

Exploring the Relationship between Apparel Brand Differentiation and Brand Purchase Intention with a Focus on Roles of Brand Identification and Brand Awareness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention, by concentrating on the roles of (individual/social) brand identification and brand awareness. In doing so, the study analyzed the data gathered from customers of a branch of Benetton Group in Shiraz, Iran. Through the non-probability sampling method, 384 customers who had purchased clothing items from the brand were selected. To collect data, a researcher-made questionnaire was constructed that included 19 items. Construct validity and content validity were used to examine the validity of the questionnaire. Its reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha (75%) and split-half (71%). The statistical analysis showed that "apparel brand differentiation" affected "brand purchase intention." However, it was revealed that, contrary to "individual brand identification", "social brand identification" indirectly mediated the aforementioned relationship. Meanwhile, "brand awareness" moderated the relationship between "apparel brand differentiation" and "individual brand identification." The findings can guide apparel brands in the market on how to design distinctive clothing items that can meet consumers' functional needs, while helping them to constitute identities congruent with their individual/social self-concept and self-expression.

Keywords: apparel brand differentiation, individual brand identification, social brand identification, brand awareness, purchase intention

1. Introduction

Maintaining and increasing profitability in the highly competitive environment of the apparel industry demands creating innovative and distinctive ways to meet customers' satisfaction (Engle et al., 1995). Furthermore, compared to other

industries, the product lifecycle in the apparel industry is constantly declining, especially as consumers show changing preferences in terms of the novelty and variety of clothes they buy (Choi et al., 2019). This is why some clothing manufacturers try to design distinct apparel styles, promoting them through

distinctive marketing elements. The distinction they seek to achieve may involve a variety of aspects, such as apparel color, design, size, type of fabric, etc.

In terms of clothing behavior, people are normally concerned with fashionable clothes, popular styles, colors, print patterns, and brands (Frings, 2005; Koester & May, 1985; Schaefer et al., 2009). Individuals use their apparel to manage their public image (how they want to be viewed by others), conform to the expectations of a specific social group, mitigate negative moods, and feel more secure in social settings (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004; Kwon, 1991). Given such issues, clothing is not only a way of expressing oneself, but also a medium through which people can gain social or interpersonal approval and acceptance (e.g., among family members, friends, or reference groups).

Because the apparel market is highly dependent on changing consumer tastes and preferences, it would be necessary to have a basic understanding of the psychology behind apparel consumption by focusing on such underlying factors as attitude and purchasing behavior (Goldsmith et al., 2012). Despite vital psychological functions of clothes/clothing, Romeo and Lee (2015) observed that expressive and aesthetic desires often went unfulfilled because in most cases clothes were meant to satisfy functional needs. This finding witnessed a lack of focus on brand identification in terms of both individual and social aspects of brand identification. Similarly, Cox and Dittmar (1995) suggest that, although customers definitely use apparel for functional purposes, they choose their clothing items in a way that symbolizes their social and interpersonal relationships (especially in the case of women).

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention in a branch of Benetton Group in Shiraz city, Iran. More specifically, the study seeks to probe into rarely explored issues regarding apparel brand differentiation and purchase intention in the case of apparel brands, by

focusing on the on the role of brand identification. Furthermore, the study addresses another gap by investigating the moderating role of brand awareness in the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand identification. These concerns, of course, remain unexplored in the literature on buying behavior in the apparel industry.

The next section of the study provides a brief review of apparel brand differentiation. Then, it is explained that purchase decisions about non-durable consumer goods have important social/individual psychological dimensions beyond the assumptions of traditional theories of customer behavior, which usually emphasize consumers' rational and cost-benefit decision-making. More specifically, the study focuses on such variables as brand identification and brand awareness to foreground highly important psychological tendencies that affect customers' brand purchase intention.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Apparel brand differentiation

Product differentiation is the process by which a product is distinguished from others, whether they are manufactured by the same company or by its competitors. This process usually tries to make a given product more appealing to consumers in a specific target market (Anderson et al., 1992). Differentiation focuses on buyers' different perceptions, although in practice what makes a product distinct does not need to be a radically distinct feature. For instance, differentiation can be simply accomplished through alternatively designed packages, advertising campaigns, sales promotion, or the distribution chain. The difference can also be represented in the functional aspects of the product itself, such as its quality or price (Hoyle, 2005).

