

## COMPARISON OF CONSUMER EVALUATION OF THE BRANDING STRATEGIES USED BY MOBILE NETWORK OPERATORS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article History:</i> Received: Jul 10, 2021 Revised: Aug 21, 2021 Accepted: Sep 20, 2021 Available Online: Oct 8, 2021</p> <hr/> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Consumer evaluation, Branding strategy, Mobile network operator.</p> <hr/> <p><i>JEL Classification:</i> M31</p>	<p>The present study explores the consumers' preferences in comparison and evaluations of branding strategies of four mobile network operators' .i.e. Telenor, Zong, Mobilink and Ufone. A standardized measure of Brand Strategy Evaluation Scale (BSES) was used for consumer evaluation perspectives and data was collected from 200 participants (108 males and 92 females, between ages 17 to 41) in Lahore, Pakistan. The convenience sampling technique was used by employing cross sectional research design. The obtained results show that consumers most positively rated Ufone network operators, with its competitive features and advertising strategy. The Telenor is only contender competing Ufone in offers and services and facilities with money matter. The present contributes to the literature of branding strategies of mobile network operators and discusses the managerial implications. Limitations and future recommendations are also provided.</p>

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, use of mobile phones has immensely increased, that even became a crucial commodity for every person with cutting edge technology in the telecommunication and mobile industry. Telecommunication sector is vast and has importance for economic-socio growth of a country, (Gilal, Paul, Gilal & Gilal, 2021). Various mobile network operators ensure customer satisfaction in the competitive market. In now days, wide range of utilities are provided by cellular companies in smartphones, (Kumar, Haque & Dhar, 2021). Consumer evaluation pronounces in term of marketing, an operator subjective opinion and perception of the product that turns out in consumer product use or avoidance. Consumer evaluation mainly depends on brand strategies adopted by different companies (David, 2019). Customer satisfaction is important for the organization to sustain profitability and strong impact (Nazir, 2015). Customer normally prefers the cellular company products and services which developed vital competitive strategies (Duong, 2016). Consumers become satisfied when a cellular company fulfills the expectations by providing relevant branding strategies, (Gilal et al., 2021). Consumers compare the branding strategies of mobile network operators on the basis of level of competitive strategies, efficiency of the organization, queries solving services and product price range of the company, (Patharia & Pandey, 2021).

#### 1.1 Research objectives

The study tended to measure disparity in consumer evaluation of different brand strategies of their mobile network operators (MOSs). The gender-based difference also speculated concerning consumer appraisal. The research.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Comparison of branding strategies may be more analyzed by age groups of people i.e. how young and old age people compare their mobile network operators with others (Chigwende & Govender, 2021). The current study has extended and attempted to provide a framework of branding strategies provided by various mobile network operators and how consumers evaluate the specific branding strategies of their respective company. The study extends the literature and provides a comprehensive data about branding strategies of mobile network operators and emerge the gap that various studies have not addressed before in this era.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

A brand could be designated as a service or product contrived by company, which has unique features and distinguishing element of branding for instance name, logo, design, representatives, symbol and sign (Mishra, 2012; Fahy, 2003). Mobile network operator adopts various branding tactics for product branding and services, based on core marketing strategies including promotion, price, access of product, striking packing and eminence (Das & Grincven, 2014). Branding strategies often held emotional component as well as functional (Kilaba & Manasseh, 2020). Mobile Network Operators use many promotional activities in this intense competition which easily switch the commitments of user to other mobile network operators. (Nhundu, 2017). Customer repurchase behaviors have been encouraged by customer satisfaction towards use of a cellular network, (Asante-Darko & Kwarteng, 2017).

Customer satisfaction and loyalty depend on brand image, promotion, call quality, call rate, signal strength, SMS quality and service quality of cellular company, (Chigwende & Govender, 2021). Trust, corporate image, service quality and price are the strategies which enables the consumers to choose a specific brand, (Patharia & Pandey, 2021). The brand slogan is another form of the strategy adopted intensively by the mobile network operator, that mainly focus on associating product and brand services with social and common cultural repertoires, keeping in mind to sustain customer brand recognition and loyalty (Foster, 2011; Hatch, Becker, and Zyl, 2011;), specially multinational companies are keen to put forth country and cultural related element in branding (Luigi & Simona, 2010; Mcenally & Chernatony, 2000). These services and offers are related to branding strategies and crucial in gaining consumer preference and loyalty. The people avail the services of mobile network service operators (MNOs) are labeled as mobile network users (MNU). The general services are used by consumer on mobile are communication, emailing, online ticketing, bank account handling, shopping, browsing, social networking, e-commerce, online gaming and many more things could be signed up in a single mobile network. Thus, the wide range of activities are doable on mobile phones, ever since high-speed internet become a basic feature of mobile network services (Chigwende & Govender, 2021). Customer mostly compare branding strategies of mobile network operators with respect to internet offers, price and service offers, (Kumar, Haque & Dhar, 2021).

