Mapping the Digital Self: The Role of Self-Image Congruence and Brand Authenticity in Shaping Purchasing Behavior, with Insights into Sustainability in Online Commerce

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the influence of self-image congruence and perceived brand authenticity on purchasing behavior in online commerce, with data collected from 302 Saudi customers. Analyzed deploying covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), the results depict a significant relationship between brand authenticity and self-image congruence, both directly influencing purchasing behavior. Additionally, brand attachment mediates the influence of self-image congruence on purchasing behavior. Social influence is identified as a key moderator, strengthening the relationship between perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior. These findings contribute to understanding how self-concept and authenticity drive consumer decisions in digital environments, offering insights into brand strategy development for online commerce.

Keywords: self-image congruence, brand attachment, social influence, purchasing behavior, e-commerce

1. Introduction

In an era dominated by digital interactions, the concept of self-image congruence has emerged as a critical determinant of consumer behavior, particularly in online commerce (Sirgy, 1982). Self-image congruence refers to the arrangement between a perceived image of a brand and a consumer's self-concept, influencing purchasing decisions and brand loyalty (Klabi, 2020). As consumers increasingly curate their digital identities, the congruence found between their self-image and the brands they engage with has become pivotal to their purchasing behavior (Aaker, 1997). This growing interconnection between self-concept and digital consumption necessitates further exploration of how self-image congruence drives consumer engagement, particularly in the context of e-commerce (Ahn, 2019). The rise of digital platforms has not only transformed how consumers interact with brands but also heightened the role of self-image congruence in these interactions (Javornik et al., 2021). Consumers tend to select brands that resonate with their self-concept, reinforcing their identity through online purchases (Balakrishnan et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in digital spaces where individuals actively project their ideal selves, and brands play a role in validating these digital personas (Hollebeek et al., 2022). Previous research highlights that the alignment found between a consumer's

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self-image and brand identity fosters a stronger emotional connection, leading to increased brand loyalty and purchasing behavior (Chen et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, brand authenticity has appeared as a crucial factor in inducing consumer trust and engagement, particularly in an online context where brand transparency and consistency are highly valued (X. Song et al., 2024). Authentic brands are perceived as genuine, trustworthy, and committed to their core values, which significantly enhances consumer loyalty (Bulmer et al., 2024). The relationship between brand authenticity and consumer behavior is well-documented, with studies indicating that authentic brands are more likely to foster long-term relationships with consumers (Kirkby et al., 2023). In an online environment saturated with branding efforts, authenticity serves as a key differentiator that influences consumer purchasing decisions (Assiouras et al., 2015). The interaction between self-image congruence and brand authenticity has become particularly relevant in digital commerce, where consumers are constantly evaluating the alignment between their self-perceptions and the authenticity of the brands they engage with (Morhart et al., 2015). Research suggests that when consumers notice a brand as reliable, they are more likely to experience positive emotions and trust towards the brand, further enhancing the impact of self-image congruence on their purchasing decisions (Qing et al., 2024). Moreover, the perceived authenticity of a brand can moderate the effect of self-image congruence, as consumers are more likely to choose brands that they feel genuinely reflect their values and identity (Pelet et al., 2020).

In the context of online commerce, where interactions are often depersonalized and transactional, the role of self-image congruence and brand authenticity becomes even more critical (Fournier, 1998). Studies indicate that consumers are drawn to brands that offer them a sense of continuity with their self-concept, and this alignment is often mediated by the brand's perceived authenticity (Fritz et al., 2017). As consumers seek brands that reflect their ideal selves, the authenticity of the brand serves as a validating mechanism that strengthens the consumer's emotional investment in the brand (J. Yang et al., 2021). This emotional investment, in turn, drives consumer loyalty and encourages repeat purchases in online commerce (Fritz et al., 2017). Furthermore, the concept of brand authenticity has gained prominence in recent years as consumers demand more transparency and ethical behavior from the brands they support (Södergren, 2021). In digital commerce, where the brand-consumer relationship is often mediated through social media and e-commerce platforms, authenticity is crucial in maintaining consumer trust (Xu et al., 2022). Research has depicted that consumers are likelier to engage with and purchase from brands that they perceive as authentic, particularly when these brands align with their personal values and identity (Guèvremont, 2021). This suggests that brand authenticity not only influences purchasing behavior but also enhances the effect of self-image congruence on consumer decision-making (Kucharska et al., 2020).

Given the increasing importance of self-image congruence and brand authenticity in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in online commerce, this study aims to explore their combined influence on purchasing decisions. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How does self-image congruence influence purchasing behavior in online commerce?

RQ2: What is the role of brand authenticity in moderating the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior in online commerce?

RQ3: How do self-image congruence and brand authenticity interact to shape consumer trust and engagement in online environments?

