Brand-Self Congruence and Brand Preference: A Study on Mobile Phone Users

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Abstract

Purpose- The aim of this study was to analyze consumer's perceived images of different mobile phone brands against their actual self-image in order to know the impact on the brand preference.

Methodology/sample- In this study questionnaires were filled by 400 respondents, where the respondent individuals belonged to different groups. To analyze the data regression and Correlation tests were applied and the relationship between dependent and independent variables were analyzed.

Findings- the relative results clearly indicated that individuals in Pakistan prefer those mobile phone brands which go along with their actual self-image, as there was a positive relation. Though, the strength of the relation was moderate, which showed that there are other factors which should be considered.

Practical Implications- The result of the research will help the marketers and brand managers in building up a brand image that is similar to the consumer's self-image. It will also help them to understand how much it is important to maintain a brand image which has an association to the consumer's self-image. As today not just the functional aspects of a mobile phone matters but the brand image of mobile also matters because through the brand consumer express their own image to others.

1. Introduction

McDowell (2006) defined a brand as a name, term, sign, a design or even a combination of all of these elements, which differentiates a product or service from others in the market, particularly its competitors. Brand names generate feelings that ultimately increase the worth of a product or service past its effective value and/or product category, whereas brand image focuses on the meaning that a target audience derives from a particular brand (Nienstedt et al., 2012).

Solomon (1983) & Kressmann at el. (2006) mentioned in their studies that self-concept purpose like self-esteem need and self-consistency dictates self-congruity (Aaker, 1997; Biel, 1997; Malhotra, 1981, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). That is to say that the more a consumer believes his/her ideal self-image to identify with the brand-user image, the more probable it becomes that the consumer will conclude that his use of the brand will meet his self-esteem requirements. This is due to the discrepancies between a consumer's actual and ideal self, which help to enhance his/her self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). Another self-concept notion also maintains that people are likely to behave in ways that identify with their self-image, thus relating to the need for self-consistency. Consumers have their beliefs about their uniqueness, lifestyles, habits, values and preferences and when their self-theories are created and enhanced, they strongly want to protect them. Any threat to self-image of consumers can cause mental collapse and psychosis (Lecky, 1945; Epstein, 1980).

Previous research has recommended that consumers prefer and buy products/brands that they believe identify with their self-concept (Ericksen 1996; Graeff 1996; Mehta 1999; Sirgy et al. 1997, 1991; Sirgy 1982). While consuming products, the self-image of consumers interacts with the brand image or product and establishes a connection, which is called self-image congruity (Sirgy, et al. 1997). Many researchers suggest that this phenomena of self-image and brand image interaction can influences different consumer behaviors (Ericksen 1996; Sirgy et al. 1997; Jamal 2004; Jamal & Goode 2001). It is very difficult to gain customers' attention, create an acceptance for a product or service, and retain consumers' interest when the information a brand develops is inconsistent with the customer's self-image (Heath & Scott 1998). Brand/marketing managers should maintain this link between the perceived image of a brand and their own self-image (Zinkham & Hong 1991).

However, for different products categories, consumers demonstrate diverse intensity of self-image congruity (Kapferer, 1997 & Graeff 1996). However, there is one more factor to consider, i.e. the degree to which self-image is triggered when analyzing the brands against their self-concept because it can moderate the effect on brand evaluations which can be created through the self-image congruity (Crimmins, 1992, Kardes, 1999 & Graef 1996).

Many researches are conducted to evaluate self-congruity and brand preference but none of the researches focused on mobile phones; only one study has studied the relationship between self-congruity and brand loyalty, with the focused product being a cell phone (Hong, 1995; Koksal & Demir, 2012). This study maintains that an evident link and direct relationship between self-congruity and brand preference on mobile phone is established, as it has become an important part of our life.

1.1. Hypothesis

If the brand image is found to be in consistency with the self-image, it is highly plausible that this brand is going to be preferred by consumers. This theory, commonly known as image congruence, is the vital point of their study. A research was conducted in the jewelry market of UK regarding image congruity and maintains that image congruity strongly predicts consumer brand preference and satisfaction (Jamal & Goode, 2001).

