The Effect of Brand Social Power Dimensions on Purchasing Decision
Based on Iranian Customers’ Subjective Readiness

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect of brand social power dimensions on purchasing decisions based on Iranian customers’ subjective readiness. A total of 382 questionnaires were distributed to university students. Brand social power, the independent variable, was measured on coercive, reward, legitimate, referent and expert dimensions. Purchasing decision, the dependent variable, was measured using three items: attitude toward the brand, purchase intention and brand familiarity. Customers’ subjective readiness was the moderator variable. Structural equation modeling based on partial least squares was used for data analysis and to test the hypotheses. Brand social power knowledge can be used to distinguish a brand from its competitors. In addition, customers’ level of subjective readiness is also an important factor in how brand social power influences attitudes, feelings and reasoning of customers in relation to purchasing a brand. It can also help brand managers to select positioning strategies in target markets. This is a relatively new issue that remains largely unaddressed by researchers. This paper helps to emphasize its importance and implications for market segmentation, branding and advertising messages.

Key words: Brand Social Power • Customers Subjective Readiness Levels • Purchasing Decision

INTRODUCTION

Perceived power has frequently been examined as a central construct for understanding human nature in general [1-3] and buyer behavior in particular [4-6]. Research in social psychology defines power as “the ability to evoke change in another’s behavior” [5]. Power is a multidimensional construct that may be acquired through legitimacy, rewards, coercion, reference, or expertise [3]. In marketing, researchers have documented power as a determinant of satisfaction in franchise dealings [5, 7], an antecedent to conflict among channel members [8], a distinguishing factor in relationships between sales managers and personnel [4, 9, 10] and an important creative element in advertising [6, 11]. Interestingly, the “power of the brand” has been extolled in numerous marketing publications [12-17] and there is limited behavioral evidence suggesting that brands exert power by influencing purchasing decisions [12, 13] and consumers’ willingness to pay a price premium [12].

These studies in channels, sales and advertising constitute meaningful empirical explorations of the effects of power in marketing; however, the role of power as it relates to branding remains uncharted territory. Is it possible that brands possess the power to influence these and other aspects of consumer behavior? Perhaps they do so not in a literal sense but rather in an attributional manner, as when individuals ascribe power—among other characteristics and associations—to brands based on their consumer-brand relationships. Might brands derive power from different bases that they exercise over consumers, just as individuals influence others by drawing upon different sources of power? Could these bases of power be leveraged as points of differentiation in brand positioning strategies? For these and other questions, this paper attempts to replace speculation about these issues with theory and data, fusing the branding literature with social influence theory to define brand social power and formulate a typology of brand social power.

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The value of a brand is associated with a specific mindset and perception of its use. For example, myocardial infarction could be a reason for purchasing a drug [12]. Brand image is a set of brand associations organized in a customer’s mind in a meaningful way [19]. Brand association is any favorable feature of brand helping to form an image of it [20] or anything is evoked by a brand [21]. Brand association communicates both concept and product meaning. In this research, brand social power is considered as the perception that customers have about brand specifications in purchasing decisions. Adapting French and Raven’s [3] typology of social influence, five bases of brand social power are developed that correspond to their original bases of power: legitimate brand social power, reward brand social power, coercive brand social power, expert brand social power and referent brand social power.

The presence of disturbance in markets and competition for customers and the influence on their purchasing decision process have drawn attention to the fact that exploration of consumers’ needs, behavior and prioritizing factors affecting this process are among the major tasks of marketers. Firms can survive only if they have the ability to meet the needs and requirements of customers by obtaining comprehensive and correct knowledge of them [22] and if they use special marketing strategies according to each target market. A firm with knowledge of the way in which consumers react to various features of items, price and promotion tricks has a competitive advantage.

According to situational leadership, there is no one best way to influence people. Which leadership style a person should use with individuals or groups depends on the readiness level for the product purchase that the leader is attempting to influence [23]. Brand management requires the ability to adjust behavior to market situations and understand the behavior of customers towards the brand [24]. Thus, according to this opinion, one single leadership that can be applied at all times and in all places does not exist and cannot be obtained, because customers’ capabilities, brand characters and situations are different and diverse. Therefore customers’ subjective readiness determines the power base that brand managers should employ to influence behavior and ensure compliance.

