



## Introduction

Brand-consumer relationships play an essential role in creating a strong and durable brand. In this regard, one of the main goals of companies is to create a sense of trust and emotional-behavioral obligations in their consumers (Fetscherin & Heilmann, 2015). On the other hand, consumers' negative perceptions of a brand's approach can cause severe damage to the relationship. The crisis that happened to Uber Technologies Inc. in 2018 is an example of the circumstances. One of the main reasons for the crisis can be mentioned in the publication of negative advertisements about the brand's communication with some stakeholders, such as reported discrimination and mistreatment of workers (Vranica, 2018).

Uber made management changes to overcome the crisis and launched a campaign costing half a billion dollars. These measures aimed to improve the brand's perception and repair the damage caused by the negative track record of the brand (Siddiqui, 2019). While such measures do not seem to have been successful (Lee, 2020). This specimen shows a brand's crisis due to consumers' negative perceptions, ultimately leading to the loss of a significant share of its market.

Studies have shown that a brand's unethical behaviors can become a brand crisis when a strong relationship exists between the consumer and the brand. (Baghi & Gabrielli, 2020). The consumer perception that a brand behaves irresponsibly or discriminately is one of the main reasons for most crises (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Bundy et al., 2017; Gillespie & Dietz, 2009). Usually, such behaviors on the part of brands lead to creating negative impressions in consumers. However, in some cases, the behaviors did not cause severe damage to brand-consumer relations and did not lead to crises or other consequences. Therefore, investigating and rooting in such cases can support measures

that reduce the reaction of consumers following irresponsible brand behavior. It can also show a path for brands' preventive strategies from the emergence of a crisis. Such goals show the reasons for the importance of conducting this research.

We observed that consumers are less negatively affected by the discriminatory and irresponsible behavior of a brand when they are closely linked to a brand or, in other words, are attached to a brand. Therefore, the main issue we intend to investigate is the influential factors in creating brand attachment in a situation where brands treat their consumers in a discriminatory and irresponsible manner. As far as the authors have reviewed, no systematic study addressing this issue has been conducted in the brand attachment literature and brand crisis prevention studies so far. The purpose of this study is to identify the dominant components of brand attachment under such circumstances. Introducing the components and considering them in the brand's strategic plans can help reduce the reaction of consumers following the irresponsible behavior of the brand and prevent a crisis.

In the first study, to probe and fill the theoretical gap, we identify the structures and components that have led to the creation or strengthening of brand attachment, where a brand treats its consumers discriminately and irresponsibly.

"Apple" brand has a discriminatory approach towards its consumers in different parts of the world. Apple has imposed severe restrictions in some markets. Consumers in the markets are not only deprived of essential services, such as warranty and after-sales services, but even many applications and ancillary services are out of their reach. The use of today's smartphones' most straightforward and essential features, such as banking applications and services, navigation programs, and music streaming services, is also limited. However, the attachment to

Apple among consumers remains strong, and they are not willing to replace it with other brands. For the newest version of Apple products, they are even willing to wait for hours in long queues, and in addition to spending an exorbitant amount of money, they also advocate it. In other words, the power of the attachment is so strong that its discriminatory behaviors have no effect on the continuance commitment of consumers, and they are still willing to advocate for the brand.

In theory, brand attachment mentions the consumers' emotional solid connection with a brand. Attached consumers believe the brand is a portion of their self-concept (Ilicic et al., 2016; Shimul, 2022). Studies have identified positive consequences as results of brand attachment, such as brand commitment (Jahn et al., 2012; Tournois & Rollero, 2020), positive WOM (Madadi et al., 2021; Rajaobelina et al., 2021), or desire to pay a higher cost for a brand (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Sarkar et al., 2021). In the second study, since both continuance commitment and the advocacy intentions to the brand are evident in attached consumers in this market, we will examine the brand attachment's consequences considering the described conditions. The second study is a drawing of our observation which shows that attached consumers continue their commitment and advocate the brand, even in the face of discriminatory and irresponsible brand behavior.

In this research, by conducting a mixed method approach, we examine what components effectively create brand attachment in a situation where the brand treats its consumers in discriminatory and irresponsible behaviors. Subsequently, we examine the continuous commitment and advocacy intentions of the brand in the consumers. Since we need to get a more accurate and in-depth knowledge of the concept of brand attachment, we use the Zmet technique. The technique focuses on discovering a brand consumer's

conscious/unconscious thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires.

## **Theoretical Literature Review**

### **Brand Attachment**

The attachment theory is based on the joint research of John Bowlby and Mary Salter Ainsworth, which they did until the end of the twentieth century (Bretherton, 1992). This theory, the developmental history of which began in the 1930s, addresses the human tendency to create, maintain, and destroy emotional relationships with particular things. Psychological and marketing research suggests that attachment transcends interpersonal connections (Pavlos A. Vlachos, 2010). In addition to the interpersonal relationships introduced by Bowlby in psychology, the concept of attachment has entered other areas such as romantic, kinship, and friendship interactions and from different perspectives (for instance, individual differences versus relationship outlook) (C. W. Park et al., 2008). It also engages concepts such as physical assets (Read et al., 2011), places (Tournois & Rollero, 2020), gifts (Shabani et al., 2017), collections (Slater, 2000), experiences (Fullwood et al., 2017), Tourism destinations (Yang et al., 2020), celebrations (de Regt & van der Lippe, 2017), education institutions (Dennis et al., 2016), all kinds of favorite objects (Wagner et al., 2020), sports teams (Brendan et al., 2015), Political activities (Chan & Ilicic, 2019) and person-brand relationship (Matzler et al., 2011; Moraes et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2017).

The above demonstrates the potential of theory and attachment styles in explaining dissimilarities in the power and businesses' customer relationship quality (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Consumer-brand relationships are manifested in various forms such as brand attachment (Thomson et al., 2005; Veer, 2013), brand commitment (Tournois & Rollero, 2020),

brand connections (Loh et al., 2021), brand evangelism (Panda et al., 2020), brand love (Joshi & Garg, 2021), brand loyalty (Hwang et al., 2021), brand passion (Gilal et al., 2021) and brand trust (Aboulnasr & Tran, 2020).

