification with a company's brands (e.g., Aaker, 1997), its target markets, or, more specifically, its prototypical consumer.

In the following sections, the effects of trust, attractiveness, distinctiveness and actual and ideal self-congruity on brand identification are discussed. The model is tested with a sample of cell phone owners in Tehran using path analysis and multiple regression. This test is followed by a discussion of the most important findings and the managerial implications and limitations of our study.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Actual and Ideal Self-Congruity

The significance of self-concept lies in the fact that in many cases, what a consumer buys can be influenced by the image that the consumer has of him or herself (Zinkham & Hong, 1991). Self-image congruence refers to the match between consumers' self-concept (e.g., actual-self, ideal-self) and the user image (or "personality") of a given product, brand, or store. Consumers might prefer brands that have images compatible with their perceptions of self (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Ericksen, 1996; Solomon, 1983; Zinkham & Hong, 1991; Jamal & Goode, 2001). Conversely, Aaker (1991) describes a consumer's relationship with a brand on five levels, with brand trust being the fourth level, preceded by brand satisfaction. In addition, because Sirgy et al. (1997) found that self-congruity has a positive effect on customers' satisfaction with a brand, the impact of self-image congruity on brand satisfaction could be considered a prelude to brand trust, though no study has been conducted on its direct effect. The current study addresses such a relationship through the following hypotheses:

H_1: Actual self-congruity has a positive effect on brand personality trust.
H_2: Ideal self-congruity has a positive effect on brand personality trust.

Belk (1988) argued that a brand is perceived as attractive when it helps a person express him/herself and when the person identifies with the brand. Some studies associate self-expressive value with the self-congruity theory and introduce the latter as a means for self-expression (Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, & Huber, 2006). Through the purchase and use of products, consumers define, maintain and enhance their self-concepts (Zinkham & Hong, 1991; Jamal & Goode, 2001).

H$_3$: Actual self-congruity has a positive effect on brand personality attractiveness.

H$_4$: Ideal self-congruity has a positive effect on brand personality attractiveness.

Self-Congruity

To measure self-congruity (actual and ideal self-congruity), we used the difference scores for brand personality and self-image. Aaker's (1997) brand personality measure consists of 15 brand personality facets (e.g., down-to-earth, honest, wholesome) that reflect five major dimensions (e.g., security, excitement, competence). The brand personality inventory was used to capture:

1. The actual self-image of the respondents ["To what extent do the following personality attributes apply to you?"];

2. The respondents' ideal self-image ["Imagine how you would like to be. To what extent do the following personality attributes apply to how you would like to be?"]; and

3. The brand-user image as perceived by the respondents ["Imagine your brand of car (e.g., BMW) as a person. Indicate the extent to which the following personality attributes apply to the brand or the typical user of the brand."].

The self-congruity scores were calculated using the method of Sirgy, Johar, Samli and Claiborne (1991).

Brand Distinctiveness

If a brand is not perceived as unique, it will have a difficult time supporting a price higher than other brands. Regardless of how a brand is formed, if it is considered unique, it can command a premium price in the marketplace (Aaker, 1996; Netemeyer, 2004). Agres and Dubitsky (1996) found a pattern for developing a successful brand by going through a progression of phases: differentiation, relevance, esteem and knowledge (Wong & Merrilees, 2008). Brand uniqueness is also considered a core/primary CBBE (Customer-Based Brand Equity) facet (Aaker, 1996; Agarwal & Rao, 1996). Commanding a premium price and forgoing respectful relationships require customers' trust; therefore,

H$_5$: Brand personality distinctiveness has a positive effect on brand personality trust.

Studies show that if a brand can deliver even an irrelevant attribute, it will be perceived as unique. Distinctiveness makes a brand more memorable and attractive, and such a brand will be chosen frequently (Carpenter, Glazer, & Nakamoto, 1994). Brewer's (1991) theory of optimal distinctiveness suggests that people attempt to resolve the fundamental tension between their need to be similar to others and their need to be unique. Cuca (2005) believed that organising the services that are both distinctive and market-related is a way to create attractive services. Kim et al. (2001) analysed and confirmed the hypothesis of the impact of distinctiveness on brand personality attractiveness. In another study on CRM, Wu and Tsai (2007) noted the positive effect of distinctiveness on company identity attractiveness.