Yet another study looked at the two variations of self-image, known as ideal self-image and actual self-image. It was concluded as a result that ideal self-image has a strong positive relationship with consumer satisfaction, and a negative relationship with actual self-image. However, both dimensions had a relationship with the loyalty aspect. Consumer satisfaction played a mediation role for ideal self-image and loyalty (Abdallat, 2012).

Many researchers claim that while self-image congruence may be generally related to consumer satisfaction but, for instance in the context of the automobile market, when a customer has high level of expertise, self-image congruency may not affect satisfaction judgments of the customer. The study concluded that among the automobile users, a strong link exists between self-image and brand satisfaction, and among brand preference and satisfaction in general. The previous researches on travel destination market also concluded the same results (Sirgy et al. 1997), retail banking (Jamal 2004) and precious jewelery market (Jamal and Goode 2001). In determining consumer choice, self-concept plays a vital role and consumers mostly prefer brands whose image is consistent with the images of their self-concept (Belk, et al. 1982; Ericksen 1996, Mehta 1999, Sirgy et al. 1982; 1997; Zinkham & Hong 1991; Jamal 2004; Jamal and Goode 2001). On this basis, the hypothesis developed is as below:

H1: Consumers prefer brands whose image positively correlate to their actual self-image.

1.2. Limitation

This study only focuses on one product category. i.e. mobile phone for theory testing. There can be many other product categories that can also be selected for this topic. Given the time constraints, only one product has been chosen.

Another limitation of this study is that only the actual self-image is chosen from all the dimensions of self-concept. There are also other dimensions of self-concept that could have been

chosen for this study, but again the time constraint and also the secondary data available on other dimensions was not enough to have a thorough understanding in this regard.

2. Literature review
2.1. Self-concept
Research has been suggestive of the notion that consumers generally perceive other consumers that they want to be a lot more similar to their own selves over the ones that they do not like. Correspondingly, consumers also like people that they see to be consistent to them compared to the ones less consistent. Projecting these results to the behavior of consumers directs to the forecast that people would purchase those brands that they think are used by the people who they think are just like them (Chaplin, 2005; Ross, 1971).

In this context, a study examined self/product congruity in three product categories and the results suggested three propositions. First, a convenience product was selected, and the assumption made was that self-image congruity did not directly affect the preference of a brand by consumers, and indirect impacts were assumed for functional congruity. Then, a shopping product was selected, and the results showed that self-image and product image congruity have direct and indirect effects on brand preference. Lastly, a specialty product was selected, and results showed that the direct effects were significant for the self-concept and product-image congruence. Therefore, except for convenience product and for both the specialty and shopping products, self-concept and product-image congruence were found to have direct effects on brand preference. Furthermore, the specialty product had the most pronounced direct effect of self-concept and functional congruity on brand preference (Landon, 1974; Wook Han, 2006).

2.2 Self - concept congruity
Self-congruity evolves as a consequential enlargement of self-concept. Self-congruity can be defined as the extent to which congruity is found between consumer's perception of a brand or product and their perceptions of their own selves (Sirgy, 1982). Jamal & Al-Marri (2007) advanced the study of Blackwell (2006) and Sirgy at al. (1997), who emphasized that brands are also assigned attributes that correlate with personal images of consumers, as in a brand can be youthful and friendly, which are varied when compared to utilitarian or functional brands, like costs and benefits in terms of performance, quality and price. The personal images are mirrored through the general users of a brand and by factors such as advertising, price and other brand associations through marketing activities, as consumers collate their self-images to a typical user of a brand (Sirgy 1982). Suppose there is a car buyer who considers himself to be modern and friendly, this consumer will use a brand which is used by people who are considered modern and friendly. This phenomenon pertaining to the juxtaposition between product-user image and consumers own self-image is known as self-image congruence (Sirgy, et al. 1997).

Brand personality is a vital part of brand image and also consequential for product differentiation. A study was conducted on brand personality and brand user-imagery congruence, and the findings revealed that self-brand congruity that is based on brand personality must be treated as a completely separate topic for further research (Parker, 2009).

