Exploring Gender Perspectives in the Saudi Fashion Market

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Abstract
This paper investigates the influence of brand clues on self-identification and social-identification in the Saudi Arabian fashion industry, focusing on gender-specific as a moderator. The data were collected through an online survey, resulting in 1,041 responses in Saudi Arabia, especially the younger generation. The data were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis, and hypothesized relationships were tested using regression via Smart-PLS software. The findings reveal that brand clues significantly affect self-identification and social-identification. In this paper, we used gender as a moderator factor where males and females respond differently to brand clues, especially in the fashion industry. We found that Saudi males prefer symbolic and practical brand attributes, whereas Saudi females prioritize emotional and ethical elements. This research contributes to the under-research areas of brand clues, self-identification, and social-identification. This study deepens the understanding of the connection between consumers' psychological needs—self-identification and social-identification—and brand clues, encompassing sensory, functional, and humanized elements. It will provide implications for fashion marketing managers to develop appropriate consumer segments, brand clues, and communication strategies for consumers.

1. Introduction

Fashion is essential for people to show themselves and signal their opinions at this stage of life. People signal their anger and happiness by wearing clothes representing their opinions and emotions. In addition, people wear fashion based on their circle of social status to signify their belonging to this social class. Saudis spent 7.3 billion dollars on fashion-related products in 2021, among the highest per capita in the world. The fashion industry contributes 1.4% to the Saudi Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Fashion Commission, 2023). Women's fashion is the dominant segment, accounting for 39.4% of the apparel market's total value, and men's fashion holds a 36.3% share (Fashion Commission, 2023). The sales growth in the fashion industry is high and is expected to grow by 47% between 2020 and 2025. The fashion market for women is

growing faster than men in Saudi Arabia. Most men buy underwear (626 million dollars), more than 50% of the total sales of men's clothes. Although the men's clothing market in Saudi grows slower than women's, the men's clothing market is expected to grow 27% from 2022-2027, faster than the Saudi economy, which is expected to grow at 4.9% (World Bank, 2022).

The fashion industry is taking a big leap in Saudi Arabia due to the growth in the purchasing power of consumers and the liberalism in people's dressing. For example, the minister of culture in Saudi started an initiative in 2021 to promote 100 Saudi brands. This initiative aims to develop the fashion industry, guide the designer, and upskill their skills in designing fashion and managing the brand to grow. This initiative aligns with Vision 2030 goals to position Saudi designers in local and global markets, strengthening the industry's representation on international platforms (Fashion Commission, 2023). Moreover, the initiative should lead the designers to represent themselves locally and on global platforms. Most designers design for women (Fashion Commission, 2023). These designers might capture Saudi taste more than international designers' houses since local designers live in the same culture as fashion consumers. That leads us to explore whether males and females wear brands to signal their opinions or/or social signals. Previous literature showed that consumers signal their opinions via fashion. Males and females signal their gender (socially and biologically) and their opinions through fashion (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013; Akdemir, 2021). In this research, we are exploring if brand clues can have a difference between males and females to desire more signaling to their self-identification or/and social-identification.

Furthermore, this study examines the moderating role of gender in these relationships, offering critical insights into how male and female consumers differently interpret and engage with brand signals. Saudi Arabia is in a great place where people want to signal their self and social opinions due to the social revolution that the country is experiencing. Prior studies explored self-congruity theory (SCT) in the context of branding. This study examined the theory in culturally transformative markets like Saudi Arabia, where fashion serves as a critical medium for self-expression and social signaling.

1.2 Theoretical Background

Scholars have explored how consumers use brands to signal their ideal-self and convey social status through fashion. Several theories provide insights to explain this consumers behavior. In this research, the frame of the model uses two complementing theories: Self-Congruity Theory (SCT) and Signaling Theory. The SCT explains the alignment of brand clues with the consumer's self-concept. However, this theory by itself would not explain the full picture because SCT addresses the personal alignment with the brand and does not explain how brands act as signal to others in social settings. Moreover, it is important to introduce signaling theory because the theory emphasize how consumers use brand to send messages about their identity, status, or group affiliation to others. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how brand clues fulfill both personal and social dimensions of consumer identity.