H_6: Brand personality distinctiveness has a positive effect on brand personality attractiveness.

Brand Attractiveness

The extent to which a brand is attractive, favourable, and distinctive (Kim et al., 2001) has important implications for the brand's success. For example, González-Benito, Martínez-Ruiz and Mollá-Descals (2008) documented the positive relationships between brand attractiveness and market share and between brand attractiveness and prices. Hayes, Alford, Silver and York (2006) indicated that consumer perception of a brand can have an impact on a consumer's opinion on the desirability of the brand as a relationship partner. Furthermore, the relationship quality appears to be dependent, to some extent, on the brand's perceived attractiveness (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009). Commanding a premium price requires customers' trust; therefore,

H_7: Brand personality attractiveness has a positive effect on brand personality trust.

Maxwell and Knox (2009) implied that the social identity theory could answer the question of what makes an employer organisation's brand attractive to its current employees. The social identity approach (SIA) offers a particularly useful lens through which to study employer brand attractiveness because organisational identification has been found to enhance a range of behaviours that may support the corporate brand. Organisational identification motivates employees to engage in organisational citizenship behaviour (van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005), to project a positive image of the organisation to external stakeholders, and to think and behave in ways that reflect the organisation's unique identity (Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000). Through the lens of SIA, organisational identity is also conceptually identical to employer brand image, and the strength of employees' identification with their organisation has been

found to increase when employees perceive their organisation's identity as attractive and unique (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Therefore, organisational identification may be treated as the intervening variable between an employer organisation's brand and the behaviour of its employees. Kim et al. (2001) also analysed and confirmed the impact of brand personality attractiveness on brand identification. Therefore,

H_8: Brand personality attractiveness has a positive effect on brand identification.

Brand Trust

A consumer who trusts a brand is more willing to remain loyal to it, pay a premium price for it, buy new products introduced under it in existing and new categories and share information about his or her tastes, preferences, and behaviours (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brand trust creates relationships between customers and the brand in which no physical and formal presence is required. Therefore,

H_9: Brand personality trust has a positive effect on brand identification.

Using previous studies and suggested hypotheses, the conceptual model of this study (Figure 1) is presented. Based on this model, actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity, and brand personality distinctiveness are considered exogenous variables, whereas brand personality trust, brand personality attractiveness, and brand identification are considered endogenous variables.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population of this study consists of cell phone buyers visiting two main cell phone retail centres in Tehran: Alaeddin Trade Complex and Tehran Great Cell Phone Market.

Data were collected via self-reporting and a paper-based questionnaire. The sample was drawn from 420 people (Based on Kerjcie and Morgan's table) living in Tehran. The response rate was nearly 91% (383 people). The study used multi-item scales to assess the constructs in our model. All items in the questionnaire were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = completely agree). Some of the measures were available in the literature, though most were adapted to suit this particular context. To measure actual and ideal personality, we used 15 items based on Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale. Brand personality trust was measured

with four items from Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) well-established distinctiveness scale.

Brand personality distinctiveness was assessed using three items established by Carlson et al. (2009). Brand identification was measured with five items based on Mael and Ashforth's (1992) study. Finally, brand personality attractiveness was assessed using four items developed by Hayes et al. (2006) (see Table 1).