By addressing these research questions, this study intends to contribute to the expanding body of literature on consumer behavior in digital contexts, offering insights into how brands can leverage self-image congruence and authenticity to enhance consumer engagement and drive purchasing behavior (Gillani et al., 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-Congruity Theory

Self-congruity theory, a fundamental concept in understanding consumer behavior, particularly in a brand selection that mirrors their self-concept, was first proposed by Sirgy (Sirgy, 1982). It suggests that individuals are driven by the need to maintain consistency between brand images and their self-image. This alignment, known as self-congruity, is pivotal in shaping consumer preferences and loyalty, as individuals tend to favor brands that mirror their identity (Sirgy & Su, 2000). The theory posits that when a brand's image aligns with a customer's self-concept, the consumer is more likely to exhibit positive behaviors such as brand loyalty and repeat purchases (Vigolo & Ugolini, 2016). In the realm of online commerce, the role of self-congruity has been amplified due to the increased visibility of consumer self-presentation in digital environments (Guo & Hsu, 2023). The digital self, the persona consumers craft online, plays a significant role in brand interaction, as it interacts with brand identity across various platforms, making the congruence between self-image and brand even more significant. Research has highlighted that consumers experience stronger identification with brands that align with their idealized self-concept, a phenomenon further amplified in the personalized digital space (Plotkina & Saurel, 2021a). The customizable nature of digital interactions empowers consumers to actively select brands that reflect their self-image, reinforcing their sense of congruity and enhancing their engagement with those brands (Hu et al., 2022).

As digital platforms have evolved, the role of self-congruity in influencing consumer behavior has become increasingly prominent. Brands that project values congruent with a consumer's self-concept, particularly those that emphasize authenticity and transparency, are likelier to foster strong emotional connections with consumers. These two factors, authenticity and transparency, are key in enhancing self-congruity. Authentic brands, defined by their consistency in reflecting core values and maintaining transparency, enhance self-congruity by providing consumers with a sense of alignment between their self-concept and the brand's identity (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016). This perceived alignment boosts consumer trust and positively impacts purchasing behavior, as consumers are more inclined to support brands that resonate with their self-identity.

2.2 Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

Self-image congruence, a core concept in marketing and branding literature, denotes the alignment between the perceived identity of a brand and a consumer's self-

concept (Hosany, 2017). This concept has been consistently shown to influence purchasing behavior, as individuals tend to gravitate toward brands that reflect their self-image. According to several studies, self-image congruence fosters emotional connections with brands, which in turn leads to stronger consumer loyalty and heightened purchasing intentions (Ahmad & Akbar, 2023). Research in consumer behavior suggests that when individuals perceive a brand as congruent with their self-concept, they are more likely to form positive associations and demonstrate a willingness to engage in brand-related purchasing activities (Wallace et al., 2020). Moreover, the consumer-brand relationship is reinforced when the brand's personality is perceived to match the consumer's personal identity, resulting in higher levels of consumer satisfaction and brand commitment (Al-Mutawa et al., 2023).

In online commerce, the significance of self-image congruence is even more pronounced, as digital platforms offer consumers greater control over the presentation and curation of their self-identity (Y. Song et al., 2024). The digital space allows individuals to craft idealized versions of themselves, and these curated identities play a crucial role in their brand interactions (Vries & Carlson, 2014). Research has demonstrated that when consumers consider that there is a similarity between their online self-image and a brand's digital persona, they are more likely to experience a sense of psychological comfort, reinforcing their preference for the brand and enhancing the likelihood of purchase (Baek et al., 2018). Additionally, digital environments enable brands to interact with consumers in more personalized ways, offering tailored experiences that reflect the consumer's self-concept. This personalization amplifies the effects of self-image congruence on purchasing behavior, particularly in online contexts where consumers seek to maintain consistency between their self-presentation and their brand choices (Plotkina & Saurel, 2021b).

Cognitive consistency theory provides further support for the association between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior, suggesting that individuals strive to maintain alignment between their attitudes and behaviors (Özer et al., 2022). When a consumer perceives congruence between their self-concept and a brand's identity, they experience reduced cognitive dissonance, which encourages them to engage in purchasing behavior that reinforces this alignment. Studies have shown that consumers are more likely to purchase products from brands that reflect their self-image because doing so helps maintain cognitive and emotional harmony (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). This phenomenon is especially relevant in online commerce, where consumers' purchasing decisions are often influenced by their desire to project a consistent and coherent digital self-image (Wu et al., 2020).

Brand authenticity is another key factor that interacts with self-image congruence to influence purchasing behavior. Consumers are likely to interact with brands that they perceive as linked to their core values, especially when those values align with their own. Authenticity enhances the consumer's trust in the brand and strengthens the emotional connection, further reinforcing the effects of self-image congruence on purchasing decisions. In digital commerce, where consumers are inundated with brand messages, authenticity acts as a differentiator that heightens consumer engagement and drives purchasing behavior (Muniz & Guzmán, 2023). When a brand's authenticity aligns with the consumer's self-image, the likelihood of purchase increases, as consumers seek to support brands that reflect their values and identity.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical and empirical insights, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H1: Self-Image congruence significantly and positively influences purchasing behavior.