There are, of course, other ways of differentiating products. Some companies, for instance, manipulate the availability of their products by supplying just a few models of them, manufacturing them only a few times a year, or selling them in a few special

shopping stores. Price is another factor that can help to differentiate a particular product. Consumer goods involve features that can be measured and compared. For instance, there is usually an association between price and product features (e.g., quality), and different prices often point to different product features (Rosen, 1974).

Differentiation tries to highlight the unique aspects of a product, and for this reason, it represents a remarkably important process to customers. Companies may also distinguish their products by calling attention to elements not associated with price-related factors. Such a strategy can generate competitive advantage, by clarifying which features a company should foreground in advertising the uniqueness of its products. A specifically remarkable feature or benefit is called a “unique selling proposition” (Moine & Lloyd, 2002). When a customer realizes and acknowledges the distinction of a product from other competing products, s/he is very likely to develop a preference for it through brand loyalty.

This long-term purpose of product differentiation can make customers loyal to the brand, thus changing the product’s demand curve. As a consequence, the company will be able to modify the product’s price (Dwivedi, 2006). Product differentiation itself can be divided into two types: the horizontal and the vertical. The former refers to cases when a product is not differentiated from competing products based on its quality or price. As such, consumers do not tend to evaluate a product by considering its price or quality. In contrast, in the case of vertical differentiation, consumers make evaluative judgments about various quality-specific dimensions of products that are sold at the same price (George et al., 1992).

Product differentiation may bring about various effects. The relationship between product differentiation and purchase intention is a very important one (particularly from the perspective of the present study). Although Oldemaat (2013) observed no significant relationship between product differentiation and purchase intention, there are some researchers who have found a

positive significant relationship between product differentiation and brand purchase intention (including Nishino et al., 2014; Knight & Kim, 2007; Summers et al., 2006).

2.2. Brand Identification

Kim et al. (2001) define the level of brand identification as the degree to which a brand expresses and promotes consumers’ identity. Del Rio et al. (2001) distinguish two functions of a brand, namely individual identification and social identification (see also Carlson et al., 2008). Individual identification denotes that consumers can identify with a specific brand and develop affinity to it. According to Carlson et al. (2008), individual identification with a brand reflects the degree of overlap between an individual's self-schema and the brand schema s/he has in mind.

From a business perspective, identity-based marketing strategies are highly important (Popp & Woratschek, 2017). Of course, although brand identification is not easily established in the short-term, when it is established it provides a more sustainable competitive advantage (Sichtmann et al., 2019). In addition, brand identity has proven to be a vital predictor of many indicators of marketing success (Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Kumar & Kaushik, 2020).

In contrast, social identification refers to the brand's ability to function as a communication instrument, allowing consumers to manifest the desire to integrate with or to dissociate from groups of individuals who make up their immediate social environment (Del Rio et al., 2001). People tend to use various factors to classify themselves as belonging to a specific group. This phenomenon, which is an integral aspect of social life, is often called social identification. In short, social identification involves a sense of belonging to certain groups or organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg et al., 1995). Groups may also be perceived as reference groups. As such, a group is not only a social unit to which people belong, but also a unit to which they wish to belong.

To investigate the relationship between brand identification and apparel purchase intention, one must realize that what consumers buy constitutes part of their “selves” (Belk, 1988), while recognized brands offer consumers self-expressive or emblematic value (Aaker, 1999). For example, clothing symbolizes an individual’s self-expressive tendencies (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006), and for this reason consumers buy clothes that are directly related to their self-concept and serve their self-expression tendencies (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Sierra and Hyman (2011) also argue that there is a strong relationship between self-expression and brand purchase intention.

2.3. Brand awareness

Brand awareness points to the ability of a customer to identify and remember a brand in different situations (Aaker, 1996). Brand awareness consists of brand recall and brand recognition. Brand recall is concerned with how often consumers exactly remember a brand name when they think of a product category. Brand recognition, on the other hand, explores whether consumers have the ability to identify a brand when they experience an associated brand cue. As such, consumers may recognize the brand correctly if they experience an image or other signals representing it.