RESULTS

Four questions were used to measure the sample's demographic status. The results showed that of the 383 respondents, 52.7% were men, and 47.3% were women. In terms of age, 14.9% were under 20, 73.4% were between 20 and 30, 8.6% were between 30 and 40, and 3.1% were over 40. In terms of marital status, 23.8% were married, and 76.2% were single. In terms of education, 3.9% had not finished high school, 51.4% had finished high school, and 44.7% had a bachelor's degree or higher. The distribution of cell phone brands (current and previous) among the respondents is provided. Because some respondents (approximately 74.7%) had changed cell phone brands, the distribution of the changed brands is also presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of cell phone brands (current and previous)

Brand	Previous Brand (%)	Current Brand (%)
Nokia	35.0	53.3
Sony Ericcson	38.8	26.4
Samsung	12.9	13.1
LG	2.4	1
Motorola	4.5	0.5
Chinese Brand	1.0	1.3
Others	5.2	4.4

Various tools of statistical analysis, including SPSS statistical software, were used in this study. Mean value, reliability analysis, Friedman Test analyses, Kruskal-Wallis analysis and Student's t-tests were performed as required to arrive at a logical conclusion about the sample data. Reliability of measures for each concept was tested for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. The findings for the Cronbach's alpha showed that the reliability coefficients were acceptable (above 0.6) for all variables. Hence, the reliability of the questionnaire was accepted (see Table 2).

Table 2
Findings for the Cronbach's alpha and references for questionnaire measures

Variable	No of items	A	References
Actual self-personality	15	0.669	Aaker (1997)
Ideal self-personality	15	0.780	Aaker (1997)
Brand personality	15	0.839	Aaker (1997)
Brand personality distinctiveness	3	0.649	Carlson et al. (2009)
Brand personality trust	4	0.710	Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)
Brand personality attractiveness	4	0.811	Bigné-Alcaniz, Chumpitaz-Cácetes, & Curras-Pérez (2010); Hayes et al. (2006)
Brand identification	5	0.808	Mael & Ashforth (1992)

Before analysing the hypotheses, it was necessary to address the means, standard deviations, and correlation. The results of the correlation analysis showed that actual self-congruity was directly related to all variables except brand trust ($r = 0.044$) and brand identification ($r = 0.073$). As Table 3 shows, ideal self-congruity was directly and significantly related to other variables. Correlation analysis has been done for all variables as well, results has been shown in detail in Table 3 ($p < 0.01$).

Table 3
Correlation, mean and standard deviation of research variables

Variables	$\overline{X}$	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Actual self-congruity	[a]0.90	0.380		**0.488	*0.122	0.044	*0.107	0.073
Ideal self-congruity	[b]0.98	0.48			**0.297	**0.218	**0.243	*0.125
Brand personality trust	2.39	0.77				**0.458	**0.597	**0.449
Brand personality distinctiveness	3.29	0.88					**0.403	**0.367
Brand personality attractiveness	2.67	0.89						**0.553
Brand identification	3.09	0.84						

Note: a (min = 0, max = 2.13); b (min = 0, max = 3.27); * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Path analysis was a good medium for depicting casual relationships. To test the conceptual model, path analysis was employed. To implement path analysis, the researcher used multiple regression three times. F statistics in ANOVA showed that there was a linear relationship among actual self-congruity, ideal self-

congruity, brand distinctiveness and brand attractiveness as independent variables for brand trust (F = 104.316, p < 0.01), and among actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity and brand distinctiveness as independent variables for brand attractiveness (F = 51.492, p < 0.01). The Finlay linear relationship between brand trust and brand attractiveness as independent variables for brand identification was also confirmed (F = 121.950, p < 0.01). Path analysis showed that brand trust (β = 0.173, t = 3.400) and brand attractiveness (β = 0.503, t = 9.863) have positive effects on brand identification. The results also revealed that ideal self-congruity (β = 0.158, t = 3.931), brand distinctiveness (β = 0.214, t = 5.087) and brand attractiveness (β = 0.483, t = 11.272) have positive effects on brand trust, which in turn indirectly influences brand identification. Similarly, ideal self-congruity (β = 0.218, t = 4.647) and brand distinctiveness (β = 0.358, t = 7.622) positively affect brand attractiveness, which indirectly influences brand identification. Conversely, this study's finding indicate that actual self-congruity has no significant effect on brand trust (β = –0.026, t = –0.566) and brand attractiveness (β = –0.003, t = –0.051) (Figure 1).