Previous investigations have shown that the framework of attachment affects a wide range of consumer reactions such as changing attitudes, satisfaction, and mental engagement as well as behaviors, for example, purchase intention, willingness to pay, WOM, and forgiveness of brand mistakes (Behi, 2011; Bidmon, 2017; Esch et al., 2006). Hence, we intend to identify, prioritize and introduce the effective components in creating and boosting brand attachment in situations where consumers are faced with irresponsible and discriminatory behaviors of the brand.

### Attachment Styles

Consumer attachment styles are distributed into two aspects. 1) *Attachment anxiety* refers to customers' fear that the brand may not be available in the required time. 2) *Attachment avoidance* refers to the degree to which a consumer distrusts a firm's goodwill. In addition to avoiding attachment, consumer fear being dependent on the firm and attempts to make an emotional and cognitive distance from it (Shimul, 2022). Thomson et al. (2012) asserted that anxiety and avoidance of attachment indirectly affect customer satisfaction via interaction (Thomson et al., 2012). Paulssen (2009) found that attachment avoidance could predict the extent of trust, satisfaction, and repurchase intention in the business context (Paulssen, 2009). Swaminathan, Stilley, and Rohini (2009) announced that the relationship between *brand personality* and *brand choice* could be moderate by attachment styles (Swaminathan et al., 2009).

Mende and Bolton (2013) stated that in terms of satisfaction, trust, and affective commitment, customers are more

appropriate for a service firm when they have lower attachment anxiety or avoidance levels (Mende & Bolton, 2011). They have shown that the styles of attachment can predict likeness and impact loyalty. They showed that consumers' satisfaction, trust, emotional commitment, and loyalty to a brand decrease when they perceive a more significant amount of attachment anxiety and avoidance (Mende et al., 2013). The hypocritical behavior of a brand leads to an increase in the tendency of consumers to avoid the brand. Consumers' avoidance is due to maintaining a positive self-image (Baghi & Antonetti, 2021). Since the irresponsible and discriminatory behaviors of the brand may increase the level of anxiety and avoidance of consumer's attachment and further affect their commitment, we intend to examine the moderating effects of the styles of attachment in the relationship between brand attachment and continuous commitment.

### Continuance Commitment to Brand

We consider "commitment" as a salient consequence of brand attachment and explore it in situations where consumers are faced with irresponsible and discriminatory brand behaviors. In the following, we examine its two obvious and expected consequences, namely continuous commitment (Fullerton, 2005; Louis & Lombart, 2010; Shukla et al., 2016) and advocacy intentions (Bilro et al., 2019; Heitmman et al., 2007; Kumar & Kaushik, 2020).

Some previous studies commitment as a continuous desire to grow, develop and maintain a long-term relationship (Polo-Redondo & Cambra-Fierro, 2008). As a complex phenomenon, commitment has several dimensions. The present study focuses on one of the most critical dimensions: continuance commitment to a brand (CCB) because It is deemed the most

appropriate and relevant in consumer-related fields (Bansal et al., 2004).

In a marketing relationship based on CCB, customers stay loyal to the other side because they feel reliant on and limited in that relationship. Such an approach is known as a calculative commitment because it consists of a motivation that is psychologically negative and distinct from the commitment that stems from loyalty. It is also expected that recognizing small investment costs associated with membership in a sector will motivate consumers to obtain a return commensurate with the investments made (Hayat Bhatti et al., 2019). Besides, CCB is expected to reduce the brand's tendency to change (Bansal et al., 2004).

### **Brand Advocacy Intention**

Brand advocacy refers to supportive consumer behaviors toward a specific firm or brand (Jung et al., 2014). Advocacy of Brand is considered a primary factor if a firm wants to thrive in various marketing activities. An example could be the recommendation of a brand to Relatives and friends (Hudson et al., 2015; Reichheld, 2003). costumer's Advocacy intentions of Brands lead to sales growth, raise customer-brand relationships, and trigger intense consumer engagement, which subsequently leads to enhancement of brand loyalty, engagement, and attachment (Jayasimha & Billore, 2016; Tsiotsou & Goldsmith, 2013).

In addition, Huba (2012) asserts that evangelist customers buy a brand's products and have much faith in them. Hence, they tend to give positive recommendations and voluntarily recruit their colleagues, relatives, and friends to represent brands. (Huba, 2012). Wallace et al. (2014) suggested that WOM and consumer advice support a firm's advertising events and help the firm sustain a positive image (Wallace et al., 2014). Under the heading advocacy intentions of a brand, consumers are viewed

as an evangelist who publishes positive WOM about a brand and becomes true advocates for that brand (Kaushik, 2020). Regarding consumer behavior, we argue that committed attachment to a brand can direct to the advocacy of that brand; therefore, high consumer interaction with a brand promotes positive WOM and represents it to others, just like a brand ambassador.

### **Research Methodology**

In this research, we adopted a mixed-method approach (Exploratory-Taxonomy Development) comprised of two studies to investigate the specific phenomenon. Generally, this research is conducted on the condition that a brand treats its customers discriminatory and irresponsible manner. In the first study, we examine what components cause customers' attachment to a brand (a qualitative approach). In the second study, we investigate the effect of brand attachment on consumers' continuous commitment and advocacy intentions (a structural equation modeling method).

#### **Study 1:**

The researchers enter the real-life world of individuals based on the phenomenological method to reach the answer to the reasons and whereby of consumer behavior in the first study. The phenomenological method is an interpretive, descriptive, and reflective approach. The method refers to understanding the nature of the lived experiences of individuals, which are usually narrated in one's language (Greening, 2019). According to Van Manen (1990), lived experiences are the lifeworld that we live and experience, through our daily interactions and activities (Dowling, 2007). Although this method is similar to several works, such as Van Kaam, Van Manen, Giorgi, Colaizzi, and Moustakas, its practical steps differ according to the provided details. The six steps outlined by van Manen were selected to provide the

framework for this research (Creswell, 2007).