Moreover, Hoeffler and Keller (2002) state that brand awareness can be distinguished from depth and width. Depth reveals how easily a customer can recall or identify a brand, whereas width tries to find out the point at which consumers immediately remember a brand name when purchasing a product. If a product manages to have brand depth and width at the same time, consumers will think of a particular brand when they intend to buy a related product. That is, the product involves a higher level of brand awareness. Furthermore, the brand name is the most important element in brand awareness (Davis et al., 2008).

Brand awareness, then, will affect purchase decisions through brand associations, contributing to marketing activities when a product has a positive brand

image (Keller, 1993). A brand name represents a symbol that can help consumers to identify service providers and to predict service outcomes (Herbig & Milewicz, 1993; Janiszewski & Van Osselaer, 2000; Turley & Moore, 1995). Brand awareness has an important function in purchase intention, because consumers tend to buy a familiar and well-known product (Keller, 1993; Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). Brand awareness can help consumers to recognize a brand out of a product category and make relevant purchase decisions (Percy & Rossiter, 1992).

Brand awareness has a considerable impact on people’s decisions and can shape their preconceptions of a product category (Hoyer & Brown, 1990). It also functions as a critical factor in consumers’ purchase intentions, as some brands are sustained in the collective memory of consumers and influence their purchase decisions. Consumers prefer a product with a high level of brand awareness, because it involves a higher market share and is more frequently subject to quality assessment (Dodds et al., 1991; Grewal et al., 1998).

3. An analysis of the research hypotheses

This study investigated the interrelationships between four constructs that were categorized into two groups. The first group (antecedent variables) included “apparel brand differentiation.” The second group (outcome variables) contained “social brand identification”, “individual brand identification”, and “brand purchase intention.” The investigation specifically focused on brand identification. The study hypothesized that “apparel brand differentiation” and “brand identification” (individual/social brand identification) were interrelated. Next, the study hypothesized “brand identification”, “apparel brand differentiation”, and “purchase intention” were directly and indirectly associated with each other.

Differentiation helps a brand to exhibit its unique and distinctive features compared to other products offered (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Differentiation, then, is a process that introduces a set of purposeful differences that

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distinguish a company's products from those of its competitors (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Successful brands are characterized by a higher brand value differentiation, as opposed to less distinctive brands (Knox, 2004). Differentiation (marketing domain) and innovation (technology domain) are the main elements of the brand management paradigm, because they shape and guide the performance of a brand. More innovative brands can effectively implement brand differentiation, and thus they can maintain their dominant position in the market for longer time periods. The reason for this is that gaining a dominant position requires new companies to have more resources in the market or to fill the innovation gap, which are both very challenging tasks (Tirole, 1988).

Product differentiation is an activity that helps a company to emphasize the difference of its products from those of other competitors, in production and marketing processes (Tintara & Respati, 2020). Difference is usually associated with greater values and benefits that meet customers' needs (Linda & Heriyanto, 2017). Differentiation represents a given brand as an alternative to other brands. As such, it can contribute to customer loyalty and consequently to customer security. Such a process makes the brand less vulnerable to the activities of competing brands. When a competitor reduces its prices, it is thought that more distinct brands will lose fewer customers (Caves and Williamson, 1985).

To be both effective and efficient, a brand identity must be compatible with customers' needs, distinguish itself from competing brands, and reflect the company's long-term plan. Strong brand differentiation helps customers to build trust in a company (Ghodeswar, 2008). Brand differentiation reveals the differences between a given brand and others to customers who can then decide which product to choose. Previous research has also shown that brand differentiation can shape brand image, which can contribute to brand identification (Berry, 2000; Chen et al., 2017; Taufiq et al., 2018).

As the studies in the literature suggest, higher levels of apparel brand differentiation could be associated with more brand purchase intention through brand identification. However, to verify such theoretical insights, the present study stated and examined nine hypotheses:

H1: There is a relationship between apparel brand differentiation and individual brand identification.

H2: There is a relationship between apparel brand differentiation and social brand identification.

H3: There is a relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention.

H4: There is a relationship between individual brand identification and brand purchase intention.

H5: There is a relationship between social brand identification and brand purchase intention.

H6: Brand awareness moderates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and customers' individual brand identification.

H7: Brand awareness moderates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and customers' social brand identification.

H8: Customers' individual brand identification mediates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention.

H9: Customers' social brand identification mediates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention.

