

BRAND ATTACHMENT, BRAND EXPERIENCE, BRAND IMAGE, PERCEIVED QUALITY, PERCEIVED VALUE, AND BRAND LOYALTY

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Abstract

This research investigated the relationship between brand attachment, brand experience, and brand image, and their influence on perceived quality, perceived value, and brand loyalty, with a specific focus on the Mashhad Leather brand in Iran. Employing an applied and descriptive research approach, the study utilized a comprehensive survey method facilitated by a standard questionnaire to gather data from a diverse group of 386 Mashhad Leather consumers. Leveraging the SmartPLS software for rigorous analysis, the study uncovered several crucial findings that shed light on the dynamics between the aforementioned variables. The results underscore the substantial impact of brand attachment, brand experience, and brand image on the perceived quality of Mashhad Leather products, highlighting the significance of emotional and experiential connections in shaping consumer perceptions. Additionally, the study reveals a robust correlation between perceived quality and perceived value, indicating that consumers' judgments of product excellence significantly shape their assessment of the brand's worth. Notably, the research findings establish perceived value as a key driver of brand loyalty, emphasizing the pivotal role it plays in fostering enduring customer-brand relationships.

Keywords: Brand Experience, Brand Image, Brand Loyalty, Brand Quality, Perceived Value

1. INTRODUCTION

It refers to a person's direct experience or participation in a specific event, whether currently lived or remembered (Schmitt, 2003). Through this interaction, consumers derive inspiration or knowledge from various aspects of goods and services. Experience encompasses post-experiential memories, perceptual processes, and any activity wherein consumers observe, listen, touch, think, or engage in communication with others. Hence, it forms a nexus between consumers, products, and services (Jeon and Yoo, 2021).

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), a real experience denotes an economic offering where consumers engage directly in the production process, thereby encountering the highest level of goods and services. Schmitt (1999) further classifies consumers as emotional beings, highlighting their significant role in human decision-making, which often surpasses rational considerations. This study can be regarded as an exploration of how individuals feel, think, act, and communicate through their various experiences.

Structural equation modeling (SEM), as proposed by Schmitt (1999), encompasses conceptual components in consumer information processing, although its classification of each component lacks clarity. It primarily focuses on the consumer's behavioral responses to the functional aspects of the brand, overlooking the holistic brand experience

itself (Zarantonello et al., 2007). Brand experience, perceived as a continuous, long-term process, is shaped by consumers through their interactions with various brand-related elements (Zarantonello et al., 2007). Acknowledging the inherent complexity, Brakus et al. (2009) define brand experience as the consumer's mental and internal responses (emotions, feelings, cognition) and behavioral reactions to brand-related stimuli. The study categorizes brand experience into sensory, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual experiences, all contributing to the overall consumer-brand relationship.

When these diverse business experiences align, they culminate in a comprehensive brand experience, vital for shaping the consumer-brand relationship (Brakus et al., 2009). Zarantonello and Schmitt (2013) further argue that brand experience holds greater significance than brand attitude in establishing brand equity, a relationship corroborated by numerous studies.

Brand equity, as defined by Yoo et al. (2000), denotes the perceived value attributed by consumers to a brand based on their assessment of the coherent products or services offered. Vázquez et al. (2002) identified components of brand equity, emphasizing brand experience alongside brand association/image and perceived quality (Jeon and Yoo, 2021). Brand awareness emerges from consumers' direct and deliberate interactions with the brand (Keller and Swaminathan, 2018), while enduring brand experiences often contribute to strong brand identification. Brakus et al. (2009) further suggest that brand-constructing consumers contribute significantly to strong brand recognition and associations, fostering brand loyalty.