1.2.1 Self-Congruity Theory (SCT)

According to Sirgy (1982), SCT highlights the role of self-concept in shaping individuals' behavior. This concept varies between genders, with notable differences in how males and females demonstrate SCT through their ideal-self and social-self. The ideal-self refers to the motivations driving individuals to perceive themselves in a particular way. In contrast, the social-self pertains to the belief of how others perceive them. Customers often seek alignment between their self-concept and brand offerings, using brand clues to reflect their desired self-image. For instance, they may choose specific brands to feel validated in their own eyes (ideal-self) or to be socially accepted and integrated within specific groups (social-self).

This distinction becomes particularly relevant in this study, where gender moderates the relationship between brand clues, self-identification, and social-identification. Gender influences how customers interpret brand clues such as logos, packaging, colors, or messaging, shaping their self-perception and how others perceive them (Khan & Fatmah, 2017). For example, women tend to be more influenced by emotional, aesthetic, and expressive aspects of branding (Grossman & Wood, 1993). Their behavior often reflects sensitivity and fluctuating emotions, as they may vividly express sadness, happiness, anger, or excitement (Tsichla, Voutsa, Margariti, & Hatzithomas, 2021). Conversely, men are more likely to exhibit functional and practical attitudes toward branding, focusing on utility and performance-driven aspects (Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000).

These findings underscore the importance of tailoring brand clues to align with gender-specific preferences. For instance, brands targeting female consumers may emphasize emotional resonance and aesthetic appeal, while those targeting male consumers may highlight functionality and practicality. Understanding these nuances allows brands to create more effective strategies that resonate with their audience's ideal and social selves.

1.2.2 Signaling Theory

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once claimed that within each of us lies a powerful intuition—the drive to be the first, to stand out, and to lead. He urged us to embrace this motive but to signal it through love, moral excellence, and generosity, allowing our actions to communicate our true values. This concept transcends individual behavior and extends to the ways in which brands signal their values and identity. Love, excellence, and generosity can be expressed through brand signals that align with consumers' self-identity while fulfilling their desire for social belonging and status. Signaling theory plays a vital role in understanding this dynamic, particularly in consumer behavior and its manifestations in fashion and marketing (Spence, 1973).

The theory provides a framework for analyzing how consumers use brands as tools to convey messages about their identity, status, and social affiliations to others. Brand cues such as logos, packaging, and designs serve as signals that consumers interpret to make decisions (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). This behavior is especially prominent in fashion, an industry rooted in symbolic expression. Fashion serves as a medium for individuals to communicate their social identity,

reflecting their alignment with societal norms and cultural values. By wearing specific brands or styles, consumers navigate their role within society and assert their belonging to particular social groups or cultural traditions (Dunham, 2011). Thus, the intersection of signaling theory and fashion reveals how deeply intertwined consumer choices are with the desire to express identity and foster social connections.

1.3 Brand Clues

Brand clues act as a link between brand consumers representing the brand's identity through various sensations, functional and human elements. These include physical attributes like packing, product design, visual elements, and humanized interactions such as customer services (Guzman & Parris, 2023; Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). Functional clues focus on tangible benefits, while mechanical and sensory aspects create emotional connections through visuals, scents, and textures (Berman, Potgieter, & Tait, 2023). Humanized clues are derived from interpersonal interactions when consumers deal with the brand, which feeds on the brand experience by reflecting professionalism and empathy. All the previous dimensions are vital in shaping how males/females connect and experience the brand.

1.4 Self-identification

Self-identification involves matching personal identity with a brand's attributes, enabling consumers to reflect their self-concept by associating the brand (Escalas & Battman, 2003). This means that males/females show their aspirations and values via brands' attributes, such as fashion brands emphasizing cultural relevance (Algumzi, 2022). Functional and emotional brand elements often serve as vehicles for consumers to express their ideal-self, where consumers can connect more with brands (Jones, Runyan, & Kim, 2012).

1.5 Social-identification

Social-identification happens when males/females establish an emotional need to belong to a social community by being exposed to a brand (Hogg & Terry, 2000). For example, brands that signal social values such as sustainability or cultural heritage enhance the connection among males/females who want to increase their sense of belonging. Consumers look for signs that drive their attention to belong to the same group or society (Alhaddad, 2019). Fashion brands are able to build a strong bond with male/female customers through signaling brand values with the society's values.