### **Sampling and Data Collection Methods**

The study population generally comprised consumers attached to the Apple brand in Tehran. Apple has a discriminatory approach towards its consumers in Iran. The brand has imposed severe restrictions on the market. Consumers in the market are not only deprived of essential services, such as warranty and after-sales services, but even many applications and ancillary services are out of their reach. However, the attachment to Apple among consumers remains strong, and they are not willing to replace it with other brands. Apple has the second largest market share in Iran after Samsung, which indicates its high popularity (Eshaghi, 2020).

In order to select the best sample population, we ensured the participants' brand attachment through a pre-test in the form of a 10-question questionnaire. To measure the "brand attachment" variable, we used a scale (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2018; Thomson et al., 2005) and The Likert psychometric response scale (five-point). We also used multiple strategy sampling methods (snowball and intensity). Patton (2002) argues that in qualitative research, there are no rules for determining sample size. According to her, the sample size depends on various items, such as what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the study, what will be believable, and valuable, and what can do with limitations of time and resources. Thus, the sample size will determine during the work. Sampling continues until data saturation is reached; the researcher recognizes that no new data is forthcoming, and no new conceptual information that requires a new code or expansion of existing codes and classes is not achieved (Patton, 2002). We reached the data saturation stage in the present study through 17 interviews.

In the study, we gathered data via in-depth interviews using Zmet (which is a projection technique). Participants have to pass the brand attachment pre-test. Then, they had 7 to 10 days to collect images, texts, sentences, slogans, and, generally, anything that revealed their thoughts or feelings about the Apple brand from a variety of sources (such as the Internet, newspapers, books, magazines) and send them to us. At this stage, while formatting the received items based on the ten steps of ZMet, we set steps and protocols and conducted in-depth, open, and guided interviews (Dodds et al., 2018).

Having performed the abovementioned steps, we extracted each interviewee's mental model and collage. Finally, we collected the data and assessed the relationships (as given by respondents) between the relevant components. The interviews analysis and sufficient data collection resulted in a collective consensus map presented as a diagram. The diagram delineates the extracted components and shows the associations among them. A comprehensive map (a) shows the majority of thoughts (b) of most people (c) most of the time. The bonds between the components are the reasons behind their connection. Comprehensive maps include three types of components.

### **Data Analysis Method**

We applied the following stages to analyze the collected data: a) speech-to-text conversion; b) line-by-line(open) coding for theme extraction (extracted 517 concepts). C) refining, aligning, and categorizing the themes obtained from open coding in the form of categories(Axial coding) (Charmaz, 2002, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Based on three-stage open, axial, and selective coding. In an inductive process, we continuously reviewed and refined the data and formed a set of similar data in terms of congruity and consistency. Then, these themes were classified into

three types: originator constructs, receiver constructs, and transmitter constructs. Subsequently, in order to find the semantic ties between the constructs in line with the study goals, we tried to identify the relations between the constructs by extracting the pattern from the general context via a cognitive mapping approach in order to finally find the links between them (Dodds et al., 2018).

The analysis was started with an open coding procedure using interpretive readings from each interview (upon the start of the first interview), extracting the initial responses, transcriptions, and annotations (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The transcript of the 1st step interview was guided by the broad themes of the previous brand attachment literature (Thomson et al., 2005). In subsequent iterations, we continued an open coding process, where the sub-themes and the coding and data-driven themes about brand attachment were re-coded. It is noteworthy that the researchers did not semantically analyze the pictures gathered by the participants at any stage. The imagery gathered by participants was used to extract their conscious and unconscious perceptions of their brand attachment experiences. They helped to a great extent to uncover essential themes and narratives which are usually hidden (Prince & Forr, 2021).

We extracted open codes to identify various aspects of brand attachment. We identified different attachment ideas and generated five total dimensions from the sub-theme; these dimensions were considered first-level transmitting constructs. For example, the theme of *paying attention to brand characteristics* was quite evident concerning brand attachment and was initially classified into three different sub-themes. In other words, the three linking constructs in stage two, namely the attention to general, functional, and appearance characteristics of the brand, were extracted and classified; these three

linking constructs were also produced by 19 originator constructs associated with these constructs.

After the transcribed interviews, we started the axial coding and coded for the brand attachment themes. In this regard, new insights into their brand attachment were revealed. Finally, we classified all the constructs extracted from each interview into three types: originator, receiver, and transmitter. We outlined them into a mental map for every single participant.

Since the present study focused on 17 interviews, there was no need to employ any assistant tool for the analysis and coding. The researchers carried out all the interviews, transcriptions, analyses, and evaluations manually. Participating members then reviewed the reliability assessment of the results within a control process.