Hersey, Blanchard and Natermeyer [23] suggest that there is a direct relationship between the readiness of consumers and the kind of power bases that have a high probability of gaining compliance. Subjective readiness is a person’s ability and willingness to direct his/her behavior towards purchasing a certain item [23]; subjective readiness levels of customers are combinations of abilities and desires. These can be divided into four levels, ranging from very low to very high. The distance between levels can be identified. In this study, the space between R₁ and R₅ (R₅/R₁) is the medium level. Thus, by assuming that the brand is the leader and the customers are followers, we use Hersey et al.’s situational leadership theory to identify the effects of brand social power dimensions on purchasing decisions based on customers’ subjective readiness levels. On the basis of these analyses, in addition to creating a powerful brand, effective strategies for special market segments can be identified in order to meet a company’s goals and save money.

**CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Theory of Social Influence and Power**: According to the most generally accepted definition, social power is the ability of one person or group to cause another person or group to change in the direction intended by the influencer [9]. This notion of power is consistent with three major theoretical orientations on social power: field theory, social exchange theory and political science theory [4].

A number of power theorists have emphasized the importance of treating power not as an attribute but as a relationship [4]. That is, power is not something that one possesses but rather a quality that an individual acquires through “the perceptions of the interpersonal dynamics experienced in relationships” [25]. The centrality of such a perception has been recognized by many authors, including “Bacharach and Lawler, Beier and Stern, Raven, Simon, Tedeschi and Bonoma, Thibaut and Kelley” [5]. The theoretical framework for this study is French and Raven’s [3] bases of social power, which is in the field theory tradition.

**Power in Marketing**: The concept of power in general and French and Raven’s [3] typology more specifically, has been used in various disciplines, including marketing. The most pervasive marketing application of French and Raven’s research has been in channels of distribution. Research in this area focuses on the relationships between channel members, with emphasis on power, conflict and satisfaction. More specifically, this research indicates that the sources of power possessed by channel members may affect the level of conflict in the channel as well as the level of satisfaction experienced by channel
members. Power also figures prominently in sales research, especially in regard to the relationship between sales managers and sales personnel and how the bases of power affect roles, conflict and satisfaction of sales personnel. Research in advertising also incorporates the concept of power. For example, content analysis has been used to determine the differential use of the various bases of power in print advertising [18].

In addition, the importance of brand equity has been recognized in the marketing literature. Although researchers agree there is a social component to brand equity, empirical work in this area stops short of exploring the brand’s ability to exert social influence on consumers and their choices. Croston, Freling and Skinner’s [18] research attempts to address this deficit and extend the brand equity literature by proposing a new construct: brand social power. Drawing from research on social influence and perceived power, five bases of brand social power are identified and a conceptual attempt is made to integrate brand social power with existing brand equity frameworks.

**Brand Social Power:** Just as power influences the effectiveness of relationships and strategies in marketing channels, sales and advertising, it also plays a pivotal role in branding. Extending the general definition of power to a branding context, brand social power is defined as “the ability of a brand to influence the behavior of consumers and to cause a consumer to do something he or she would not have done otherwise” [18]. Here, brand social power is treated as a component of customer-based brand equity, regardless of whether the construct is treated as cognitive or relational [26].

The cognitive perspective of brand equity draws upon the memory literature and learning theory to explain brand equity and how to build strong brands [24]. Aaker [12] offers a commonly accepted (primarily cognitive) model, which includes five bases of brand equity: brand associations, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary assets. In this framework, each base constitutes an asset that creates brand equity in various ways. Brand social power—a perceptual concept that resides in the minds of a brand’s consumers—may be characterized as a brand association, which is defined by Aaker [12] as “anything ‘linked’ in memory to a brand” [18]. Brand associations can create a value for consumers by eliciting positive feelings and attitudes.

