

**A STUDY OF THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED
QUALITY IN IMPACT OF INTERNAL MARKETING
STRATEGY ON BRAND EQUITY
A CASE MCI TELECOMMUNICATION COMPANY**

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Abstract

Main goal of the present study is to study mediating role of perceived quality of service in impact of internal marketing strategy on brand equity of MCI. Statistical population consists of all employees of marketing personnel department and customers of MCI Company in Tehran. This research is descriptive - survey. The tools to collect data are questionnaire which its validity was approved based on content and its reliability was approved by using Cronbach's alpha. For data analysis, structural equations model (path analysis) and single-sample mean test were used by software of Lisrel and SPSS. The results from hypotheses test confirmed the mediating role of perceived quality of services in impact of internal marketing strategy on brand equity. Also, results indicated that internal marketing as a positive and significant impact on perceived quality of services and additionally perceived quality has a positive and significant impact on brand equity. The related findings showed that at present internal marketing is in modest condition in this company but the condition of variables such as perceived quality of services and brand equity is relatively favorable.

Keywords: Internal marketing, Perceived service quality, Brand equity, MCI Company

INTRODUCTION

Internal marketing is one of the marketing concepts which were introduced by Berry about 20 years ago as a way to solve problems relating to employees of organization and providing quality or services to them. Despite the expansion of this concept in the marketing literature, it is actually less used. The next debate was conducted in the context of internal marketing reflects the fact that this branch of marketing requires extensive research.

Internal marketing is an infrastructure and foundation of marketing services and nowadays it has become one of the vital and main strategies in many service companies such as banks (Payne, Stewart, & Mackie, 1998) which can be justified with challenges that organizations face in conditions of global competition. The nature of business has changed such a way that many successful manufacturing and service industries in the world, look for to serve efficiently and consistent with customer requirements as a source of competitive advantage (Lewis, 1987).

One of the most valuable assets of any company is its brand. The more brand value is in the minds of consumers, the company can receive more benefits in the light of it. Brand equity is one of the assets that retain value and customer loyalty altogether. Brand is the promise made by producer to the consumer and requires companies to be honest about their products and services. In today's competitive world that goods are not in much distinction physically, a prestigious brand can create significant competitive advantage.

Brand equity is final goal or added value which is made by product with the help of brand. Brand equity is considered as assets for company which increases turnovers of business (Simon & Sullivan, 1993) and it is multi-dimensional concept that can be increased by strengthening its dimensions. These dimensions are: knowledge, perceived quality, loyalty, association and other assets of the brand (Aaker, 2009).

The importance of perceived quality has been considered in many works during last year's. Providing the best quality to customers is undoubtedly important for service enterprises available in today's competitive market. Those companies with the ability to provide valuable service products from customers' point of view can reach the main competitive advantage. Therefore, both managers and researchers should consider how to evaluate and emphasize offered services by customers. Perceived quality by customers is necessary for organizations and has become spotlight of marketing strategies in recent years.

Studies in this area suggest a positive relationship between internal customer satisfaction (employees) and the organization's brand. Studies by Cowherd and Levine (1992) reflect the fact that employee satisfaction (internal customers) has a significant impact on product quality and thus have a positive impact on brand equity.

Today telecommunications industry has undergone changes that had never experienced before in its history. These changes have had a significant impact on both the structure and the nature of competition in this industry. In our country, in recent years the mobile telecommunication industry has become much more competitive and more dynamic than before. In the more dynamic and competitive environment of telecommunication industry, internal marketing has brought sustainable competitive advantage for the telecom industry because it helps to create quality accepted by customers and thus to increase brand equity. Thus using correct strategies of internal marketing has become vital for them.

The issue will be addressed in this study is that in mobile telecom field, how and to what extent internal marketing strategies (internal customers of organization who are human resources of organization) influence the quality of offered products and services to external customers how their perception of quality of offered products and services can influence brand equity of MCI company?

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL BASICS

Internal Marketing

Internal marketing is considered as academic, scientific and commercial knowledge of improving satisfaction of customers and employees. This branch of marketing is influenced mostly by quality management and service marketing which emphasizes the importance and necessity of creating quality in whole package of offering services. This area of marketing considers the relationship between customers and internal service providers in creating value for external customers and this can be appeared as a value chain and means to develop quality of products and services and internal and external interactions (Lings, 1999).