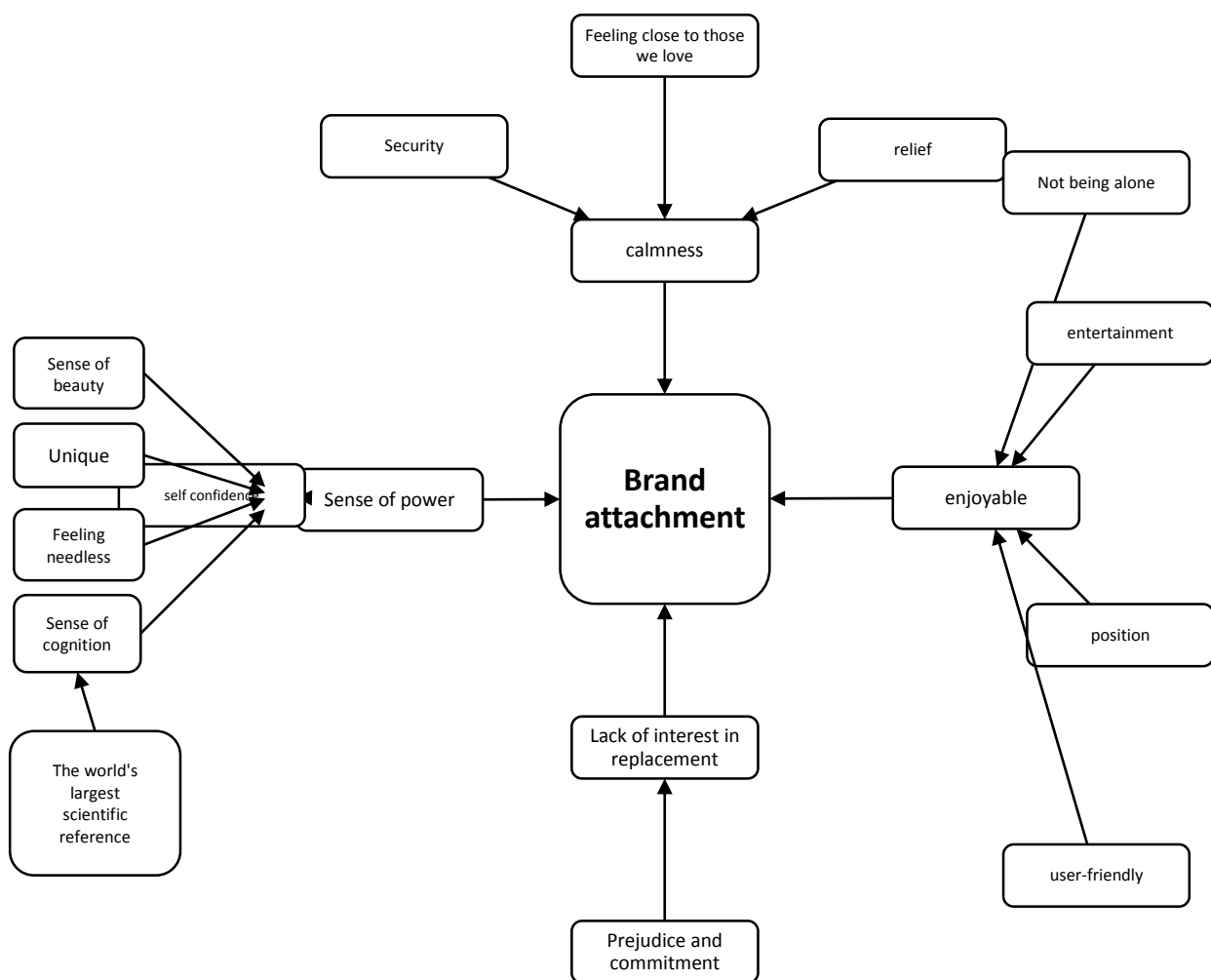
In the first step, we implemented a review and re-coding method to ensure reliability. In this procedure involving three authors, we extracted the interrogating feature of themes and codes separately to guarantee compatibility and *create them connections*. (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Subsequently, we used a second coder, and next, we compared the output of both coders utilizing Perreault and Leigh's (1989) "index of reliability" for coding reliability checking. This study's *reliability index* is 0.87, indicating that the coding is reliable. Furthermore, the coders resolved the existing disagreements after a short discussion.

In the second step, we tried to enhance the items' credibility, reliability, and accuracy. In this regard, we presented the extracted constructs, categories, and themes to the participants narratively along with a survey form and asked them to express their opinion on the results. Moreover, the researchers' long-term engagement with the subjects and their proper knowledge of the study context can help enhance the validity of the findings.

**Results**

Following the main query of the research, we conducted each interview to extract the constructs related to brand attachment formation. After the interviews, we outlined the mental map of each interviewee that indicated the constructs and the inter-relationship for creating a brand attachment (figure 1). It should be noted that each

interviewee approved the delineated mental maps. The categories extracted for the brand attachment variable show its affective and cognitive essence. Categories such as brand interest and desirable mental relationships represent the emotional dimensions, and classes such as self-identification of brand and brand cognitive empathy reflect the cognitive dimensions of brand attachment.



*Figure 1: Mental map of the interviewee: Ms., 36 years old, bachelor, income up to 500 USD, employed, resident of Tehran*

Findings show the extraction of 517 concepts, of which 499 are originators and 18 are linking constructs (in two levels). The receiver construct was deemed as the

brand attachment. Eighteen constructs that determine the brand attachment variable are: *Attention to brand characteristics, desirable emotional and psychological*



relationship, brand self-identification, secure physical and mental base, commitment, functional characteristics of the brand, love or affiliation to the brand, distinction, general characteristics, good brand sense, calmness, brand appearance, pleasure and joy, affiliation, prejudice, confidence, trust, lack of interest in replacing a brand with another.

Next, we identified the interviewees' attachment to the Apple brand and their

relations based on the comprehensive mental map and the visual analysis of the components. Then, we drew the findings in a diagram presented in Figure (2) as the conclusion.

In tables (1) and (2), we have presented the extracted linking constructs in two levels. The tables have been organized based on the highest frequency of the constructs.