If the brand image is found to be in consistency with the self-image, it is highly plausible that this brand is going to be preferred by consumers. This theory, commonly known as image congruence, is the vital point of their study and the above discussed works of various researchers support this notion. A research was conducted in the jewelry market of UK regarding image congruity and maintains that image congruity strongly predicts consumer brand preference and satisfaction (Jamal & Goode, 2001).

Findings suggest that in automobile market self-image is good indicator of brand satisfaction, but this does not apply to the consumers with a higher level of expertise. Through this, marketers and brand managers can enhance their brand attributes and also devise their positioning strategy by analyzing the brand image alongside the self-image of the target consumers (Jamal & Al-Marri, 2010).

In another research conducted to understand the effects of image congruence with particular reference to counterfeit products and their evaluations, results revealed that image congruence strongly affected consumer attitude and intention to purchase. Also, it came to light that the ideal self-image has a positive relationship when genuine products are considered, and actual self is considered more when counterfeit products are considered (Peng, Wong & Wen, 2012).

It has also been suggested in previous research that consumer behaviours are bound to be affected by the self-image a consumer wants to depict in different situations (Schiffman & Kanuk 2004). Each person's social surroundings also form an important part of such situations and include the personality and image of those with whom they interact (Belk, 1975), both in the context of significant others and other interpersonal relationships. In 1997, Graeff researched the influence of actual self and ideal self on product evaluations by manipulating the consumption situations. The results of his study conclude that when the consumer's self-image and brand image were congruent, there was a favorable impact on the consumer's attitude as well as purchase intention.

Figure 1: Conceptual Frame Work
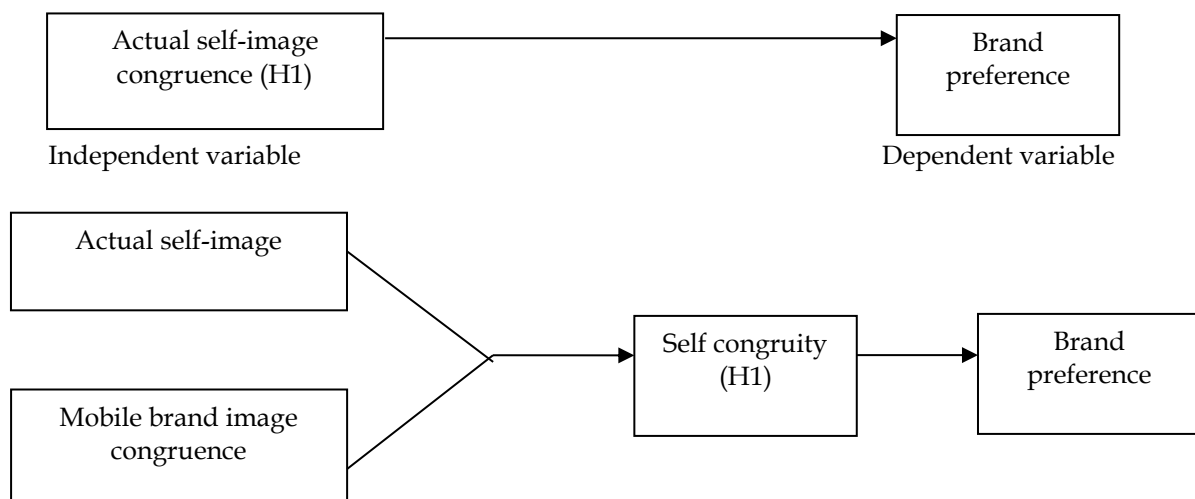
3. Methodology

The research method adopted for the study is explanatory in nature. For this research, quantitative method was selected after reviewing the literature because most of the research conducted on the same topic with different product categories used a quantitative approach. The traditional method involved data collection for the respondent's interpretations of the product-user image, and then the respondent's interpretations of their own self-image by relating it to product and its user image. Traditionally, these were measured through the semantic differential scale, then calculating the discrepancy scores mathematically and in the end, adding up all the results of discrepancy scores for each dimension. However, by the time researchers started to analyze the method, they found problems with the traditional method due to which results were not reliable. Sirgy, who conducted various studies on this topic, evaluated this traditional method and highlighted three major problems; first was the usage of discrepancy score, second was the usage of irrelevant images that were not related to consumer's perceived image about a brand; and third was the usage of compensatory decision rule (Sirgy et al., 1997). He discussed these problems in detail and then suggested a different way to address these issues by majoring the self-image congruity directly.