Yoo and Donthu's (2001) research indicates that brand-image associations are reinforced through management communication and experiences, contributing to enhanced brand equity when the experience aligns with the brand. Ding and Tseng's (2015) study of various food service brands highlights how branding experiences, focusing on the cognitive dimension of brand equity such as brand awareness, association, and quality, can foster brand loyalty. Consumers tend to shape their perceptions and memories of the brand based on their specific brand experiences. The congruence between beliefs and attitudes post-experience can influence changes in brand image, particularly as consumers engage with the brand through pre-purchase experiences, leading them to form assessments of brand quality (Zarantonello and Schmidt, 2013).

Assessed quality refers to consumers' subjective evaluations of the overall value of a business's products and services. Higher perceived quality signifies that consumers perceive the brand as superior. Ding and Tseng's (2015) study reveals that consumers in the service sector positively assess a brand's quality through comprehensive evaluations (Jeon and Yoo, 2021).

Contrarily, according to Iglesias et al. (2011) and Francisco-Maffezzoli et al. (2014), the direct relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty lacks significance. Furthermore, Moreira et al. (2017) confirm that consumers' purchase intentions are not directly influenced by brand experience but rather indirectly through brand equity. Therefore, the individual and holistic experiences emphasized by Brakus et al. (2009) and Schmidt (2003) prompt us to consider the sensory, emotional, and cognitive aspects that have the potential to positively impact brand equity.

Perceived value represents a comprehensive measure of a customer's assessment of the costs and benefits associated with using or experiencing a product or service. The value that a brand delivers to consumers constitutes a fundamental component of brand

equity. When selecting a brand, consumers rely on their perceived evaluation of the balance between product price and utility. While benefit-value serves as a fundamental factor influencing consumer behavior, it encompasses broader concepts such as interest, attitude, trust, and opinion, making it a robust predictor of individual behavior (Gallarza and Saura, 2006).

Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's inclination to repeatedly purchase a favored product or service, driven by the development of strong and positive emotional connections with a specific brand (Hung et al., 2019). Elevated brand loyalty not only amplifies the likelihood of consumers recommending the brand to others but also diminishes their inclination to opt for alternative brands. As defined by Dick and Basu (1994), brand loyalty extends beyond mere repeat purchase behavior, encompassing emotional states characterized by attachment to companies, products, and services. Researchers have also identified loyalty based on consumers' consistent repeat purchase patterns (Elbeltagi and Gag, 2016). Thus, loyalty stands as a pivotal consumer attitude and behavior that continues to garner significant research attention (Alan et al., 2016).

The relationship between perceived value and brand loyalty has been consistently validated in numerous studies (Overby and Lee, 2006; Peña et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2020). Higher perceived value corresponds to an increased likelihood of repeated consumer behavior. Notably, consumer perception of value serves as a pivotal driving factor, significantly influencing the prediction of future loyalty (Yu et al., 2020). Acker (1991) contends that heightened consumer perception of a brand's value leads to greater satisfaction and loyalty. Peña et al. (2017) discerned a direct correlation between loyalty and consumers' perceived functional and emotional value within the service sector. When a grocery store or restaurant effectively meets consumers' needs, they perceive its utility value, which subsequently elevates the likelihood of revisits and repurchases (Jones et al., 2006). Similarly, the provision of an enjoyable shopping experience fosters the hedonic value, encouraging repeat visits and purchases (Yu et al., 2020; Jeon and Yoo, 2021).

Companies boasting a substantial base of loyal customers not only witness increased revenue and expanded market share but also experience higher returns on investment (Huang et al., 2018). Brand loyalty is intrinsically linked to the commitment exhibited by consumers, as they repeatedly engage with a brand over time, promote it to others, and demonstrate resistance to switching to alternative brands (Song et al., 2019). Consequently, researchers strive to identify the primary drivers of brand loyalty and brand attachment, often pinpointing them as pivotal factors (Huang et al., 2018). Strong cognitive and emotional bonds between consumers and a brand foster positive intentions towards that particular brand (Yu, 2020). Existing empirical evidence corroborates this perspective. For instance, Huang and Lee (2018) elucidate how brand attachment is shaped by customers' experiences and memories of a brand, significantly influencing the development of positive behavioral intentions. Jang's (2021) study examining the role of green spaces in coffee shops confirms that customers establish strong emotional connections with these spaces, ultimately enhancing loyalty. Therefore, based on these instances, this research aims to address the core question regarding the impact of brand attachment, experience, and image on brand loyalty. The research hypotheses are as follows:

- H1) Brand attachment has a positive effect on perceived quality.
- H2) Brand experience has a positive effect on perceived quality.