The main objective of internal marketing is to ensure satisfaction between employees and development of quality in order to achieve satisfaction of external customers that this is going on as a process from internal customers to external customers. Studies suggest the positive relationship between satisfaction of internal customers of organization (employees) and job satisfaction of its external customers (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000).

There are various models of internal marketing presented. In each of these models, elements of internal marketing are different. However, these models have some overlapping elements. Ballantyne (2000) believes elements of marketing includes employee involvement in the development of policies, procedures and processes, unilateral feedback, training, information sharing, bilateral interaction and team learning. Gronroos (2000) believes dimensions of internal marketing include: training, management support and internal

communication, intelligence support, human resources management, external communications, and IT systems development and improving internal service.

Finn et al. (1996) referred internal marketing elements including respect, accuracy and speed, useful information, keeping informed and active feedback (Finn, Baker, Marshall, & Anderson, 1996). From Foreman and Mooney's point of view (1995), elements of internal marketing include employee development, bonuses, understanding and internalizing the vision (Foreman & Money, 1995). Tansuhaj and colleagues (1991) argue that positive attitude towards the employees; training, communications, two-way feedback and helping to understand the relationship between performance and reward are the constituent elements of internal marketing.

In his study, internal marketing model is based on model by Bansal et al. (2001). According to this model, internal marketing elements include:

Employment Security

This aspect of internal marketing considers equipping employees in order to have considerable employment security. Gasta et al (2011) believe that employment security means organization provides suitable context to enable individual so that it is dependent on individual based on expertise and empowerment and requires his expertise and empowerment externally. Researches show that increasing the level of employment security will increase satisfaction, loyalty and trust in management (Bansal et al., 2001).

Diverse and Widespread Training

In developed global economy, knowledge creation and development is one of the main factors to achieve global competitive advantage. Generally, employee training is in relation to recognition and problem solving, making necessary changes in processes and methods of performance and after-sales services. According to studies, investment on training with have tangible results that these results include improving attitudes, promoting skills in relation to improving quality of services and satisfaction level & loyalty of employees Up (Bansal et al., 2001).

Offering Generous Bonuses

Offering higher wages and benefits than average level of industry and payments in proportion with performance and productivity is one of these methods. According to researches, employees with higher wages and benefits an average have more satisfaction and commitment to organization (Bansal et al., 2001).

Knowledge and Information Sharing

In order to create communication and information sharing of organization, information flow should be established by using various methods. The importance of his flow is in facilitating decision making and creating suitable feedback mechanism. It also promotes ability levels (Bansal et al., 2001).

Employees' Empowerment

Some defined empowerment as a form of lack of concentration which requires authority assignment of fundamental decisions to subordinates (Tubbs & Moss, 2000). In another definition, empowerment includes taking responsibility to make decision in ongoing activities (Herrenkohl, Judson, & Heffner, 1999).

Participation of employees and their empowerment are of new methods to release talent and ability of human in organizations. The main goal to assign authority and right of decision-making to lower levels is to stimulate pride and self-confidence, self-respect and taking responsibility in employees (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992).

Decreasing Social Gap between Employees

By decreasing social gap, they can easily express their ideas and as a result I increases creativity, honesty, trust and job satisfaction. Two methods of decreasing position difference is to decrease difference in wages in organization horizontally and to create organizational symbols in line with organizational communication based on culture of honesty, trust and organizational justice (Bansal et al., 2001).

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality of services is related to a level of quality which customer perceives during receiving services from organization and after that from performance of organization. This perceived level of performance can be expected more or less than or equal to performance level. Satisfaction with performance is function of primary expected level of performance and perceived performance (Aldlaigan & Buttle, 2002). Parasuraman and colleagues (1985) defined perceived quality as customer perception of total quality or superiority of product or services by accepting considerable objective in relation to other options. Aaker (2009) states hat perceived quality should be considered in two different areas-service quality and product quality. Various models have been proposed to assess the quality of service. Gronroos (2000) discusses service quality based on three dimensions of technical, functional qualities and image of company.

Lehtinen and Lehtinen suggested three dimensions of physical quality of products and services, interactional quality and organizational quality in order to assess service quality (Harrison, 2000). In his research, in order to assess service quality, SERVQUAL model has been used. It is one of the assessment models of service quality which was first introduced by Parasurman. It includes 5 dimensions (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991):

Tangibles (physical evidence)

This refers to issues such as appearance and adornment of employees, facilities, equipment.

Reliability

Means that organization offers its services to customers without mistake and delay.