The concept of brand authenticity has gained increasing attention in recent years due to its role in influencing consumer trust and purchasing behavior in online commerce. Brand authenticity refers to a brand's perceived genuineness, reliability, and adherence to its core values, which consumers often equate with higher quality and ethical standards. Previous studies suggest that authenticity is a key driver in consumer-brand relationships, particularly in digital environments where skepticism toward mass-produced content and promotional tactics tends to be higher. Brands that are seen as authentic can develop deeper emotional connections with consumers, leading to stronger engagement and brand loyalty.

Authenticity has been identified as a crucial factor in the development of trust between brands and consumers. Trust, in turn, is a significant predictor of consumer purchasing behavior, especially in digital marketplaces where consumers cannot physically interact with products before purchase. The ability of a brand to convey authenticity through its online presence and messaging increases the likelihood that consumers will perceive the brand as trustworthy, ultimately influencing their purchase decisions. In this context, perceived authenticity enhances the consumer's confidence in the brand, reducing uncertainty in purchase decisions. Moreover, several studies indicate that brand authenticity positively affects perceived value, which is a direct driver of consumer purchasing behavior. Consumers who perceive a brand as authentic are more likely to view the products offered by that brand as high in value, not just in terms of quality but also in aligning with their personal values and self-image. This value congruence plays a critical role in decision-making, as consumers are more inclined to purchase from brands that reflect their own beliefs and identity. Based on these insights from the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Perceived brand authenticity significantly and positively influences purchasing behavior.

2.3 Mediating role of brand attachment

The concept of "self-image congruence", defined as the alignment between an individual's self-concept and the perceived image of a brand, has been extensively studied in consumer behavior research (Malär et al., 2011). Self-image congruence is a powerful determinant of consumer preferences and loyalty, as consumers are more likely to get attached to brands that resonate with their self-concept (S. Yang et al., 2020). Previous studies have demonstrated that self-image congruence fosters a sense of identification with the brand, which in turn leads to increased engagement and purchase behavior (Mähner et al., 2023). This alignment between self-concept and brand identity is particularly significant in the context of online commerce, where digital interactions provide consumers with the opportunity to express their ideal selves through their brand choices (Abadi et al., 2021). Brand authenticity, a related construct, refers to the degree to which a brand is perceived as genuine, consistent, and true to its values (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). Authentic

brands create deeper emotional connections with consumers, enhancing their sense of trust and loyalty (Rosado-Pinto et al., 2020). In digital commerce, where brand messages are often scrutinized for sincerity, authenticity becomes an essential factor that strengthens the self-image congruence-purchasing behavior relationship (Bulmer et al., 2024). The interplay between self-image congruence and brand authenticity suggests that when consumers imagine a brand as both authentic and congruent with their self-concept, they are more likely to form strong emotional bonds with the brand, which ultimately leads to increased purchasing behavior (Dash et al., 2021). Building on these concepts, we propose that brand attachment mediates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior. Brand attachment, defined as the emotional bond that consumers form with a brand, plays a crucial role in translating self-image congruence into actionable purchasing behavior (Guèvremont, 2021). Consumers who perceive strong self-congruence with an authentic brand are more likely to develop brand attachment, which then drives their purchasing decisions. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: Brand attachment mediates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior.

The concept of brand authenticity has emerged as a critical element in fostering consumer trust and brand loyalty in online commerce settings. Brand authenticity, characterized by a brand's transparency, consistency, and genuineness, has been found to positively influence consumer perceptions, leading to stronger brand attachment and subsequent purchasing behavior. Research suggests that when consumers consider a brand as authentic, they are more likely to form emotional connections with that brand, a phenomenon referred to as brand attachment.

Brand attachment, defined as the emotional bond between a consumer and a brand, plays a mediating role in translating perceptions of brand authenticity into purchasing actions. In the context of online commerce, brand attachment is further reinforced by digital platforms, which allow for more personalized and dynamic interactions between consumers and brands. The emotional attachment that consumers develop towards authentic brands has been shown to enhance purchasing intentions, particularly when consumers feel that the brand reflects their values and identity. Prior studies have demonstrated that brand attachment can serve as a key mediator in the relationship between perceived brand attributes, such as authenticity, and consumer behavior outcomes. This connection is especially relevant in digital commerce, where consumers rely heavily on brand cues to make purchasing decisions. Given the significance of brand attachment in online purchasing behavior, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Brand attachment mediates the relationship between perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior.

2.3 Moderating Role of Social Influence

Self-image congruence refers to the degree of alignment between a consumer's self-concept and their perception of a brand's identity, and it has been consistently identified as a critical driver of purchasing behavior in both traditional and digital commerce contexts. Numerous studies have confirmed that when consumers expect a high level of self-image congruence with a brand, they are more likely to exhibit favorable