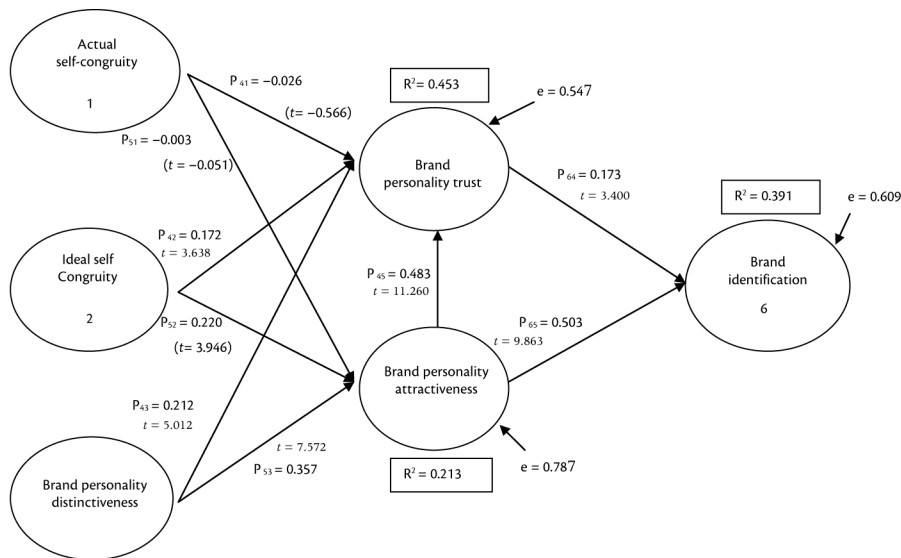*Figure 1.* Tested model

The non-significant paths were eliminated to obtain the final modified model as shown in Figure 2. As Figure 2 indicates, β coefficients, t, and R2 are provided.
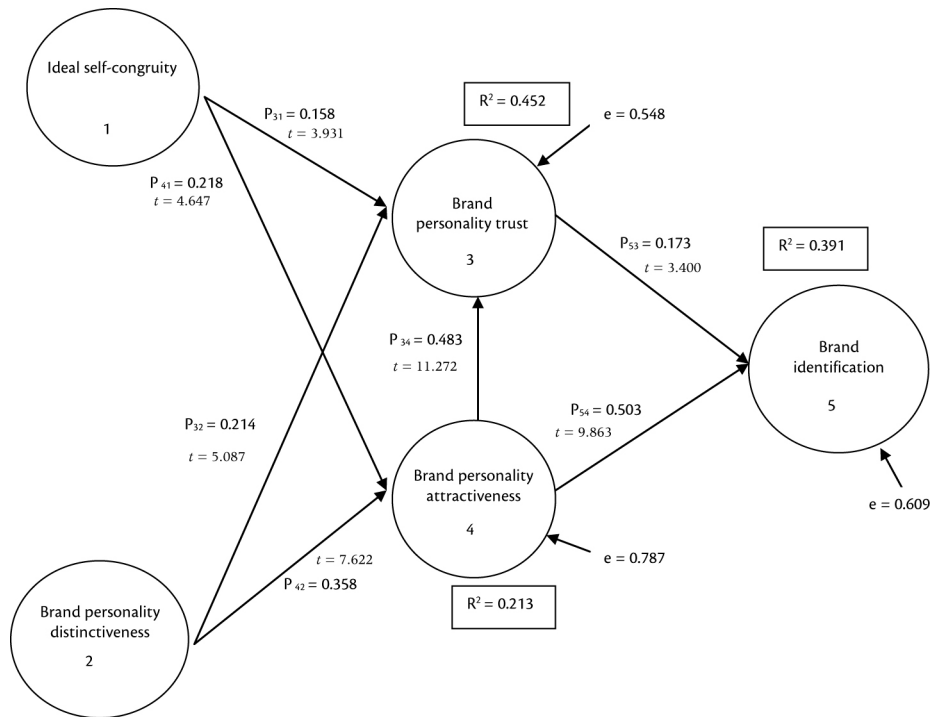
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Figure 2. Modified model

As such, all paths except H_1 and H_4 were confirmed. To analyse the direct and indirect effects of independent variables on the dependent ones, the total, direct, and indirect effects of endogenous variables should be provided (Table 4).