1.6 Hypotheses Development

Research has shown that the relationship between brand clues, self-identification, and social-identification has not been fully explored directly. In fact, most of the existing literature has focused on the indirect effects of brand experience in bridging brand clues and self-identification (Berry et al., 2006; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Furthermore, self-identification has consistently been found to influence social-identification positively. Males and females' self-image can be reflected easily when another group of individuals share the same exposure to the same clues of a

ceratin brand (Jones et al., 2012). Thus, brand clues have a major key motivator to shaping males/females' identity

1.6.1 Brand Clues and Self-identification

Brand clues can take several forms, including functional, mechanical, and humanized. Functional brand clues, such as the use of premium materials in luxury brands like Gucci or Chanel, convey exclusivity and quality, helping consumers align with their ideal self-image. Mechanical clues, such as the iconic monogram patterns of Louis Vuitton or Burberry's plaid design, evoke sensory recognition and signal brand identity through visual elements. Additionally, store layout and packaging design enhance the brand experience, fostering connections with social groups. These brand clues represent a brand's identity, allowing consumers to align their self-image with brand attributes (Jones et al., 2012).

Understanding how brand clues influence self-identification is especially important in contexts like the fashion industry, where personal style often reflects deeper individual aspirations. For example, premium brands signal a sense of exclusivity that reflects people's ideal self. In addition, gender plays a significant moderating role between brand clues and self-identification. While men might prioritize functionality, women value the emotional and aesthetic elements of the brand. This relationship highlights the need for brands to develop tailored strategies that resonate with different consumer segments. We propose the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a positive impact between brand clues and self-identification
H1a: Gender moderates the positive impact between brand clues and self-identification

1.6.2 Brand Clues and Social-identification

The role of brand clues in shaping social-identity is particularly prominent in fashion, where cultural and societal expressions are interwoven. Some cultures have more single cultural representation than others. Eastern cultures are rich in cultural relations, particularly in the context of Asia's new wealthy classes (Pinches, 2005). In culturally rich settings like Saudi Arabia, the fashion industry plays a vital role in reflecting identity, social norms, and cultural signals. Algumzi (2022) emphasizes that consumers choose fashion to signal deeper cultural and social aspirations. This might be true in rapidly transforming societies like Saudi Arabia, where fashion has become a medium for expressing identity and signaling social belonging. Males and females might act differently in signaling their self and their social needs. This emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamic that gender could play in the fashion industry, which might be a game changer in unlocking the different desires and needs between different segments. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective brand strategies that cater to diverse consumer needs and preferences. Based on these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed:
H2: There is a positive impact between brand clues and social-identification
H2a: Gender moderates the positive impact between brand clues and social-identification

Figure 1 illustrates the moderating role of gender in the relationship between brand cues and self-identification, as well as between brand cues and social identification.
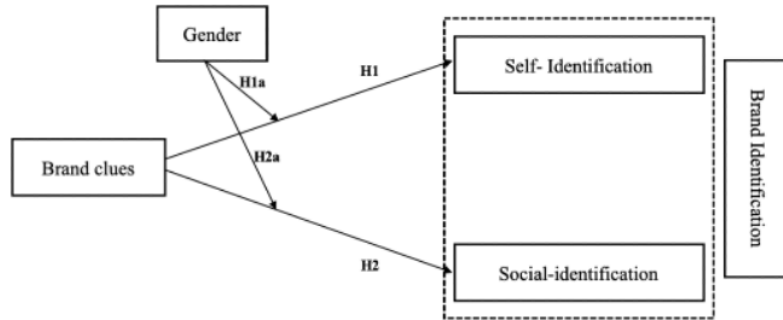

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2. Method

2.1 Sample and data collection

The data was collected from Saudi context using simple random sampling through online survey. The survey begins with a section on demographic information, gathering details about participants' gender, educational level, age, occupation, income, and marital status. The core sections of the survey focus on participants' awareness on brand clues, self-identification, and social-identification. A total of 1,041 participants were finalized, which is considered remarkable (Comrey & Lee, 1992).