- H3) Brand image has a positive effect on perceived quality.
- H4) Perceived quality has a positive effect on perceived value.
- H5) Perceived value has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

The conceptual model of the research based on hypothesis is shown in Figure 1.

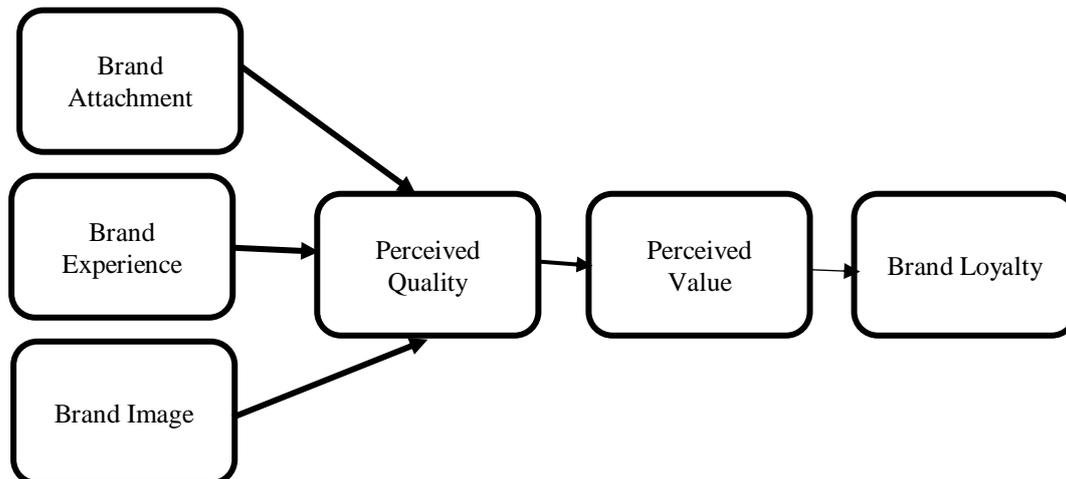


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Model

2. RESEARCH METHODS

In this research, both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were employed to analyze the data collected from the samples. Initially, inferential statistics were used to examine the measurement model and the structural model of the research. To this end, SmartPLS software was utilized, primarily chosen for its superior applicability in handling small sample sizes. Additionally, the software was deemed effective in managing abnormal data, a common challenge encountered in some research studies (Ringel et al., 2012). The bootstrapping test, facilitated by SmartPLS software, was employed to compute the t-value and assess the research hypotheses.

The statistical population of the research comprises consumers of Mashad Leather in Iran. As the number of Mashad Leather customers is practically limitless, a sample size of 386 consumers was selected based on the table provided by Krejcie & Morgan (1970). Consequently, questionnaires were distributed among the chosen consumers for subsequent analysis.

A standardized questionnaire was employed as the data collection tool. Brand attachment was measured using 4 items adapted from Tsai (2011), while brand experience was assessed through 3 items adapted from Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010). The measurement of brand image incorporated 5 items adapted from Kayaman, R., & Arasli (2007). Perceived quality was evaluated using 3 items adapted from Gummerus et al. (2010), and perceived value was determined based on 4 items adapted from Pezzuti et al. (2021) and Sinha and Sheth (2020). Lastly, brand loyalty was gauged using 3 items adapted from Acker (1996).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Result

3.1.1. Validity and Reliability

For assessing the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, both convergent validity and divergent validity were evaluated using the PLS software. The criteria considered were the recommended values for Cronbach's alpha (0.7) (Cronbach, 1951), composite reliability (0.7) (Nunnally, 1978), and average variance extracted (0.5) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Comparison of the research findings against these predefined benchmarks indicated that all three criteria were adequately met. This affirmed the reliability and convergent validity of the questionnaire employed in this study (Ahmadian et al., 2023; Ahmadian and AbdImaleki, 2018). Table 1 presents the results of the validity and reliability analysis.

