From the Quest for Authenticity to Advocacy:
How Do Authentic Brands Create Brand Advocate Consumers?

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Abstract

In a quest to investigate whether brands that position themselves as authentic create brand advocate consumers, the current study analyzes and collates the extant literature on brand authenticity through unfolding the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy on the grounds of brand experience, actual self-image congruence, consumer involvement as well as the product category with an aim to explore whether brand authenticity positively influences brand advocacy behavior among consumers. The relationships are investigated through a comprehensive research model using two different product categories (i.e., mobile phone and automobile) with a large sample of 825 respondents for both categories in total. Through an online survey, data was collected from mobile phone and automobile consumers with regards to two brands (Apple and Mercedes) predefined as a result of the first pilot study conducted. The research hypotheses were tested and analyzed with Structural Equation Model (SEM) on SmartPLS 4 statistical program. The findings reveal that brand authenticity positively predicts brand advocacy mirroring previous research, however, on a single product category (mobile phone). Brand experience is proven to have a significant mediating impact in this relationship whereas actual self-image congruence and consumer involvement are not proven to strengthen the relationship. Consequently, academics and practitioners can benefit from the theoretical model: This research presents news insights on brand authenticity to better understand consumers' perceptions in order to create brand advocate consumers in a fiercely competitive environment, in addition to adding new constructs to the body of brand authenticity literature for further research.

INTRODUCTION

What is authentic? What is real? Answers to these questions have long been sought after for centuries and only more to come. Across many works of art and science, many poets, painters, scholars, philosophers, and scientists have long sought for what is "authentic" or what is "real" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The concept of authenticity has been a deep-rooted term since the earliest times in history and has been a highly researched concept within the social sciences for decades. However, the rise of authenticity becomes prominent as a response to modernization (Lehman et al., 2019). The disparate usage of the concept has given the rise for the formation of new conceptualizations of the term, hence further enriching it across various disciplines.

Human beings have a natural tendency to seek for authenticity in life, even more so, in our century. There has always been a search for authenticity for certain, yet not as much as it is in our era. On the grounds that contemporary life is becoming increasingly artificial and inauthentic, the need for authenticity in the modern society has greatly increased in time as we lose originality and naturality each day (Şimşek, 2017). Even more so in the marketing realm, considering that consumers today are flooded with marketing messages at every possible touchpoint via their smart phones, smart TV's, computers, etc. in a highly connected age, it's a huge opportunity for brands to stand out as "authentic" among their competitors by conveying the hints of an authentic brand in all their communication messages and at each encounter with the consumers. Marketers began to reconsider their positioning strategies for effectively portraying consumer experiences and expectations, and aspirations when marketing scholars observed an increase in the gravity of authenticity to customers (Yuan et al., 2014).

At its core and on a broader perspective, authenticity ensures the feeling of security and trust we human beings wish to attain irrespective of the conditions and consequences. This helps us achieve the feeling of congruence on a broader view.

Why is brand authenticity concept on the upbeat in marketing realm? It is very crucial when we consider the fact that brands occupy a great space in our lives, even more than we think they do: We use them, eat them, wear them, experience them, consume them, desire for them. In this sense, we live brands (Morhart, 2015). Therefore, consumers' perceptions of a brand play a central part in defining the longevity of a brand.

Amidst an incessantly changing marketplace and rapid technological advances, consumers and their needs, wants, perceptions, motives, and behaviors have dramatically changed, as well.

Already an essential concept for the marketing world, brand authenticity has gained even a greater importance in this turbulent atmosphere for brands that prioritize attaining a higher emotional engagement with consumers by occupying higher rates of heart share and mind share rather than merely concentrating on the market share figures. Many consumers today prefer the brands that are purposeful, relevant, and authentic, as though this contributes their lives more worth and makes their lives more meaningful (Morhart, 2015).

Even though the extensive academic research that has been carried out in the past decades undoubtedly played a pivotal role in contributing to the concept of *brand authenticity* (e.g., Beverland, 2006; Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2014), the literature has its own gaps to be filled with new areas of research on the network of other constructs *brand authenticity* may be linked to and/or has an influence on. So far, for instance, there has been little academic discussion about the relation between brand authenticity and brand advocacy (Dağ Başar, 2020) and much uncertainty still exists about the relations of these constructs as to whether authentic brands create brand advocate consumers or not.