4. Research methodology

4.1. The theoretical framework of the research

The model used in this study was composed of a number of independent, dependent and mediator variables. In this model, "individual brand identification" and "social brand identification" were mediator variables, whereas "brand awareness" was a mediator variable.

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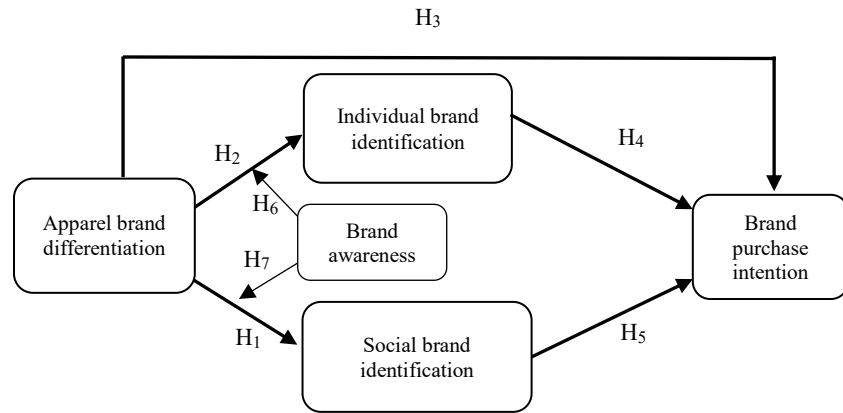


Figure 1. The theoretical model employed in this study.

4.2. Research design and statistical analysis

This study was a descriptive survey that followed applied purposes. The data for analysis were collected through copies of a questionnaire. The participants were 384 customers of a branch of Benetton Group in Shiraz city, Iran. The questionnaire included two sections: In the first section, a five-point Likert scale was used to measure the factors related to “apparel brand differentiation”, “individual brand identification”, “social brand identification”, and “brand purchase intention.” The second section collected the general information of the respondents such as their age, gender, education and income.

Following that, the validity of the questionnaire was examined by focusing on

content and construct validity types (through confirmatory factor analysis as reported in Table 1). Next, the reliability of the questionnaire was tested and confirmed through Cronbach's alpha (89%) and split-half (81%). For the statistical analysis procedure, structural equation modelling (SEM) was processed in LISREL software (Version 8.7). To analyze the role of the moderator variables, the hierarchical regression method was conducted in SPSS software. The variables used in the theoretical model are described in Table 1, which shows the numbers assigned to the questions in the questionnaire and their partial reliability.

Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analysis (validity test) and reliability test

Variable in the model	Dimensions	Path coefficient	Factor loading	Reliability	
				Cronbach's alpha	Split half
Individual brand identification	1	0.65	11.90	%70	%65
	2	0.71	13.19		
	3	0.59	10.65		
	4	0.50	8.88		
Social brand identification	1	0.47	7.28	%67	%61
	2	0.54	8.28		
	3	0.60	9.00		
Apparel brand differentiation	1	0.47	8.57	%74	%70.6
	2	0.53	9.83		
	3	0.48	8.77		
	4	0.57	10.56		
	5	0.52	9.55		
	6	0.46	8.23		

	7	0.55	10.21		
	8	0.55	10.14		
Brand awareness	1	0.52	9.34	%72	%61
	2	0.61	11.02		
Brand purchase intention	1	0.48	4.67	%68	%59
	2	0.26	3.70		
Total	19	-	-	%75	%71

5. Findings

5.1. Descriptive statistics

This section reports the information of the respondents in terms of their age, gender, income and education level. As the findings

of descriptive analysis in Table 2 show, relatively more customers buying Benetton Group's products came from the "middle-income" groups and were mainly young and educated housewives.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the participants