The relational perspective of brand equity emphasizes the consumer-brand relationship and depicts brand equity as a function of the personal value or meaning that a brand holds for the consumer [26]. Representative of work in this vein is Fournier’s [16] brand relationship quality construct, which assesses the strength and durability of a consumer-brand relationship in terms of three dimensions: affective and socioemotive attachments (love/passion and self-connection), behavioral ties (commitment and interdependence); and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality). Viewing brand social power through a relational lens, one might perceive brand social power as a component of the brand behaviors that nourish the consumer-brand relationship [18].

**The Bases of Brand Social Power:** According to Croston, Freling and Skinner’s [18] research on brand social power, which is based on French and Raven’s work, five brand social powers are identified, each increasing the brand’s capacity to influence the perceptions, values and/or behaviors of customers:

- **Coercive Brand Social Power:** Coercive brand social power is the ability of the brand to influence a consumer’s behavior through the perception that the brand can mediate negative outcomes for the individual. Negative outcomes in this case may include dissatisfaction, a sense of failure, a sense of rejection or disapproval, a negative image and lower perceived social status. The strength of a brand’s coercive brand social power depends on the ability of the brand to mediate punishment(s) and the consumer’s perception of the severity of the punishment.

- **Reward Brand Social Power:** Reward brand social power is the ability of the brand to influence a consumer’s behavior through perceptions that the brand can mediate positive outcomes for the individual. Positive outcomes in this case are intrinsic rewards that the brand can offer consumers, such as satisfaction, a sense of achievement, a sense of acceptance, a positive image and higher perceived social status. The strength of reward brand social power is contingent upon the brand’s ability to mediate rewards as well as the value that the consumer places on those rewards.

- **Legitimate Brand Social Power:** Legitimate brand social power is the ability of a brand to influence a consumer’s behavior via its perceived position in the industry, its reputation and/or its duration in the
industry. A brand’s position within its industry may be gauged by its perceived market share. The theory of double jeopardy may inform theorizing on how a brand’s industry position influences its legitimate brand social power. According to this theory, brands with a large market share have more consumers who purchase more frequently than do brands with a small market share. Another indicator of legitimate brand social power is the brand’s reputation. Virgin and Qoronfleh’s [27] analysis of corporate reputation and stock performance indicate that a company’s stock performance is directly and positively related to its reputation. A brand’s duration in the industry may also influence its legitimate brand social power. Bogart and Lehman [28] found heightened brand awareness with more extensive brand history. Therefore, brands with a longer industry presence should have more legitimate brand social power.

- **Referent Brand Social Power**: Referent brand social power is the ability of the brand to influence a consumer’s behavior by fostering attraction to and/or identification with the brand. When a brand possesses referent brand social power, consumers pursue a feeling of oneness with the brand and seek to become closely associated with it. The strength of referent brand social power depends on the consumer’s attraction to and identification with the brand. Research in social psychology suggests that a key source of interpersonal attraction is perceived similarity. Given consumers’ personification of brands and relationships with brands, it is proposed that this source of attractiveness will extend to the consumer-brand relationship and that consumers who perceive similarities with the brand will also be more strongly attracted to it.

- **Expert Brand Social Power**: Expert brand social power is the ability of the brand to influence a consumer’s behavior through perceptions that the brand has specialized knowledge and/or expertise. Specialized knowledge and/or expertise in this case refer to innovativeness, quality, consistency of superior performance and/or superior knowledge associated with the brand. One dimension of a brand’s expert brand social power is consumers’ perception of its specialized knowledge and/or expertise with the product category. Given the demonstrated effectiveness of expertise in influencing consumer behavior in a selling context, a brand’s expert brand social power is expected to elicit similar behavioral responses among consumers. A consumer’s knowledge or skills in a particular domain may also affect the strength of a brand’s expert brand social power. French and Raven [3] contend that an influence (i.e., the consumer) not only evaluates the expertise of the influencer (i.e., the brand) against an absolute standard but also in relation to his or her own knowledge.