Previous relevant literature on MNOs suggested, Butt and Run (2009) five major mobile network companies operating in Pakistan from last two decades e.g. Ufone, Telenor, Mobilink, Warid and Zong. The sharp progression in the telecom sector augmented competition and challenges. These all companies are consistently facing rivalry in the market from a competitor, therefore frequently adopting challenging and heading innovative branding strategies and services. Consumer selection of specific network depends on offered services evaluation of mobile network companies (Hassan, Ahmad, and Aminudin, 2013). MNOs introduce a variety of packages in a brand campaign to attract customers. The consumer selection process of a network centered on, a monthly commitment of customers toward mobile network operator, monthly charges, rewards offer, and value-added services provided by MNOs. Monthly charges included monthly fee that users pay to their network operators. In additions Kauser, Qureshi, Shahzad, and Hasan (2012) rewards refer to special benefit offer by MNOs during the particular period and value-added services included all extra services provided by mobile MNOs. For MNOs customer satisfaction is instigated to be highly allied with customers' perception of services. These variables affect consumers' decision to remain with a cellular company (brand loyal) or switch to another network (brand switching) (Hanif, Hafeez, & Riaz, 2010; Nawaz & Usman, 2010; Khan, 2010). Evaluation of consumer perception of branding was solely studied with a standardized procedure by Khan, Mujitaba, Zaheer and Bukahri (2014), and have categorized five different sub-domains (offer and

services, competitive feature, advertising strategy, brand identity and facilitation with money matter) of brand strategies of MNOs. Consumers' perception focus on these five aspects of brand strategy of MNOs in Pakistan. The difference in consumer evaluation for different companies branding strategy needs to be explored. Comparison of consumer evaluation of branding strategy is understudied with specifically MNOs. The gender-based differences in brand strategy evaluation are not well studied too. Whereas available literature postulated that females are more perceptive towards branding. Either such conscious perception about branding exist regarding MNOs, need to be answered. Hence this study is proposed to focus on consumer comparison of the branding strategy of different MNOs. This study will highlight the consumer attractive element in services, are being used by them. Adding on the most effective strategy identification that guarantees consumer loyalty and preference could also be expected to enunciate in findings. We are anticipating measuring gender-based variance in brand strategy evaluation of MNOs.

*H1: There will be a significant difference in consumer evaluation of braiding strategies*

*H2; Gender would be important in braiding strategies evaluation in consumer perspective*

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Sample

The present study used a non-probability convenient sampling technique for recruiting participants consisting of mobile networks operators (users of a mobile phone) representing all mobile network operators available in Lahore city (Mobilink, Telenor, Ufone, Warid and Zong). The sample consisted of 200 participants (108 men and 92 women), age ranged between 17 to 41 years ( $M = 26.03$ ,  $SD = 5.78$ ). The sample possessed diversity in terms of marital status, education, occupation and monthly family income.

#### 3.2 Instruments

**Branding Strategies Evaluation Scale (BSES).** The scale was developed and validated by Khan, Mujitaba, Bukhari and Tariq (2014), (See Appendix A) The scale has 21 items with five sub-scales (factors) namely offers and services (5 items), competitive features (6 items), advertising strategies (4 items), brand identity (3 items) and facilitation with money matters (3 items). The respondents have to rate each item on a Likert type 5-point scale (1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Good 4 = Very Good and 5 = Excellent).

All the scores are added up to obtain the overall score on the scale. A higher total score on the scale represents a more positive rating of the branding strategies of the respondent's preferred mobile network operator and vice versa. In addition to a total score on the scale, five sub-scores can be calculated for the five factors of the scale. The sub-score for offers and services (factor 1) is obtained by adding items 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18. The sub-score for competitive features (factor 2) is obtained by adding items 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13. The sub-score for advertising strategies (factor 3) is obtained by adding items 4, 5, 6 and 7. The sub-score for brand identity (factor 4) is obtained by adding items 1, 2 and 3. The sub-score for facilitation with money matters (factor 5) is obtained items 19, 20 and 21. The sub-scale scores are interpreted in the same way as the total score.