Responsiveness

States that employees tend to help customers and reply to their questions and give them necessary guidance.

Assurance

Means that employees make confidence and security sense in customers with their behavior and treatment method.

Empathy

Means that organization understands problems of customers and will solve them and cares about them individually.

Brand Equity

Brand is of a great importance to every company and creating and maintaining it in minds of customers is one of the main objectives of marketers. Aaker (2009) knows brand as a symbol which is related to many assets and mental commitment and is offered to identify and differentiate products. Aaker model is a conceptual perspective that seeks to determine characteristics which form brand equity from customer point of view. Although in classical definitions, brand equity refers to added value of a brand. In recent definitions Brand equity has wider definition including a set of details which lead to choose product by customer (Daskalopoulou & Petrou, 2005). Methods based on financial value, brand equity has been extracted from other assets of organization. Based on this perspective, brand equity is inclining cash flows that are resulted from labeled products in addition to cash flows from selling

unlabeled products (Farquhar, 1989). From Aaker point of view, brand equity includes a set of five categories of assets and commitments related to brand, its name and symbol that adds or subtracts a value to or from a product or service offered to a company or its customers. These categories of assets are: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand belongings and other specified assets (Aaker, 2009). In supplementary research by Yoo and Donthu, these researches were competed and finally four dimension of brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty and perceived quality as dimensions of brand equity and three dimensions of price, advertising and promotions were stated as effective variables (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Brand equity has many benefits for companies and producers, for example if the brand has high equity then targeted consumer will have positive behavior toward brand and as a result he will tend to pay high price for product, repeat his purchase, do mouth advertising for product (Kim & Hyun, 2011).

For the purposes of this study and based on the theoretical basics that were raised in relation to variables, hypotheses are formulated as follows:

Research Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis

Perceived quality of service plays a significant mediating role in impact of internal marketing strategy on brand equity.

Sub-Hypotheses

1. Perceived quality of service plays a significant mediating role in impact of employment security on brand equity.
2. Perceived quality of service plays a significant mediating role in impact of training on brand equity.
3. Perceived quality of service plays a significant mediating role in impact of empowerment on brand equity.
4. Perceived quality of service plays a significant mediating role in impact of information sharing on brand equity.
5. Perceived quality of service plays a significant mediating role in impact of bonuses on brand equity.
6. Perceived quality of service plays a significant mediating role in impact of decreasing social gap on brand equity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is applied and it is descriptive survey based on data collection and analysis method. Statistical population consists of all employees of marketing personnel department and customers of MCI Company in Tehran. According to statistics of company, employees were 250 people. In order to define sample size of both populations, Cochran formula was used which was defined 146 for employees and 384 for customers. In order to sample both populations, simple random sampling was used.

A tool to collect data was a questionnaire. To assess the internal marketing, a questionnaire made by author based on model Bansal et al. (2001), a standard questionnaire Parasuraman and colleagues (1991) was used to assess the perceived quality of service and a questionnaire made by author was used to assess brand equity. In order to check the validity of questionnaire, the content of comments by professors, experts in this field were used. To check the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficients was used and according to obtained values (Table 1) it was indicated that all three questionnaires have appropriate reliability.

Table 1: Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha

Factors	α
Internal Marketing	0.84
Perceived Quality	0.89
Brand Equity	0.86

In order to analyze the data from structural equations model (path Analysis) was used with the help of Lisrel and one-sample t-test using SPSS software and will show the findings in he follow. To achieving model minimization in Lisrel, the authors used maximum likelihood estimation.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Results of Path Analysis

Figure 1 resents structural equation model (path analysis) related to main hypothesis in standard estimation. As can be seen, the obtained standard coefficient for the relationship between internal marketing and perceived quality of service is equal to .61 that shows positive and significant correlation between these two variables. The coefficient of determination (R^2) equals to 0.37 shows internal marketing explains 37 percent of changes in perceived quality of services. Also the coefficient obtained for the relationship between perceived quality and brand equity is positive and equals 0.58 that this shows a positive and significant correlation between these two variables. Obtained variability or coefficient of determination (R^2) equals to 0.34 that

shows perceived quality of service explains 34 percent of changes in brand equity. Thus due to confirming the positive impact of internal marketing on one hand and positive impact of perceived quality on brand equity on the other hand, it is concluded that internal marketing has indirect impact (with mediating role of perceived quality of services) on brand equity and its coefficient equals 0.35.