**PURCHASING DECISION**

- **Attitude Toward the Brand**: Brand attitudes are defined as consumers’ evaluations of a brand [29]. Brand attitudes are important, because they form the basis of consumer behavior (e.g., brand choice) [24]. Attitude towards a brand is the desire for or lack of desire for a brand. Social scientists have long acknowledged that attitudes may elicit three types of evaluative responses: affective responses comprised of the feelings or emotions an individual has in relation to an attitude object; cognitive responses consisting of the thoughts an individual has about the attitude object; and conative responses composed of an individual’s actions with respect to the attitude object. However, empirical tests of the tripartite model of attitudinal responding have produced equivocal results for this conceptual trinity and the evidence supporting a discriminant behavioral component is particularly tenuous.

This research focuses on evaluative responses that are conative in nature—specifically, the ability of a brand to wield social power over and induce certain behaviors among their consumers. Aside from the prescriptive utility that a better understanding of brand social power may provide positioning strategies for brand managers, results generated here may add another voice to the debate regarding whether the division of evaluative attitudinal responses is one worth preserving in the current attitude theory and whether consumers respond to attitude objects such as brands in a behavioral manner [18].

- **Purchase Intention**: Purchasing intention is the likelihood that customers in a certain purchasing situation choose a certain brand of a product category [18]. Fishbein and Ajzen [30] contend that "the best single predictor of an individual’s behavior will be a measure of his intention to perform that
behavior". Purchase intentions data can assist managers in their marketing decisions related to product demand (new and existing products), market segmentation and promotional strategies [31]. Bagozzi proposes three types of intentions: present-oriented, future-oriented and goal-oriented. Goal-oriented intentions address "outcomes toward which one strives" [32]. Brand social power focuses on goal-oriented purchasing intentions.

- **Brand Familiarity**: A set of direct and indirect experiences associated with services and products brands obtained by consumers via advertising, interactions with sales agents, tests and consumption of products is known as brand familiarity [33]. Brand familiarity positively influences the purchasing decision based on a high level of confidence in the brand [34].

**Research Hypotheses**: A follower low in readiness needs strong directive behavior in order to become productive. To engage in this style, the leader may have to use coercive power. The behavior of people at low levels of readiness seems to be influenced by the awareness that costs will be incurred if they do not follow the rules. Thus, sanctions such as the perceived power to fire, transfer and demote may be important ways in which a leader can enforce compliance from people who are unable or unwilling. The leader’s coercive power may motivate the followers to avoid the punishment or cost by doing what the leader tells them to do [23]. Extending this viewpoint to brand social power, when customers have very low subjective readiness (R_s)–they are unable to and not interested in making decisions on purchasing–imposing power that can push the customers towards the intended brand is coercive social power of brand, which exerts its effect by emphasizing the negative outcomes of not purchasing the intended brand. Thus, we make the following hypothesis:

**H1**: For customers with very low subjective readiness (R_s), coercive brand social power has the greatest effect on customer purchasing decisions.

A follower with a low to moderate level of readiness often needs high amounts of supportive and directive behavior. This selling style is often enhanced by reward power. Because individuals at this readiness level are willing to try new behavior, the leader needs to be perceived as having access to rewards in order to gain compliance and reinforce growth in the desired direction [23]. Reward brand social power is enhanced when customers see the ability of a brand to reward and value it. Customers who are willing but unable (R_s), revise their behavior if they know that an increase in their function (i.e. purchasing) leads to rewards. Based on this, we make the following hypothesis:

**H2**: For customers with low subjective readiness (R_s), reward brand social power has the greatest effect on customer purchasing decisions.

The leadership styles that tend to influence those at moderate levels of readiness (R_m/R_s) are selling and participating. Legitimate power seems to be helpful in effective use of these styles. By the time that a follower reaches these moderate levels of readiness, the power of the leader has become legitimate. That is, if the leader is able to induce compliance or influence behavior by virtue of his or her position in the organizational hierarchy. Followers high in readiness are far less impressed with title or position than they are with expertise or information. However, followers in the moderate ranges of readiness can often be influenced if they find it appropriate for a person in that position or with that title to make that decision [23]. Extending this viewpoint to brand social power knowledge, when customers have moderate subjective readiness (R_m/R_s), legitimate brand social power can influence purchasing decisions via market share, reputation and longevity in the product category [18]. As a result, we make the following hypothesis:

**H3**: For customers with moderate subjective readiness (R_m/R_s), legitimate brand social power has the greatest effect on customer purchasing decisions.