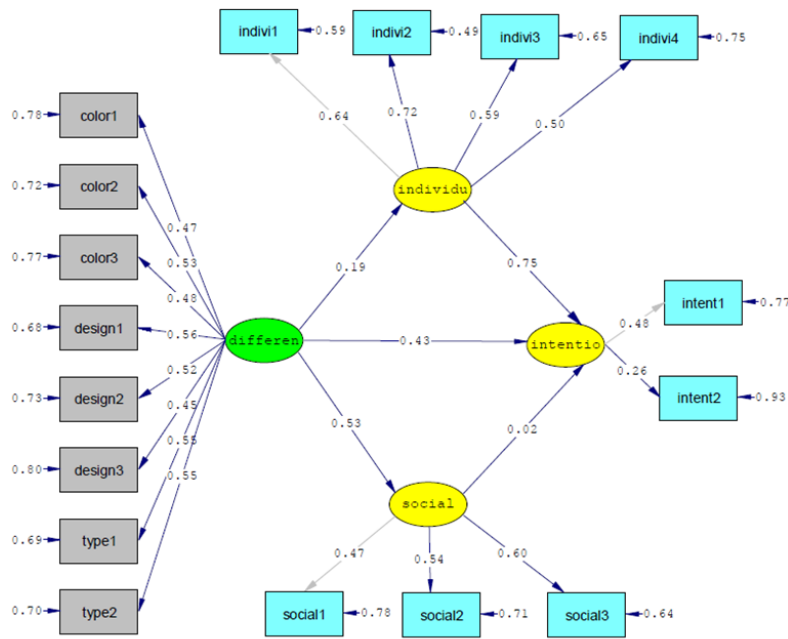
Education				Income			Age			Job		
MA and higher	BA	Associate's Degree	High school Diploma and below	High Income	Average income	Low income	Old	Middle-aged	Young	Business	Unemployed	Housewife
16%	42%	11%	30%	23%	40%	37%	15%	35%	50%	21%	16%	63%

5.2. Structural equation modelling

The relationships depicted in Figure 1 and Figure 2 were tested through a structural model processed in LISREL8.7. A covariance matrix and maximum likelihood estimation were used to estimate the model parameters. Missing data were handled through pairwise deletion. The four constructs explored in the model were "apparel brand differentiation", "individual brand identification", "social brand identification", and "purchase intentions", which had 8, 4, 3, and 2 items, respectively. The SEM's path coefficients and the t statistics associated with five path coefficients were used to test the hypotheses. Initial findings revealed that four of the five path coefficients were not rejected.

5.3. Variables in the model and their structural effects

As Figure 2 shows, it would be predictable for "apparel brand differentiation" to affect customers' "individual brand identification" and "social brand identification." The following analytical models involved two modes: The first analytical mode predicted the relationships between the variables from a structural equation approach. The second one, however, confirmed the validity of the relationship between the variables under investigation. Table 4 shows the results of parameters validation.



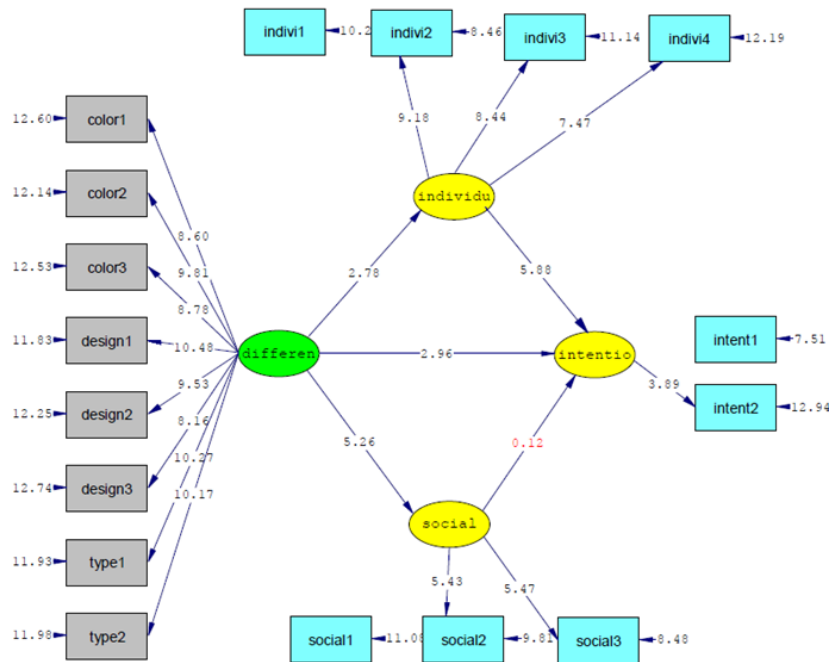
Chi-Square=225.38, df=114, P-value=0.00000, RMSEA=0.051

Figure 2. The relationships between the variables investigated through SEM

To verify the reliability of the estimates of the effects in a standard mode, one should focus on significant values in each set of relationship between the variables. A significant value would be greater than ± 1.96 ,

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which would signal a significant path between the two variables involved. Figure 3 clearly displays the mutual effects of the variables in terms of the standard estimation and significant values.