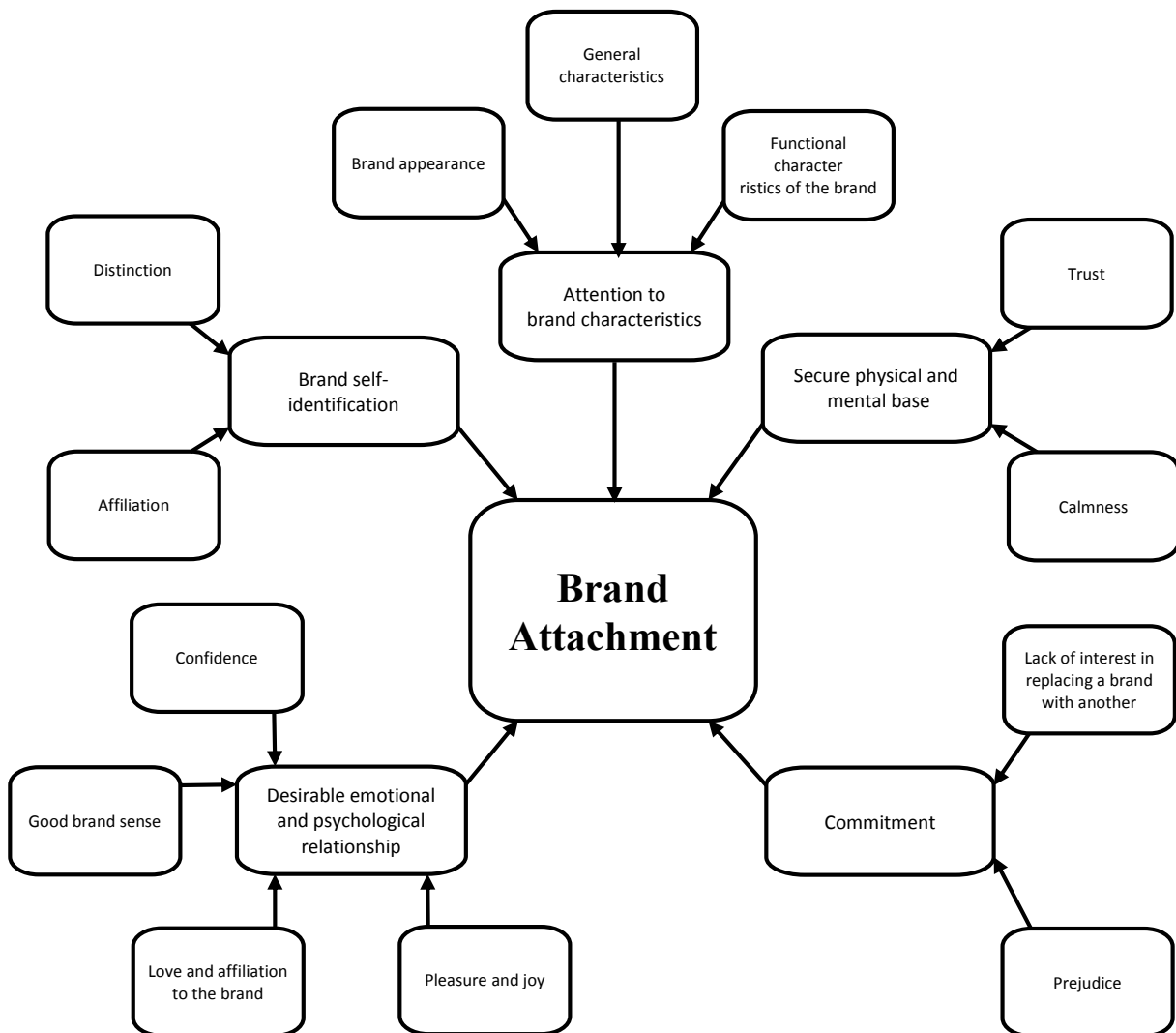


Figure 2: A summary of the comprehensive map of the structures extracted from the interviews and the relationships between them

Table 1: Prioritization of the level-one Transmitter constructs

Receiver constructs	Ranking	transmitter constructs in the first the level
Brand Attachment	1	Attention to brand characteristics (185)
	2	desirable emotional and psychological relationship(153)

	3	brand self-identification(85)
	4	secure physical and mental base(58)
	5	Commitment(36)

Table 2: Prioritization of the level-two Transmitter constructs

Receiver constructs	Ranking	transmitter constructs in the second level	Frequency	The transmitter construct that is on the first level and is related to it
Brand Attachment	1	functional characteristics of the brand	97	Attention to brand characteristics
	2	love and affiliation to the brand	55	desirable emotional and psychological relationship
	2	distinction	54	brand self-identification
	3	general characteristics	48	Attention to brand characteristics
	4	good brand sense	46	desirable emotional and psychological relationship
	4	calmness	43	secure physical and mental base
	5	brand appearance	40	Attention to brand characteristics
	5	pleasure and joy	36	desirable emotional and psychological relationship
	6	affiliation	31	brand self-identification
	7	prejudice	21	commitment
	8	confidence	16	desirable emotional and psychological relationship
	8	trust	15	secure physical and mental base
	8	lack of interest in replacing a brand with another	15	commitment

**Hypotheses development and conceptual model**

In the first study, we identified effective constructs in creating brand attachment where the brand has irresponsible and discriminatory behaviors with its consumers. In the following, according to our observations, we will study the consumer's continuance commitment and their advocacy intentions of Apple even when faced with such behaviors. So after reviewing the literature in this field, we present the hypotheses and conceptual model (Figure 3). In this regard, we intend to investigate the hypotheses through a survey study.

**H1:** brand attachment (H1a: Affection – Passion, H1b: Connection) has a significant effect on enhancing a customer's CCB.

**H2:** Committed brand attachment has a significant effect on boosting brand advocacy intentions.

**H3:** Attachment anxiety moderates the relationship between attachment (H3a: Affection – Passion, H3b: Connection) and CCB.

**H4:** Avoiding brand attachment moderates the relationship between brand attachment (H4a: Affection – Passion, H4b: Connection) and CCB.