In comparison to similar research studies on the concept, this study proposes a different outlook with relatively unorthodox combination of variables that are assumed to have direct and/or indirect effects on the brand authenticity and brand advocacy relation; theoretical paradigms, experiential factors (sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral), self-concept of consumers as well as their involvement levels in order to explain brand authenticity and brand advocacy relation. The focal point of present study is bringing a new perspective on the brand authenticity core concept by unfolding the effects perceived brand authenticity on brand advocacy. In order to achieve this goal, the research model presented in the present study suggests analyzing "brand authenticity" construct a broader approach where its antecedents, moderator and mediator variables as well as their outcomes come into play. Aim of the research, therefore, is to represent the interrelation of the construct within other highly researched brand constructs such as *brand experience* and *brand advocacy* as well as the consumers' self-congruence and involvement so as to underscore the increasing importance of authenticity within the marketing discipline. Consequently, brands can benefit from a lasting brand along with advocate consumers by integrating the authenticity cues into their brand management strategies by scrupulously looking out for *brand authenticity* indicators.

Brand advocacy takes place as one of the key consequences of high levels of customer-brand identification which occurs socially and/or physically on consumer behaviors (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). In other words, consumers can use the power of word-of-mouth marketing on a social level whereas they can even go as far as getting tattoos on their bodies in terms of high levels of advocacy that goes beyond buying and using the brand's merchandise on a physical level.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H1: Brand authenticity positively predicts brand advocacy.

In the Experience Economy today, authenticity has emerged as the top concern that shapes individuals' purchasing decisions since they seek out places and activities that engage them in a naturally intimate and memorable way (Gilmore & Pine, 2009). In other words, consumers' authentic perception of brands may enhance their experience with a specific brand which may offer them the intimate and memorable experiences they seek.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is established:

H2: Brand authenticity positively predicts brand experience.

The brand advocacy pyramid is one prism through which we can clearly evaluate the importance of brand experience that plays a key role in creating brand advocates. According to Rusticus (2007), every consumer segmentation can be done based on the level of brand experience satisfaction of consumers. Brand advocate consumers constitute the top of the pyramid whereas the brand adopters that are adequately satisfied with the brand experience form the base of the pyramid, where majority of the customer base will be found.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

H3: Brand experience positively predicts brand advocacy.

If individuals attribute a success or failure to an internal cause, they will be motivated to try again in case of a failure or continue to keep the success because they believe success or failure depend on their own actions rather than extrinsic factors. The parallel rationale explains the motivation of

consumers for advocating a brand. At this junction, experiences with a brand play a crucial role in this direction.

Authentically perceived brands lead to experiencing brand offerings in a positive way, which eventually creates brand advocate consumers.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Brand experience mediates the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy.

It can be argued that consumers who are able to go through an authentic experience with a brand can necessarily attach a congruency with their real self and the authentic brand, which eventually gives rise to brand advocacy.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H5: Actual Self-Image Congruence strengthens the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy.

Consumers' word-of-mouth marketing of the identified-with brand is one of the primary outcomes of identification of consumers with brands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Consumers' promoting of a brand or brand advocacy can occur both on social level (word-of-mouth and/or advocating the brand under negative word-of-mouth situations) and physical level (purchasing products with the brand's logo) (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012)

Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

H6: Consumer Involvement strengthens the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy.

The product category is essential in the consumer-brand relationship in the light of the existing literature and it may have a significant role in the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy where consumers are likely to have more tendency to advocate those brands that they perceive as authentic when it comes to certain product categories that they can associate their self-image with.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Product category influences all relationships between consumers and brands.

Two pilot studies were completed prior to the main study was carried out. The first pilot study was conducted in order to identify two brands from various product categories that consumers perceive to be the most authentic. The second pilot study was conducted in order to test the final survey design on the two pre-identified brands (i.e., *Apple* and *Mercedes*) that were selected as a result of the first pilot study.

The measurement items used for the data collection were selected among those scales the validity and reliability of which were commonly accepted and greatly used in the various previous academic studies.