Table 1. Validity and reliability results

Variables	AVE	(CR)	Cronbach
Brand attachment	0.55	0.83	0.73
Brand experience	0.73	0.89	0.81
Brand image	0.62	0.89	0.84
Perceived quality	0.74	0.90	0.83
Perceived value	0.60	0.85	0.77
Brand Loyalty	0.66	0.85	0.74

3.1.2. Hypothesis Results

The primary and fundamental criterion for assessing the relationship between structural components within the model is the significance coefficients, often expressed as T-values. These values are calculated using the Bootstrapping test, a reliable method for generating standard errors and T-values. The Bootstrapping test approximates the sample distribution of a predictor by resampling from the original sample with replacement. Interpreting the results of the Bootstrapping test follows a similar approach to that of the T-test. Specifically, if the sample size exceeds 120 individuals, values greater than 1.96 are deemed significant at the 0.05 significance level, while values greater than 2.58 are considered significant at the 0.01 significance level. This is because the distribution of T in samples of more than 120 individuals approximates a standard distribution but with slightly less deviation. Consequently, when these values exceed 1.96, it signifies the validity of the relationships between variables and, consequently, the confirmation of the research hypotheses at a 95% confidence level. In this research, with a sample size of 386 individuals, the significant values at 95%, 99%, and 99.9% confidence levels are 1.96, 2.58, and 3.27, respectively. Considering the research model and the sample size, the use of the PLS method for structural analysis is appropriate, as recommended by Hair et al. (2013).

However, the T-values assess the accuracy of relationships but don't measure the strength of these relationships. For that purpose, the R-Square criterion, discussed below, should be employed. The significance coefficients of the research hypotheses have been estimated using the Bootstrapping command, as depicted in Figure 2.

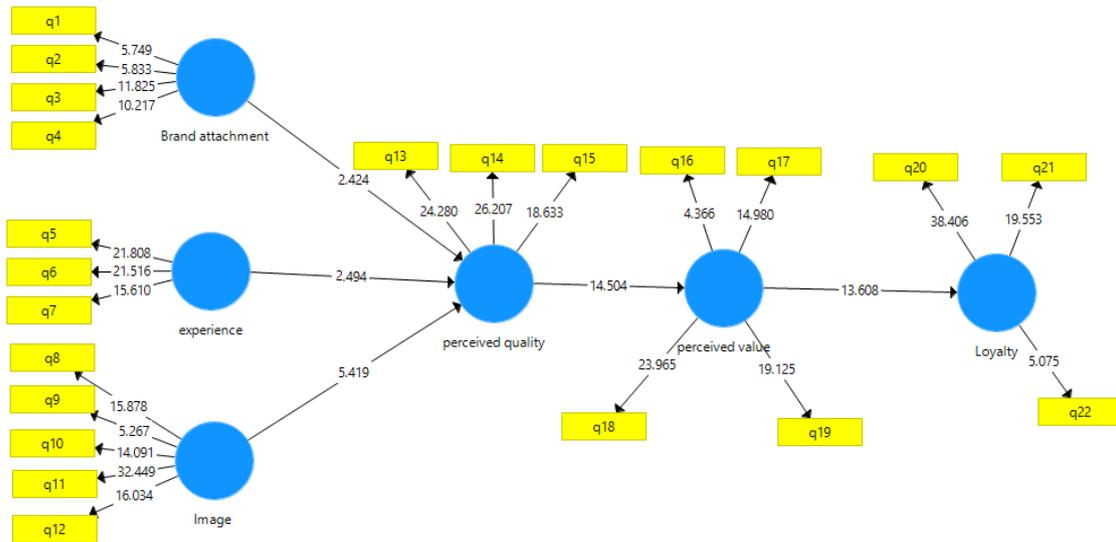


Figure 2. T-value results

Figure 2 shows the relationships between the variables that have been studied by t-values. Therefore, the t-values obtained from the bootstrapping test show that the research hypotheses are accepted considering that it is greater than 1.96. Also, Figure 4 deals with the path coefficients and factor loadings of research variables, which shows that all factor loadings are higher than the average value of 0.4.