Most of the sample falls within the 20–30 age group (58.9%), followed by those aged 30–40 (26.8%), with the remaining participants distributed across the 40–50 age group and those above 50 years old. The sample is predominantly female (86.4%), with males making up 13.6%. The distribution varies in income levels, with a significant proportion earning less than 5,000 SAR (41.2%) and another segment earning 5,001–20,000 SAR (32.9%). For occupations, the largest groups are students (46.2%) and employees (42.4%), while the remainder comprises business owners and retirees. Most participants hold a bachelor's degree (73%), with the rest holding qualifications such as diplomas, master's degrees, or PhDs. Additionally, the marital status is skewed towards single participants (64.3%), with 35.7% of the sample being married. Income, occupation, education level, and marital status are pivotal in shaping self-image and social-identification. These factors influence consumers' access to brands, their value perception, and how they express their identity to themselves and others. Understanding these dynamics helps brands tailor their strategies to resonate with different demographic groups, enhancing engagement and loyalty. Table 1 summarizes the sample characteristics.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Condition	N= Sample	Percentile (%)
Age		
Between 20-30	613	58.9%
Between 30-40	279	26.8%
Between 40-50	102	9.8%
Above 50	47	4.5%
Gender		
Male	142	13.6%
Female	899	86.4%
Income (SAR)		
Less than 5,000	429	41.2%
5,001- 20,000	343	32.9%
20,001-30,000	116	11.1%
Above 30,000	153	14.7%
Occupation		
Student	441	42.4%
Employee	481	46.2%
Business owner	55	5.3%
Retired	64	6.1%
Educational Level		
Diploma	60	5.8%
Bachelor	760	73%
Masters' degree	165	15.9%
PhD degree	56	5.4%
Marital Status		
Married	372	35.7%
Not married	669	64.3%
Total	**1041**	**100%**

Source: prepared by the researcher

2.2 Measurement of the Variables

All items in this study were adapted from pervious scholars to maintain the high level of validity and reliability (Khan & Fatma, 2017; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Mael & Tetrick, 1992). The brand clues construct comprises four items adopted from previous work (Khan & Fatma, 2017). For self-identification, three items were sourced from Escalas and Bettman (2003), while four items for social-identification were drawn from the studies by Mael and Tetrick (1992). Originally, all scales were designed as seven-point Likert scales, but they were transformed into five-point Likert scales for this study. This adjustment aligns with the preference among researchers, as five-point scales are often favoured for their clarity and ease of use (Jenkins & Taber, 1977; Lissitz & Green, 1975). Additionally, while both scales have their merits, the five-point Likert scale is often preferred for its simplicity, ease of use, and compatibility with

analysis. It balances providing enough variance for meaningful insights and being user-friendly for respondents (Jenkins & Taber, 1977; Lissitz & Green, 1975).

3. Results

3.1 Reliability

This study investigates the impact of brand clues on self-identification and social-identification, focusing on how gender moderates these direct relationships. The analysis was conducted using Smart-PLS software. To ensure the reliability of the constructs, Cronbach's Alpha values were calculated for the variables: brand clues, self-identification, and social-identification. All variables produced Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the widely accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability (Kline, 2005; DeVellis, 2003; Nunnally, 1978). Specifically, Cronbach's Alpha values were 0.843 for brand clues, 0.790 for self-identification, and 0.732 for social-identification. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was calculated to assess the convergent validity of the constructs. All variables achieved AVE values above the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The AVE values were 0.680 for brand clues, 0.704 for self-identification, and 0.519 for social-identification. These results confirm that the constructs are both reliable and valid. A detailed summary of the constructs' reliability and AVE values is provided in table 2 and table 3.