The questionnaire form used in the second pilot study and main study consists of three groups of question sets. In the first group, the consumers participating in the research were asked to indicate whether they used or had ever used the specific brand which were identified within the scope of the first pilot study, and they were asked to assess the statements given only for that specific brand (*i.e.,* Apple or Mercedes). In the second group of question sets in the questionnaire, the consumers were required to reply to the questions that measured the variables of brand authenticity, brand experience, brand advocacy, consumer involvement and actual self-image congruence. In the third group of question sets, the participants' demographic characteristics were determined which included age, gender, marital status, education level and income level.

In the questionnaire, brand authenticity was tested with 15 items, brand advocacy with 3 items, brand experience with 12 items, actual self-image congruence with 3 items, and finally consumer involvement with 3 items. A total of 36 items were included for testing the research hypotheses in the first section of the questionnaire. All the items for these scales were graded with the 5-point

Likert type (Strongly Disagree = 1, Strongly Agree = 5). In the second part of the questionnaire, there are demographic questions included in the survey in order to determine the demographic characteristics of participants as well as obtaining descriptive information about the participants of the research.

There were two pilot studies conducted prior to the main study. The objective of the first pilot study was to conduct extensive research on the brands that are perceived as authentic in the minds of consumers and identify two brands from different product categories with which the respondents perceived as most authentic considering the characteristics of authentic brands, so that the selected two brands could be used in the second pilot study to test the proposed research model. Expanding on the extant literature, the first pilot study set out to discover those brands that are perceived as authentic in eight different categories: *Automobile, White Goods, PC, Mobile Phone, Food, Clothing, Alcohol Drink,* and *Watch.* Along with this study, the first pilot test aimed at shedding a light on the brands that were perceived by the Turkish consumers as authentic for any future academic study to be utilized from the pool of these brands.

As for the utilization of these brands for this study, the findings of the first pilot study were narrowed down and two of the most authentic perceived brands from automobile category and mobile phone category, *Mercedes* and *Apple* respectively, were decided to be used. Regarding these two product categories, 21 respondents among a total of 121 responses for automobile category mentioned *Mercedes* to be the most authentic automobile brand compared to other brands mentioned such as *Volvo, BMW, Volkswagen, Audi*, and so on. On the other hand, 81 respondents among a total of 121 responses for mobile phone category mentioned *Apple* to be the most authentic mobile phone brand by far compared to other brands mentioned such as *Samsung, Huawei,* and so on.

The second pilot study was carried out to test proposed survey design on the two selected authentic-perceived brands identified as the outcome of the first pilot study. Also, some of the items in the questionnaire were re-considered and the translation of some items were rephrased with a clearer identification as a result of the pilot testing. In addition, the reverse coded items were changed into positive statements in the main study based on the results of the second pilot study.

As for the main study, convenience sampling method which is one of the non-probability sampling methods, was used. The data for main study was collected within five months period (May-June-

July-August-September-October) in 2022. By the end of the survey period, data was collected from 1134 respondents in total, 879 of whom completed the survey thoroughly. A negligible number of respondents (3) were under 18, and therefore, they were removed from the total number of completed responses. Out of the completed surveys, 825 surveys were found suitable for analysis for a total of both brands, (400 for Mercedes, 425 for Apple).

RESULTS

Prior to analyzing the final research model, an analysis on the initial research model was done without including moderating variables in the model. Validity and reliability of the constructs were evaluated. Internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were all tested as a part of validity and reliability assessments. Cronbach's Alpha and CR=Composite Reliability coefficients were tested for internal consistency reliability. Average variance (AVE=Average Variance Extracted) values and factor loads were used in order to determine convergent validity. Factor loads were expected to be ≥0.70; Cronbach's Alpha and combined reliability coefficients were expected to be ≥0.70; and finally, the average variance explained was expected to be ≥0.50. (Hair et al., 2006; Hair et al., 2022; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The same analysis steps were taken for the initial and final research model. Concisely summarizing the hypotheses results, majority of the research hypotheses were supported whereas only two hypotheses were rejected. On a more specific note, the impact of brand authenticity on brand experience (H2), the impact of brand experience on brand advocacy (H3) as well as the mediating impact of brand experience on the relation between brand authenticity and brand advocacy (H4) were the fully supported hypotheses of the research. On the other hand, direct impact of brand authenticity on brand advocacy (H1) as well as the impact of product category on the relation between brand authenticity and brand advocacy (H7) were partially supported on a single product category level (i.e., mobile phone). Finally, the moderating impact of actual self-image congruence on the relation between brand authenticity and brand advocacy (H5) and the moderating impact of consumer involvement on the relation between brand authenticity and brand advocacy (H6) were the rejected hypotheses of this research.