Figure 1: Structural Equation Model (Path Analysis) of Main Hypothesis in Standard Estimation Mode

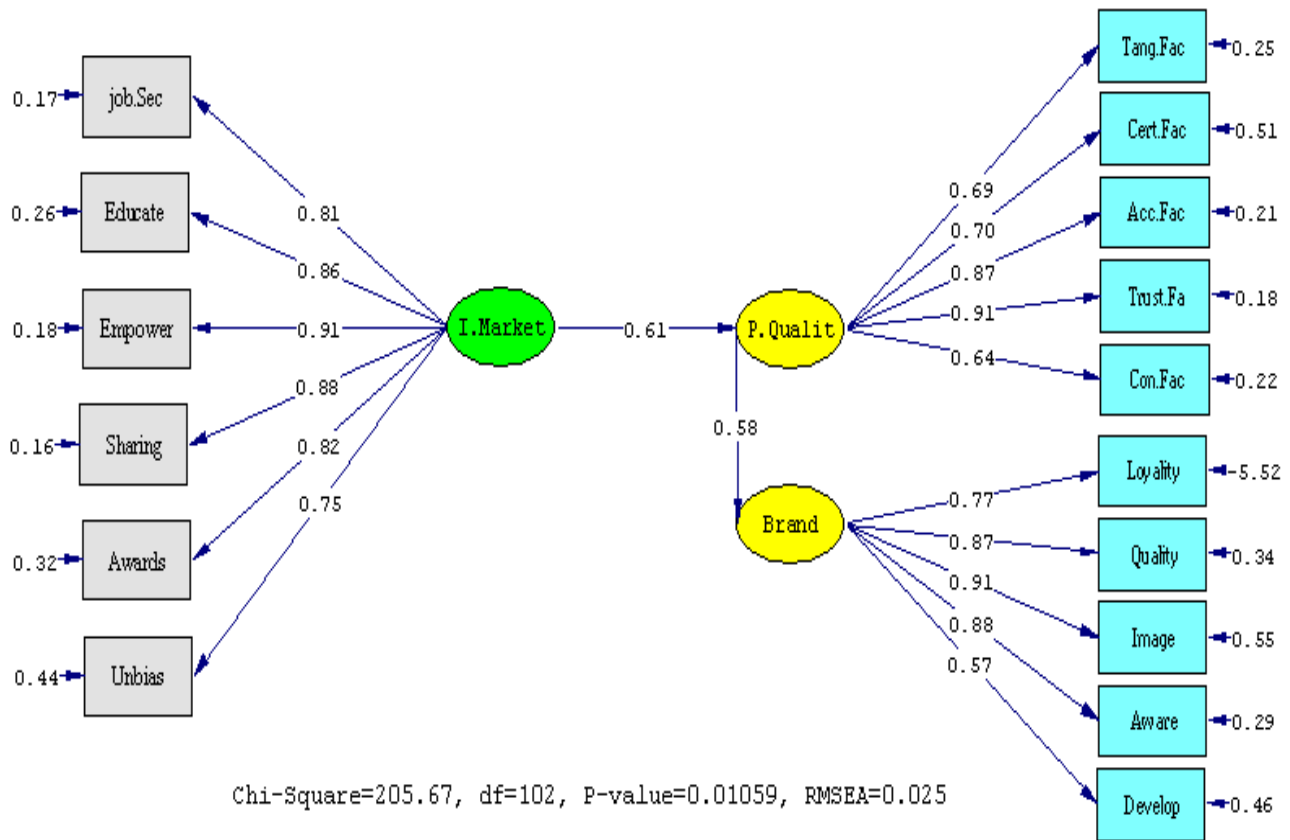


Figure 2 shows structural equation model (path analysis) of main hypothesis in significance mode. According to this figure, obtained significant number for relationship between internal marketing and perceived quality equals 8.55 and obtained significant number for relationship between perceived quality and brand equity equals 8.12 and both are greater than 1.96. Therefore, main hypothesis of the study is confirmed at 95 percent of confidence and it can be said that perceived quality plays a mediating role in impact of internal marketing strategy on brand equity.