purchasing intentions and greater brand loyalty. The self-congruity theory provides a foundational basis for understanding how the alignment of personal identity and brand image leads to a higher likelihood of purchasing behavior, as consumers seek products and brands that reinforce their self-concept. In online commerce, the role of self-image congruence is amplified due to the digital nature of consumer-brand interactions, which provides greater visibility of both consumer identities and brand personas. Research shows that in digital environments, consumers actively curate their identities, and they gravitate towards brands that reflect and enhance their desired self-image.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in social media-driven online commerce, where self-presentation and identity construction are central to consumer engagement with brands. Self-image congruence is closely tied to social comparison, where consumers rely on external validation to align their behavior with socially accepted norms (Sirgy, 1982). The social influence thus plays a significant role in shaping purchasing behavior, as consumers seek to match their self-image with socially endorsed standards (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). In contrast, brand authenticity is often perceived as an internal judgment, less influenced by social factors. Authenticity is grounded in personal beliefs about a brand's integrity, stability, and alignment with one's values (Morhart et al., 2015). This individual evaluation, shaped by introspection rather than social approval, explains why social influence may have a weaker effect. Authenticity tends to be evaluated based on internalized perceptions of a brand's sincerity (McManus et al., 2022), making it less dependent on external validation compared to self-image congruence. Thus, while social influence drives purchasing behavior by enhancing self-image congruence, its impact on brand authenticity is more limited due to the personal nature of authenticity judgments.

Social influence, defined as the impact of the opinions and behaviors of others on an individual's decision-making, plays a significant role in moderating the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior. In online settings, social influence is particularly pronounced due to the highly interactive and connected nature of digital platforms. The opinions and behaviors of peers, influencers, and online communities have been shown to significantly affect consumer perceptions of brands and, subsequently, their purchasing behavior. Therefore, it is hypothesized that social influence moderates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior. Specifically, when consumers expect high social validation for a brand that aligns with their self-image, they are more likely to engage in purchasing behavior. Conversely, in the absence of strong social influence, the effect of self-image congruence on purchasing behavior may be diminished. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Social influence moderates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior.

The concept of brand authenticity has gained significant attention in marketing research, particularly in understanding its impact on consumer purchasing behavior. Brand authenticity is often perceived as a brand's ability to remain true to its values, consistent in communication, and transparent in its actions, which fosters consumer trust and emotional connection. Research indicates that consumers are more likely to associate with brands they perceive as authentic, as authenticity aligns with their desire for genuine interactions in increasingly digital spaces. In the context of online commerce, where personal identity and digital self-presentation are closely tied to consumer behavior, brand authenticity

becomes even more salient, influencing purchase intentions and long-term loyalty. Self-image congruence, or the degree to which a consumer's perception of a brand matches their self-concept, has been widely recognized as a critical factor in shaping purchasing behavior.

The alignment between self-concept and brand identity provides consumers with a sense of validation and self-expression, motivating them to purchase products that reinforce their self-image. Previous research suggests that self-image congruence, when paired with perceived brand authenticity, can significantly enhance consumer trust, thereby increasing the likelihood of purchasing. Consumers seek out brands that not only reflect their self-identity but also maintain a level of authenticity that validates their emotional and psychological investment in the brand. In the digital age, the role of social influence has expanded, particularly in the realm of online commerce, where peer opinions and social networks heavily impact consumer choices. Social influence refers to the degree to which a consumer's purchasing decisions are shaped by the opinions and behaviors of others, including friends, family, and online communities. Brands that are perceived as authentic are often endorsed and validated through social channels, further influencing consumer behavior. This leads to the proposition that social influence may serve as a moderating factor in the relationship between brand authenticity and purchasing behavior, amplifying the effect of authenticity when reinforced by social validation.

H6: Social influence moderates the relationship between perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior.
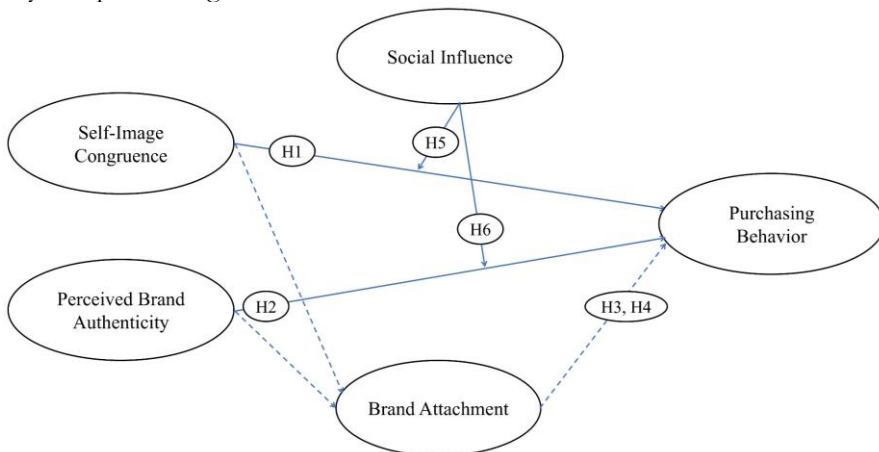

