Self-Congruence and Emotional Brand Attachment: Experience of Young Sri Lankan Smartphone Consumers

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Abstract

Having considered the significance of self-Congruence and Emotional Brand Attachment, this study aims to examine the impact of self-congruence on emotional brand attachment in Sri Lankan context by taking the smartphones consumers on board. The paper also examined the relative importance of actual self-congruence versus ideal self-congruence, on creating emotional attachment to brands. This is an explanatory research. Data were collected from 400 smartphone consumers who belong to the age category of 19 - 45 through a structured questionnaire. The study disclosed that self-congruence positively impacted on emotional brand attachment while utilitarian benefits were moderating the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. The investigation of the moderating impact is an original contribution to the knowledge. The findings of the paper led to some important theoretical and managerial implications in the South Asian Context.

Keywords:
Actual Self-Congruence, Emotional Brand Attachment, Hedonic Benefits, Ideal Self-Congruence, Self-Congruence, Utilitarian Benefits

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INTRODUCTION

Smartphones are becoming one of the key possessions present consumers are using or aspiring to use. Over the past few years, it can be observed that the popularity and usage of smartphones among individuals have been increasing (Chan et al., 2015; Datsan and Gecti, 2014; Sarwar and Soomro, 2013). The figure of global smartphone users has reached 3.5 billion in 2020 (statista.com). In Sri Lanka, it is estimated that there are 5.2 million mobile internet subscribers who use smart devices for accessing the internet in 2018 (Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka Statistics, 2020). Furthermore, some smartphone brands are dominating the global marketplace by occupying leading places among the best brands in the world; Apple, Samsung and Huawei have occupied 1st, 6th and 74th places respectively (Interbrand, 2020).

Present consumers have given an important place for their smartphones in their lives. They have tended to develop close relationships with their smartphones (Chan et al., 2015) and also emotional linkages between smartphones and their users are becoming stronger (Dastan and Gecti, 2014). Smartphones are used for managing self-identities of individuals (Chan et al., 2015), and also for showing the status of people (Suki, 2013). Moreover, smartphones offer both utilitarian and hedonic benefits for consumers (Dastan and Gecti, 2014). Accordingly, on one hand, creating an emotional bond with the consumer is advantageous for companies to make their brand strong in this competitive business environment. On the other hand, literature shows that young consumers have favourable behaviour towards smartphones, compared to other age categories; they are the most internet-savvy and, have a high usage rate and a tendency to try new technological products and service (Persaud and Azhar, 2012; Grant and O’Donohoe, 2007; Barutcu, 2007). Thus, the study focused on young smartphone consumers in Sri Lanka, representing the South Asian region.

Although consumers interact with thousands of products and brands in their lives, they do not create strong emotional attachments with each and every product or a brand they interact with; they develop an intense emotional attachment to only a small subset of these products and brands they interact with (Japutra et al., 2014; Thomson et al., 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). According to Thomson et al. (2005), emotional brand attachment represents a more enduring concept forming a more consistent basis of
consumers’ response to brands. Attachment towards an object develops over time, and strong attachment leads to favourable attitudes towards the object, and one who is emotionally attached to the object is satisfied with it (Thomson et al. 2005). Thus, creating an emotionally attached brand has been identified as an important marketing goal of present marketers (Aboulnasr and Tran, 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2019; Malar et al., 2011).

Increasingly, companies are striving and searching for ways to create strong emotional brand attachments with consumers. Some scholars have suggested that self-concept connection (self-congruence) between a consumer’s self-image and a brand’s personality can be a basis for creating an emotional attachment to a brand (Japutra et al., 2018, Malar et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2005). Hence, researchers have suggested self-congruence between consumer’s self-image and brand’s personality as a significant source of creating emotional attachment to brands as it links to consumer’s self-concept (Japutra et al., 2018; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Park et al., 2010). Moreover, supporting the above argument, Park et al. (2010) indicated that brand attachment is developed through the relationship between self and the brand over time. Therefore, it is proposed that additional researches are much needed in the area of emotional attachment and how marketers could enhance emotional attachments to brands (Aboulnasr and Tran, 2020; Park et al., 2010). Essentially, studying emotional brand attachment is recognized as important, as it drives towards strong brand loyalty and repurchasing behavior (So et al., 2013; Grisaffe and Nguyenm, 2011; Orth et al., 2010). Thus, addressing the above gap, the current study was developed mainly with the objective of examining the impact of self-congruence on consumers’ emotional attachment to brands.

Self-congruence is generally characterized as the “match” or “mismatch” between a consumer’s self-image and a product image, brand image, or company image (Sirgy, 1986). However, it can be observed that there are differences in the application of self-congruence in creating emotional attachment to brands. Some marketers stress that their brands help consumers to express themselves as they are (actual self), while some marketers stress that their brands help consumers to express themselves as they wish to be (ideal self) (Malar et al., 2011). Therefore, emotional brand attachment can be achieved either through actual self-congruence or ideal self-congruence. Accordingly, in the light of these, another key question to be addressed is which strategy to use and when to use it to strengthen emotional attachment to brands. Accordingly, to address the above issue as well, the present study aimed to examine which
self-congruence (actual or ideal) had the salient impact on emotional attachment to brands.