The central objective of this study is to reveal the perceived brand authenticity concept to marketing academicians as well as to practitioners as an integral pathway to creating brand advocacy through the multi-dimensional experience consumers have with a brand, and eventually to determine the direction of the relationship between brand authenticity, brand experience and brand advocacy through the lens of actual self-image congruence and consumer involvement. Through a deeper understanding of brand authenticity constructs, this dissertation aimed at answering such research questions as to whether perceived brand authenticity create brand advocate consumers; how authentic perception of brands impacts consumers' experience with a specific brand; whether consumers' experience with a specific brand affect their advocacy behavior; to what extent, if any, do consumers' involvement levels and self-image congruence with a brand affect their advocacy behavior for authentic brands; and finally, whether advocacy behavior of consumers for authentic brands change for different product categories. In order to fulfill the objective of this research, a comprehensive research model was developed and was evaluated using SEM on a large data set with an aim to attain representative results. The data for measuring the variables of the research were collected from consumers for two product categories, i.e., mobile phone consumers and automobile users, and the data was based on the consumer perceptions of two brands (Apple and Mercedes) from these two categories. In the present research, the mobile phone and automobile product categories were chosen due to several reasons: (1) Both categories appeal to a large number of consumers, (2) both product categories are among dynamic product groups which are constantly changing and keeping up with the technological advances as well as consumer expectations, (3) the perceptions of the consumers towards the brands of both product categories have a significant impact on the marketing strategies and practices of brands, therefore having the potential to offer practical implications to marketing applications, (4) both product categories are considered to have potential symbolic meanings for consumers as playing an important role in their self-identity projects. As a consequence, it is aimed to provide a valuable insight for marketing practitioners in mobile phones and automotive sectors as well as to the marketing scholars on the concept of brand authenticity by contributing to the literature on the influence of brand authenticity on brand experience and brand advocacy.

DISCUSSION

In the present research, the impact of brand authenticity on brand advocacy is confirmed only on product category level: The results show that brand advocacy behavior among consumers of mobile phones is positively influenced by their perception of a brand's authenticity, in contrast to consumers of automobiles.

The findings of previous brand authenticity research prove that authenticity of a brand plays a pivotal role for consumers whether to integrate the brand into their identity (Morhart et al., 2014). Taking its stance from this viewpoint, the current study proposed that an authentically perceived brand with which its consumers can identify themselves would increase the likelihood of brand advocacy behaviors of the loyal consumers. This study has been unable to demonstrate that actual self-image congruence of consumers has a moderating impact on the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy. One reason for this finding could be due to product category choices in the study. Perhaps, the moderation effect of actual self-image congruence on the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy could be tested on another product category such as apparels which supposedly might have a more direct and stronger impact on consumers' self-identity projects, thereby self-image congruence may have a deeper meaning for the consumers. Another reason could be related to the involvement level of the consumers in this study. Correspondingly, no evidence of consumer involvement was detected as a mediator on the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy in contrast to the proposed research hypothesis.

Findings of the research have demonstrated that experience is an important denominator for today's consumers who live in an experience economy, and it plays an integral part as a catalyst in brand perceptions the most essential of which is perceived brand authenticity for this study. The findings observed in current study regarding the positive impact of perceived brand authenticity on brand experience mirror those of the previous studies that have examined the effect of perceived brand authenticity on brand experience. Brand authenticity is discovered to be one of the main factors of the brand experience that is proven to have positive influence on customer emotions (Safeer et al., 2020). In other words, perceived brand authenticity fosters positive brand interactions and brand experience (Raza et al., 2021) similar to the findings of present study. Furthermore, the impact of brand experience on brand advocacy is another perspective that this

research aims to provide a clarification for. The findings observed in this study indicate that there is a positive impact of brand experience on brand advocacy behavior of consumers. This finding also accords with the previous research on measuring the effect of brand experience on brand advocacy which proved that high levels of brand experience create brand advocate consumers that are eager to promote positive word of mouth about a specific brand (Rusticus, 2007). The findings regarding the mediating role of brand experience suggests a meaningful insight: Brand experience proves to have a full mediation within the relationship between brand authenticity and brand advocacy. Differently stated, it is important for consumers to experience an authentic brand so as to advocate the brand under certain conditions.