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

3. Data Collection and Methods

3.1 Sample and procedure

The study focused on individuals aged 18 and older living in Saudi Arabia who had used e-commerce platforms for making purchases within the past six months. Saudi Arabia was selected as the research site due to its rapidly expanding online commerce sector. As of 2024, Saudi Arabia's e-commerce market continues its rapid expansion. The number of users is predicted to reach 24.7 million by 2029, with a user penetration rate of

approximately 43.6% in 2024. By 2027, e-commerce sales are expected to exceed $30 billion, continuing to grow toward $44 billion by 2030. This growth is driven by the country's Vision 2030 initiative, which promotes digital economy advancements, significant investments in logistics infrastructure, and simplified licensing for domestic delivery providers (Brohan, 2024). The data was collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Facebook and WhatsApp groups between May and June 2024. A non-probabilistic sampling approach (i.e., purposive sampling strategy) was used, where participants were intentionally chosen based on specific criteria (Chakraborty et al., 2024). The survey yielded 329 responses, of which 302 were valid after screening, yielding a valid sample rate of 91.7%.

Table 1: Codes, constructs and measurement items

Constructs	Items code	Items
Self-Image Congruence	SC1	"The brand's online presence is consistent with how I see myself".
	SC2	"This brand reflects my ideal online identity".
	SC3	"I feel that this brand matches the way I would like others to see me online".
	SC4	"Using this brand helps me express my true self online".
	SC5	This brand represents who I am as a person in the digital space".
Perceived Brand Authenticity	PB1	"The brand reflects its core values consistently in its digital presence"
	PB2	"This brand comes across as genuine in its online communications"
	PB3	"I believe this brand remains true to its claims across its digital platforms"
Brand Attachment	BA1	"This brand's digital presence makes me feel secure".
	BA2	"I feel emotionally connected to this brand when interacting with it online".
	BA3	"I would be upset if I could no longer access this brand online".
	BA4	"I feel a strong bond with this brand through its digital channels".
	BA5	"I feel warmth toward this brand when engaging with it online".
Social Influence	SI1	"I often consider the views of my social circle when purchasing from brands perceived as authentic in digital spaces".

	SI 2	"The people I interact with online expect me to engage with brands that align with my digital self-presentation".
	SI3	"My purchasing decisions in online commerce are influenced by the brand preferences of those close to me".
	SI4	"People whose opinions I respect believe that I should buy from brands that reflect my online identity".
Purchasing Behavior	PU1	"I tend to purchase products from brands that align with my self-image".
	PU2	"The likelihood of me purchasing from a brand increases if I believe the brand is authentic".
	PU3	"I frequently purchase products from brands that represent who I am or aspire to be".
	PU4	"When a brand feels genuine, I am more inclined to buy its products online".

3.2 Measurement of Variables and Constructs

The survey items are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The measurement items for self-image congruence (Nandy et al., 2023), perceived brand authenticity (Jia et al., 2024), brand attachment (Beeler et al., 2021), social influence (Davlembayeva et al., 2024), and purchasing behavior (X. Yang et al., 2022) are adapted from past studies. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

4. Analysis and Results
4.1 Path analysis

The path analysis results revealed significant relationships among key variables in the study. As indicated in Table 4, self-image congruence (SC) positively influenced perceived brand authenticity (PB) ($\beta = .152$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. This finding aligns with previous research, which demonstrates that when consumers perceive a congruence between the brand's identity and their self-concept, they are more likely to view the brand as authentic, thus enhancing their emotional and behavioral engagement with the brand (Sirgy et al., 1997). Furthermore, perceived brand authenticity also showed a significant positive impact on purchasing behavior (PU) ($\beta = .372$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 2. This outcome highlights the critical role of brand authenticity in fostering consumer trust and driving purchase decisions, consistent with findings in the extant literature on consumer behavior in online contexts.

Table 2: Convergent validity and Reliability

Variable	Items	Factor loadings		AVE	CR
Self-Image Congruence	SC1	0.765		0.513	0.757
	SC2	0.696			
	SC3	0.751			
	SC4	0.885			
	SC5	0.769			
Perceived Brand Authenticity	PB1	0.792		0.508	0.776
	PB2	0.621			
	PB3	0.650			
Brand Attachment	BA1	0.725		0.511	0.815
	BA2	0.600			
	BA3	0.797			
	BA4	0.670			
	BA5	0.765			
Social Influence	SI1	0.629		0.562	0.769
	SI2	0.654			
	SI3	0.648			
	SI4	0.547			
Purchasing Behavior	PU1	0.761		0.633	0.781
	PU2	0.827			
	PU3	0.835			
	PU4	0.811			

Note(s): AVE = Average variance extracted; CR = Composite reliability

Table 3. Discriminant validity

	Mean	SDV	SC	PB	SI	BA	PU
SC	4.331	0.465	*0.726*				
PB	4.261	0.495	0.49	*0.756*			

SI	4.206	0.499	0.41	0.29	*0.711*		
BA	3.773	0.548	0.39	0.32	0.41	*0.736*	
PU	4.452	0.559	0.53	0.35	0.42	0.56	*0.721*

Note(s): SDV=Standard Deviation; SC= Self-Image Congruence; PB= Perceived Brand Authenticity; BA= Brand Attachment; SI= Social Influence; PU= Purchasing Behavior.
Source (s): Prepared by researchers