Furthermore, it is indicated that studying emotional attachment with respect to different types of products and brands is another area to be investigated (Aboulnasr and Tran, 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2019; Grisaffe and Nguyenm, 2011; Thomson et al., 2005). Moreover, it is stated that there are differences in the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment with respect to different types of product categories; while some products make the people highly attached and some do not (Japutra et al., 2018; Thomson et al., 2005). According to previous studies related to luxury products and fashion products, emotional attachment was found to be high (So et al., 2013; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Thomson et al., 2005), while it is low for compulsive buying (Japutra et al., 2018) and convenience goods (Thomson et al., 2005). Furthermore, luxury products and fashion products are identified as products which offer hedonic benefits (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Belk, 1988) while functional or problem-solving brands such as convenience goods are identified as products offering utilitarian benefits (Park et al., 1986). Thus, it can be concluded that the argument of hedonic products like fashion products are more related to emotional aspects of the consumer-brand relationship than are utilitarian products (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Also, Malar et al. (2011) suggested studying the moderating effects of hedonic and utilitarian benefits of products on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment as an area of further study. Further, some studies have identified the importance of studying the role of hedonic and utilitarian benefits in relation to different product categories and contexts (Shahzad et al., 2019; Gattol et al., 2016; Palazon and Ballester, 2013). Thus, focusing on the above gap, the current study further aimed to examine how hedonic and utilitarian benefits of products moderate the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.

Therefore, in this context, this study was developed mainly with three research objectives: (1) to examine the impact of actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment, (2) to examine which self-congruence (actual or ideal) has the salient impact on emotional brand attachment, and also (3) to examine moderating impact of hedonic benefits and utilitarian benefits on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment.
The current paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge broadly for brand management and in particular for self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. Especially, in the existing literature it is indicated that there is a need for more studies in particular to assess the impact of emotional brand attachments, and the ways of building emotional attachments to brands (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Park et al., 2010). Thus, this paper addressed such gap in knowledge. Exploring the new knowledge based on the Asian context, namely in Sri Lanka (a developing country in Asia) is also an addition to the knowledge, as such knowledge is seldom in the Asian context (Jayarathne 2019, Tan et al., 2019; Japutra et al., 2018). The main theoretical contribution of this study is theorizing the moderating effects of hedonic and utilitarian nature of products on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional attachment to brands. The need of such investigation has already been identified by scholars, for instance, Malar et al. (2011).

This paper is organized in five sections. The second section is to discuss the relevant literature and to develop hypotheses. Research methodologies adopted in the study are discussed in the third section. Then, the fourth section is allocated for the analysis and results. The last section is for discussing the results while highlighting the contribution of the paper, managerial implications and direction for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Brand Attachment

The concept of emotional brand attachment was borrowed from the attachment theory in psychology. According to Bowlby (1969, p. 242), “attachment is an emotion-laden mother-infant bonding phenomenon, wherein each party manifests intense pleasure in the other’s company, and especially in the other’s expression of affection, whereas distance and expressions of rejection are appraised as disagreeable or painful,” as cited by Grisaffé and Nguyenmn (2011, p. 1053). Bowlby’s attachment theory is mainly based on interpersonal relations like parent-infant relations. However, studies have recognized that emotional attachments can be developed for different objects such as different possessions, gifts and also marketplace entities, including products and brands (So et al., 2013; Park et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Further, supporting the above argument,
Fournier (1998) indicated “brand” as an active and contributing relationship partner, and not as a passive marketing object.

Thus, emotional brand attachment is defined as a long-lasting commitment inducing the bond between the brand and the consumer (Esch et al., 2006). Also, according to Thomson et al. (2005), emotional brand attachment is a more enduring concept, forming a more consistent basis of consumers’ responses to brands. Accordingly, emotional attachment improves the relationship between the consumer and the brand, and it strengthens the positive feeling towards the brand, and increases the consumer’s retention (Loureiro et al., 2012). The study of Thomson et al. (2005) could be introduced as a significant work in the area of emotional brand attachment. It has conceptualized the concept of emotional brand attachment as having three first order factors; affection, passion, and connection.