Chi-Square=225.38, df=114, P-value=0.00000, RMSEA=0.051

Figure 3. Structural Model Fit Test

5.4. Model fitness indices

In addition to the estimates of the model coefficients, LISREL software processed some indices that could help to test

the overall fit of the model. The indices used in the study, along with other functional parameters, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Indices used in the model

Indices	Standard level	The value reported in the analysis
x ² /df	Less than 3	1.95
GFI	Greater than 90%	0.94
RMSEA	Less than 0.05	0.051
IFI	Greater than 90%	0.94
CFI	Greater than 90%	0.94
AGFI	Greater than 90%	0.91
NFI	Greater than 90%	0.88
NNFI	Greater than 90%	0.92
RFI	Greater than 90%	0.86

Model estimation generated the goodness-of-fit statistics (as mentioned in Table 4). These fit statistics showed an acceptable fit between the model and the data (Hair et al., 2010; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Therefore, the overall model fit was found satisfactory and the model could not be rejected based on the data observed.

5.5. The moderating role of “brand awareness”

This section examines the role of “brand awareness” as a moderator variable. To investigate this role, the hierarchical regression method was used. Of course, before implementing the method, it was necessary to observe a significant relationship between “brand awareness” and the other dependent/independent variables. Table 4 shows details of the relationships.

Table 4. Correlations between the variables

		Differentiation	Individual	Social	Brand awareness
Apparel brand differentiation	Pearson Correlation	1	.127*	.313**	.059
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.011	.000	.243
	N	400	400	400	400
Individual identification	Pearson Correlation	.127*	1	.197**	.747**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011		.000	.000
	N	400	400	400	400
Social identification	Pearson Correlation	.313**	.197**	1	.189**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	400	400	400	400
Brand awareness	Pearson Correlation	.059	.747**	.189**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.243	.000	.000	
	N	400	400	400	400

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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

As Table 5 shows, because there were some significant correlations between “brand awareness” and the dependent/independent variables, “brand awareness” moderated the relationship between “apparel brand differentiation” and “individual brand

identification.” However, the variable did not moderate the relationship between “apparel brand differentiation” and “social brand identification” in the sample of the customers under investigation.

Table 5. The moderating role of “brand awareness”

3			2		1	Levels
“Brand awareness” as a moderator: “Apparel brand differentiation” and “individual brand identification”						
with moderator and its interaction with independent variable			With moderator		No moderator	Level feature
Apparel brand differentiation * Brand awareness	Brand awareness	Apparel brand differentiation	Brand awareness	Apparel brand differentiation	Apparel brand differentiation	Variables used in each level
0.957			J	0.751	0.127	B
0.915			T	0.562	0.014	Adjusted R Square
0.351			A	0.548	0.016	R Square Change
0.000			T	0.000	0.011	sig
“Brand awareness” as a moderator: “apparel brand differentiation” and “social brand identification”						
with moderator and its interaction with independent variable			with moderator		No moderator	Level feature
Apparel brand differentiation * Brand awareness	Brand awareness	Apparel brand differentiation	Brand awareness	Apparel brand differentiation	Apparel brand differentiation	Variables used in each level
0.362			0.356		0.313	B
0.124			0.123		0.095	Adjusted R Square
0.004			0.029		0.098	R Square Change
0.185			0.000		0.000	Sig.

Table 6 provides a summary of the findings of the above analysis, by showing the results of the hypotheses tested.

Table 6. The results of the hypotheses tested

Hypothesis	Hypothesis statement	Result
H1	There is a relationship between apparel brand differentiation and individual brand identification.	Confirmed
H2	There is a relationship between apparel brand differentiation and social brand identification.	Confirmed

H3	There is a relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention.	Confirmed
H4	There is a relationship between individual brand identification and brand purchase intention.	Confirmed
H5	There is a relationship between social brand identification and brand purchase intention.	Rejected
H6	Brand awareness moderates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and customers' individual brand identification.	Confirmed
H7	Brand awareness moderates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and customers' social brand identification.	Rejected
H8	Customers' individual brand identification mediates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention.	Confirmed
H9	Customers' social brand identification mediates the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention.	Rejected

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1. Overview of the findings

Persuading people to buy products represents one of the most important steps in marketing, which a company can accomplish by emphasizing the distinctive features of its products. Differentiation involves a process in which the customer is aware that a brand can lead to brand identification, while differentiation may have a strong relationship with brand purchase intention. The present study investigated the relationships between these variables in the apparel industry by exploring consumers of an actual brand (Benetton Group) in Shiraz, Iran.