Table 2. Construct Reliability

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	STDEV	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Brand Clues	0.843	0.843	0.011	76.599	0.000
Self-Identification	0.790	0.790	0.014	57.101	0.000
Social-Identification	0.732	0.731	0.016	45.243	0.000

Note: STDEV= Standard Deviation
Source: prepared by the researcher

Table 3. Average Variance Extracted

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	(STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Brand Clues	0.680	0.680	0.015	44.365	0.000
Self-Identification	0.704	0.704	0.014	50.759	0.000
Social-Identification	0.519	0.516	0.028	18.601	0.000

Note: STDEV= Standard Deviation
Source: prepared by the researcher

3.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed by examining the cross-loadings of the constructs on their respective items. Eleven items were analyzed: four for brand clues, four for social-identification, and three for self-identification. All cross-loadings exceeded the threshold of 0.60, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity, which aligns with the preferred value of 0.50 or higher, as suggested by previous researchers (Awang, 2016; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Additionally, the sampling adequacy was evaluated using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, which was conducted using SPSS software. The test generated a KMO value of 0.836, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Kaiser, 1974), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The results were statistically significant, and the degree of freedom (df = 55) corresponds to the number of item combinations tested to determine the KMO value. These findings ensure that the sample size and data structure are adequate for the analysis. A comprehensive summary of the cross-loadings for discriminant validity and the KMO test results for sampling adequacy is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Factor Loading

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	(STDEV)	P values
BC1	0.777			0.000
BC2.	0.828			0.000
BC3.	0.865			0.000
BC4.	0.827			0.000
Sel1		0.856		0.000
Sel2.		0.843		0.000
Sel3.		0.817		0.000
Sol1.			0.725	0.000
Sol2.			0.625	0.000
Sol3.			0.719	0.000
Sol4.			0.803	0.000
KMO= 0.836				
Sig.= 0.000				
df= 55				

Note: BC= Brand clue; Sel= Self-identification; Sol= Social-identification **;** STDEV= Standard Deviation

Source: prepared by the researcher

3.3 Correlation

The correlation matrix was assessed using Pearson's correlation coefficient to evaluate the relationships between the constructs in the dataset (Cohen, 1988). Cohen categorizes correlations as follows: a small correlation occurs when */r/* is between 0.10 and 0.30, a medium correlation when */r/* is between 0.30 and 0.50, and a large correlation when /*r*/ is 0.50 or above. The results indicate that the variable brand clues is significantly correlated with both self-identification

(*r=0.503*) and social-identification (*r= 0.219*), representing a large and small correlation, respectively. Additionally, self-identification significantly correlates with social-identification (*r=0.361*), indicating a medium correlation. These findings demonstrate meaningful relationships between the constructs, supporting the validity of the dataset for further analysis. A detailed summary of the correlation matrix is provided in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlation Matrix

		Gender	BC	Sel.	Sol.
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	.115**	.045	.036
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.145	.241
	N	1041	1041	1041	1041
BC	Pearson Correlation	.115**	1	.503**	.219**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	1041	1041	1041	1041
Sel.	Pearson Correlation	.045	.503**	1	.361**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.145	.000		.000
	N	1041	1041	1041	1041
Sol.	Pearson Correlation	.036	.219**	.361**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.241	.000	.000	
	N	1041	1041	1041	1041

Note: BC= Brand clue; Sel= Self-identification; Sol= Social-identification
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: Author own work