Therefore, it can be determined that consumers’ emotional attachment to a brand might predict their commitment to the brand (e.g., brand loyalty), and willingness to make financial sacrifices in order to obtain the brand (e.g., to pay a price premium) (Thomson et al. 2005). Thus, emotional brand attachment is identified as a significant determinant of customers’ loyalty, which leads to devoted, profitable, customer repurchasing behavior (Grisaffe and Nguyenm, 2011), irrespective of some drawbacks, costs, as well as incentives and enticements from other brands aiming to induce switching (Oliver, 1999). However, it should be mentioned that every relationship does not have emotional bond or attachment (Grisaffe and Nguyenm, 2011). Rather, individuals selectively relate to brands depending on the consumers’ self-concept and brand’s personality, as it provides a vehicle for self-expression (Orth et al., 2010).

**Self-Congruence**

The theoretical foundation of self-congruence theory is considered as the self-concept, and the concept of self-congruence is widely accepted in the marketing and social-psychology literature (Plewa and Palmer, 2014). Generally, it can be described that the perceived similarity between an individual’s self-image and the image of a product are referred to as self-congruity (Abel et al., 2013). Accordingly, self-image congruence is defined as the match between consumers’ self-concept (actual self or ideal self) and the user image (or “personality”) of a given product, brand, store, etc. The terms
“self-image congruence,” “self-congruence,” “self-congruity,” and “image congruence” are used interchangeably in consumer behavior literature (Abdallat, 2012; Kressmann et al., 2006).

There are different images for different products and brands in the environment (Dolich, 1969). However, individuals prefer products or brands that are perceived as having images similar to their self-concepts (more congruent with their self-concept), and reject products or brands which are different from their self-concepts (Abel et al., 2013; Malhotra, 1988; Dolich, 1969). Further, individuals define themselves by consuming or using brands whose personalities are perceived to be congruent with their own personalities (Aaker, 1999; Sirgy, 1982). Thus, individuals select brands with particular image associations which match their individual personalities or personalities they aspire to be, to communicate to others (Parker, 2009). Greater the match between consumer’s self-concept and the brand’s user image, greater the likelihood that consumers will have positive behavioural responses towards the brand (Kwak and Kang, 2009; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Self-congruity is guided by self-concept motives such as the need for self-esteem and self-consistency (Sirgy et al., 1997; Aaker, 1997; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982).

**Perceived Actual-Self Congruence and Perceived Ideal-Self Congruence**

Even though there are different conceptualizations for the self-concept, most researches have conceptualized self-concept as having two components: actual self-concept and ideal self-concept (Abdallat, 2012). The actual self is based on the perceived reality of oneself (who and what I think I am now), whereas the ideal self is shaped by imagination of ideals and goals related to what a person believes that he or she would like to be or aspire to become (how consumers like to see themselves) (Abdallat, 2012; Malar et. al., 2011; Graeff, 1996). As mentioned earlier, the effect of self-image congruence on consumer behavior was explained by the self-congruity theory. According to this theory, consumer behavior is determined, in part, by the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison involving the product-user image and the consumer’s self-concept (actual self or ideal self) (Sirgy et al., 1997). Thus, the match between actual self-image and product user image is referred to as “actual self-congruence,” and the match between ideal self-image, and product user image as “ideal self-congruence” in the self-concept literature (Sirgy and Su, 2000; Sirgy, 1980).
According to self and personality theories, most individuals are motivated by an “actualizing tendency” that serves the purpose to develop all abilities in ways that maintain and enhance one’s self-image (Parker, 2009). Thus, actual self-congruence focuses on consumers searching for reality and authenticity in their personalities. Therefore, consumers achieve actual self-congruence by selecting, consuming, and using brands and products which enhance their actual self-image. Further, according to actual self-congruence, consumers are motivated to protect their personal identities. They may feel uncomfortable if they see themselves using a product that is not reflective of their actual selves (Sirgy and Su, 2000). Therefore, because of the motive for self-consistency, people behave in ways consistent with how they see themselves - consistent with their actual self-image. People have beliefs about their own identities, values, lifestyles, preferences, and habits. Thus, once their “self-theories” are established, they become highly motivated to protect them. Accordingly, on one hand, people satisfy their need for self-consistency through purchasing or consuming products which match their actual self-image (Kressmann et al., 2006).

On the other hand, it is argued that sometimes consumers do not want to express themselves as they are in a purchase or consumption situation, but rather expect to express their ideal self-images (Landon, 1974). “Ideal self” focuses on consumers searching for idealized visions of their personalities (Malar et al., 2011), and they are constantly trying to improve upon their self-concepts (Landon, 1974). “The ideal-self motivates behavior through the need for self-esteem (e.g., Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Johar and Sirgy 1991; Sirgy 1986; Sirgy et al., 1992)” as cited by Sirgy and Su (2000, pg. 344). Thus, people satisfy their need for self-esteem through consuming and using products that are consistent with their ideal self-images (Kressmann et al., 2006; Sirgy and Su, 2000). The greater the match between the brand’s user image with the consumer’s ideal self-image, the more likely that consumers implicitly infer that the use of the brand should meet their need for self-esteem.