The authors reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of  $\alpha = .91$  for the total score of Branding Strategies Evaluation Scale on the normative sample. For the same sample, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for subscales range between  $\alpha = .66$  (Facilitation with Money) to  $\alpha = .84$  (Offers and Services). For the present study's sample measure psychometric properties of the scale were,  $\alpha = .90$  for the total score of Branding Strategies Evaluation Scale while the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for sub-scales range between  $\alpha = .71$  (Facilitation with Money) to  $\alpha = .80$  (Competitive Features).

#### 3.3 Ethical Considerations

The requirement for meeting ethical considerations was fulfilled during research work. The participants were briefed about the research and written consent to participate in the research was taken from them before data collection. They were informed that the study would not result in any physical or psychological harm to them and if desired they were free to withdraw from the research any time.

### 3.4 Procedure

The respondents were approached individually in public places such as parks, shopping areas and libraries etc. They were briefed about the purpose of the study. If they were willing to participate in the research, they were asked to fill up the required material on the spot. Most respondents took 10-12 minutes to do so.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20. Initially, the demographic characteristics of the sample were determined (see Table 1). The next step was to calculate the means, standard deviations and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the respondents (see Table 4.2).

**Table 4.1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Study 3 Sample (N= 200)*

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	108	54.0%
Female	92	46.0%
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	123	61.5%
Married	77	38.5%
<i>Monthly Family Income in Pak Rs.</i>		
Less than 10000	14	7.0%
10000 to 25000	50	25.0%
26000 to 50000"	54	27.0%
51000 to 75000	30	15.0%
76000 to 100000	28	14.0%
Above 100000	24	12.0%
<i>Network</i>		
Mobilink	40	20.0%
Telenor	40	20.0%
Ufone	40	20.0%
Warid	40	20.0%
Zong	40	20.0%

**Table 4.2**

**Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients of Respondents' Scores on BSES (N = 200)**

Scale	No. of Items	M(SD)	$\alpha$
BSES Total	21	68.66 (15.02)	.90
Offers and Services	5	15.76 (4.43)	.75
Competitive Features	6	18.99 (5.32)	.80
Advertising Strategies	4	12.85 (3.81)	.72
Brand Identity	3	10.96 (2.75)	.77
Facilitation with Money Matters	3	10.11 (2.12)	.71

One-Way Between-Groups ANOVA was used to test whether there were significant overall and specific mean differences in the way consumers of various mobile network operators evaluate the branding strategies of their preferred mobile network operator. Specifically, the ANOVA tested the following research questions:

Table 4.3 shows that the mean total scores of the consumers of five mobile network operators differed significantly from each other on BSES,  $F(4, 195) = 7.54, p < .001$ . Ufone users most positively evaluated their MNOs on aggregated scores of BSES. Similar results emerged on the comparisons of participants response on the sub-scale of competitive features,  $F(4, 195) = 2.42, p < .05$  and advertising strategies,  $F(4, 195) = 9.69, p < .001$ . These sub-scale comparisons revealed significant mean differences between the groups with consumers of Ufone obtaining the highest mean scores as compared to their competitors. Significant mean differences in consumers' evaluations were also found on the sub-scales of offers and services,  $F(4, 195) = 4.49, p < .01$  and facilitation with money matters,  $F(4, 195) = 18.58, p < .001$ . For both sub-scales, the consumers of Telenor gave the highest ratings. No significant mean differences were found between the consumers' ratings on the sub-scale of facilitation with money matters.

**Table 4.3**

**One-Way Between-Groups ANOVA for BSES's Total and Sub-Scale Scores (N = 200)**

Measured Area	Mobile Network Operator					$F(df)$	$P$
	Mobilink $M(SD)$	Telenor $M(SD)$	Ufone $M(SD)$	Warid $M(SD)$	Zong $M(SD)$		
BSES Total	72.30 (11.47)	72.05 (16.83)	74.05 (11.18)	65.53 (11.97)	59.35 (17.73)	7.54***	.001
Offers and Services	16.45 (4.00)	16.90 (4.63)	16.55 (3.82)	15.55 (3.37)	13.35 (5.34)	4.49**	.002
Competitive Features	19.23 (5.38)	19.63 (5.19)	20.43 (4.48)	18.68 (4.65)	16.98 (6.36)	2.42*	.050