Table 4. Structural results

Hypothesis	Regression paths	S.E.	C.R.	p-value	Result
H1	SC → PB	.152	3.337	0.000	Supported
H2	PB → PU	.372	3.214	0.002	Supported

Note(s): S.E.=Standard estimates; CR= Composite reliability.
Source(s): Prepared by researchers

4.2 Mediation analysis

  The mediation analysis was conducted to explore the indirect effect of Brand Attachment (BA) on the relationship between Self-Image Congruence (SC) and Purchasing Behavior (PU). As shown in Table 5, the indirect path from SC to PU through BA was found to be significant, with an indirect effect of 0.096, a direct effect of 0.169, and a total effect of 0.265, all supported by a t-value of 2.282 and a p-value of 0.021. These results suggest that Brand Attachment is found to partially mediate the relationship between SC and PU, indicating that the degree to which a consumer feels attached to a brand amplifies the effect of their self-image congruence on purchasing behavior, in line with prior research on consumer-brand identification and emotional attachment in the marketing management literature.

  However, the mediation analysis did not find significant results for the path from Perceived Brand Authenticity (PB) to Purchasing Behavior (PU) through Brand Attachment (BA). The indirect effect in this case was reported as 0.034, with a non-significant p-value of 0.101, indicating that Brand Attachment does not mediate the effect of Brand Authenticity on Purchasing Behavior. This finding aligns with some prior studies

that suggest brand authenticity's direct influence on purchasing behavior may bypass emotional attachment mechanisms (Kucharska et al., 2020). The relationship between brand authenticity and purchasing behavior, bypassing emotional attachment, can be explained by the intrinsic nature of authenticity as a more objective and tangible brand characteristic. Authenticity represents a brand's consistency with its values, honesty, and transparency, which consumers may perceive as a direct indication of quality and trustworthiness, leading to purchasing decisions without the need for emotional intermediation. Research suggests that consumers, especially in online environments, prioritize authentic brand attributes over emotional connections, as these attributes provide a more reliable basis for evaluating the brand's commitment to delivering on its promises (Morhart et al., 2015). Consequently, while self-image congruence often requires an emotional connection to establish attachment, brand authenticity serves as a direct cognitive cue that reassures consumers, thus enabling quicker and more rational purchasing decisions (Fritz et al., 2017). This bypass of brand attachment may reflect a growing emphasis on functional, rather than emotional, drivers in online consumer behavior, particularly in contexts where consumers are less influenced by direct physical interactions with the brand (Södergren, 2021).

These insights contribute to a nuanced understanding of how consumers' emotional connections with brands interact with self-image and authenticity, adding depth to the discussion on digital self-representation in online commerce.

Table 5. Mediation analysis results

Path description	Mediator	Indirect effect	Direct effect	Total effect (Direct + Indirect)	t-value	P-value	Result
SC → PU	Brand Attachment (BA)	0.096	0.169	0.265	2.282	0.021	Supported
PB → PU		0.034	0.089	0.123	0.151	0.101	Not supported

Source(s): *Prepared by researchers*

4.3 Moderation analysis

The moderation analysis in Table 6 further examined the role of social influence (SI) in moderating the relationship between perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior. Results indicated that social influence significantly strengthened the positive impact of self-image congruence on purchasing behavior ($\beta = 0.265$, t = 2.282, p = .021), supporting Hypothesis 6. This result suggests that social validation, particularly through online communities and peer interactions, amplifies the effect of brand authenticity on consumer behavior. However, no significant moderating effect of social influence was found for the relationship between perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior ($p > .05$), indicating that while social influence reinforces the effect of self-image

congruence, it does not directly enhance the impact of brand authenticity on purchasing decisions (Sirgy et al., 1997).

Table 6. Moderation analysis results

Path description	Moderator	Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
SC → PU	Social Influence (SI)	0.265	2.282	0.021	Supported
PB → PU		0.123	0.151	0.101	Not supported

5. Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the intricate dynamics between self-image congruence, brand authenticity, and purchasing behavior in the context of online commerce. The significant impact of self-image congruence on perceived brand authenticity (H1) highlights a well-established connection in consumer behavior literature, where individuals are drawn to brands that reflect their self-concept. This result aligns with the notion that when consumers see themselves in a brand, they perceive the brand as more authentic and trustworthy. This is particularly important in online commerce, where brand interactions are often mediated by digital platforms, making the perception of authenticity a key factor in consumer decision-making. The study also reveals that perceived brand authenticity has a direct and significant effect on purchasing behavior (H2), affirming that consumers are more likely to buy from brands they deem authentic. This supports prior findings in marketing literature, where brand authenticity is closely tied to brand loyalty and purchasing decisions. Authentic brands provide a sense of consistency, trust, and transparency, which are highly valued by consumers in the online marketplace. These findings are particularly relevant in digital environments, where the lack of physical interaction makes the authenticity of a brand more crucial in influencing purchasing behavior.