Sirgy et al. (1997) assessed the validity of this new approach by conducting six studies and comparing their results. In this new method, respondents were required to think of any brand and then of a person who is a consumer of that brand, and resultantly rate the statements on a Likert scale by indicating their agreement or disagreement about how similar they think the person is with the image that they actually perceive about their own selves i.e. the actual self-image. The target

population for this research included all the mobile phone users in Pakistan. For this research, convenience sampling was conducted to select a sample of four-hundred consumers (n=400) from many thousands of mobile phone users. The data collection instrument for this research was a questionnaire. From reviewing the literature, it came to light that most of the research in this domain included a questionnaire as the research instrument. Data integration was done through the use of SPSS software. The hypotheses were tested statistically by running regression analysis and correlation test in order to measure the correlation between dependent and independent variables will be measured.

4. Analysis
4.1. Reliability Test

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.959	.960	11

Table-1 shows Cronbach's alpha to be **0.959**, indicating high level of internal consistency for the scale with this particular sample.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.954	0.956	10

Table-2 shows Cronbach's alpha to be **0.954**, indicating high level of internal consistency for the scale with this particular sample.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

H1: Consumers prefer brands whose image positively correlate to their actual self-image.

Following Sirgy at, al (1997), correlation as well as regression were conducted to analyze the relationship as well as its strength. Actual self-image congruence was chosen as the independent variable, while brand preference was the dependent variable. The results were as follows:

4.2.1. Correlation

Table 3: Correlation

		Actual Self	Brand Preference
Actual Self	Pearson Correlation	1	.641**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	402	402
Brand Preference	Pearson Correlation	.641**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	402	402

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation value has come out positive, indicating that there is a positive correlation at the value 0.641**. Also, given the fact that this value is significant, it can be concluded that the collected data supports the hypothesis H1, thus rejecting the null hypothesis. Also, Table-3 shows the sig. value to be 0.000 which is lower than 0.05, indicating the existence of a relationship among the two variables i.e. actual self-congruence and brand preference, and also that it is significant.

This result suggests that consumers prefer only those brands whose perceived image in the mind of consumers is consistent to their actual self-image.

4.2.2. Regression

Table 4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.641ᵃ	0.41	0.409	0.6536

a. Predictors: (Constant), Actual Self

Table 5: Coefficientsᵃ

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.103	.128		16.442	.000
	Actual Self	.542	.032	.641	16.687	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Preference

The r-value equals to 0.641, whereas r^2 is 0.410, this means that the effect of self-image congruence on brand preference is 41% and the rest is due to the discrepancy of other factors. This finding thus concludes that there is a linkage between actual self-image congruence and brand preference as suggested by Sirgy et al. (1997).

$R = 0.641$, $p<0.001$

From the above data it can be seen that:

a = 2.103

b= 0.542

p=0.000

Here, the value of p is less than 0.05 therefore the relationship is reliable.

Regression equation

y'=bx + a

y'= 0.542(x) + (2.103)

y'=0.542(x) + 2.103

Brand preference=0.542 (Actual self-image congruence) + 2.103

Interpretation: 1 unit increase in 'x' will bring 0.542 changes in 'y'. Therefore, brand preference (y) can be predicted from any given value of actual self-congruence (x).