**Study 2:**

**Methodology**

**Sampling method and sample size of Population**

The Population of the present study is generally comprised of Tehran-based consumers attached to the Apple brand. We distributed a questionnaire among the

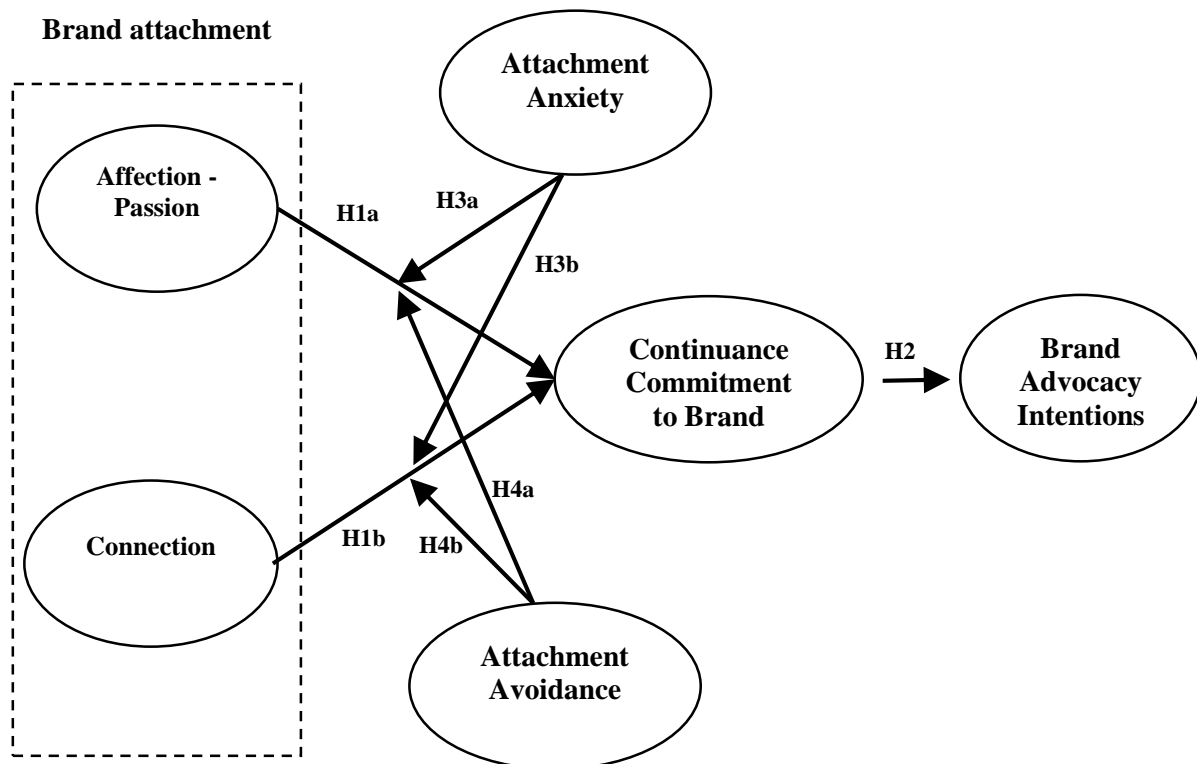


Figure 3: Conceptual model

respondents through Google Docs. We used the convenience sampling method. In the first step, we needed to confirm the respondents' attachment to the Apple brand. Therefore, we ensured their brand attachment via the 10-question test, and only those who showed the desired level of attachment (over 60%) were used in the assessment process.

Based on Glenn D. Israel Table, the number of sufficient samples for a population of over 100,000 subjects and a 5%- precision is about 400 (Israel, 1992). Accordingly, we used 409 samples to test the study's hypotheses. However, regarding the response rate and the non-analyzable questionnaires, we distributed more than 409 questionnaires to reach the minimum number of needed samples.

**Methods and Tools of Data Collection**

We used a standard questionnaire for the assessment of each variable. Accordingly, we adopted a scale validation for "Brand Attachment" (Ganassali & Matysiewicz, 2018; Thomson et al., 2005), a scale for

"Brand Attachment Styles" (Mende & Bolton, 2011; Rippé Cindy et al., 2019), a scale for "Brand Advocacy" (Shukla et al., 2016), and a scale for "Continuance Commitment" (Louis & Lombart, 2010). These variables were measured using the five-point Likert psychometric response scale.

**Data Analysis**

In this study, we investigated the specified paths according to the conceptual model by structural equation modeling method and especially the path analysis technique with Smart PLS. SEM is a comprehensive approach to hypotheses testing regarding relationships between observed and latent variables. Among all methods of multivariate analysis, it is the only method of structural equations that simultaneously uses both multiple regression analysis and factor analysis (J. F. Hair et al., 2006).

Of the 409 respondents, the majority were between 31–40 years old (around 50%). They represented more females (57%) than males (43%). Participants

represented different education levels, with the majority having Bachelor's degrees (42%). (Statistics summary shown in Table 3)

**Reflective measurement model**

Three main results, namely "internal construct reliability," "convergent validity," and "discriminant validity," are reported in the evaluation of the reflective measurement model (Cheah et al., 2018). All the reflective constructs are reliable and

consistent as the values are above 0.70 (Hair et al., 2016) (refer to table 4). In addition, the convergent validity of the measurement is determined by satisfactory loads and average variance extracted, with all values above the 0.708 rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2010) and 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

According to the discriminant validity obtained, it can be deduced that the primary constructs measure different aspects (refer to Table 5).

*Table 3. Demographic description of participants (N=409)*

Variables/criteria	N	%
Gender		
Male	175	42.8
Female	234	57.2
Age (years)		
Less Than 20	50	12.2
21 - 30	38	9.3
31 – 40	174	42.5
41 - 50	100	24.4
Older than 51	47	11.5
Education		
Up To diploma	13	3.2
Above diploma	84	20.5
Bachelor	206	50.4
MA	89	21.8
PHD	17	4.2

*Table 4. Measurement model fit indices*

Construct	Subdimension	Item	Factor loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Dijkstra Henseler	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Brand Attachment	Affection - Passion	loved	0.801	0.880	0.881	0.913	0.677
		peaceful	0.778				
		passionate	0.829				
		delighted	0.856				
		captivated	0.848				
	Connection	connected	0.878	0.838	0.844	0.903	0.756
		bonded	0.824				
		attached	0.905				
continuance commitment to Brand	This brand has a lot of meaning to me	I am strongly related to this brand	0.914	0.855	0.858	0.912	0.775
		Even if I wanted, it would be hard for me to change brands	0.863				
			0.864				
Advocacy Intentions	I usually say positive things about "Apple" to other people	I would recommend "Apple" to others who seek my advice	0.922	0.895	0.906	0.934	0.825
		I would encourage friends and relatives to shop for "Apple"	0.911				
			0.892				

Table 5. Discriminant Validity

	Brand Commitment	Brand Attachment		Advocacy Intentions
		Affection - Passion	Connection	
continuance commitment to Brand	0.881			
Brand Attachment	Affection - Passion	0.554	0.823	
	Connection	0.694	0.639	0.870
Advocacy Intentions	0.454	0.352	0.361	0.908

Structural model assessment

We implemented the structural model with a five-step approach when the validity and reliability of the structure were confirmed. We used inner VIF for examining the collinearity issue. Numerous researchers believe the acceptable value for VIF to be lower than 3.33. As shown in table (6), the values are well below the threshold. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no issue of multicollinearity in this model.