CONCLUSION

The research in marketing realm concentrating on marketing communications and consumer behavior has borrowed The Attribution Theory from social psychology discipline and the attribution research findings in order to better comprehend what the consumers would refer to when exposed to marketing stimuli within the framework of attribution theory. The consumer might refer to external attributions such as the environment, message, product, marketer (Dağ, 2020), or to internal attributions such as such as endeavor or competency throughout the attribution process (Wang et al., 2008). Laying the groundwork to the present research, Attribution Theory plays an integral role for explaining the research findings since the intrinsic motives of consumers to attach meaning to the products/brands on a symbolic level constitute an important part of brand authenticity, and this in turn shapes consumers' brand perceptions. Rather than being an intrinsic element of the brand, authenticity is created by the consumer of the brand and consumers are inclined to authenticate brands in their perceptions in a way to allude to their true selves (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). In other words, consumers attribute authenticity to brands and explain their true selves through the means of brands. Consumers construct their opinions of a brand's authenticity based on the clues they gather from its "*continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolic*" (Morhart et al., 2014). A long-standing brand that lives up to its brand promises on an ethically grounded manner may form an authentic perception in the eyes of its consumers. What is more, the symbolic meaning a brand holds for its consumer may be a strong authenticity cue. Findings of the current research postulate that the positive impact of the brand authenticity dimensions on brand

experience as well as their positive impact on brand advocacy on product level underscores the significance of attribution for consumers and brands alike. The results of this study reveal the impact of consumers' brand authenticity perceptions of technological products on brand advocacy. Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that consumers' purchasing preferences are significantly influenced by the brands that can stand out from the competition by making promises that they can fulfill, and as a result, they are perceived as authentic by their consumers. This study also reveals the fact that how consumers experience brands have an utmost importance on their advocacy behavior towards brands.