Figure 2: Structural Equation Model (Path Analysis) of Main Hypothesis in Significance Mode

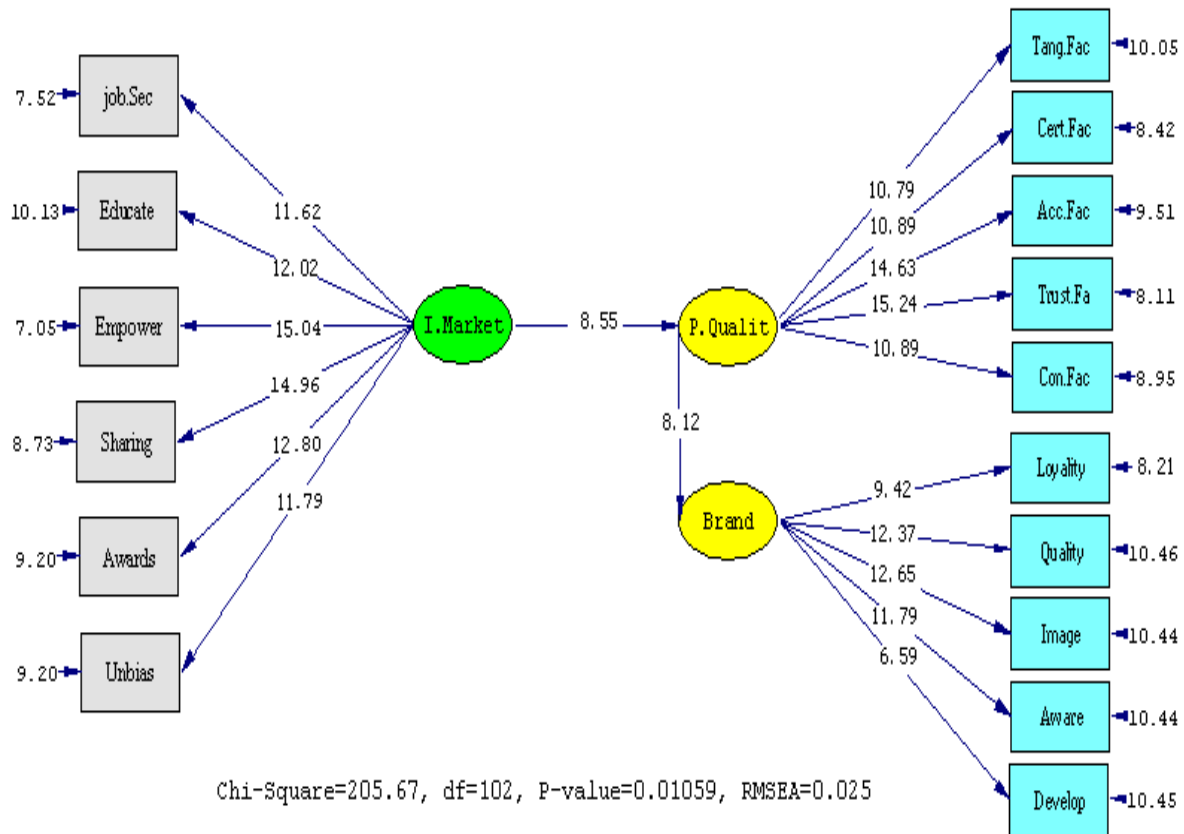


Figure 3 shows a structural equation model (path analysis) related to the research hypotheses in standard estimation mode. Correlation coefficient between employment security and perceived quality equals to 0.29, correlation coefficient between extensive training and the perceived quality equals 0.45, correlation coefficient between employee empowerment and perceived quality equals to 0.52, correlation coefficient between knowledge sharing between perceived quality equals to 0.43, correlation coefficient between bonuses and perceived quality equals to 0.31 and correlation coefficient between the reduction of social gap of employees and perceived quality equals 0.28. With regard to the coefficients obtained, there is a positive and significant correlation between each 6 internal marketing dimensions were confirmed (employment security, widespread training, empowerment of employees, bonuses, knowledge and information sharing and decreasing social gap between employees) with perceived quality and perceived mediating role of services was confirmed in impact of internal marketing dimensions on brand equity.

Figure 3: Structural Equation Model (Path Analysis) of Sub-Hypotheses in Standard Estimation Mode