To assess the hypotheses' results, we use the bootstrapping technique (1000 resampling). it shows that brand attachment (Affection - Passion (H1:  $\beta = 0.186$ ,  $t = 3.830$ ) and Connection (H2:  $\beta = 0.575$ ,  $t = 13.034$ )) have positive effect on CCB, and CCB (H3:  $\beta = 0.454$ ,  $t = 9.509$ ) have positive effect on Brand Advocacy Intentions .

For cross-checking each path's importance, we assessed the effect size ( $f^2$ ) (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). Based on the guideline of Cohen (1988), the size of the effect can be split into three levels: small (0.02), medium (0.15), and large (0.35). The findings revealed that Affection – Passion ( $f^2 = 0.041$ ) display a small effect size. While Connection ( $f^2 = 0.393$ ) display a large effect size in developing CCB. In addition, CCB ( $f^2 = 0.259$ ) exhibit a large effect size in developing Brand Advocacy Intentions (refer to Table 6).

According to Figure 4, all the predictors explain 50.2% and 20.6% of the variance in CCB and Brand Advocacy Intentions,

respectively. In addition, the blindfolding process is performed to evaluate the model's predictive relevance. ( $Q^2$ ). The values of  $Q^2$  for the endogenous are higher than zero at 0.502 and 0.580 (Representing a considerable predictive relevance). It indicates that the model contains a quality of predictive (Hair et al., 2016).

In H3 and H4 hypotheses, we examined the impact of brand attachment (a: Affection - Passion, b: Connection) on CCB while taking “anxiety” and “avoidance” into consideration as the moderator variables. In terms of total effects, anxiety significantly and negatively affects CCB ( $\beta = -0.242$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), as well as, avoidance significantly and negatively affects CCB ( $\beta = -0.398$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). It means that as the amount of anxiety and avoidance increases, the amount of commitment will decrease.

The moderating effect of anxiety is not significant in the relationship between H3a: Affection - Passion and CCB ( $\beta = -0.077$ ,  $p = 0.063$ ) and H3b: Connection and CCB ( $\beta = -0.028$ ,  $p = 0.386$ ). Thus, hypotheses H3a and H3b are rejected. Also the moderating effect of avoidance is not significant in the relationship between H4a: Affection - Passion and CCB ( $\beta = 0.006$ ,  $p = 0.813$ ) and H4b: Connection and CCB ( $\beta = 0.032$ ,  $p = 0.254$ ). Thus, hypotheses H4a and H4b are rejected. (Table 7)

Table 6. Structural Model

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. beta	t-value	p-value	VIF	f <sup>2</sup>
H1a	Brand attachment → Affection - Passion	0.186	3.830	0.000	1.692	0.041
H2b	Brand attachment → Connection	0.575	13.034	0.000	1.692	0.393
H3	Committed brand attachment → CCB	0.454	9.509	0.000	1.000	0.259

Note(s): p < 0.001; BAI: Brand Advocacy Intentions; CCB: Continuance Commitment to Brand