Moreover, the mediation analysis provides deeper insights into the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior. The role of brand attachment as a mediator further underscores the emotional connection consumers develop with brands that align with their self-image. This emotional bond, as established in previous studies (Thomson et al., 2005), enhances consumer loyalty and increases the likelihood of repeated purchases. The study's findings echo research by Park et al. (Whan Park et al., 2010), who argue that self-congruity not only drives consumer satisfaction but also fosters a deeper attachment to the brand, which in turn influences purchasing behavior. However, the moderation analysis presents a more complex picture, particularly in the role of social influence. While social influence significantly moderates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior (H6), it does not significantly affect the relationship between perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior. This finding suggests that consumers' purchasing decisions based on brand authenticity are more

personal and intrinsic, and less affected by external social validation. This observation is consistent with earlier studies that argue authenticity is an internally driven perception, shaped by personal values and beliefs rather than social pressures (Kang et al., 2023). In contrast, social influence appears to play a more substantial role in situations where self-image congruence is involved, likely because individuals seek social approval when their identity is closely tied to their brand choices (Krautz & Hoffmann, 2017). This distinction between the roles of brand authenticity and social influence is critical for marketers. In the age of social media, where peer opinions and social networks hold significant sway, understanding when and how social influence impacts purchasing behavior can help brands tailor their marketing strategies more effectively. Brands that focus on authenticity may benefit from positioning themselves as genuine and value-driven, appealing to consumers who prioritize personal alignment over social endorsement.

AI-driven personalization, which leverages vast amounts of consumer data, is becoming increasingly sophisticated in tailoring brand interactions to individual preferences. As AI continues to evolve, it could intensify the significance of self-image congruence by delivering hyper-personalized experiences that align more closely with consumers' evolving identities and values. This potential for deeper personalization suggests that AI could not only enhance congruence but also shift consumer expectations about what it means for a brand to be a reflection of their self-image (Shimul & Phau, 2023). Similarly, AI may redefine brand authenticity in the eyes of consumers. Traditionally, authenticity has been tied to a brand's consistency, transparency, and alignment with values. With AI, the dynamic nature of interactions raises new questions about how authenticity is perceived when the brand's "voice" is, in part, a product of algorithms rather than human-driven decisions (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). While AI can optimize interactions to align with individual values, some consumers may question whether these AI-driven interactions are genuinely authentic or simply reflect calculated strategies designed to elicit specific responses (Chernev et al., 2024; Choi et al., 2023). This tension between personalization and authenticity will likely shape future consumer-brand relationships. Brands that successfully balance AI-driven personalization with a genuine sense of authenticity could maintain a strong competitive edge in an increasingly digital marketplace (Susandy et al., 2023). Our study provides a foundation for examining these dynamics and invites future research to explore how consumers will navigate these evolving relationships as AI's role continues to expand.

Meanwhile, brands that focus on aligning with consumers' self-image should consider using social proof and influencer marketing to strengthen their appeal, particularly for customers who value social validation when making purchases. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the complex ways self-image congruence and brand authenticity shape online buying behavior. Exploring the influence of social dynamics and emotional attachment to brands reveals how multifaceted consumer decision-making can be in the digital space. These findings provide useful insights for marketers looking to build stronger relationships with customers, increase brand loyalty, and boost online sales.

While the primary focus of this study has been on self-image congruence and brand authenticity as drivers of purchasing behavior, it is important to consider that these factors may also influence sustainable purchasing decisions. In today's digital marketplace, consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that reflect their values, including

sustainability. Although this study does not directly explore this aspect, future research could examine how the alignment of brand authenticity with sustainability initiatives impacts purchasing behavior, particularly as consumers seek to balance their self-concept with ethical consumption choices. Sustainable purchasing behavior is becoming increasingly relevant as consumers align their self-concept with values that reflect social and environmental responsibility. Brand authenticity, which significantly impacts consumer trust and loyalty, often includes sustainability, allowing consumers to view brands as both ethical and reliable (Morhart et al., 2015). Research shows that when brands embed sustainability within their identity, consumer loyalty is strengthened (Parris & Guzmán, 2023). Self-image congruence, a key driver in purchasing decisions, also plays a role as consumers tend to prefer brands whose sustainability values align with their personal beliefs (Aaker, 1997; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967).

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the existing literature on self-image congruence, brand authenticity, and purchasing behavior in online commerce, particularly through the lens of digital self-concept. The findings reinforce the theoretical underpinnings of self-congruence theory, which suggests that consumers are more likely to interact with brands that reflect their self-image. This study extends the theory into the digital context, demonstrating that self-image congruence continues to play a critical role in online purchasing behavior, particularly as individuals project curated versions of themselves in digital spaces. These results echo prior studies, which indicate that congruence between the brand image and consumer self-concept leads to greater satisfaction and loyalty.