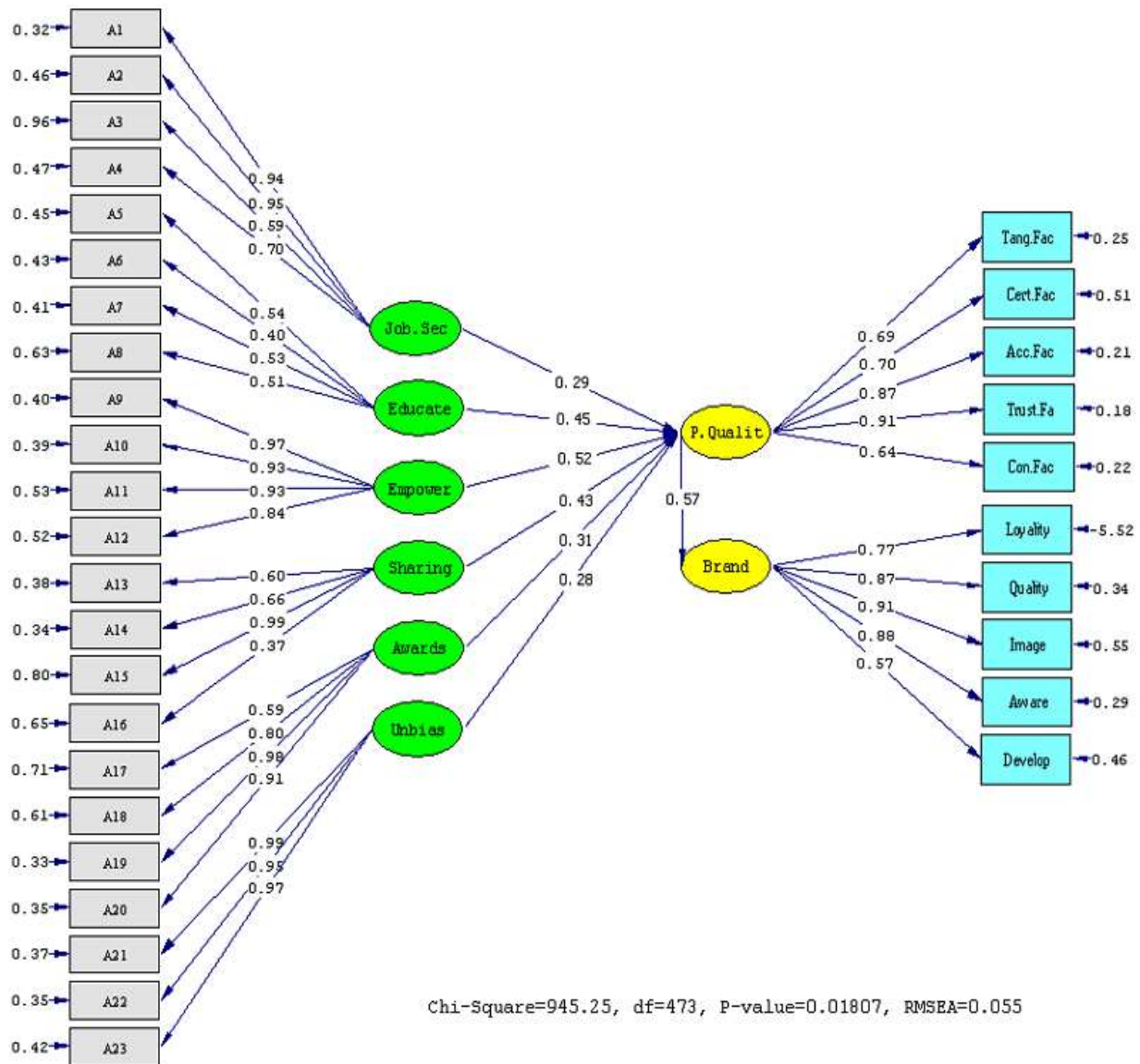


Figure 4 shows structural equation model (path analysis) of sub-hypotheses in significance mode. Given that the obtained t-value for each of six dimensions of internal marketing with perceived quality is greater than 1.96 and on the other hand, observed t-value for the relationship between perceived quality and brand equity is also greater than 1.96, then each sub-hypothesis is confirmed (Table 2).

Figure 4: Structural Equation Model (Path Analysis) of Sub-Hypotheses in Significance Mode