Self-Congruence and Emotional Brand Attachment

Brand attachments represent the proximity of the self to a brand in terms of strong cognitive and affective perceptions regarding the brand existing in the consumer’s mind (Fournier, 1998). Thus, self-concept connection between a consumer and brand(s) can be a basis for emotional brand attachment (Park et al., 2007; Fournier, 1998). Moreover, Orth et al. (2010) stated that consumers’
attachments to brands depend at least partially on their perceptions of a brand’s personality and how this personality interacts, contributes, and promotes the self-concept of consumers, and it is established that brand personality interacts with consumer personality in influencing attachments. Emotions are often aroused when attachment is strong, because emotions are inherent to brand-self connection (Park et al., 2010). Accordingly, emotional attachment makes consumers to identify the brand as part of the self, and they develop a sense of oneness with the brand based on the associations and cognitive links that connect the brand with the consumer’s self (Park et al., 2010). Existing studies on self-congruence suggest that when there are higher number of similarities existing between consumers and brands, there is a greater emotional bond between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1998; Sirgy, 1982). Hwang and Kandampully (2012) indicated that consumer’s perception regarding the match between self-concept and a particular brand influence on emotional attachment toward the brand, and this match between self-concept and brand is determined by the commonalities of those two. Thus, higher the match between self-concept and the brand, higher the emotional attachment would be. Therefore, it is found that self-concept connection increases emotional attachment and there is a positive impact of self-concept connection on emotional brand attachment (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). This is true for both actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence.

Hence, by identifying lack of knowledge in the area of self-congruence and emotional brand attachment in the South Asian context the current study was designed to examine the impact of actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment taking Sri Lanka as the proxy for the context. The above discussion led to the development of the first hypothesis as;

\[ H_{1a}: \] The degree of actual self-congruence has a positive effect on the degree of emotional brand attachment in Sri Lanka

\[ H_{1b}: \] The degree of ideal self-congruence has a positive effect on the degree of emotional brand attachment in Sri Lanka
Relative Salient Impact of Actual Self-Congruence versus Ideal Self-Congruence on Emotional Brand Attachment

It is important to know which approach; whether actual self-congruence or ideal self-congruence effect strongly on emotional brand attachment. The actual-self deals with reality, while the ideal-self deals with imagination or dream. Accordingly, the actual self is psychologically close, while the ideal self is psychologically distant. Therefore, Malar et al. (2011) put forth the following arguments, “first, psychologically distant things are those not present in an individual’s direct experience of reality. They may be thought of or constructed, but they cannot be experienced directly. Secondly, an ideal self-view refers to something that takes place further into the future (versus the actual, which is viewed in the here and now). Thirdly, the ideal self is shaped by imagination of ideals and goals related to what an individual believes he or she would like to be, and thus is hypothetical (further away from reality), and less likely to occur than a consumer’s actual self.” (p. 38). Accordingly, consumers will understand actual self-congruence of a product or a brand conveniently (i.e., concretely with many details). When a brand’s personality is close to a consumer’s ideal self, it is linked with an abstract, and it requires higher level of understanding. Also, ideal self is related to the future. Accordingly, these differences impact consumers’ emotional attachment to brands.

Thus, with the objective of empirically examining which self-congruence (actual or ideal) had the salient impact on emotional brand attachment in the Sri Lankan context, the following hypothesis was developed,

\[ H_2: \text{The degree of actual self-congruence has a stronger effect on the degree of emotional brand attachment than ideal self-congruence in Sri Lanka} \]

Hedonic and Utilitarian Benefits

Consumers purchase goods and services and perform consumption behaviors for two basic reasons: (1) consummatory affective (hedonic) gratification (from sensory attributes/symbols of status), and (2) instrumental, utilitarian reasons concerned with “expectations of consequences” (of a means Ends variety, from functional and non-sensory attributes) (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Accordingly, it can be stated that consumers are having the above expectations with regard to purchase and consumption of different products and brands in the market.
Moderating Effects of Hedonic Benefits

According to the existing literature in marketing, “hedonic benefits” can be identified as aesthetic, experiential, and enjoyment-related benefits consumers expect from a product or a brand (Chitturi et al. 2007). Further, the benefits customers gain from a product/brand can be classified as hedonic when they provide intrinsic stimulation, fun, and self-esteem (Chandon et al., 2000). Overall evaluation regarding the hedonic aspect of a product/brand is assumed to be based on the consumer’s assessment of how much pleasure he/she gets from experiencing the product/brand (Batra and Ahtola, 1990). According to Chitturi et al. (2008), consumers assign greater importance to hedonic benefits over utilitarian benefits they obtain from a product. Hedonic benefits represent “aspire-to-meet” or “symbolic” expectations of consumers (Chitturi et al., 2008). As per Jamal and Goode (2001), products are not only a bundle of attributes that deliver particular benefits to consumers, but they are also capable of delivering symbolic meanings to consumers, and through use and consumption consumers communicate symbolic meaning attached to brands.