Additionally, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the significant influence of perceived brand authenticity on purchasing behavior, which is consistent with previous works (Aaker, 1997). Consumers who perceive a brand as real are likelier to engage with that brand and trust it, especially in the highly competitive online marketplace. The importance of authenticity as a key driver of consumer behavior, particularly in digital environments, cannot be overstated, as it fosters deeper emotional connections between consumers and brands (Moreno & Kang, 2020). The study also highlights the moderating role of social influence in the direct relationship between purchasing behavior and self-image congruence, which aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Ajzen (Ajzen, 1991), in his Theory of Planned Behavior. Social networks, online reviews, and peer endorsements serve as critical external cues that validate the authenticity of a brand, further amplifying the consumer's intention to purchase. This finding underscores the importance of social validation in digital commerce, where consumers rely on social proof to guide their purchasing decisions.

The research also sheds light on the mediating role of brand attachment in the direct relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior. The results indicate that brand attachment enhances the effect of self-image congruence on purchasing behavior, suggesting that emotional connections between consumers and brands are crucial for driving online purchases. This highlights the need for brands to focus on

fostering strong emotional ties with consumers, as these connections lead to higher engagement and repeat purchases.

6.2 Managerial implications

The findings of this study offer several valuable insights for managers in the online commerce space, particularly regarding the interplay between self-image congruence, perceived brand authenticity, and purchasing behavior. First, the positive relationship between perceived brand authenticity and self-image congruence suggests that managers should invest in building and communicating a brand image that aligns with their target consumers' self-concept (Bulmer et al., 2024). Brands that reflect the personal identity of their consumers are more likely to foster deeper emotional connections, leading to increased customer loyalty and repeat purchases. By crafting a brand personality that resonates with consumer values, online retailers can effectively leverage the self-concept to enhance purchasing behaviors.

Additionally, the study's results highlight the critical role of brand authenticity in influencing purchasing decisions. Authenticity has emerged as a key driver of consumer trust in online settings, where the risk of misinformation or fraudulent behavior can deter purchases (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Managers should prioritize transparent communication and consistency across digital platforms to bolster perceptions of authenticity. This is especially important in e-commerce, where customers may not physically interact with product offerings and must rely on brand representation. Ensuring that all touchpoints, from social media to customer service, reflect the brand's core values will reinforce authenticity and positively influence purchasing behavior (Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). Moreover, the findings underscore the moderating role of social influence on the relationship between brand authenticity and purchasing behavior. In the age of digital social networks, peer opinions and online reviews play a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes towards brands. Managers should encourage user-generated content and facilitate community engagement around their brands to capitalize on the power of social influence (Liao & Chen, 2024). Creating platforms for consumers to share their experiences can amplify brand authenticity and encourage purchases through social validation. This aligns with research on the impact of social proof in online commerce, where positive consumer interactions can boost brand credibility and drive purchasing behavior. Finally, the mediation analysis suggests that brand attachment significantly mediates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior. Managers should focus on fostering strong emotional bonds between consumers and the brand, which can enhance the likelihood of repeat purchases. This can be achieved by consistently reinforcing the alignment between the brand's identity and the consumer's self-concept through personalized marketing strategies, loyalty programs, and experiential branding.

7. Limitations and Future Research Avenues

Despite the significant conclusions in this study, some limitations should be acknowledged. A primary disadvantage is a dependence on self-reported data, which may be influenced by biases such as social desirability bias, possibly compromising the accuracy of replies about purchase behavior (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Furthermore, while the sample

size (n = 359) is adequate, it is geographically limited to Saudi Arabia, restricting the generalizability of the conclusions and results to other cultural and market contexts. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on food delivery services, which may limit the application of the findings to other e-commerce sectors, warranting future research across diverse product categories to validate these results.

For future research, expanding the scope to include cross-cultural comparisons would provide insights into how self-image congruence and brand authenticity impact purchasing behavior across different consumer markets. Given that the moderation effect of social influence on the relationship between perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior was found to be significant, future studies could further explore the nuances of social influence in various online platforms, such as social media and e-commerce marketplaces. Moreover, longitudinal studies could provide a better understanding of how these relationships evolve over time, especially in rapidly changing digital commerce environments.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes to the expanding body of research on online commerce by exploring the dynamic relationship between self-image congruence, perceived brand authenticity, and purchasing behavior. The findings demonstrate that self-image congruence significantly influences perceived brand authenticity, which in turn positively impacts purchasing behavior, as supported by prior research on self-congruity theory (Sirgy et al., 1997). The results further reveal that brand attachment mediates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior, suggesting that consumers are more likely to interact with brands that align with their self-image and evoke emotional attachment (Park et al., 2005). While social influence moderates the relationship between self-image congruence and purchasing behavior, its impact on perceived brand authenticity and purchasing behavior was found to be non-significant, aligning with findings from consumer loyalty studies (Oliver, 1997). Overall, this research emphasizes the critical role of self-concept and brand authenticity in driving online purchasing decisions and offers valuable insights for marketers aiming to foster long-term consumer relationships. Future researchers may also consider conducting systematic reviews (Khan et al., 2024), qualitative studies (Ishrat, Hasan, Farooq, et al., 2023) and bibliometric analysis-based reviews (Fakhar et al., 2023; Ishrat, Hasan, Khan, et al., 2023; Rashid et al., 2024) on the constructs employed in this study.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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