A follower at a moderate to high level of readiness tends to need little direction but still requires a high level of communication and support from the leader. This participating style may be utilized if the leader has referent power. This source of power is based on good personal relations with the follower. With people who are able but unwilling or insecure, this power base tends to be an important means of instilling confidence and providing encouragement, recognition and other supportive behavior. When that occurs, followers will generally respond in a positive way, permitting the leader to influence them, because they like, admire, or identify with the leader. In attempting to influence people who are able but insecure or unwilling (R_s), high relationship behavior
is necessary. If people have a confidence problem, then the manager needs to encourage them. If they have a motivation problem, then the manager needs to discuss and solve the problem. Thus, confidence, trust and rapport are important for influencing people [23]. In fact, this is the same situation in which referent brand social power exerts its effect by making customers identify with brand and consider it as unique [18]. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H4:** In customers with high subjective readiness (R), referent brand social power has the greatest effect on customer purchasing decision.

A follower who develops a high level of readiness often requires little direction or support. This follower is able and willing to perform the tasks required and tends to respond most readily to a delegating leadership style and expert power. Thus, a leader is most likely to gain respect from and influence a person who has both competence and confidence by possessing the expertise, skill and knowledge that this follower recognizes as important. Followers who are competent and confident require little direction or supportive behavior; they are able and willing to perform on their own. The driver for influencing these followers is expert power. With followers who are able and willing, leaders are more effective if they possess the expertise, skill and knowledge that followers respect and value [23]. This is related to the theory which says that the intended brand has the ability to influence customer behavior via perceptions of the skills or specialized knowledge (such as innovativeness, quality, high performance and higher brand knowledge) that the brand provides to the person [18]. Thus, we make the following hypothesis:

**H5:** In customers with very high subjective readiness (R), expert brand social power has the greatest effect on customer purchasing decisions.

According to Hersey et al.’s [23] situational leadership theory, power bases that can influence customer’s behavior at various levels of subjective readiness, as shown in Figure 1.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Subjects and Design:** In this study, information was collected from 382 students in the management program at Tehran Azad Islamic University using a descriptive design and class random sampling. Information was gathered on two brands: Sony and Nokia.

**Stimuli Selection:** In choosing a product type, those with high involvement should be considered. Involvement is a person's perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values and interests [35]. Consumer involvement has been introduced to explain why consumers are interested in some purchase activities more than others and how consumers perceive different messages during purchase consideration. Briefly, consumer involvement suggests a continuum of consumer interest in products and services [36]. Also, involvement with purchases leads one to search for more information and spend more time looking for the right selection [35]. Thus, when product involvement is low,
less attention is drawn to the brand. Sony laptops and Nokia mobile phones were chosen as the products, because they are very popular with Iranian students.

**Procedure:** The study was performed in classrooms. Subjects were divided into two groups based on their interests in and information about each product. One group answered the questions about Sony laptops and the other answered questions about Nokia mobile phones.

First, subjects answered 10 questions in order to determine their subjective readiness levels: R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6. The original scale was designed to measure the readiness levels of organizational employees by the Leadership Studies Center [37], extending management concepts and theories to marketing. With the help of marketing and management professors, we modified and redesigned this scale to measure customers’ subjective readiness. This questionnaire had an 8-point scale in which 8 and 1 were the highest and the lowest subjective readiness levels, respectively. In order to determine the level of each subject, the readiness matrix designed by the Studies Center was used.