Thus, consumers not only consider utilitarian or functional attributes of a product in their purchase decision making process, but also the value-expressive or personality-related attributes of the product (Chon, 1992). Supporting the above argument, “Levy (1959) argued that the consumer is not functionally oriented and that her behavior is significantly affected by the symbols encountered in the identification of goods in the marketplace” as cited by Sirgy (1982, p. 289). Further, it is indicated that hedonic consumption acts are based not on what consumers know to be real but rather on what they desire reality to be (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). On the other hand, in research on hedonic consumption, it is mentioned that consumers may purchase certain products with the intent of generating an emotional reaction within themselves (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Highlighting the role of emotions in consumer choice decisions, Maslow (1968) stated that “emotional desires dominate utilitarian motives in the choice of products” as cited by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982, p. 94). In another study Spangenberg et al. (1997) indicated that hedonically consumed products stimulate internal imagery and emotional arousal. Thus, hedonic dimensions of products and brands stimulate emotional responses to brands, as implying the status of individuals is more relevant to hedonic products (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006).
To address the gap of examining moderating impact of hedonic benefits on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment (Malar et al., 2011), the following hypotheses were developed,

$H_{3a}$: Hedonic benefits of the product moderate the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment in Sri Lanka

$H_{3b}$: Hedonic benefits of the product moderate the relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment in Sri Lanka.

**Utilitarian Benefits**

Further, utilitarian benefits are referred to as functional, instrumental, and practical benefits consumers expect from a product (Chitturi et al., 2007). Also, benefits customers gain from a product could be classified as utilitarian when those benefits help consumers to maximize the utility, efficiency, and economy (Chandon et al., 2000). Also, the overall evaluation regarding the utilitarian aspect is based on the assessment about the instrumental value of the product/brand’s functional attributes (Batra and Ahtola, 1990). Moreover, it is indicated that meeting the required level of functional performance is a prerequisite or “must meet” (Chitturi et al., 2008). They offer consumers, feelings of confidence and security.

However, Chitturi et al. (2008, p. 50) presented a rather opposing argument to the existing literature; “a product that is twice as good as expected on the utilitarian dimension will produce the same type and intensity of positive emotional response as one that is twice as good as expected on the hedonic dimension.” In the same study, researchers mentioned that utilitarian benefits evoke different emotional responses. Thus, to address the gap of examining moderating impact of utilitarian benefits on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment (Malar et al., 2011), the following hypotheses were developed,

$H_{3c}$: Utilitarian benefits of the product moderate the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment in Sri Lanka

$H_{3d}$: Utilitarian benefits of the product moderate the relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment in Sri Lanka
Theoretical Framework

Based on the above literature discussion, the theoretical framework of the study was derived and is depicted in Figure 1.

![Theoretical Framework of the Study](source: Author)

**Figure 1:** Theoretical Framework of the Study  
*Source: Author*

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is an explanatory research since it attempts to test hypotheses (Dewasiri et al., 2018). Smartphone consumers who belong to the age category of 19 - 45 were selected as the respondents of the study. 500 questionnaires were distributed and 400 responses were received. Thus, the response rate of the study is 80%. Further, the judgmental sampling technique was used when collecting data. Self-administrated questionnaire was used as the data collection technique. Independent sample t-test was used to ensure non-response bias. Structural Equation Modeling and Multiple Linear Regression were performed as the main data analysis techniques of the study using AMOS 20.0 and SPSS 21.0. Actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence were measured using the scale Malar et al. (2011). In measuring actual self-congruence, firstly, respondents were instructed to imagine the personality of the smartphone brand they were using. Then, they were instructed to think about how they see themselves (their actual self-image). Once the respondents had done this, they...
were asked to indicate the match or mismatch between personality of the smartphone brand they were using and their actual self-image by responding to two items designed to measure the actual self-congruence. A sample item is “The personality of the smartphone brand I use is consistent with how I see myself (my actual self).” The same procedure was applied to measure ideal self-congruence as well. In that, respondents were instructed to think about how they would like to see themselves (their ideal self-image). Once the respondents had done this, they were asked to indicate the match or mismatch between personality of the smartphone brand they were using and their ideal self-image by responding to two items designed to measure ideal self-congruence. A sample item is “The personality of the smartphone brand I use is consistent with how I would like to be (my ideal self).” The emotional brand attachment was measured using the ten items scale developed by Thomson et al. (2005). These ten items were categorized under three first order factors; affection, connection, and passion. To measure emotional brand attachment, respondents were instructed to indicate their agreement with the ten statements in relation to the smartphone brand they were using. A sample item is “My feelings toward the smartphone brand I use can be characterized by affection.” Hedonic benefits and utilitarian benefits were measured through the scales developed by Voss, Spangenberg, and Grohmann (2003). Items of each construct were measured using five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree = 1” to “strongly agree = 5”. The validity and reliability of all measurement scales used in the study were ensured. Further, to assess the uni-dimensionality of the constructs, factor analysis was performed. All factor loadings were significant, and all items showed loadings above either 0.5 or 0.7 as recommended by Hair et al. (2010). To ensure the convergent validity of the constructs, AVE and CR values were calculated. According to Table 1, all AVE values are above 0.5, and all CR values are above 0.7.