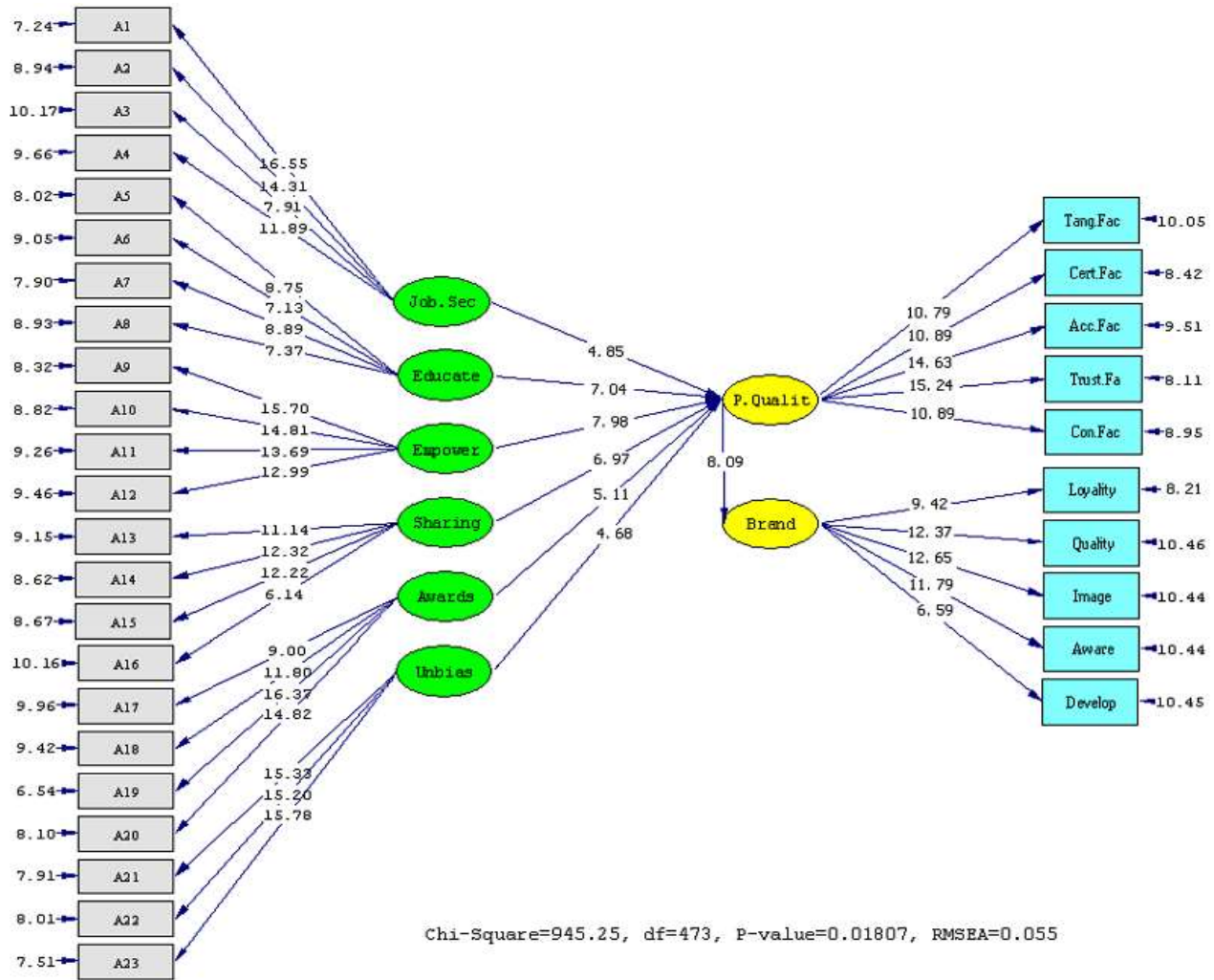


Table 2: Summarized Results of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path	Correlation coefficient
Main	Perceived quality of service has significant mediating role in impact of internal marketing strategy on brand equity	0.35
1	Perceived quality of service has significant mediating role in impact of employment security on brand equity	0.17
2	Perceived quality of service has significant mediating role in impact of training on brand equity	0.26
3	Perceived quality of service has significant mediating role in impact of empowerment on brand equity	0.30
4	Perceived quality of service has significant mediating role in impact of knowledge sharing on brand equity	0.25
5	Perceived quality of service has significant mediating role in impact of bonuses on brand equity	0.18
6	Perceived quality of service has significant mediating role in impact of decreasing social gap on brand equity	0.16

One-Sample t-Test Results

To check the status quo of the variables (internal marketing, perceived quality of service and brand equity) in population, of one-sample t-test was used. Table 3 shows the results of this test. .