Fifteen items allowed researchers to identify the social power bases of brand in relation to each product. These items were used by Crosno, Freling and Skinner [18]. Swasy’s [38] Social Power Scales were modified for use in relation to products. Subjects were told to think of comparable brands in the same product category and express their agreement or disagreement with each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

In the third phase, subjects answered 11 questions that allowed researchers to measure their attitudes towards the brand, their purchasing intentions and the extent of their familiarity with the brand. Attitude toward the brand was assessed by asking subjects to complete the statement, “I feel (this brand) is…” using four 5-point semantic differential items (anchored by favorable/unfavorable, good/bad, likable/unlikable and pleasant/unpleasant). This measure is consistent with those reported in the marketing literature [18].

Subjects were also asked to indicate the likelihood that they would purchase each brand when the next purchase occasion in the product category arose. Using four 5-point semantic differential items (anchored by very likely/not at all likely, very probable/not at all probable, very possible/not at all possible and very certain/not at all certain). This measure of purchase intention parallels those used in previous marketing studies [18].

Because research suggests that product familiarity can influence the manner in which subjects process information about brands [18], subjects’ familiarity with the product category of each stimulus product was also assessed. Using Machleit, Allen and Madden’s [39] brand familiarity scale, subjects rated their familiarity, experience and knowledge level with each product category using three 5-point semantic differential items.

**RESULTS**

**Manipulation Checks:** In order to study the final validity and power of the designed model (Figure 2) for both the Sony laptop and Nokia mobile groups, Lisrel fitness indices were used to test the hypotheses. Structural equation modeling was used to analyze the questionnaire and test the research hypotheses. Due to the presence of numerous variables for each construct, the small size of the overall and divided samples and grouping into five subjective readiness levels, partial least squares approach was used to estimate factor loadings and pathway coefficients. This generated Lisrel results for modern estimation.

**Hypothesis Testing:** Using the first part of the questionnaire, customers’ subjective readiness was measured. Customers were divided into five groups according to their subjective readiness level. For each level, the effect of brand social power models on purchasing decision was analyzed and tested. In a structured equation model using Lisrel method, if the t-value for pathway coefficient is larger than 1.96, then the pathway coefficient is significant at the 5% level; the null hypothesis is rejected and the research hypothesis is accepted. In this research, each hypothesis was examined using t-value indices.

**Hypothesis 1:** In Sony laptop customers with a very low level of subjective readiness (R1), coercive brand social power had the single greatest effect on purchasing decisions (t = 8.2); thus H1 is accepted. For Nokia mobile customers with very low subjective readiness levels (R1), the effect of coercive brand social power was not significant (t = 0.03); thus, H1 is rejected.

**Hypothesis 2:** In Sony laptop customers with a low level of subjective readiness (R2), reward brand social power had the single greatest effect on purchasing decisions (t = 2.4); thus, H2 is supported. For Nokia mobile
customers with low subjective readiness levels \( (R_s) \), the effect of reward brand social power on purchasing decision was not significant \( (t = 0.07) \); thus, \( H_2 \) is rejected. At this level of subjective readiness \( (R_s) \), expert brand social power \( (t = 2.08) \) showed the greatest effect on the purchasing decisions of Nokia mobile customers.

**Hypothesis 3:** In Sony laptop customers with a moderate level of subjective readiness \( (R/R_s) \), the effect of legitimate brand social power on purchasing decision was not significant \( (t = 0.184) \); thus, the third hypothesis is rejected. At this level of subjective readiness \( (R/R_s) \), referent brand social power \( (t = 6.68) \) and expert brand social power \( (t = 5.94) \), respectively, showed the greatest effects on the purchasing decisions of Sony laptop customers. For Nokia mobile customers at this level of subjective readiness \( (R/R_s) \), two pathway coefficients of legitimate brand social power \( (t = 7.5) \) and referent brand social power \( (t = 2.7) \) on purchasing decision are significant. However, respecting the fact that a legitimate pathway has a pathway coefficient that is essentially more significant than a referent pathway, legitimate brand social power had the greatest effect on purchasing decisions of Nokia mobile customers with a moderate subjective readiness level \( (R/R_s) \); therefore, \( H_3 \) is supported.