**Table 1:** Test for Convergent Validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>CR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual Self-Congruence</td>
<td>0.690</td>
<td>0.817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Self-Congruence</td>
<td>0.780</td>
<td>0.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedonic Benefits</td>
<td>0.548</td>
<td>0.935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian Benefits</td>
<td>0.567</td>
<td>0.940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Attachment</td>
<td>0.740</td>
<td>0.850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey Data
Discriminant validity was tested for the constructs which indicates the extent to which a construct is truly distinct from the other constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Accordingly, all construct average variance extracted (AVE) estimates should be larger than the corresponding ‘squared inter-construct correlation estimates (SIC)’. Test for discriminant validity is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Test for Discriminant Validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>IS</th>
<th>HB</th>
<th>UB</th>
<th>EBA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AS</td>
<td>0.831</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS</td>
<td>0.882</td>
<td>0.883</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HB</td>
<td>0.466</td>
<td>0.528</td>
<td>0.740</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UB</td>
<td>0.330</td>
<td>0.379</td>
<td>0.712</td>
<td>0.753</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBA</td>
<td>0.689</td>
<td>0.755</td>
<td>0.692</td>
<td>0.560</td>
<td>0.860</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Survey Data*

With regard to reliability of measures, all Cronbach’s Alpha values were above 0.7, and had high inter-item consistency. Among these, the scale that measured utilitarian benefits had the highest reliability score, 0.939. Cronbach’s Alpha values for the rest of the constructs were HB=0.936, EBA= 0.907, IS=0.875, and AS=0.814.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION**

Collected data were cleaned before performing data analysis; identified 05 outliers were removed from the data set, and missing responses were substituted by mean response of the variables. According to Skewness and kurtosis statistics, it is determined that the sample is normally distributed. Further, the linearity and the homoscedasticity of the data were assessed using normal probability plots and scatter plots. Next, the data set was tested for multicollinearity and, it is not existed in the data set. The measurement model was constructed to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess how well different constructs fit into the model. At this stage, each latent construct to be included in the model was identified and the measured indicator variables (items) were assigned to latent constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Five latent variables; actual self-congruence, ideal self-congruence, emotional brand attachment, hedonic benefits, and utilitarian benefits; consisted in the theoretical model were sent to the final measurement model of the study.
Thus, measures of the initial measurement model were CIMIN/DF = 2.771, GFI = .802, AGFI = .772, RMSEA = .067, NFI = .847, IFI = .897, TLI = .887, CFI = .896, and PRATIO = .919. With the purpose of improving the model, further modifications were done and second order constructs were also adjusted. Accordingly, the measures of the modified measurement model suggested that the model fitted the data considerably well; three type of model fits namely absolute fit, incremental fit, and parsimony fit were achieved. The measures were CIMIN/DF = 1.864, GFI = .870, AGFI = .847, RMSEA = .047, NFI = .900, IFI = .951, TLI = .945, CFI = .951, and RATIO = .894.

Under the first two objectives of the study; examining the impact of actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment; and examining which self-congruence had the salient impact on emotional brand attachment, the respective hypotheses were tested through the structural model (Hair et al. 2010). The structural model of the study is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Basic Structural Model  
*Source: Authors’ own (AMOS Graphics)*
The structural model attained absolute goodness of fit (CIMIN/DF=1.615, AGFI=.949, GFI=.970, and RMSEA=.039) and incremental goodness of fit (NFI=.973, IFI=.990, TLI=.985, and CFI=.989). However, parsimony goodness of fit index; PRATIO value of the structural model indicated relatively a lower value (.682). Anyway, AGFI and CIMIN/DF were also considered as parsimony fit indices. Thus, it could be concluded that the structural model achieved the required level of model fit. Results of hypotheses testing related to basic structural model are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Results of Hypotheses Testing for the Basic Structural Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>C.R.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Actual Self-Congruence Emotional Brand Attachment</td>
<td>.245</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>2.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Ideal Self-Congruence Emotional Brand Attachment</td>
<td>.575</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>5.298</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author

According to Table 3, there is a positive effect of the degree of actual self-congruence on the degree of emotional brand attachment ($\beta=0.25$, $p\leq0.05$), which supports $H_{1a}$. Further, the degree of ideal self-congruence also has a strong positive effect on the degree of emotional brand attachment ($\beta=0.58$, $p\leq0.001$), which supports $H_{1b}$. However, $H_2$; the degree of actual self-congruence has a stronger effect on the degree of emotional brand attachment than the ideal self-congruence, is not supported. According to the values of these two path coefficients, there is a stronger effect on the degree of emotional brand attachment from the degree of ideal self-congruence ($\beta=0.58$, $p\leq0.001$) than actual self-congruence ($\beta=0.25$, $p\leq0.05$).