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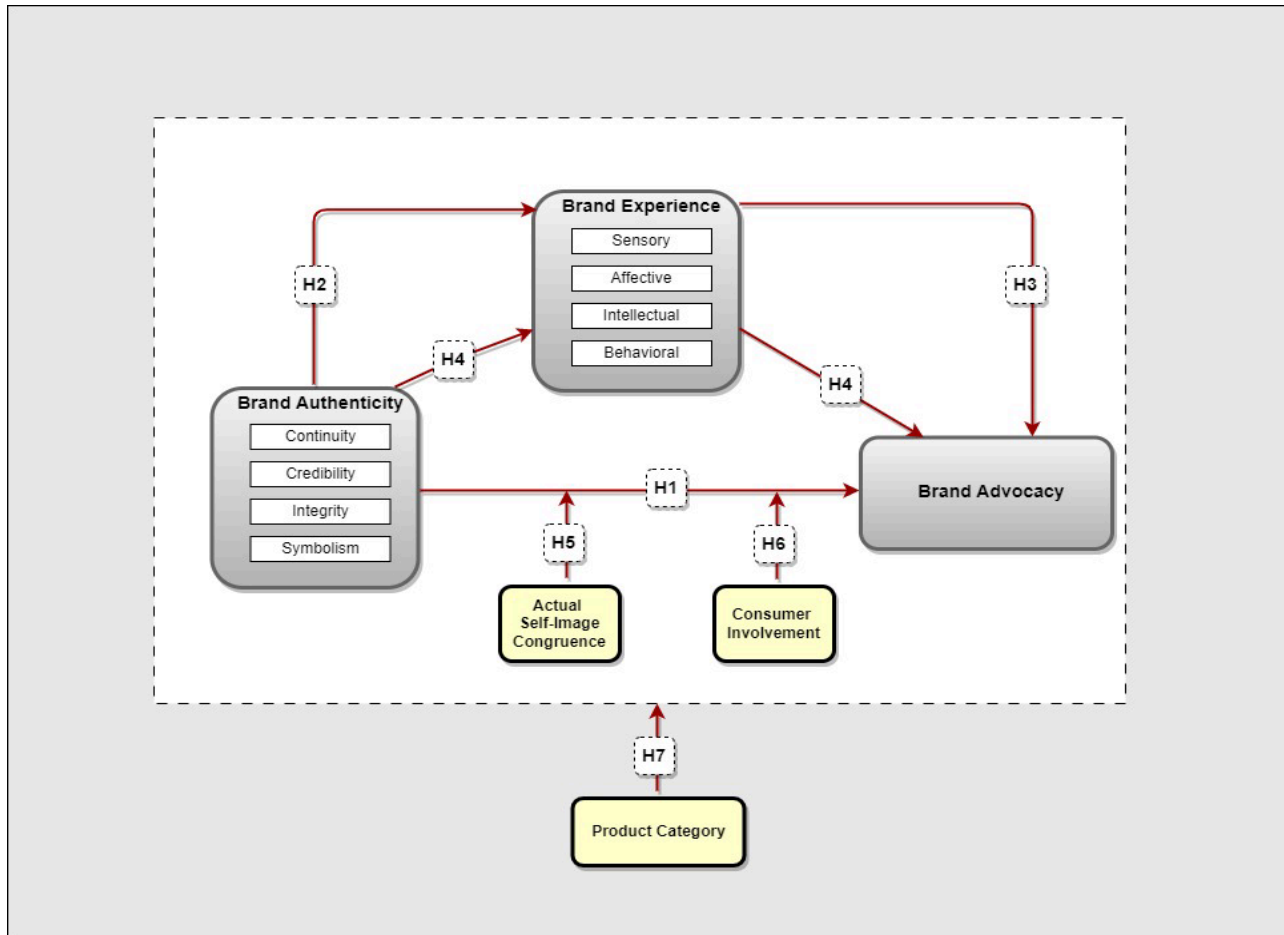
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TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1 *Proposed Research Model*

Table 1 *Construct Validity and Reliability Results*

	Mobile Phone (Apple)	Automobile (Mercedes)	All Product Categories
Cronbach's Alpha	**0.60-0.90**		
Brand Authenticity (BA)	0.859	0.822	0.879
Brand Advocacy (B.ADV)	0.880	0.875	0.856
Brand Experience (BE)	0.933	0.918	0.930
Actual Self-Image Congruence (ASIC)	0.857	0.862	0.855
Consumer Involvement (CI)	0.814	0.754	0.793
Composite reliability (rho_c)	**0.60-0.90**		
Brand Authenticity (BA)	0.860	0.828	0.897
Brand Advocacy (B.ADV)	0.881	0.873	0.864
Brand Experience (BE)	0.933	0.918	0.930
Actual Self-Image Congruence (ASIC)	0.857	0.863	0.859
Consumer Involvement (CI)	0.823	0.764	0.816
Average variance extracted (AVE)	**>0.50**		
Brand Authenticity (BA)	0.611	0.617	0.648
Brand Advocacy (B.ADV)	0.711	0.637	0.670
Brand Experience (BE)	0.776	0.737	0.768
Actual Self-Image Congruence (ASIC)	0.668	0.678	0.666
Consumer Involvement (CI)	0.701	0.621	0.670
Discriminant Validity (Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT))	YES	YES	YES

Summary statistics of Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) table is set out as follows:

Table 2 *Discriminant Validity Results*

	ASIC	B.ADV	BA	BE	CI_Intrst
ASIC					
B.ADV	0.781				
BA	0.650	0.678			
BE	0.821	0.854	0.782		
CI_Intrst	0.790	0.839	0.583	0.780	

Table 3 *Significance of Path Coefficients*

Item	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
BA -> B.ADV	0.066	0.066	0.049	1.363	0.086
BA -> BE	0.787	0.788	0.018	44.527	0.000
BE -> B.ADV	0.448	0.448	0.075	5.956	0.000
ASIC x BA -> B.ADV	0.025	0.024	0.046	0.532	0.297
CI_Intrst x BA -> B.ADV	-0.034	-0.034	0.052	0.643	0.260