3.4 Moderation Analysis

The proposed hypotheses were tested using Smart-PLS software, which provided key statistical outputs, including p-values, standard deviation (STDEV), t-statistics, and coefficient values (β). The results demonstrated significant direct relationships, indicating that brand clues positively influence both self-identification and social-identification (*t-test = 10.773, STDEV = 0.063, β = 0.676, p < 0.001; t-test = 6.105, STDEV = 0.081, β = 0.497, p < 0.001*). Consequently, H1 and H2 were supported. Moreover, the findings reveal that gender has a significant moderating effect when acting as a moderator (t-*test = 2.768, STDEV = 0.069, β = -0.192, p < 0.001; t-test = 2.900, STDEV = 0.089, β = -0.258, p < 0.001*). Therefore, H1a and H2a were also supported. Detailed results of the hypotheses testing are summarized in figure 2, figure 3, and table 6.. Furthermore, the results of the moderation analysis reveal that gender significantly affects both relationships between brand clues and the dependent variables: self-identification and social-identification. Figure 3. summarizes the slope analysis for the variables and the moderator.
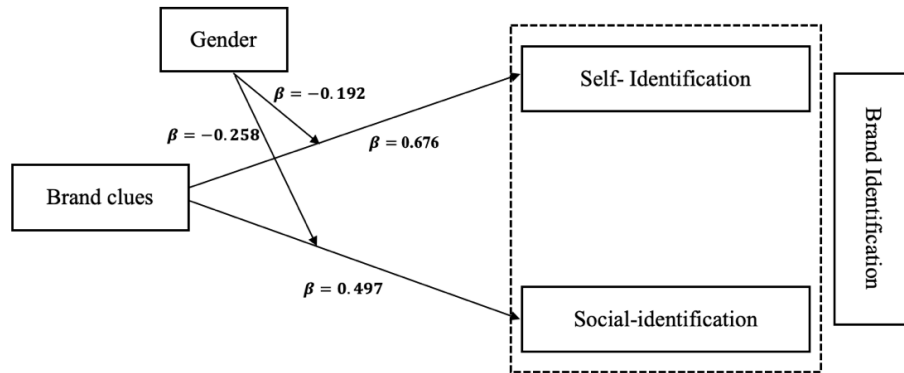
Figure 2: Hypotheses Analysis
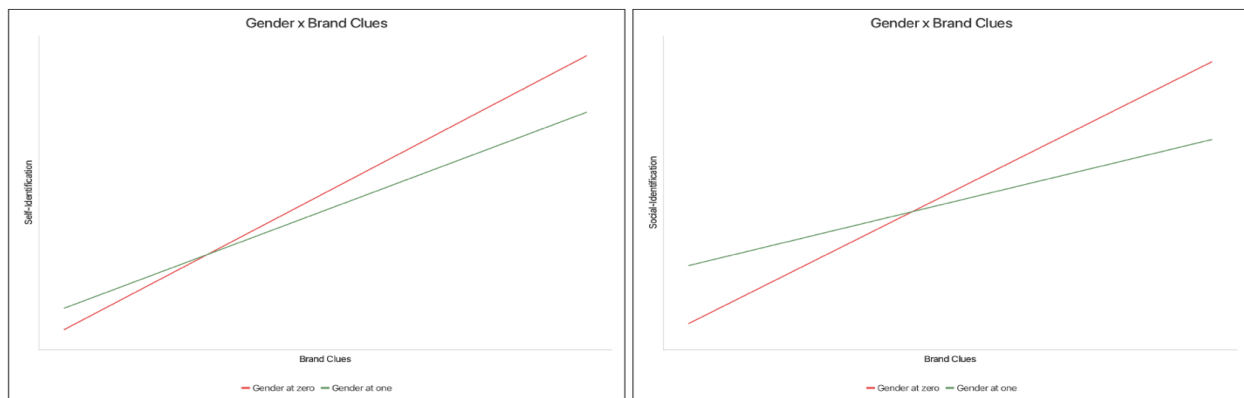*Source: Author own work obtained from Smart-PLS*

Figure 3. Moderation Analysis
Source: Obtained from Smart-PLS

Table 6. Hypotheses Testing (Direct Relationship & Moderation)

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	(STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
H1: BC-> Sel.	0.676	0.677	0.063	10.773	0.000*
H2: BC-> Sol.	0.497	0.498	0.081	6.105	0.000*
H1a: Gender x BC-> Sel.	-0.192	-0.193	0.069	2.786	0.005*
H2a: Gender x BC-> Sol.	-0.258	-0.255	0.089	2.900	0.004*

Note: BC= Brand clue; Sel= Self-identification; Sol= Social-identification; STDEV= Standard Deviation

Source: prepared by the researcher

4. Discussion

In line with SCT, the findings of this paper indicate that when brand offers signals, labels, emotional words, functional words, and colors evoking femineity or masculinity in the fashion industry, customers' ideal self and social self are aligned (Tsichla et al., 2021; Khan & Fatmah, 2017; Jones et al. 2012; Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000; Grossman & Wood, 1993; Sirgey, 1982) This paper examines the impact of brand clues on self-identification and social-identification, and whether or not gender moderates this relationship. The findings suggest that brand clues significantly influence self-identification and social-identification; gender significantly moderates these direct relationships. These results are consistent with previous studies (Tsichla et al., 2021; Khan & Fatmah, 2017; Jones et al., 2012; Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000; Grossman & Wood, 1993). In other words, females can identify themselves solely and socially when they reflect the aesthetic elements in their fashionable styles (Khan & Fatmah, 2017; Jones et al., 2012; Grossman & Wood, 1993). Males can identify themselves individually and collectively when expressing comfort, ease of use, or long-lasting fabrics (Tsichla et al., 2021; Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000).