Complementary Tests

An analysis of the means of brand trust, brand attractiveness, and brand identification through one sample *t*-test resulted in no significant difference among the surveyed brands. However, a study of the mean distinctiveness among the surveyed brands showed that Samsung had the least distinctiveness (Table 5).

Table 4
Direct, indirect and total effects

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Effect		
		Direct	Indirect	Total
Brand personality trust	Ideal self-congruity	0.158	(0.218 × 0.483)	0.263
	Brand personality distinctiveness	0.214	(0.358 × 0.483)	0.387
	Brand personality attractiveness	0.483		**0.483**
Brand personality attractiveness	Ideal self-congruity	0.218		0.218
	Brand personality distinctiveness	0.358		**0.358**
Brand identification	Ideal self-congruity		(0.158 × 0.173) + (0.218 × 0.503) + (0.218 × 0.483 × 0.173)	0.155
	Brand personality distinctiveness		(0.214 × 0.173) + (0.358 × 0.503) + (0.358 × 0.483 × 0.173)	0.247
	Brand personality trust	0.173		0.173
	Brand personality attractiveness	0.503	(0.483 × 0.173)	**0.586**

Table 5
Analysis of the means of research variables through a one-sample t-test

Brand	Brand identification			Attractiveness			Trust			Distinctiveness		
	X	t	Sig	X	t	Sig	X	t	Sig	X	t	Sig
Nokia	3.07	−.39	.694	2.67	−.028	.978	2.31	−1.50	.136	3.26	−.469	**.639**
Sony Ericsson	3.12	.44	.662	2.66	−.109	.914	2.51	1.56	.121	3.37	.913	**.363**
Samsung	3.12	.23	.822	2.83	.972	.336	2.60	1.83	.074	3.74	3.54	**.001**
LG	2.85	−.70	.532	2.44	−.707	.530	2.62	.75	.509	3.00	−1.23	**.306**

CONCLUSION

This study shows that brand personality trust (β = 0.173, t = 3.400) has a positive effect on brand identification. This is consistent with the findings of Wu and Tsai (2007), which confirm the indirect effect of trust on customer-company identification through a company's distinctiveness, prestige, and identity attractiveness. In this way, brand trust creates customer-brand relationships that require no physical and formal presence and may lead to a broader perception of oneness with a brand.

This study also showed that brand personality attractiveness (β = 0.503, t = 9.863) has a positive effect on brand identification. This was also illustrated by Ashforth and Mael's (1989) study on employer brand attractiveness, which confirmed its positive effect on organisational identification. Kim et al. (2001) also reached the same conclusion. Perceived brand attractiveness may significantly affect the customer-brand relationship. A brand's desirability may influence a customer to perceive that brand as a friend, which in turn may serve as a factor in creating oneness with a brand.

This study also shows that ideal self-congruity (β = 0.158, t = 3.931) has a positive impact on brand personality trust and indirectly affects brand identification. The positive effect of self-image congruity on customers' satisfaction as a post-purchase behaviour has been already proven. As previously mentioned, Aaker (1997) described the customer-brand relationship in five facets, among which brand trust is the fourth facet, preceded by brand satisfaction. As such, the effect of self-image congruity on brand satisfaction may be considered a prelude to brand trust.