The third objective of the study, examining the moderation effects of hedonic and utilitarian benefits on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment, $H_{3a} - H_{3d}$ were tested through multiple regression analysis. To test the effect of hedonic benefits on the relationship of self-congruence and emotional brand attachment, the products of actual self-congruence and ideal-self congruence with hedonic benefits were regressed and the regression results are shown in Table 4.
According to Table 4, regarding H₃ₐ, hedonic benefits of the product significantly moderate the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment (β=0.79, p≤0.05). Thus, H₃ₐ was supported. However, H₃ₖ; hedonic benefits of the product significantly moderate the relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment, was not supported.

Then, to test the moderation effects of utilitarian benefits on the relationship of self-congruence and emotional brand attachment, the products of actual self-congruence and ideal-self congruence with utilitarian benefits were regressed and the regression results are shown in the Table 5.

According to Table 5, regarding H₃ₖ, utilitarian benefits of the product significantly moderate the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment (β=0.86, p≤0.05). Thus, H₃ₖ was supported.
However, H₃d; utilitarian benefits of the product significantly moderated the relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment, was not supported.

**DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The main focus of this study was to identify the impact of self-congruence; ideal self-congruence and actual self-congruence; on emotional brand attachment in the Sri Lankan context. Current study disclosed a positive impact of self-congruence (both actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence) on emotional attachment to brands in the Asian context in the study setting of Sri Lankan smartphone users. It confirmed the existing knowledge on self-congruence which are mainly derived from the Developed Countries. For instance, scholars (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Fournier, 1998; Sirgy, 1982) said when there are more similarities or commonalities that exist between consumers and brands, the emotional bonds between consumers and brands would build up. Further, according to Park et al., 2007; Fournier, 1998, Malar et al., 2011, and Hwang and Kandampully, 2012, self-concept connection between a consumer and brand(s) could be a basis for emotional brand attachment.

Regarding the relative salient impact of actual self-congruence versus ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment, it was hypothesized that there is a stronger effect of actual self-congruence on emotional brand attachment than ideal self-congruence. Conversely, according to the current study it was found that there is a stronger effect of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment than actual self-congruence. Further, this finding is inconsistent with the findings of Malar et al. (2011) which suggested brands with actual self-congruence generate higher levels of emotional brand attachment over brands with ideal self-congruence. Moreover, contrary to the current finding, based on a study conducted in health club patronage, Abel et al. (2013) indicated that consumers purchase brands maintaining an image similar to their actual self-image. In the same study it is identified that there is no significant positive congruence between ideal self and health club image. However, findings of Malhotra (1988) were consistent with the current finding. Malhotra (1988) found that there are differences in the role of actual and ideal self-concepts in a study conducted relating to the housing market. It shows that role played by ideal and actual self-congruence in the Asian context is not identical to the Developed countries’ context.
The current study, showed that effects of moderators (hedonic and utilitarian benefits) had impacted only on the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment. The relationship between ideal self-congruence and emotional brand attachment was not affected by the moderation effects of hedonic and utilitarian benefits. Further, findings revealed that utilitarian benefits had more effects than hedonic benefits of products. This is the first study that tested the moderation effects of hedonic and utilitarian benefits on the relationship of self-congruence and emotional brand attachment as per the authors’ knowledge, despite the fact that it had been discussed indirectly (e.g. Hwang and Kandampully 2012). However, such relationship was not tested empirically. Thus, such finding is new knowledge to the literature on self-congruence and brand attachment in particular. Further, Hwang and Kandampully (2012) stated that self-connection with luxury fashion brands with hedonic aspects led to build emotional relationships with those brands. However, the above implications were not consistent with the findings of the current study. Accordingly, in the Sri Lankan context, it could be determined that utilitarian aspects play a significant role in creating emotional attachment to brands over hedonic aspects.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment had been conceptualized in the previous literature and self-congruence between consumer self-image and brand personality was identified as a basis for creating emotional attachments to brands (Japutra et al., 2018; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Malar et al. 2011; Park et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2005; Fournier, 1998). However, existing studies indicated that there is a need for more studies in the area of emotional brand attachments and ways of building and enhancing emotional attachments to brands (Aboulnasr and Tran, 2020; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Park et al., 2010) especially in the Asian Context, as the majority of knowledge was built up in developed countries’ context. Thus, the current study contributed to fill the above inadequacies in theoretical knowledge in the area of self-congruence and emotional attachment to brands especially in the context of Asia and in particular to Sri Lanka. Accordingly, it is suggested that self-congruence (both actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence) increased emotional attachments to brands. Further, the current study identified that ideal self-congruence is having a stronger effect on emotional brand attachment than actual self-congruence in the Sri Lankan
context. These findings extend some of the existing knowledge (Malhotra, 1988) to the Asia while challenging others (Malar et al., 2011). Furthermore, existing knowledge says that there are differences in the relationship between self-congruence and emotional brand attachment with respect to different types of product categories. Some products are highly attached while some are not (Dwivedi et al., 2019; Japutra et al., 2018; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Thomson et al., 2005). Thus, the literature shows the need of studying emotional attachment with respect to different types of product categories (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Grisaffe and Nguyenm, 2011; Thomson et al., 2005), while highlighting the need of investigating hedonic and utilitarian benefits along with the nature of products (Malar et al. (2011), Exploring the moderating impact of hedonic and utilitarian benefits on the relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment as suggested by Malar et al (2011) is the main theoretical contribution of this study. In addition, two aspects of emotional brand attachment, namely, Affection and EA-Combined, are identified, disclosing that Asian perspective of emotional brand attachment is differing from its original conceptualization (by Thomson et al., 2005 as Affection, Connection, and Passion) in developed countries’ context.