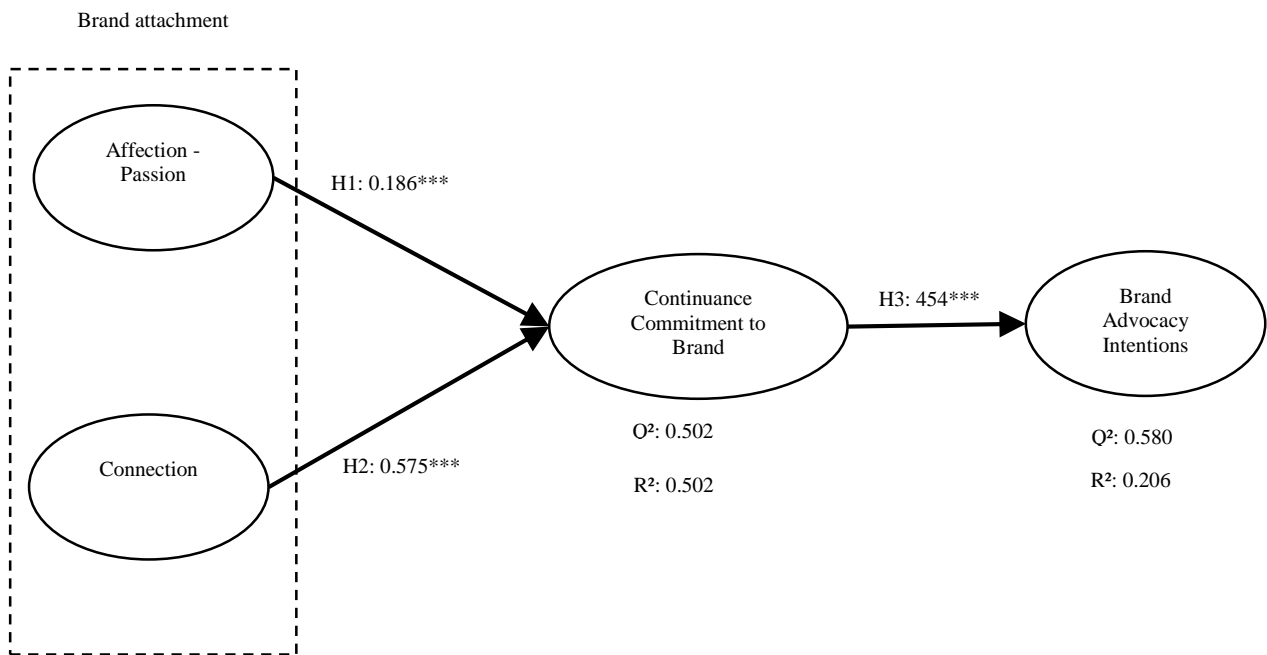


Figure 4: Structural Model Result

Table 7. Attachment styles' Moderating effect (Dependent Variable: continuance commitment to Brand)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficients	p-value
	Attachment Anxiety → CCB	-0.242	0.000
H3a	Attachment Anxiety * Affection - Passion	-0.077	0.063
H3b	Attachment Anxiety * Connection	-0.028	0.386
	Attachment Avoidance → CCB	-0.398	0.000
H4a	Attachment Avoidance * Affection - Passion	0.006	0.813
H4b	Attachment Avoidance * Connection	0.032	0.254

Note(s): p < 0.001; CCB: Continuance Commitment to Brand

**Conclusion, Discussion, and Comparison**

The findings showed that attached consumers tend to maintain their commitment to the brand even when faced with irresponsible and discriminatory brand behaviors. This study confirmed the brand's continuous commitment and advocacy intentions as two outcomes of brand commitment. The findings show the power of commitment in these consumers. Irresponsible and discriminatory behaviors of the brand led to an increase in anxiety and avoidance of consumer attachment. The

negative effect of this issue was confirmed in the relationship between consumers' brand attachment and commitment.

However, these variables' moderating effect was not sufficient to severely reduce or eliminate brand commitment. With the increase in the speed of news publication and the fierce competition of brands, the slightest irresponsible behavior of a brand can spread quickly and lead to the loss of its market share. Eventually, It may end up causing a brand crisis. According to many previous cases (such as the Uber crisis), it

seems that spending much money and managerial measures to overcome the brand crisis has not been successful. Therefore, preventive measures can be a higher priority for brands. In this regard and based on the findings, creating and strengthening a solid emotional bond with consumers, in the format of brand attachment, can reduce the negative impact of some irresponsible behaviors and news published about such behaviors.

Continuous commitment and brand advocacy intentions were confirmed as essential and apparent consequences of brand attachment under the detailed conditions of this research. The issue shows that the attached consumers are less willing to break their commitment and modify their advocacy intentions when accosting discriminatory and irresponsible brand behaviors. This approach of the consumers can play an essential role in reducing their reaction when they face negative news and help prevent a brand crisis.

Some previous studies have presented the brand attachment variable as an affective link (Malar et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2005), whereas others have described it as an emotional and cognitive link (Behi, 2011; Lacoeyuilhe, 2000; Park et al., 2006; Pedeliento, 2018). In this study, we introduced brand attachment as an emotional-cognitive link. In other words, we showed that emotion and logic go hand in hand to create and strengthen a strong bond, which is called attachment, between the consumer-brand.

The effects detected regarding the attachment avoidance and anxiety in this study converge with the results obtained by (Japutra et al., 2014, 2018; Thomson, 2006; Thomson et al., 2012). Continuance commitment, as one of the aspects of brand commitment, converges with the results of investigations by Bansal et al. (2006) and Fullerton (2003, 2004), and Tsiotsou & Goldsmith (2013).

The positive effect of brand commitment on boosting advocacy intentions, which was found in this study, is converge with the results of Fullerton (2005). The results of the research, in some respects, converge with the results obtained by Ching-Fu Chen et al. (2020), Raffaele Donvito et al. (2020), (Kashani et al., 2017), Ganassali and Matysiewicz (2018), Huang (2015).

### **Practical suggestions**

While existing studies suggest that brand attachment creates desirable behaviors, our study showed that brand attachment is created and strengthened by which factors in situations where brands behave discriminatingly and irresponsibly with their consumers.

Following the results of this study, managers and marketers can focus on constructs such as *brand characteristics* and *the development of favorable emotional and psychological relationships with the brand* as the two most effective components of creating and boosting brand attachment. The approach enables them to enhance relationships or create strong bonds with the customers and achieve the desired consequences of brand attachment. Furthermore, it can be a measure to prevent a brand crisis.

According to the results of this investigating, the brand's continuous commitment and advocacy intentions in attached consumers can play an essential role in reducing their reaction to negative news published. In this regard, we suggest that brand managers continuously expose consumers to news related to the behaviors that place the brand responsibly. This measure can prepare them to overcome probabilistic negative news.

### **Limitations**

We faced limitations regarding the time, place, and ongoing conditions. The study falls under the category of cross-sectional studies carried out in the summer of 2021. In terms of place, the study was limited to

subjects living in Iran, specifically in Tehran. We conducted this study amid the COVID-19 pandemic, sweeping worldwide for months. This situation forced us to collect most of the data (interviews and questionnaires) online.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings, we suggest that focusing on some constructs can pave the way to reaching brand attachment; thus, researchers, adopting experimental quantitative approaches, can manipulate the independent variables, which are the constructs identified in this study, and implement the results at a practical level. The factors identified in this research could not study all the consequences of brand attachment where consumers are faced with irresponsible and discriminatory behaviors of a brand. Thus, it is a suggestion for future research. We also suggest that this topic be studied in other fields and industries using proper and related research methods.

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*Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 32(5), 435-452  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08961530.2020.1717400>

**HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

*Kashani M., Hamdi K., Navabakhsh M. (2022). Prevention of brand crisis: the brand attachments' role in the mitigation of adverse consumer reactions, 3(4): 47-68.*

**DOI:**

Url: [https://ijfaes.srbiau.ac.ir/article\\_16607.html](https://ijfaes.srbiau.ac.ir/article_16607.html)

Journal homepage: <https://ijfaes.srbiau.ac.ir>