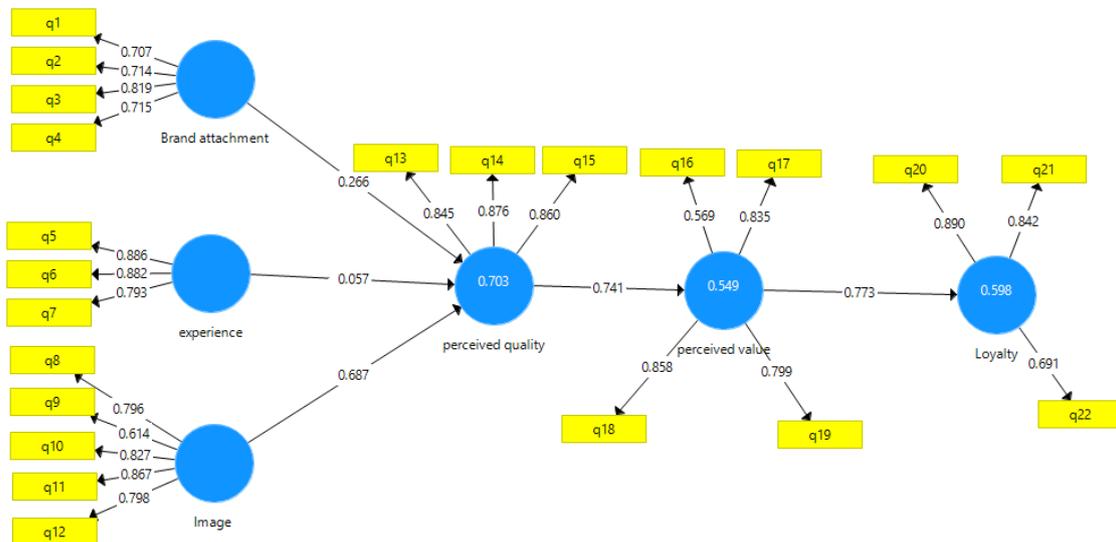


Figure 3. Factor loading results

According to the data analysis algorithm in PLS, following the assessment of the fit of the measurement models, structural model, and general model, the researcher can proceed to test the research hypotheses and draw conclusions. This section comprises two key aspects: examining the significance coefficients (t) associated with each hypothesis and evaluating the standardized coefficients related to the paths of each hypothesis.

The significance coefficients of the model paths determine whether the research hypotheses are deemed significant. As previously indicated, considering the statistical population of 386 individuals, a coefficient exceeding 1.96 signifies the significance of the corresponding hypothesis at a 95% confidence level, thus confirming the hypothesis. A coefficient surpassing 2.58 indicates significance at a 99% confidence level, while a value exceeding 3.27 suggests significance at a 99.9% confidence level. Consequently, the bootstrapping test is instrumental in determining the significance of the variable effects and whether the hypotheses should be accepted or rejected.

The subsequent step involves assessing the strength of the variables' impact on one another using standard path coefficients (beta coefficients). These coefficients, obtained through significant coefficients, establish the relationship between two latent variables. Utilizing the PLS command, the research model algorithm is depicted alongside standardized factor loading coefficients. The standardized path coefficients between variables elucidate how the changes in one variable correspond to the magnitude specified in the corresponding path for another variable. These coefficients, combined with the significant t coefficients pertaining to each hypothesis, collectively indicate the outcome of the researched hypotheses.