Table 3: Summarized Results of One-Sample t-Test

Variables	Number of samples	Average	T	Significance level	Lower limit	Upper limit
Internal marketing	150	3.096	1.942	0.052	-0.0897	0.1915
Perceived quality	384	3.806	22.957	0.000	0.7268	0.8752
Brand equity	384	3.471	11.508	0.000	0.3632	0.5140

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Internal marketing is infrastructure and foundation of service marketing and nowadays has become one of vital strategies of many service companies. In the dynamic and competitive environment of communication industry, internal marketing has brought sustainable competitive advantage for communication industry and consequently helps to increase brand equity. Thus, using correct strategies of internal marketing has been of great importance. Present study has been done with the aim of studying mediating role of perceived quality of services in relation to internal marketing and brand equity in studied company. The results of the analysis showed that internal marketing has a positive and significant impact on perceived quality of service in this company. These results are consistent with results of researches by Baghizade Baghdashti (2010); Ramezanpoor Et al. (2012); Ebrahimi and Abdulolbaghi (2010); Akroush and Al-Mohammad (2010); Tabatabai Hanzaii and Akhavan (2010). The results of this study showed that the perceived quality of service has a positive and significant impact on brand equity ha are consistent with finding of researches by Biel (1992) Rahimi (2010). In addition, present study confirmed the mediating role of perceived quality in the relationship between internal marketing and brand equity of studied company and this finding has been less considered in previous studies.

About this mobile phone operator, according to research findings that internal marketing has positive impact on brand equity through perceived quality of services, considering internal marketing dimensions and promoting its status is necessary. In particular, the survey results showed that the current situation of this variable in studied population is not desirable. Therefore, key proposal in this regard to company's senior managers is that take steps in order to improve status of internal marketing with specific measures and using certain mechanisms.

Generally, company should focus on its internal capabilities and capacities to seek continuous improvement of its products and services to meet the diverse needs of customers and to attract and maintain their satisfaction and loyalty. The following suggestions are offered in this regard:

Proposals related to the first hypothesis: At present, employment security at MCI is not desirable. In order to improve the employment security, it is recommended that the company plans clearly to transform temporary employment contracts to permanent Also providing a future image of employment and outlining career path can be effective in creating sense of employment security.

Proposals related to the second hypothesis: training is another element of internal marketing. Generally employee training is in relation to identification and problem solving, making necessary changes in process and performances and after-sales services. Investments on training will have tangible results that these findings constitute improvement of attitudes, increasing skills in relation to promoting service quality and satisfaction and loyalty of employees. So having an efficient and effective educational system (in which educational needs are diagnosed clearly, a good plan has been designed to meet needs, designed plan performed correctly and suitable evaluation of educational procedure will be done) is critical and important for every organization.

Proposals relating to the third hypothesis: Empowerment is one of the key elements of internal marketing. There are numerous individual and organizational benefits of empowerment programs. Given the current state of empowerment at MCI, it seems necessary to perform empowerment programs. Efforts should be made employees feel that they do important and significant work and are effective in achieving the company's goals. There should made sense of competence so they know themselves empowered to do tasks and better and higher quality service offering. Previous studies have detected various factors (such as organizational structure, organizational culture, leadership style, compensation system, training, self-managed work teams, etc.) that are effective in employee empowerment.

Proposals related to the fourth hypothesis: According to research findings, considering information sharing and efforts to improve the current situation of MCI is necessary. The purpose of information sharing, equip employees with information and knowledge for better performance and continuous quality improvement of product and services. Although many studies have shown that information sharing has benefits for organization and it is very useful to improve employees skills, decision-making, rapid response to environmental demands and ... but less organizations have reached the appropriate level of information sharing and there are numerous obstacles for information sharing.

Proposals related to the fifth hypothesis: Results showed that the current state of this variable is relatively good in studied population. However, due to positive impact of this variable on brand equity, in order to have more effectiveness it is recommended that rewarding system should be based on performance and according to doubled efforts of each individual to achieve organizational goals, receives bonuses and bonuses and rewards are fairly distributed among employees.

Proposals related to the sixth hypothesis: Decreasing social gap between employees leads to make up a sense of equality in employees that consequently the desire for cooperation, mutual trust and job satisfaction of employees are created. Although the situation of this variable was evaluated relatively favorable at MCI, but with respect to its impact on brand equity it is recommended: Company management should take critical actions to improve organizational justice (distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice). This means that division of labor should be done in terms of volume and complexity fairly and commensurate with the expertise and capabilities of people. Managers should act without any prejudice and discrimination when dealing with employees (rewarding, leave, missions, etc.). Managers should consider interests of all employees in decision-making and avoid to pursuit of the interests of a particular group in their decisions. Managers should inform employees about results of decisions that should be taken about them.

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