Advertising Strategies	13.85 (2.73)	12.70 (4.15)	15.23 (2.82)	11.13 (3.92)	11.33 (3.70)	9.69***	.000
Brand Identity	11.40 (2.81)	11.20 (3.20)	11.35 (1.98)	10.20 (2.32)	10.65 (3.15)	1.44	.222
Facilitation with Money Matters	11.38 (2.75)	11.63 (2.71)	10.50 (2.08)	9.98 (2.40)	7.05 (3.34)	18.58***	.000

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 4.4 shows the results of an independent sample  $t$ -test that was carried out to explore whether there were any gender differences (both on total and sub-scale scores of BSS) in the consumers' evaluation of the branding strategies used by their preferred mobile network operator. The results revealed that there was a significant mean difference between the scores of men and women on the total score of BSES:  $t(198) = -3.91$ ,  $p < .001$  with women scoring higher than men. Significant mean differences between the scores of men and women were also found on the sub-scales of offers and services:  $t(198) = -3.07$ ,  $p < .01$ , competitive features:  $t(198) = -4.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , advertising strategies:  $t(198) = -2.97$ ,  $p < .01$ , and brand identity:  $t(198) = -2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ . On all these sub-scales women obtained higher mean scores as compared to men.

**Table 4.4**

**Independent Sample  $t$ -test comparing BSES's Scores based on Gender**

	Men ( $n = 108$ )		Women ( $n = 92$ )		$t$	$P$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$		
BSES Total	64.95	14.61	73.00	14.39	-3.91	.000***
Offers and Services	14.89	4.32	16.78	4.37	-3.07	.002**
Competitive Features	17.61	4.92	20.60	5.36	-4.11	.000***
Advertising Strategies	12.12	3.84	13.70	3.61	-2.97	.003**
Brand Identity	10.56	2.72	11.42	2.72	-2.23	.027*
Facilitation with Money Matters	9.77	3.13	10.50	3.10	-1.66	.099

$df = 198$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present study intended to compare the perceptions of the consumers of various Pakistani mobile network operators about the effectiveness of the various branding strategies used by their preferred mobile network operator. Strategic brand management significantly influence the consumers choices, sense of autonomy, passion and relatedness, (Gilal et al., 2021) . Use of mobile telecommunication as substitute of landline is considered highly portable and growing exponentially in all over the world, (Kilaba & Manasseh, 2020). This growth contributes in continuous development, competitive environment and launching of many branding strategies and prepaid services to the customers, (David, 2019). Communication strategies have important role in building loyal relations between consumers and company. (Patharia & Pandey, 2021). The main finding of current study described Ufone as the most positively evaluated services provider with its competitive features and advertising strategies. Telenor was the only operator, exceed Ufone in offers and services and facilitating in money matters. Women were found more generous and subtle about brand strategies evaluation as compared to male counterparts in our study. Overall the MNUs of Ufone evaluated most positively their mobile network operator. In subdomain of branding strategy evaluation, Ufone's network users rated its competitive features and advertising strategies higher as compared to the consumers of other networks. That was yield by significant mean differences in the consumers' evaluation of the branding strategies used by their preferred mobile network operator (see Table 4.3). The previous studies supported our claim, presented Ufone as a favourite



Pakistani mobile network service provider (Ahmed & Qazi, 2011; Said, Mohib & Asghar, 2013). On the contrary of these findings, some studies have also found other networks, like Mobilink or Telenor, as most preferred mobile network operators of Pakistani consumers (Jan & Wajidi, 2011; Said et al., 2013). But this assertion could not verify in our findings, only Telenor rated high than Ufone in providing offers and services and facilitation with money matters. However, Ufone positively exceeds to other network operators in general brand strategy evaluation of MNOs. It is interesting and important to mention here that previous research in this area has focused on a single and specific branding strategy (e.g., price, advertising strategy and user-based services); mobile network operators were not compared as a single construct accompanied with subdomains. So, the present study was one of its kinds and provided new insight regarding inclusive as well as specific differences in the consumers' evaluation of the branding strategies used by their preferred MNOs.

Our findings are unparallel to some previous outcomes, Akhter, Abbasi, Ali, and Afzal (2010) suggested that a distinct product identity/ image, besides several other factors, play an important role in brand preferences. However, for the present study, no significant mean differences were found between the consumers' ratings on the evaluation of their mobile network operator's brand identity. One possible explanation of our findings could be supported by the fact that mobile network operators invest in developing a distinct brand identity for themselves (Said, Mohib & Asghar, 2013) which is recognized by their consumers at more or less the same level along the continuum of evaluation.