5. Findings

The correlations results indicate that for actual self-image congruence, which was the independent variable, and the dependent variable of brand preference, the Pearson correlation value is positive, indicating a positive, significant correlation at the value 0.641**, thus supporting hypothesis H1 and rejecting the null hypothesis. Table-4 also shows that the sig. value is 0.000 which is lower than 0.05, indicating that the presence of a relationship among the two variables i.e. actual self-congruence and brand preference is very much significant. This result also suggests that consumers prefer only that brand whose perceived image in the mind of consumers is consistent to their actual self-image. Similarly, the result of regression shows that the r-value equals to 0.641, whereas r^2 is 0.410 ($r = 0.641$, $p<0.001$), indicating the influence of self-image congruence on brand preference at 41%, and the rest is due to the discrepancy of other factors. This finding, therefore, concludes that the correlation

does exist between actual self-image congruence and brand preference as suggested by Sirgy et al. (1997).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Consumer purchases are well-defined and intentional in nature because when consumers go out to purchase, they want a brand that is different from other brands and through which they could differentiate themselves from others. Therefore, there would be a difference in the preference of brands with regards to intentions for purchase. Consumers demand for such a product that could differentiate them from others, make them stand out and give them a feeling that this brand is exclusively made for them. They want a brand which matches their personality and is just like them (Dolich, 1969).

The conclusions drawn as a result of this research are congruous with the conclusions of Sirgy et al. (1997) who examined six different studies with the same methodology. These results are also congruous with the findings of Graef (1996), who investigated the congruence between brand image and two variations of self-image, namely actual self-image and ideal self-image. Both the studies established a strong relationship between these two dimensions of self-concept and brand preference.

This research also establishes that consumers prefer their actual self to be similar with the mobile phone brand image. The study findings suggest that consumers evaluate their actual self-concept against brand image and then prefer a brand where a positive correlation exists between these two elements. Through correlation and regression analyses, we found that there is a positive correlation between actual self and brand preference, and both are moderately related to each other, with the result that there is a 41% influence of actual self-image on brand preference, while the rest is due to the discrepancy of other factors. It is also discussed by the researchers that self-congruity is not the only factor in consumer purchase decisions, and there are other factors like conspicuousness of consumption, activation of self-concept while making the purchase decision, high and low involvement of consumer while making the purchase, etc. Hence, these and other factors that are not known should also be considered in the model.

This research establishes that people are aware and conscious of their self-image and brand image congruence for mobile phone brand. Hence, the implications for marketers are that when they are developing their promotional activities, they should consider actual self and brand image congruence, as it is an important aspect.

7. Recommendations

According to the findings of our study and the conclusions made, the following recommendations can be drawn:

Brand image is the major aspect that helps a product to remain competitive in the mobile phone industry. Therefore, it is very important to hire people who are skilled, creative, and think out of the box, and who will manage the brand well enough for it to stand out among many other brands in the industry.

Marketers use several product-related aspects like packaging, TV ads, billboards, hoardings, panaflexes, digital advertisements, etc. to develop and build up the brand image. Marketers can further use these elements in delivering a brand image that people can associate with themselves. They can associate cues to link the brand to a certain situation that will be related to the consumer and it will help them more to associate with the brand based on its suitability to their image. Customer loyalty could be the most desirable attribute through which companies can achieve this goal. Any complaints or negative associations that are raised about the brand should be removed immediately before it damages the brand completely. Also, companies can take precautionary action to avoid these negative associations before they happen in the first place.

Brand image can be either made or destroyed by the employees as they are the ambassadors of the company who carry the image to consumers either positively or negatively. If they are not

satisfied with the company the company should take actions to turn their attitudes from negative to positive and for this they can setup incentive programs, recognition ceremonies, initiate events that would involve the employees in healthy activities and they feel relaxed and help them in changing their mood and releasing work stress. These activities will lead to positive attitude of employees and they will become loyal toward the company and will be motivated to turn the customer towards the company and make them loyal to ensure repeated purchases. The employees are an important part of the company and act as company ambassadors; therefore, these people need to be kept motivated so as to keep up with the desirable image.

8. Further Research

Studies that focus on investigating the likelihood of enhancing the self-evaluation of consumers with respect to the linkage they develop between self-image and brand image need to be conducted that identify possible ways of strengthening this relationship. Similarly, studies also need to focus on identifying the reasons behind the decreasing self-evaluation in this context.

Future research can also investigate a multi-dimensional measure of self-concept, which can also include other facets of self-concept apart from actual self-image.

This same study could be done for other product categories as well, as this study only focused on mobile phones.

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