**Hypothesis 4:** In Sony laptop customers with a high level of subjective readiness \( (R_s) \), referent brand social power had the greatest effect on purchasing decisions \( (t = 2.7) \); thus, \( H_4 \) is supported. For Nokia mobile customers at this level of subjective readiness \( (R_s) \), two pathway coefficients of referent brand social power \( (t = 4.4) \) and expert brand social power \( (t = 3.5) \) on purchasing decision are significant. Since the referent pathway showed more significant coefficients than the expert pathway, referent brand social power had the greatest effect on purchasing decisions of Nokia mobile customers with a high level of subjective readiness \( (R_s) \); thus, \( H_4 \) is supported.

**Hypothesis 5:** In Sony laptop customers with a very high level of subjective readiness \( (R_s) \), two pathway coefficients of referent brand social power \( (t = 2.37) \) and expert brand social power \( (t = 4.09) \) were significant on purchasing decision. Since the expert pathway has an more significant coefficients than the referent pathway, expert brand social power showed the greatest effects on purchasing decisions among Sony laptop customers with a very high level of subjective readiness \( (R_s) \); thus, \( H_5 \) is supported. For Nokia mobile customers at this subjective readiness level \( (R_s) \), three pathway coefficients of reward brand social power \( (t = 2.8) \), referent brand social power \( (t = 2.31) \) and expert brand social power \( (t = 9.4) \) on purchasing decision were significant. Since the expert pathway showed a pathway coefficient that is essentially more significant than the reward and referent pathways, expert brand social power had the greatest effect on purchasing decisions of Nokia mobiles customers at a very high subjective readiness level \( (R_s) \); thus, \( H_5 \) is supported.
DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to identify the brand social power dimensions of purchasing decisions at various subjective readiness level of customers (including attitude toward the brand, purchase intention and brand familiarity). Drawing on a seminal work in the area of social power and influence theory, brand social power was defined as the ability of a brand to influence the behavior of consumers and conceptualized as possessing five dimensions analogous to French and Raven’s [3] original bases of social power. Also, referring to Hersey and Blanchard situational leadership theory, the readiness levels of employees were generalized to the subjective readiness levels of customers in order to obtain a new indicator for market segmentation. Subjective readiness refers to the ability and desire to direct one’s behavior towards purchasing a special item, conceptualized at five levels ranging from very low to very high.

According to the results obtained from research model pathway analysis in relation to Sony laptops and Nokia mobiles, brand social power knowledge can be used to distinguish a brand from its competitors. In addition, customers’ level of subjective readiness is an important factor in how brand social power influences customer attitudes, feelings and reasoning in relation to purchasing a brand. It can also help brand managers to select positioning strategies in target markets. Marketers can identify market segments by obtaining information on customer attitude and level of subjective readiness. They can create perceptions of their brand in order to increase market share, create positioning policies, evaluate advertising programs and prepare attractive promotional programs. This is obvious when marketers emphasize a brand’s social power to meet the needs and requirements of customers. A brand can also be positioned against competitors based on any brand social power base that resonates with the target market. For instance, if laptop customers are seeking favorable performance, but this need is not being fulfilled with their current brand, then building the positioning strategy of a competing brand around the ability to offer favorable performance may appeal to these consumers and result in market share gains among this target segment. Likewise, if the industry leader effectively communicates and exercises, say, legitimate brand power, then a competing brand may still achieve differentiation by building its positioning strategy centered on another brand social power base.

At some subjective readiness levels, more than one dimension of brand social power affected purchasing decisions. This reflects the multi-dimensional nature of the social power of brands. The results of testing H5 in relation to Nokia mobile customers and H3, H4 and H5 in relation to Sony laptop customers illustrates this. This observation implies an unforeseen complexity of the brand social power construct and suggests that, given brand social power’s capacity to influence consumer reactions to a given brand, marketers must be mindful of the potential for consumers to derive unintended conclusions about the nature of a brand’s power from marketing communications and through product usage.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE STUDIES