The gender-based differences are quite prominent in the evaluation of brand strategies of MNOs. In a comparison of men, women gave higher ratings on overall and subcomponent of brand strategy evaluation except for facilitation with money matters where men and women's ratings were not significantly different from each other (see Table 4.4). The result suggests that women tend to be more generous and lenient evaluators when appraising a product/service as compared to men. The previous literature is not available on the gender-based difference in brand strategy evaluation concerning the current finding. Additional research required to elaborate on gender role in brand strategies evaluation. Our findings signify, gender must be part of the implementation of brand strategy such as a huge percentage of MNU is consisting of women.

### **5.1 Limitations and Future Recommendations**

The current study is not without limitations. The present study was conducted in Lahore city by adopting cross sectional research design. Future studies may be conducted on various cities of other regions in order to see the generalizability of existing findings. Secondly current study evaluate the five basic branding strategies that provided by various mobile network operators. Futures researches are encouraged to conduct researches on additional branding strategies of cellular companies. Future studies may explore additional Branding strategies that may have different impact on consumer choice to select a mobile network operators, (Patharia & Pandey, 2021). cost and barriers which force to switch customers' loyalty of cellular companies and make their perception of satisfaction in general as well as particular towards branding strategies of a cellular company may be analyzed in more specific way (Chigwende & Govender, 2021). On the basis of above discussion we believe that current study opens a new way for marketers to manage their existing brands with attempting more standardized efforts in setting of branding strategies.

### **5.2 Managerial Implications**

The present research can be used to assess individual/group differences on the branding strategies of mobile network operators and other services. It will facilitate mobile network operators in Pakistan to maintain their better branding strategies. The mobile network operators may improve their flaw in branding strategies for gaining customers' positive perception. More specifically gender-based preference would also consider in MNO Branding strategies. The current study suggests some practical and theoretical implications for mobile network operators. Theoretically using branding strategies of mobile network operators in Pakistan have received little attention in the emerging economy. The literature of branding strategies in this sector provides a gateway to enhance the performance of cellular companies and management must attract their respective customers by adopting more techniques of existing brands.

### 5.3 Conclusion

Our study concluded that Ufone was auspiciously valued mobile network services provider in the educated urban population in Pakistan with its competitive features and effective advertising component of brand strategy. Further elucidated, Telenor undermined the Ufone in branding strategy component of offers and services and care in money matters. By and large, we recommended that the following components might be the part of effective brand strategy for mobile network services providers. Females were more generous and sensitive in branding strategies as compared to males. Therefore, in the implementation of brand strategy female's evaluation would take into account. Last but not least, our study has strengthened the Brand Strategy Evaluation Scale (BSES) generalization on a different sample, which has not been tested before on any other population. BSES is now disposed for more generalization and can be tested on the general population with more demographic variability.

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## Appendix A Brand Strategy Evaluation Scale (BSES)

### Instruction

Please evaluate the quality of the following features of your preferred mobile network by choosing the option that best corresponds to you.

**Note:** Please choose only one of the following mobile network operators for rating all the items.

☐ Mobilink      ☐ Telenor      ☐ Ufone      ☐ Warid      ☐ Zong

		Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
1	Brand Name	1	2	3	4	5
2	Brand Logo	1	2	3	4	5
3	Brand Slogan	1	2	3	4	5
4	Creative Advertising	1	2	3	4	5
5	Emotional Advertising	1	2	3	4	5
6	Use of a Celebrity in Advertising	1	2	3	4	5
7	Use of Humor in Advertising	1	2	3	4	5
8	Distinguished Offers	1	2	3	4	5
9	Distinguished Price	1	2	3	4	5
10	Distinguished Quality	1	2	3	4	5
11	Distinguished Post Purchase Services	1	2	3	4	5
12	Free Offers	1	2	3	4	5
13	Bundle Offers	1	2	3	4	5
14	Prize Offers	1	2	3	4	5
15	Budgeted Offers	1	2	3	4	5
16	Customer Care	1	2	3	4	5
17	Help Line	1	2	3	4	5
18	Complaint Response	1	2	3	4	5
19	Bill Payment Service	1	2	3	4	5
20	Money Transfer Service	1	2	3	4	5
21	Advance Balance Service	1	2	3	4	5

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