The findings of the study are as follows: The first observation suggested that "apparel brand differentiation" could affect "brand purchase intention" through three dimensions, namely design, color and fabric. This observation was in line with that of Funk and Ndubisi (2004). The reason for this effect could be explained by psychological and especially aesthetical needs of female customers. Apparently, when they see diverse clothing designs, colors, and features, they are invoked to impulsively purchase clothes.

The second finding of the study supported the mediating role of customers' "individual brand identification" in the relationship between "apparel brand differentiation" and "brand purchase intention." This mediating role, however, was not confirmed in the case of "social brand

identification." This finding was also consistent with what Funk and Ndubisi (2004) found. One explanation for this tendency is that in developing countries (e.g., Iran) a higher level of "individual brand identification" may be observed among female customers, because they cannot find social identification by wearing special brands due to restrictions, some prohibitive beliefs, and dress codes in the public.

The survey results revealed the mediating role of "individual brand identification" and the moderating role of "brand awareness." Given these findings, two suggestions can be shared. First, Benetton Group's advertising campaign is advised to focus on customers' "individual brand identity." This suggestion can prove to be effective because it is ignored in the current slogan of Benetton. Furthermore, Benetton Group should apply the strategy of semi-globalization and try to offer products more compatible with public conventions in different countries. However, due to the high factor loadings of design and apparel fabric, designs should be specifically inspected in terms of gender-based factors in the Iranian target market.

Meanwhile, a company's advertising campaigns and customized selling procedures must emphasize the fabrics and apparel features that customers generally have no information about. In terms of color design, Benetton can adapt its color patterns to contextual determinants (e.g., seasons or

cultural ceremonies/celebrations), while providing more diversified color options to meet customers' color-related needs. In this context, some colors may be more compatible with a given season and can help to differentiate the brand from its competitors. Designers also should consider the congruency of the apparel designs and their color configurations in relation to young people's preferred schemes (e.g., customized cheerful colors/designs).

6.2. Implications

Differencing clothing products is a highly significant strategy in a market in which quality and congruence are prioritized. Without a well-formulated plan to manufacture differentiated products, no company can influence customers' purchase intention. Companies should rely on a collaborative approach to designing differentiated apparel, by participating customers in the design process. Furthermore, offering clothes that are compatible with customers' favorite self-identification and self-expression tendencies further contributes to brand differentiation and brand congruence. This study revealed that creating congruent apparel was no possible without identifying customers' psychological needs and without trying to address such needs in operational dimensions (including design, color and fabric). Hence, the theoretical model tested in this paper was effective in predicting customer' purchase intention for differentiated apparel.

Meanwhile, the finding could help companies in the apparel industry to figure out why some customers are more eager to buy congruent products. To address this issue, one can effectively draw on the notion of brand awareness (as explored in this study). Companies, even those offering highly congruent products, must make efforts to increase their brand awareness in customers' minds. Managers should actively promote and improve brand awareness among customers to enhance their purchase intentions.

6.3. Limitations and future directions

This study sought to explore the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and brand purchase intention. It also concentrated on the role of brand identification and brand awareness. Because the study concentrated on apparel industry, the findings specifically represented the situation in this sector (and not other sectors). Moreover, the questionnaire, as the data collection instrument, only gathered data related to some components of the variables, although they may involve other components that could affect the analysis of the results. Another limitation was the number of the respondents; obviously, a larger sample could provide more reliable findings.

To overcome the limitations, future studies can focus on the moderating role of ecological factors in the relationship between apparel brand differentiation and customer purchase intention. The theoretical model in this research can be used to investigate the effect of differentiated products (e.g., women's shoes/bags) on brand identification and purchase intention. In future investigations, the model could be tested by relying on larger statistical samples in other countries, especially where women can enjoy more social freedoms. This study focused on women, although future investigations are advised to explore men's buying behavior as well.

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