Although predictions offered here regarding the relationship between brand social power and purchasing decisions based on Iranian customers’ subjective readiness failed to receive unanimous support, it is worth noting that for a majority of customers, subjective readiness perceptions of strong brand social power on the manipulated dimension were associated with greater purchasing decisions for the target brand. This finding validates the assertion that brands have the capacity to influence consumer behavior, substantiating the existence of brand social power and justifying the application of French and Raven’s [3] power typology in a branding context. In a broader sense, the association between brand social power and purchasing decision based on Iranian customers’ subjective readiness documented here constitutes unambiguous, albeit limited, evidence that individuals (consumers) develop attitudes toward objects (brands) that elicit evaluative responses which are behavioral in nature. Although this finding will not likely resolve differing opinions regarding the validity of tripartite attitude models, it does suggest that conation—arguably the most empirically problematic of the three components—is a legitimate attitudinal response.

This research also has implications for work on brand extensions. Much of the extant brand extension research focuses on the fit or similarity between the brand and the extension [40-42]. These studies suggest that an extension is likely to be successful (unsuccessful) when consumers perceive good (poor) fit between the brand’s current product category and the new product. This notion of perceived fit can also be explained in the context of brand social power.

Specifically, French and Raven [3] posit that power can only be exerted within a range. When a new product falls within the range of the brand’s power, it may be
capable of influencing consumers’ behaviors and thus more likely to be a successful extension. However, if the extension is outside the range of the brand’s power, then it is less likely to influence consumers’ behaviors and thus less likely to be successful.

The real world is littered with examples that bear out this conjecture. For instance, Bic is known for its inexpensive, disposable products and arguably possesses expert power in this domain. Initially associated with writing utensils, Bic was successful in extending its brand name to razors and lighters, both of which resided within its range of expert power. However, Bic was unsuccessful in extending its brand name to perfume, a product category that clearly fell outside the range of its brand social power. Research suggests that a “new product failure may well tarnish the reputation of sister products carrying the same brand name” [43] and “that unsuccessful brand extensions can dilute brand names by diminishing the favourable attitude beliefs consumers have learned to associate with the family brand name” [44]. Extensions outside a brand’s range of social power may also experience higher levels of product failure and diminish the power of the brand. Analyzing potential brand extensions using the brand social power typology presented here may enable brand managers to identify new products that exist outside the domain of the parent brand and to reduce the likelihood of new product failures.

Although this study represents a fruitful inquiry in the area of brand social power, it also highlights several issues in need of future research. It seems that if defining subjective readiness items factors relating to price are also considered (i.e. its subjective nature is eliminated), then research on this area may obtain other results which enrich this study. It is also suggested that two other readiness levels (i.e. R/Pr and R/Prd) ignored in this study should be added to subjective readiness levels. Connection brand social power and “information brand social power are added to social power bases; in this way, brand social power knowledge becomes richer.

In addition to exploring brand social power effects across a variety of industries and product categories, future research should build upon the results of this exploratory main effects study by employing a more rigorous experimental design that incorporates important antecedents, dependent measures and moderating variables to more meaningfully test relationships. Antecedents that should be experimentally manipulated and investigated include, but are not limited to, sales promotions, rewards programs and product endorsers. Exploring these factors would elucidate how different sources of brand social power evolve and are maintained and strengthened; this would also aid brand managers in developing strategies for building brand social power. Moreover, product involvement can be used as another moderating variable in order to study the way in which each of the brand social power dimensions influence purchasing decisions in the case of high and low product subjective involvement.

Although this research assesses three essential purchasing decision-related measures (i.e., brand attitudes, purchase intentions and brand familiarity), it is crucial to test the relationship of brand social power to other dependent variables, including additional individual-level (e.g., brand extendability) and product level (e.g., market share) performance measures. Finally, potential moderators of the main effect relationships established here need to be examined so that brand managers are familiar with factors that diminish or heighten the impact of a brand’s power. It is imperative to determine how, if at all, key individual-difference variables (e.g., product involvement, product knowledge, familiarity, trust and perceived risk) and product-related factors (e.g., conspicuousness of consumption, nature of the good and frequency of use) influence the power a brand commands. These experimental postscripts will conceptually clarify the domain of the brand social power construct and enable marketing managers to adopt a more considered approach to developing effective brand communications.

REFERENCES