The findings of this study indicate that gender significantly moderates the relationship between brand clues and both self-identification and social-identification, consistent with previous research (Tsichla et al., 2021; Khan & Fatmah, 2017; Jones et al., 2012; Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000; Grossman & Wood, 1993). Specifically, males exhibit a stronger association between brand clues and identification processes compared to females. This finding reflects males' greater reliance on symbolic brand clues to define their self-image and social identity. Males are more prone to value practicality and functionality, which are often signaled by brand elements such as logos, slogans, mascots, labels, and packaging (Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000). These symbolic clues align closely with males' preferences for utility and practicality (Bakış & Kitapçı, 2023), reinforcing their sense of self-identity. Moreover, men may view these brand cues as tools for enhancing social status or belonging to a specific community. For example, brands like Nike use symbolic elements to promote athleticism and excitement, which resonate strongly with males' aspirations for competence, power, and achievement. Additionally, societal and cultural norms may amplify the importance of these cues by encouraging men to display career success or life accomplishments through their clothing choices. Furthermore,

males' focus-oriented cognitive processing (Radecki & Jaccard, 1996) drives them toward fashion items that directly and explicitly reflect their goals, making brand clues a crucial factor in their identification processes.

Conversely, the weaker influence of brand clues on females' self-identification and social-identification can be attributed to their broader focus on emotional, relational, and aesthetic considerations beyond surface-level brand cues (Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000). Female consumers often prioritize elements such as sustainability, eco-friendliness, and cruelty-free clothing, which align with deeper cultural, psychological, and contextual factors. For example, the Fashion Commission of Saudi Arabia emphasizes key areas like sustainability, cultural traditions, and invention (Fashion Commission, 2023), which reflect broader societal and emotional values. Female consumers in Saudi Arabia are particularly attuned to these dimensions, deriving a significant portion of their self and social identities from a brand's alignment with ethical production, environmental responsibility, and cultural representation. This value-driven approach reduces the direct impact of symbolic brand clues while highlighting the importance of deeper brand commitments. Moreover, practical factors such as ease of use on websites or applications, user experience, and privacy considerations may further influence females' identification processes (Hymavathi & Vashi, 2018). These factors and a holistic approach to fashion consumption suggest that females prioritize emotional resonance and broader societal alignment over functional or symbolic brand elements. In addition, symbolic clues that emphasize environmentally friendly, sustainable, or trend-setting clothing play a pivotal role in shaping females' emotional and aesthetic preferences (Bakış & Kitapçı, 2023). When aligned with females ' psychological needs, these clues can create strong emotional connections, reinforcing their identification with brands that reflect ethical and aesthetic values.

Finally, tailoring brand strategies to males' and females' distinct psychological and social tendencies is essential for maximizing engagement. For males, brands should emphasize functional, goal-oriented, and symbolic cues reinforcing competence, strength, and practicality. For females, brands should prioritize emotional and aesthetic factors while aligning with broader societal values such as sustainability and cultural representation. By addressing these gender-specific preferences, brands can effectively enhance both self-identification and social-identification, driving stronger relationships with their target audiences.

5. Implications

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the SCT by exploring how gender moderates the impact of brand-related clues on consumers' self-identification and social identification. SCT traditionally emphasizes the alignment between a consumer's self-concept and the symbolic meaning of a brand as a driver of consumer behavior. Our findings extend this theoretical framework in significant ways. First, this paper expands SCT to enlighten the literature on the role of gender moderation. Since SCT focuses on the ideal-self and social-self, this research indicates the the moderation role of gender in the relationship of brand clues, self-identification, and social

identification. The findings of this paper reveal that gender acts as a moderator in the relationship of the variables. Males and females proved that they respond differently to the brand clues in the fashion market. While the emotional clues drive females, males are attracted to the functional clues (Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000; Grossman & Wood, 1993). Second, there is a major distinction between self-identification and social-identification when the antecedent variable is brand clues moderated by gender. Previous research has shown that this distinction is indirectly mediated by another variable, such as brand experience (Khan & Fatma, 2017; Jones, Runyan, & Kim, 2012). Self-identification is mainly evident in male consumers if the fashionable item is functional. At the same time, social-identification is more evident in female consumers if the fashionable item is emotional in Saudi Arabia. Finally, SCT states that congruity between self-concept and brand image inherently leads to positive consumer behaviors (Sirgy, 1982). However, this study demonstrates that gender nuances may moderate this mechanism in certain contexts.

5.2 Practical Implications

This study offers several managerial implications to guide marketers and decision-makers in effectively targeting different genders. First, managers should develop brand strategies that distinguish between male and female when interacting with brand clues. Although males and females are different in their self-image and social-image, they are more spontaneous reflecting their ideal-self and social-self in exceptional ways (Tsichla et al., 2021; Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000). Second, marketing campaigns should be targeted to align with gender-specific angles. For instance, campaigns targeting males can emphasize functional and objective benefits that help men reflect their ideal-self and social-self. For instance, highlighting features such as the materials comfort, ease of care, or skin-friendly materials can appeal to male consumers' practical inclinations (Fisher & Dube, 2005; Eagly et al., 2000). Conversely, campaigns targeted toward women can focus on emotional factors aligning with their aesthetics and sustainability preferences. Promoting features such as cruelty-free clothing, environmentally friendly production, and attractive, fashionable designs can enhance emotional connections with women. Moreover, brands can exploit more effective messaging by addressing the psychological preferences of each gender: functional and practical signals for males and emotionally resonant signals for females. These targeted techniques can optimize customers' identification with the brand and foster a stronger sense of belonging within their social groups. This paper may use inspiring Consumer-Generated Content (CGC) to attract females' social-identification demand and highlight individuality in delivering the brands' signals to enhance males' self-identification (Senanu, Anning-Dorson, & Tackie, 2023). Lastly, decision-makers in future major events, such as the 2027 AFC Asian Cup, 2034 FIFA World Cup, and 2030 Expo Saudi Arabia, can benefit from this paper by assisting both males and females to increase their self-image and social-image under the umbrella of Saudi vision focused on sustainability cultural traditions, and invention (Fashion Commission, 2023).

6. Limitations and Future Research

This research is subject to several limitations. First, it is geographically restricted to a specific location within Saudi Arabia, which may limit the generalizability of its findings. Future research could expand the scope to include other regions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Middle Eastern countries, providing a broader understanding of the phenomena studied. Second, the conceptual model employed in this study is relatively simple and does not incorporate key variables directly related to customer behavior, such as customer satisfaction, brand attitude, or purchase behavior. Future research could enrich the model by integrating these variables to provide a more comprehensive analysis. Third, this study exclusively employs a quantitative approach, which, while valuable, may not fully capture the depth of participants' self and social-identification. Future researchers could complement this approach with qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain richer and more nuanced insights. Fourth, the descriptive statistics reveal a sample predominantly skewed toward females, which may introduce biasness due to the overrepresentation of feminine perspectives. Future studies could address this limitation by ensuring a more balanced sample that includes a higher proportion of male participants, thereby capturing masculine perspectives more effectively. Fifth, the findings of this paper may become outdated due to the rapid societal changes taking place. Future studies could adopt more adaptive and sustainable approaches to ensure the results remain relevant and applicable. Finally, the gender-based perceptions explored in this study may introduce bias in responses, particularly given the focus on self-identification and social-identification. Future research could integrate insights from the Twitter Trend Tool (3Ts) that can provide a practical methodology for exploring how brand clues interact with gender dynamics to influence self-identification and social-identification (Rudniy, Rudna, & Park, 2024).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study advances our understanding of the relationship between brand clues, self-identification, and social-identification, emphasizing gender moderation. The study used SCT and signaling theory to highlight that brand clues such as symbolic elements, emotional and functional words, and visual clues significantly impact individuals' identification with themselves and socially. The results demonstrate that gender plays a vital role in moderating these dynamics, with males showing stronger clues to define their identity while females prioritize emotional, ethical, and aesthetic considerations.

Acknowledgments

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