Similarly, brand personality distinctiveness (β = 0.214, t = 5.087) has a positive effect on brand personality trust. Agres and Dubitsky (1996) found a pattern for developing a successful brand by going through a progression of phases: differentiation, relevance, esteem and knowledge. A series of linear regressions shows that brand personality attractiveness (β = 0.483, t = 11.272) has a positive effect on brand personality trust. Hayes et al. (2006) argued that perceived brand attractiveness may influence the consumer-brand relationship in meaningful and predictable ways. Their study indicated that a consumer's brand perception can impact his or her opinion of brand desirability as a relationship partner. Furthermore, the relationship quality appears to be dependent, to some extent, on the brand's perceived attractiveness (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009), which in turn may be considered an incentive to increase brand personality trust.

This study also indicates the positive effect of ideal self-congruity (β = 0.218, t = 4.647) on brand personality attractiveness. The self-expressive value is mainly a force that makes consumers buy goods and services. Considering previous studies, self-congruity with brand concept may be considered a natural development of the self-concept (Usakli & Baloglu, 2010). Belk (1988) argued that a brand is perceived as attractive when it helps a person express him/herself and when the person identifies with that brand. Aaker (1999) argued that a brand is used for self-expression and to reflect self-concept. In another study, Kim et al. (2001) confirmed that the self-expressive value and distinctiveness of a brand influence the attractiveness of a brand personality.

The findings of this study showing the positive impact of brand personality distinctiveness ($\beta = 0.358$, $t = 7.622$) on brand personality attractiveness are consistent with those of Kim et al. (2001) and Wu and Tsai (2007).

However, this study shows that the effects of actual self-congruity on brand personality trust ($\beta = -0.026$, $t = 0.566$) and brand personality attractiveness ($\beta = -0.003$, $t = -0.051$) are not significant or meaningful. Although many studies have addressed the positive effect of self-image congruity on customers´ preferences (Ericksen, 1996), others have shown that self-image congruity may not be an important factor in purchasing and evaluating all product categories (Jamal & Goode, 2001). Considering the positive relationships in the model, this study confirms the positive indirect effects of the aforementioned variables on brand identification, with brand personality attractiveness having the greatest impact. This study also addresses brand personality distinctiveness. The effect of brand personality attractiveness on brand personality trust and the impact of brand personality distinctiveness on the two endogenous variables of brand personality attractiveness and brand personality trust seem to be remarkable. The analysis of these effects shows that ideal self-congruity has the least impact on brand identification.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

Because one of the most successful sales techniques is to introduce products to customers based on their personality type, more emphasis should be placed on ideal self-congruity to attract customers to a given cell phone brand.

Innovation and creativity in producing more attractive and distinctive cell phones provide more intimacy with a given brand. Cell phone importers in Iran should be aware of this. They should also avoid any bias and prejudice toward a certain brand to save the national capital. The strong effects of brand personality attractiveness and distinctiveness on brand trust show that using an attractive and distinctive marketing mix in introducing a product, in addition to higher brand identification, can play a determining role in creating brand trust. However, due to the strong effects of distinctiveness on brand personality attractiveness and cell phone brand personality identification, it also applies to brand personality distinctiveness.

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FUTURE RESEARCH

The conceptual model of this study can be tested for other products. Because brand identification in a cognitive concept creates an overlap between an individual's pattern and an institution's pattern, sports environments and related retailers are appropriate contexts for brand identification studies. A recent concept in brand studies is customer involvement, frequently illustrating the moderator effect on customer's behaviour. Because brand identification is a concept linked to customer's behaviour, it is recommended that the effect of customer involvement on the relationship between actual and ideal self-congruity, brand attractiveness and brand trust be surveyed.

Because the cell phone market is vast and significant, it is recommended that other determinants such as price, quality, ads, and distribution channels are analysed through other models.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The brand personality facets as identified by Aaker (1997) were translated to suit this study. This limitation was removed to an acceptable extent using expert recommendations. The foreign origins of most cell phone brands and lack of domestic brands may significantly affect the customer's perceptions of brands and their associations. Additionally, negative attitudes toward some brands affect such perceptions. Domestic sales figures were unavailable for several brands, which made it impossible to properly extract the different classes' data in terms of their weighted averages.

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