This study proposes several implications for marketing managers and other practitioners. First, due to the importance of creating an emotionally attached brand to consumers. Organizations should focus on creating emotional attachments to brands with the purpose of achieving strong brand loyalty and positive behavioral reactions from target customers towards their brands. Next, the study recognizes and proposes that self-congruence between a consumer and a brand as a key way of creating an emotional attachment to a brand. Thus, marketers need to develop their marketing strategies in a way to facilitate achieving self-congruence between self-images of their target consumers and personalities of their brands. Therefore, when developing positioning strategies marketers need to ensure that positioning of their brands match with the self-images of their target consumers. Therefore, in implementing brand positioning, marketers need to consider how to manage marketing mix strategies properly to elicit expected responses from customers. Especially, communication mix elements could play a significant role in this regard.

Furthermore, the current study suggests two different approaches to achieve self-congruence; actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence. Actual self-congruence follows a more authentic approach while ideal self-
congruence follows a more aspirational approach in branding. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of marketers to determine which approach to be followed in positioning their brands. However, according to the current study, it is suggested that ideal self-congruence has a more salient effect in creating emotional connections to brands than actual self-congruence. Thus, it can be proposed that aspirational branding approach is more appropriate than authentic branding in the Asian context. Accordingly, marketers need to develop personalities for their brands to match the desired identities of their target customers. In achieving congruence between consumers’ desired self-images and personalities of their brands, marketing communication has to play a significant role to communicate and emphasize this fit to target consumers. However, the current study further indicates that there is a positive impact of actual self-congruence on emotional attachments to brands as well. Thus, it suggests a more realistic or authentic approach to brand positioning. Accordingly, marketers should determine whether to follow aspirational branding or authentic branding in positioning their brands. Further, right understanding regarding the respective target markets is also important in this regard.

Further, implications related to the type of product (hedonic versus utilitarian nature) in creating emotional attachment to brands through self-congruence were also identified in the current study. It can be suggested that when marketers are using authentic branding approach, it is appropriate to focus more on utilitarian benefits of the product/brand to customers than on hedonic benefits of the product/brand. However, hedonic aspects are also applicable in using authentic branding approach. Thus, marketers need to identify the situations in which they need to emphasize and communicate utilitarian benefits, and in which situations they need to emphasize hedonic benefits. In aspirational branding, further focusing on utilitarian or hedonic aspects cannot be recommended according to the findings of the study.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the purpose of studying the self-congruence and emotional brand attachment in the South Asian context, taking the Sri Lankan smartphone consumers as the study setting. Importantly, as the key contribution, this research theorized the moderation effects of hedonic and utilitarian benefits of products on the relationship of self-congruence and emotional attachment. Further, the study showed that there is a strong positive
impact of self-congruence on emotional attachment to brands in Sri Lanka as an extension to the current knowledge. It also found out that ideal self-congruence has a more salient impact on creating emotional brand attachment than actual self-congruence. Finally, based on the findings of the study, several implications are proposed for researchers as well as for practitioners. This study can be extended for other developed countries in the Asian region to explore either similar or contradictory findings. It can also be done in different product categories to validate the results of the current study.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is important to mention few limitations faced by the study. First, generalizability of the findings can be limited due to judgmental sampling technique used in the study. Also, other than effects of self-congruence, hedonic, and utilitarian benefits of products, other factors which impact emotional brand attachment are not recognized in the study. As a future research area, it can be suggested to employ qualitative studies to further study reasons for the empirical differences of similar studies. Also, the moderating effects of public versus private consumption on the relationship between self-congruence and emotional attachment can be proposed as another area for further studies. Furthermore, considering different product categories in future studies will also be important.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES


