HOW BRAND AUTHENTICITY SHAPES CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS: EVIDENCE FROM ONLINE CLOTHING BUYERS IN EMERGING MARKETS

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Abstract

In online clothing selling, there is usually doubt on the consumers side as they can not physically test the product and therefore brand related signals are crucial in influencing the brand perceptions. The brand authenticity has become a key determinant of consumer judgments, and little evidence has been done to identify how it can help brand image depending on value-based processes within emerging markets. This research was based on the Signaling Theory and the Social Exchange Theory and examined the direct influence of brand authenticity on brand image and the mediating functions of functional perceived value and social perceived value between online clothing consumers in Pakistan. It was a quantitative survey, with a cross-section as it was carried out at a specific point in time and involved 312 valid responses of consumers who had an online experience of purchasing apparel recently. A median data analysis based on regression was conducted with Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 4) and 5000 bootstrap resamples (Model 5) in the evaluation of mediations. The findings reveal that brand image is greatly positively influenced by brand authenticity. In addition, both functional and social perceived values partially mediate this relationship indicating that authenticity improves brand image by raising the perceived utilitarian and symbolic benefits. The findings contribute to the theoretical knowledge of a brand image about brand authenticity in e-commerce and managerial messages of online apparel companies to enhance a brand image through the use of authenticity-based approaches.

INTRODUCTION

The fast emergence of online shopping has had a fundamental change on consumer buying behaviour in any industry, and the apparel industry has been the major affected by its high levels of information asymmetry and experience uncertainties (Zafar et al., 2025). Online shoppers do not have time to touch online clothes physically and this increases the perceived risk and increases the levels of dependence on cues that communicate the quality of the product and brand credibility. These cues have also included brand authenticity which will be defined as perceived genuineness, honesty and consistency of the actions and communications of a brand as a key limiting determinant of consumer evaluations in the digital marketplaces.

Authenticity, in its turn, contributes to lessening uncertainty by conveying the essentials of a brand in terms of its values and its product features, which leads to a high level of consumer trust (Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Zafar et al., 2025).

Although having conceded importance, comparatively limited empirical studies have been conducted to describe how brand authenticity is converted to a favourable brand image in terms of internet apparel retailing practices, in particular involving value-based processes. Brand image is the sum of the associations and perceptions over a brand by the customers or consumers, and it has a powerful impact on smattering and acquiring loyalty, word of mouth and adoption requests. Previous research in the related field revealed that authenticity has a positive impact on consumer attitudes in the form of brand love, trust, and perceived quality (Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Zafar et al., 2025). Nonetheless, there is limited research on how authenticity is used to influence brand image, and this is especially so in the emerging markets where online shopping of clothing is gaining traction and consumer trust issues have not yet been solved entirely.

Hypothetically, this paper incorporates the Signaling Theory and the Social Exchange Theory in explicating how authenticity enhances brand image by means of consumer considerations of worth. The Signaling Theory is based on the idea that in online settings the information about a direct product is unavailable and brands need to make use of observable signals such as authenticity as a means of communicating the unobservable quality information and mitigating information asymmetry. Veritable signals enhance the assurance among consumers in brand products, consequently defining the downstream brand analysis. This view is augmented by social Exchange Theory, which holds that consumers consider brands in terms of costs-benefits with positive results (e.g., functional benefits, social recognition) generating a positive perceived-value and prompting positive reciprocal rewarding responses (e.g., favourable brand image).

There are two critical value perceptions which are considered as mediators in this study; functional perceived value and social perceived value. Functional perceived value The functional perceived value is the measure which is based on practical benefits to the consumer like durability of the product, the quality of product and the performance. Social perceived value is the level of value the brand association offers in promoting the social identity, acceptance or status of the consumer. The dimensions of values discussed are especially relevant when it comes to apparel consumption since apparel not only satisfies the functional human needs but also attends to the socio-psychological requirements connected with identity and self-presentation.

A study of these mediators in the online clothing purchaser setting in Pakistan gives a useful addition to branding literature since they are explored empirically. The Pakistani market of e-commerce is can be described by the rising numbers of digital penetration and the presence of substantial problems of trust lack, uncertainty of quality, and reliable plans. A better insight into the process by which authenticity cues translate into a positive brand image via value perceptions may provide actionable information that online retailers may use to create high brand equity in online competitive markets.

Research Problem

The rapid development of online clothes merchandising in Pakistan has heightened competition among clothing brands thus it is even more challenging to consumers to know which claims on the brands are authentic and which are dotted. As opposed to the physical retail setting, using the online platform, the clothing buyers cannot be able to assess the quality, fabric and fit of the clothes before they buy them. Consequently, consumers depend much on brand-based cues in order to make their judgment of credibility, reliability and general brand value. Brand authenticity has become one of these signals that can be critical determining the process of shaping consumer perception of the brands in digital marketplaces.

Brand authenticity is a term used when discussing the beliefs of consumers that a brand is real, trusting, stable, and faithful to the values and promises which the brand claimed to be (Morhart et al., 2015; Campagna et al., 2023). The other studies have proven that brand authenticity produces a positive impact on the main consumer metrics, including trust, loyalty, engagement, and brand attachment (Sodergren, 2021; Bartsch et al., 2022). Nevertheless, even though its significance is acknowledged, little focus has been given to the concept of brand authenticity in online apparel market, especially in the emerging markets like Pakistan by previous research.

More to the point, despite the fact that the literature does recognize that brand authenticity facilitates overall brand assessments, a lack of empirical insight exists on the processes in which authenticity modifies brand image, particularly in the form of perceptions of both functional perceived value (e.g., quality, performance and value for money), and social perceived value (e.g., social approval and identity expression). Mediating variables in the analysis of selected research have largely been performed by previous studies with trust or emotional attachment, whereas the mechanisms based on perceived value have been under-examined (Nunes et al., 2021; Safeer et al., 2023). Such a lack is especially important in the online clothing market where the perception of value takes a leading role in influencing the brand perception of a consumer when they cannot physically view the product.

Using Signaling Theory, brand authenticity can be viewed as a plausible message, which minimizes the informational asymmetry as well as doubt in the case of online shopping (Spence, 1978; Karasek and Bryant, 2012). Simultaneously, the Social Exchange Theory proposes that consumers who feel more functional and social benefits in a genuine brand as a result of the exchange react in the form of positive brand appraisals, such as enhanced brand image (Homans, 1958). Although these theoretical perspectives seem relevant, empirical studies of the direct and indirect impacts of brand authenticity on brand image based on functional and social perceived value as parallel mediating variables in the context of the online clothing industry in Pakistan are very limited.

Thus, the research issue as the main question in this research is lack of empirical and theoretical clarity in terms of how brand authenticity can directly and indirectly impact brand image through functional and social perceived value among online clothing consumers in Pakistan. The development of this gap will aid the progress of the theory of branding by augmenting authenticity studies beyond the trust-based theories, and it will offer practical suggestions to the online apparel brands utilizing emerging digital markets with extreme levels of consumer uncertainty.

The main aim of this research is to identify how brand authenticity has an impact on brand image in online clothing in Pakistan taking into account the direct impact as well as the indirect impact on brand image through functional and social perceived value. In particular, the study is expected to (1) examine the direct impact of brand authenticity and brand image in the case of online apparel brands, (2) scan the impact of functional perceived value as a mediator of the relationship between brand authenticity and brand image, and (3) determine the impact of social perceived value as a mediator of the relationship between brand authenticity and brand image.

According to these goals, the research question that will lead to the current study is: What is the impact of brand authenticity on brand image by online clothing purchasers in Pakistan? This is again subdivided into three sub questions; (1) Does brand authenticity directly influence brand image in online apparel shopping? (2) Does functional perceived value mediate brand authenticity brand image relationship and (3) Does social perceived value mediate brand authenticity brand image relationship? These objectives and questions combined should give a complete picture of the influence of authenticity on consumer attitudes and value-related results of emerging digital markets.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Brand Authenticity and Brand Image

Recent branding studies are increasingly appreciating brand authenticity as a core factor which determines the overall brands assessment by consumers especially when digital and online market place is concerned. Brand authenticity is considered to be the perceptions held by consumers that a brand is sincere, steady and authentic to its claimed values and commitments (Campagna et al., 2023). In online clothing retail business, where customers can not physically test the products before buying it, authenticity will be an essential indicator where the brands convey credibility, reliability, and honesty. Consequently, consumers have become quite dependent on authenticity signals in order to make judgments related to the quality of the brand and its trustworthiness.

The empirical findings in the studies carried out in the online retailing and fashion-related settings show that genuine brands are more predisposed to create clear, strong, and favorable brand images. By means of consumers thinking that a brand is genuine, the latter develops more beneficial reactions and excellent overall analyses since the brand can be perceived as credible, significant, and value-focused (Bartsch et al., 2022; Zafar et al., 2025). These results indicate that authenticity has a leading role in the formation of brand image, especially in the atmosphere of high uncertainty and the lack of product information.

According to the Signaling Theory, brand authenticity is a source of a credible signal which will reduce information asymmetry between a brand and a consumer (Karasek and Bryant, 2012). The online clothing brands can deliver their promises and implement open communication and proven coordination between their values and their actions, the consumers will see greater affiliation to the brand. Previous studies are in agreement with the idea that authenticity can boost brand image by increasing beliefs in purported credibility, quality, and affect (Nunes et al., 2021; Safeer et al., 2023). This is particularly applicable in the developing world like in Pakistan where the customers are normally uncertain about the quality with the inconsistent quality standards, imitations and misleading internet advertisements.

According to the discussion above, it is anticipated that brand image among online clothing buyers will increase directly with brand authenticity.

H1: Brand authenticity exerts both a positive and linear impact on brand image on online clothing consumer in Pakistan.

Brand Authenticity and Functional Perceived Value

Potential literature indicates that brand authenticity is overly important in terms of the functional perceived value by the consumers with online shopping context. Functional perceived value is the analysis of the consumers on the quality, performance, longevity and worth of the product based on money (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). Real brands are often seen as more stable and predictable, and it makes consumers feel more confident about the performance of the product and less functional uncertainty (Campagna et al., 2023).

The functional risk of consumers in the context of online clothing retailing is rather significant as they are not able to directly evaluate the quality of fabrics, quality of stitches, accuracy of sizing, and fit before making a purchase. According to the empirical studies that occurred after 2020, authenticity-related cues are honest product descriptions, consistent sizing information, clear return policies, and honest brand communication which have a significant positive impact on the perception of functional values in consumers through the minimization of uncertainty and perceived risk (Ismat and Suki, 2024; Deng et al., 2025). By having the perception that an apparel brand is legitimate, customers have increased trust in how the product will provide the desired functional value. Social Exchange Theory states that consumers appraise exchange relationships based on the comparisons between the perceived costs and the perceived benefits (Homans, 1958). Introducing

high functional value by an authentic brand is reciprocated by the consumers with a more positive brand image, as well as, a more positive brand evaluation. The effectiveness of the mediating power of functional perceived value in relaying the impact of brand-related cues to brand consequences is supported by previous empirical studies in both digital and apparel markets (Safeer et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2024).

It can be assumed, therefore, that functional perceived value should convey the brand authenticity impact on brand image.

H2: the functional perceived value mediates the association between brand authenticity and brand image among online clothing purchasers in Pakistan.

Brand Authenticity and Social Perceived Value

In the modern day research, the significance of social perceived value in the consumption of fashion and apparel is growing. The degree to which a brand builds consumer social self-concept, social status, and social acceptance of others is termed social perceived value (Nunes et al., 2021). Online clothing markets brands have functional, symbolic and identity-based functions which cause social value to be of special concern to consumers.

According to recent research, authentic brands tend to give rise to positive social value more due to the perception of being serse, moral and socially acceptable (Bartsch et al., 2022; Zafar et al., 2025). The resultant effect of consumers identifying with the authentic clothing brands is that they can have higher levels of pride, social acceptance and a feeling of identification with desirable social identities. This is even more exaggerated in the collectivist mode of culture like Pakistan where social image and peer support as well as perceptions about the society have a great impact on consumption behavior.

According to the Social Exchange Theory, consumers are likely to give this back through brand favorable consideration by determining social benefits attained through an authentic brand. A mediating effect of social perceived value is shown to exist between authenticity related constructs and brand image in the context

of online and fashion in relation to empirical evidence (Safeer et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Based herein social perceived value is likely to play an important psychological role where brand authenticity serves as a mediator in brand image.

H3: The social perceived value mediates the connection between brand authenticity and the brand image among internet apparel purchasers in Pakistan.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical model of this research shows the role of brand authenticity in linking brand image to online clothing consumers in Pakistan directly and indirectly via functional perceived value and social perceived value. The framework is a representation of the actuals of the online shopping of clothing as a consumer is not in a position to physically explore the items but must use cues that are associated with a brand to base their evaluation and judgment. The consumers usually become confused about the quality, sizing, durability and reliability when making purchases online. In this kind of scenario, brands need to be an indicator of integrity and reliability in order to diminish perceived risk. One of the mechanisms that lead to the creation of the sense of trust and beneficial brand appraisals is brand authenticity, which refers to the perceptions of consumers that a brand is real, truthful, and aligned with its values and promises (Campagna et al., 2023; Sodergren, 2021). Original brands enable consumers to draw more positive and definite perceptions which is directly connected to the better brand image.

The model is based on Signaling Theory, which assumes that brands convey the unobservable qualities in the circumstances of information asymmetry (Spence, 1978; Karasek and Bryant, 2012). Authenticity is a plausible cue that implies the existence of reliability, consistency, and sincerity and assists consumers to build the connection between brands and lower risk and greater trust (Nunes et al., 2021; Safeer et al., 2023). In addition to the direct impacts, brand authenticity has indirect impacts on brand image, namely, on perceived value, which fits well the

Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958). Functional perceived value is practical benefits which include quality, performance and value money. Authenticity decreases functional uncertainty, which indicates the stable performance of the product and improves evaluations about the brand (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001; Ismat and Suki, 2024; Deng et al., 2025). Social perceived value involves the capture of symbolic and social benefits, which include identity expression, social approval or respect. Real brands increase social value, especially in collectivist societies such as Pakistan and reinforce brand image through pride and societal

endorsement (Bartsch et al., 2022; Zafar et al., 2025; Rodrigues et al., 2024).

In this regard, the framework suggests that two mediating pathways parallel are undertaken including the functional value and the social value. Brand authenticity has a positive influence on the brand image and, at the same time, on the strengthening of perceptions of utilitarian and symbolic benefits. The combination of integrated model offers a conceptual depiction of cognitive signaling and relational exchange processes which are theoretically strong and empirically testable in connecting authenticity to positive brand perceptions regarding online apparel market.
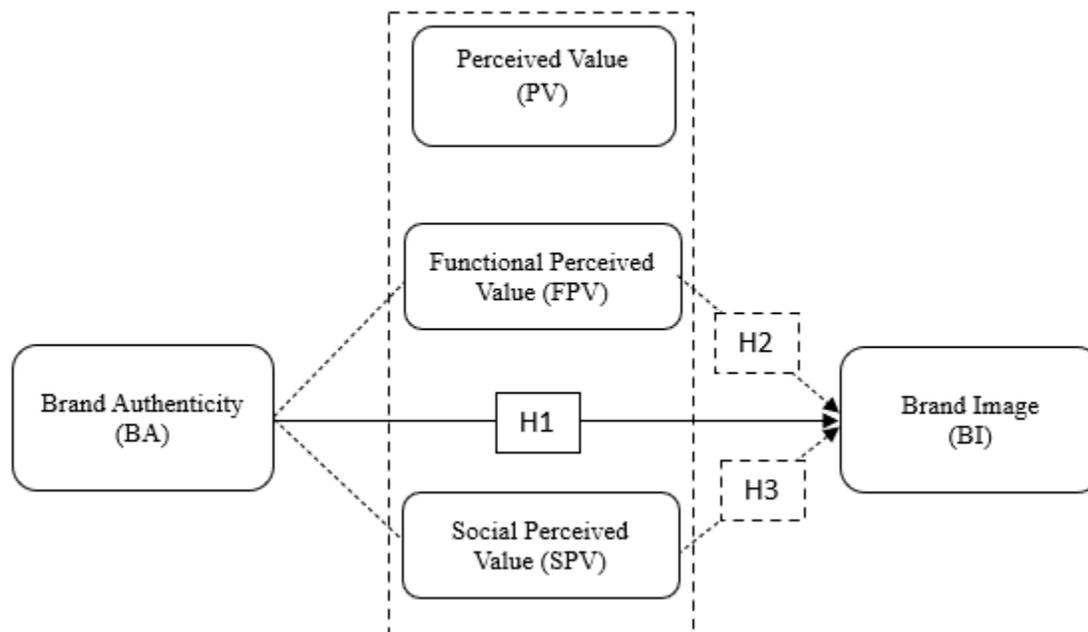

Figure 1. Research Framework

Methodology
This research assumed a quantitative-based study which was carried out in a cross-sectional survey to empirically verify the hypothesized relationships between brand authenticity, functional perceived value, social perceived value, and brand image of online apparel shopping. A quantitative design will be suitable to investigate causal relationships between latent variables since it allows objectively measuring consumer

perceptions with the help of standardized tools and testing causal relationships through a set of

statistical operations (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Moreover, the cross-sectional survey technique is frequently used in branding and consumer behavior studies because it can be used to collect data on a large group of people at one specific point in time and enables the researcher to study the actual consumer reactions with no

manipulation (Malhotra et al., 2024; Mukarram, M., Shakil, M. H., Ehsan, S., Anees, R. T., and Nordin, N. A., 2025). This shape is especially appropriate to those types of online clothing stores, where consumers are highly dependant on brand related prompts since they are unable to physically appraise products before making a purchase. The target consumers were Pakistani people who had experience in online shopping of clothes. To make responses relevant, the participants needed to have used online apparel at least once within the last six months using online shops, including brand websites, e-commerce marketplaces, or stores with the help of social media. To have variety in terms of demography and online shopping behavior of the respondents, data were gathered in Lahore and Islamabad cities of Pakistan. The number of obtained valid responses is 312, which is higher than the recommended minimum informative sample size to conduct a mediation analysis and regression-based modeling to ensure sufficient weight and dependability of evidence (Hair et al., 2022). There was a non-probability convenience sample method used in the study because of the constraint of time and accessibility where a non-probability convenience sampling method is usually applied in consumer research where the sample must hold specific experiential criteria (e.g., must have prior exposure to online shopping, etc.) (Etikan, 2024). They were collected using an online survey in the form of a structured self-administered questionnaire sent using social internet networks and email. This was done by assuring the respondents of confidentiality and anonymity, and their participation was voluntary to minimize the bias of responses and encourage honest reporting.

Measurement Scales

The questionnaires also contained demographic questions and the scales of measurement derived out of existing sources. The brand authenticity was measured with 6-item Morhart et al. (2015) measure, as functional perceived value with 5-item PERVAL measure by Sweeney and Soutar (2001), and social perceived value with 5-item altered Morhart et al. (2015), and Netemeyer et

al. (1992) measures. The brand image was also overwhelmed through five items which were modified in accordance with Keller (1993) and Low and Lamb (2000) quantifications. Prejudices against all constructs were judged based on a five-point Likert scale and slight adjustments in context were done according to suggested scale adaptation protocols (Hair et al., 2022).

Data Analysis Procedure

All l the statistical analyses were undertaken in SPSS. The dataset was well filtered on the issue of missing values, and outliers and normality issues to maintain quality data and accuracy of results before hypothesis testing. There were quantitative data preparation rules that are recommended by this screening procedure (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). The descriptive statistics were calculated to represent the respondent demographic traits as well as to illustrate the distribution of the study variables.

To determine the reliability of the measurement scales, Cronbach alpha was used, with a greater value of more than 0.70 termed as being acceptable, and thus, demonstrated moderate internal consistency of the scale between the items (Hair et al., 2022). Construct validity of the instrument was also supported by the use of the previous study established and validated measurement scales.

The hypothesis put forward was tested through the use of regression. Particularly, mediation analysis has been conducted with the macro Model 4 of Hayes, which is referred to as PROCESS in the SPSS. The use of PROCESS in mediation testing is generally highly recommended due to its ability to give strong estimates of the indirect effects, as well as not depending on the assumption of normality (Hayes, 2022). A bootstrapping method of 5000 resamples was used to come up with bias adjusted confidence intervals of the indirect effects. The mediation effects were considered statistically significant when the 95 percent confidence interval was outside the zero (Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

A test to be performed to determine the hypothesis involved talking about the direct

relationship between brand authenticity and brand image (H1), the indirect relationship between the brand authenticity and functional perceived value and social perceived value (H2 and H3). The significance of these relationships was assessed with the help of regression coefficients, standard errors and bootstrapped confidence intervals. In general, the analysis process provided rigor and reliability of the findings.

Data Screening and Descriptive Statistics

To validate the quality of data, the dataset has been filtered in terms of data missing, outliers as well as the normality before carrying out the actual analysis. These 320 questionnaires were collected and 312 of those who responded validly were taken to further analysis. The Mahalanobis distance was used to evaluate multivariate outliers and the level of severity of the detected outliers was not found to be severe (p <.001). Moreover, the values of skewness and kurtosis of all measurement items were between 1.21 and 1.18, which have good normality and indicate the appropriateness of the data to be used in the analysis based on regression (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019).

According to the available descriptive statistics (Table 1.0), the sample was demographically varied and in accordance with the intended online apparel consumer target in Pakistan. The gender distribution was comparatively equal, 51.9 /48.1 females and males respectively. The majority of the respondents were aged 18 to 35 years (82.7%), as the age group is mostly involved in online shopping. Education wise, 51.3 were undergraduate holders and 38.4 were postgraduate graduates. The outcome of income results suggests that 64.1 earned PKR 30,000 to 80,000 a month. Lastly, the majority of respondents (67.9) stated that they have purchased online clothes 2-5 times in the last six months, which attests to the active online buyers.

Table 1.0: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 312)			
Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	150	48.1
	Female	162	51.9
Age (years)	18–25	140	44.9
	26–35	118	37.8
	36–45	54	17.3
Education Level	High School	32	10.3
	Undergraduate	160	51.3
	Postgraduate	120	38.4
Monthly Income (PKR)	<30,000	68	21.8
	30,000–50,000	112	35.9
	50,001–80,000	88	28.2
	>80,000	44	14.1
Online Shopping Frequency (past 6 months)	1	58	18.6
	2–5	212	67.9
	>5	42	13.5

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Cronbachs Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) were used to determine the internal consistency of the constructs. Factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used to

test convergent validity. Table 2.0 provides the results.

Table 2.0: Reliability and Convergent Validity					
Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Brand Authenticity (BA)	6	0.71–0.88	0.91	0.93	0.63
Functional Perceived Value (FPV)	5	0.72–0.89	0.89	0.91	0.61
Social Perceived Value (SPV)	5	0.70–0.87	0.88	0.90	0.59
Brand Image (BI)	5	0.73–0.90	0.92	0.94	0.66

Table 2.0 shows the reliability and convergent validity scores of all constructs of the study such as Brand Authenticity (BA), Functional Perceived Value (FPV), Social Perceived Value (SPV) and Brand Image (BI). In summation, the measurement model possesses a high level of psychometric quality since all constructs surpassed Cronbach alpha (> 0.70), Composite Reliability (CR > 0.70), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.50) which ensures a strongly significant internal consistency and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2022). In particular, the results showed 0.70 to 0.90 as a range of item factor loadings, which meant that all indicators had considerable relationships with the constructs to which they belonged and had their own significant contributions to measurement accuracy. Cronbach alpha values which were equal to 0.88 to 0.92 also indicated that there is high internal consistency among scale items supporting reliability (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). In a similar way, the CR values of 0.90 to 0.94 provided the constructs with stability and reliability. AVE values of between 0.59 and 0.66 were also used to show convergent validity and indicate that each construct was explaining its indicators by more than 50 percent (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Taken together, the findings indicate that measurement scales prove to be reliable and suitable in further testing of the hypothesis and mediation analysis.

Discriminant Validity
Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio were used in measuring the discriminant validity.

Table 3.0: Fornell-Larcker Criterion				
Construct	BA	FPV	SPV	BI
BA	0.79			
FPV	0.58	0.78		
SPV	0.54	0.61	0.77	
BI	0.62	0.66	0.63	0.81

The evaluation of discriminant validity was made to make sure that every construct within the measurement model is empirically different compared to other constructs. Both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), which are popular methods in modern

measurement validation studies, were used to determine the discriminant validity in this study (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015). As indicated in Table 3.0, the diagonal coefficients of AVE of each of the constructs (BA = 0.79, FPV = 0.78, SPV = 0.77, BI = 0.81) are larger than the inter-construct coefficients of AVE. This shows that the individual constructs are more varied with their own indicators than with the others hence meets the FornellLarcker requirement (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Inter-construct and Discriminant The square roots of AVE are larger than inter-construct correlations and all of the HTMT values are lower than 0.85, which proves the discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 4.0: HTMT Ratio				
Constructs	BA	FPV	SPV	BI
BA	—	0.72	0.68	0.74
FPV	0.72	—	0.70	0.76
SPV	0.68	0.70	—	0.73
BI	0.74	0.76	0.73	—

Moreover, the tables also show the results of the HTMT, with all the values less than the recommended range (0.85), and still below the scores, which additionally proves that the constructs are discriminant in nature in the model (Henseler et al., 2015). Taken as a group, these results suggest that the measurement model could be considered to have reached criteria of estimated discriminant validity, which means that Brand Authenticity, Functional perceptions of value, Social perceptions of value and Brand Image are conceptually and statistically independent constructs that are used in future to test hypotheses and mediate.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations
Table 5.0 presents means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among the study variables.

Table 5.0: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations						
Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Brand Authenticity (BA)	4.12	0.64	1			
2. Functional PV (FPV)	3.98	0.68	0.58**	1		
3. Social PV (SPV)	3.91	0.70	0.54**	0.61**	1	
4. Brand Image (BI)	4.05	0.66	0.62**	0.66**	0.63**	1

Note: p < .01.

The correlations were all significant and positive as was expected in the theoretical expectations of the study. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 5.0 in the form of means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients between the major aspects of the study including Brand Authenticity (BA), Functional Perceived Value (FPV), Social Perceived Value (SPV), and Brand Image (BI). The average scores were between 3.91-4.12, which implied that the respondents on average gave high ratings on authenticity perceptions, perceived value, and brand image ratings scores. In particular, Brand Authenticity was the most popular with the highest mean (M = 4.12, SD = 0.64), then Brand Image came next with a mean of (M = 4.05, SD = 0.66), which implies that the perception of the brand as relatively authentic occurs among online Pakistani customers of apparel brands as well as brand image perceptions are also positive. The analysis correlation showed that all constructs had significant and positive correlation at the 0.01 level. Brand Authenticity showed positive significant correlations with Functional Perceived

Value (r = 0.58 p =.01), Social Perceived Value (r = 0.54 p =.01), and Brand Image (r = 0.62 p =.01). Equally, the correlation between Brand Image and Functional Perceived Value (r = 0.66, p < .01) as well as the Social Perceived Value (r = 0.63, p < .01) was positive. The findings show that increased authenticity perceptions are linked to increased functional and social value perceptions in addition to a more desirable brand image. These results align well with branding research dwellings upon specifically that true brands lessen doubt and accelerate consumer credibility, thus, enhancing brand assessments and considerations of advantages (Ilicic and Webster, 2016; Morhart et al., 2015). In addition, the strong correlations substantiate the theoretical propositions based on Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory, which state that authenticity acts as a plausible signal of the market and enhances perceived value evaluations in consumers in the online setting (Spence, 1973; Yang et al., 2023).

Direct Effect Analysis (Hypothesis 1)

Regression analysis was conducted to test H1: Brand authenticity → Brand image.

Table 6.0: Direct Effect Regression						
Predictor	Outcome	β	SE	t	p	R²
BA	BI	0.42	0.05	8.40	<.001	0.38

As expected, brand authenticity was a strong predictor of brand image (b = 0.42, p = less, H1 does hold). The model explained successful brand image in 38 percent. In order to test Hypothesis 1 (H1) regression analysis was used to determine the direct implications of Brand Authenticity on Brand Image. These findings were presented in Table 4.6 and supported the presence of a significant H1 as Brand Authenticity was a potent predictor of Brand Image (b = 0.42, SE = 0.05, t = 8.40, p <.001). Brand Image was explained with a significant amount of fluctuation as 38 percent of the variance was determined using the model (R2 = 0.38). This result supports the previous studies, which state that authenticity can positively influence brand image by evoking consumer trust, perceived credibility, and emotional attachment especially in online markets, where there is no physical product evaluation availability (Napoli et al., 2016; Shen and Kim, 2024). All in all, descriptive and regression findings give a green light to the initial empirical validation of the proposed conceptual framework and the need to conduct functional and social perceived value functional mediation analysis.

Mediation Analysis (Hypotheses 2 & 3)

High multi-to-one parallel mediations between the independent and dependent variables were examined by means of the Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. We should use bootstrapping to test mediation since there is no assumption of normality of indirect effects and the estimates of the confidence interval are more robust (Hayes, 2022; Preacher and Hayes, 2008). The mediation model explored the validity of brand authenticity as the indirect boosters of brand image with the intention of the consumer perceiving functional and social value.

Table 7.0 results suggest that brand authenticity was a strong predictor of functional perceived value (b = 0.58, p <. 001) and accounted for 34 percent of the variance (R2 = 0.34). What this implies is that consumers holding the perception of an online apparel brand as such are better placed to think that the brand has got the better utilitarian advantages e.g. quality, reliability and performance. The research implicates this with Signaling Theory that suggests that authenticity presents a reputation of truthfulness and minimizes uncertainty as well as boosts consumer trust in the advantages of product purchases (Spence, 1973; Shen and Kim, 2024). Equally, brand authenticity was a well-predicted social perceived value (b = 0.54, p <.001), which explained the 29% of its variance (R2 = 0.29). It means that the authentic brands are seen as socially desirable as well, and consumers can

obtain social approval and prestige and express their identities through brand association, in accordance with the studies that highlighted

authenticity as a symbolic brand resource to consumer identity formation (Morhart et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2023).

Table 7.0: Path Analysis (IV → Mediators)						
Predictor	Mediator	β	SE	t	p	R²
BA	FPV	0.58	0.05	11.60	<.001	0.34
BA	SPV	0.54	0.05	10.80	<.001	0.29

Moreover, the findings indicate that the two mediators were great predictors of brand image. The functional perceived value exerted a positive influence on brand image (b = 0.36, p <.001), and the social perceived value also exerted a positive influence on brand image (b =0.32, p < .001). These results suggest that consumers acquire positive brand image perceptions where consumers believe that good functional utility and social benefits are offered by the brand. This justifies Social Exchange Theory that implies

consumers compare the brands concerning rewards and benefits they obtain in the process of their participation and loyalty (Blau, 1964). Notably, the direct impact of brand authenticity on brand image was still important (b = 0.24, p < .001), which means that the brand image is directly and indirectly affected by the value perceptions of authenticity. This trend proves the existence of partial mediation, i.e., that perceived value explains the authenticity-brand image connection but not all of it (Hayes, 2022).

Mediators → Outcome (DV)

Table 8.0: Mediators (Outcome → DV)					
Mediator	Outcome	β	SE	t	p
FPV	BI	0.36	0.06	6.00	<.001
SPV	BI	0.32	0.06	5.33	<.001
BA	BI (direct effect)	0.24	0.05	4.80	<.001

The brand image was significantly predicted by both the mediators and the direct effect of brand authenticity was significant showing that it was partially mediated.

Bootstrapped Indirect Effects

Table 9.0: Bootstrapped Indirect Effects				
Indirect Path	Effect	Boot SE	95% CI	Result
BA → FPV → BI	0.21	0.04	0.14, 0.30	Significant
BA → SPV → BI	0.17	0.04	0.10, 0.26	Significant
Total Indirect	0.38	0.05	0.29, 0.48	Significant

Brand image and brand authenticity had a strong relationship that was mediated by functional and social perceived values. Given that the direct effect was also noteworthy, they supported partial mediation (Hayes, 2022). The mediation results are further proved by the bootstrapped indirect effects provided in Table 9.0. Indirect impact through functional perceived value (BA - FPV - BI) was found to be significant (effect = 0.21) with significant confidence interval that does not contain 0 (0.14, 0.30). Similarly, the existence of

the indirect effect via social perceived value (BA - SPV - BI) was also important (effect = 0.17), it has a confidence range of (0.10, 0.26). It is because the mediation effects are supported as the results of both confidence intervals do not contain 0. The combined indirect impact (0.38) was also considerable to verify that both functional and social perceived value have a critical role to play in mediating the effect of brand authenticity on the brand image. On the whole, these results support the claim that authenticity boosts brand

image by increasing consumer perception about the utilitarian performance and symbolic-social benefits, especially in the online apparel markets

where the level of uncertainty and risk is elevated (Napoli et al., 2016; Shen and Kim, 2024).

Table 10.0: Hypotheses Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	BA → BI	Supported
H2	BA → FPV → BI	Supported (partial mediation)
H3	BA → SPV → BI	Supported (partial mediation)

The results show that brand authenticity has a very strong, positive, direct influence on brand image and therefore the functional and social perceived values have vital mediation measures to this kind of relationship, which indicates that the argument that brand authenticity and brand image are parallel is right. The constructs have all satisfied the reliability and validity views, which illustrates empirical evidence of the theoretical framework and indicates that authenticity improves brand image because it makes the brand appear to have higher functional and social value perceptions.

Discussion

The results of this research are highly empirical to support the framework which explains the relationship between brand authenticity and brand image that improves online apparel market in Pakistan using value-based processes. The descriptive statistics suggest that the respondents in general had an authentic perception of the preferences to the offered online apparel brands and also viewed their brand image positively, which was evidence of the increasing significance of authenticity signals in the digital retailing space. The analysis of correlation showed that brand authenticity had significant and positive correlation with both functional perceived value and social perceived value alongside brand image. These findings are consistent with the branding literatures which indicate that authenticity is a strategic cue, which decreases uncertainty and enhances consumer ratings within the online buying state of affairs (Shen and Kim, 2024). As the regression analysis showed, brand authenticity has a very strong positive direct impact on brand image (b = 0.42, p < .001), and its impact is even in the explanation of a

significant share of brand image (R2 = 0.38). This observation directly adds to the Signaling Theory that estimates credible brands indications like authenticity enhance consumer judgment since they reduce information lapses in online strategies (Spence, 1973). Authenticity cues can be trusted to be the measure of quality, integrity, and consistency when consumers are unable to personally examine products, which will result in more favorable brand perceptions and improved brand image (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2016).

Also, there are significant associations between the dimensions of the authenticity and perceived value, which demonstrate the effectiveness of the Social Exchange Theory since consumers are likely to consider brands in terms of attaining the functional advantages, as well as the social advantages connected with associating with the brand (Blau, 1964). Functional value is perceived utility and performance and social value is the benefits of symbolism and social approval. In online fashion shopping, where identity expression and social presence are also valued as the aspect, authenticity will potentially enhance perceptions of value and consequently provide a positive brand image (Yang et al., 2023). On the whole, these findings indicate that the more authentic a brand is seen to be, the more it can be regarded as credible and worthwhile, and thus improve its positioning in the market. The article builds on the existing literature by establishing confirming that the authenticity based brand image formation is especially pertinent in a relatively new market such as Pakistan where online retailing supplemented by rising consumer reliance on intangible brand indicators.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research provides valuable theoretical implications to the online clothing retailing brands and consumer behavior literature, especially in the new markets. To begin with, the results expand brand authenticity theory by establishing the fact that the brand authenticity contributes substantially to brand image in the virtual space. Even though, the concept of authenticity has been established as a desirable brand resource, insufficient studies have been conducted to investigate how these concepts influence brand image in rising economies. The prevailing connection emphasizes the role of authenticity as a crucial intangible asset which reinforces consumer considerations in the context of uncertainty in the online world (Morhart et al., 2015; Shen and Kim, 2024).

Second, the research reinforces Signaling Theory by demonstrating how brand authenticity acts as a plausible communication that eliminates the information asymmetry in the online shopping, where people cannot evaluate the quality of the products physically. Verisimilitude signals hence enhance reliability and further brand image apprehensions (Spence, 1973; Yang et al., 2023).

Third, the findings add to Social Exchange Theory, by establishing that functional and social perceived value intermediates the brand authenticity and brand image connection, which underlie positive brand outcomes as a result of utilitarian and symbolic benefits (Blau, 1964; Hayes, 2022).

The findings provide good managerial values to online clothing brands in Pakistan and other emerging economies. Authenticity should also be a priority of brand managers: they need to create and convey authenticity by using transparent storytelling, filling their supply chain with good ethics, and reinforcing their brand message to enhance brand image (Napoli et al., 2016; Shen and Kim, 2024). Further, businesses need to make sure that the actual performance of the product is followed with the authenticity through enhancing the product quality, proper size, proper description, and strong product delivery. Lastly, marketers need to create social perceived value through influencer marketing, user-generated content, and community campaigns that makes the symbolic identity and social approval stronger. Depending on the credibility of digital communication as a mean of acquisition, the introduction of authenticity would thus develop the trust, perceived value and competitiveness of the brand in the long term.

Conclusion

This paper conducted research on the effect of brand authenticity on brand image in Pakistani online apparel buyers with particular reference to the mediating effects of the functional perceived value and social perceived value. The findings are a good indication of strong positive effects of brand authenticity on brand image. Also, as the results reveal, authenticity complements brand image by going through parallel value-added channels because consumers view authentic brands to provide them with more functional utility and stronger social advantages. The above results contribute to a better understanding of the importance of authenticity as a strategic brand cue that minimizes the uncertainty and improves consumer analysis in e-commerce. On the whole, the research is relevant to the body of branding theory, and offers practical guidance to managers aiming to reinforce brand image and consumer attitude to brand in new online clothing markets.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Nevertheless, this study has a range of limitations that can be used in future research despite providing contributions. First, the research design was a cross-sectional research design limiting the power to make causal conclusions. Longitudinal designs can be used in future research to understand the changes in perceptions of authenticity and brand image over time, especially when customers have acquired repeated online purchasing experiences (Hair et al., 2022). Second, the convenience sampling strategy was used to obtain the data, and the results might not be generalized. Future study should look into method of probability sampling or large-scale sampling frames in other regions and sub-socio-economic groups to enhance

external validity. Third, the consumers in this case study were in Pakistan which is an emerging market with distinct cultural and economic environments. Future studies may reproduce the model across other developing economies or make cross-country comparative studies that can be used to investigate cultural variations in validity perception and brand image development (Steenkamp, 2020). Fourth, the research explored only two intermediate variables, namely functional and social perceived value. Subsequent studies may add to this framework by incorporating other mediators like brand trust, brand love, customer engagement, or perceived risk which are becoming known as extremely important variables in online branding and consumer decision-making (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023).

Lastly, any subsequent studies can consider how other influential factors like consumer skepticism, digital literacy, or level of involvement can be moderating variables to determine when authenticity produces stronger or weaker effects. These extensions would give a better insight into authenticity-based branding in online markets.

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