Table 2 presents the outcomes of the structural model, offering insights into the tested research hypotheses. Based on the values presented in this table, a significant value exceeding 1.96 confirms the respective hypothesis. Consequently, according to the results depicted in the table, all research hypotheses are affirmed.

Table 2. Summary of structural model for hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Significant coefficient	Standard of coefficient
H1) Brand attachment has a positive effect on perceived quality.	2.424	0.266
H2) Brand experience has a positive effect on perceived quality.	2.494	0.057
H3) Brand image has a positive effect on perceived quality.	5.419	0.687
H4) Perceived quality has a positive effect on perceived value.	14.504	0.741
H5) Perceived value has a positive effect on brand loyalty.	13.608	0.773

3.2. Discussion

The research findings indicate that consumers of Mashad Leather exhibit emotional fervor and strong allegiance towards the brand. Brand attachment, rooted in deep emotional connections between individuals or between a person and an object at a specific time or place, forms the basis of this devoted consumer relationship. Attachment theory postulates that individuals naturally seek closeness and emotional bonds to protect themselves from physical and psychological threats. In the context of this study, attachment to the product and attachment to the brand are characterized by an emotional bond between individuals and the brand, characterized by profound feelings of connection, solidarity, and affection, encompassing the emotions and thoughts associated with the brand and the relationship defined by the individual. Establishing a fundamental

connection between individuals and the brand serves as an effective strategy for fostering brand attachment.

Brand experience, as an aspect of experiential marketing, encompasses a comprehensive approach that influences customers' perceptions of the product or company. Its primary objective is to create a distinct and memorable experience throughout the customer's journey with the brand. Many marketing experts emphasize the importance of comprehending how consumers perceive and experience the brand, considering it vital for devising effective marketing strategies for products and services. Brand experience serves as a predictive tool for understanding consumer behavior. This experience can be derived either directly or indirectly. Direct consumer experience stems from physical interaction with the product, while indirect experience arises from advertising or marketing communications. These experiences can be short-term or long-term, positive or negative, shaping the customer's mental image of the brand across various touchpoints. As consumers engage with the brand, they develop mental associations and perceptions, influencing their preferences and shaping their emotional ties with the brand.

Therefore, customer experiences of the brand are an exceptionally pivotal concept in brand management, driving alterations in brand associations and fostering improved experiences to augment brand value. The creation of a robust brand necessitates the establishment of a positive and distinctive customer experience. For discerning brand-conscious individuals, all elements associated with the brand should function as advocates, ensuring that the perception derived from product usage aligns harmoniously with the customer's initial expectations.

Conversely, brand image is chiefly shaped by external factors. It embodies how consumers perceive and conceptualize the brand—the image projected to and perceived by consumers over an extended period. A positive brand image significantly contributes to the enhancement of brand equity, making it crucial in securing a larger market share. Consequently, it enables companies to command premium prices, as customers demonstrate a willingness to pay more for brands they trust. A favorable brand image also facilitates the successful execution of brand and product development strategies, as consumers perceive the brand favorably and place their trust in its offerings. Hence, comprehending and engaging with the brand, while consistently providing positive experiences for customers, represents a fundamental strategy for indirectly fortifying the brand image.

Perceived quality refers to the customers' subjective assessment of the overall excellence and superiority of a product or service, relative to their expectations and competing alternatives. This dimension finds application in various models related to customers' purchase intentions and consumer behavior and holds significant importance in the realm of marketing management. It primarily represents a customer's perception and is considered a central element within the brand equity framework, deeply rooted in consumer behavior. Zitmal regards perceived quality as the customer's personal judgment concerning a product's performance, deeming it an integral part of a brand's distinct value proposition. According to Zitmal, the higher the perceived quality by customers, the more inclined they are to choose the brand over its competitors. Notably, the experience of using the product, individual preferences, and the consumption context can significantly influence individuals' perception of quality.

On the other hand, customer-perceived value signifies the value realized and comprehended by customers through the purchase of a product. It signifies the variance between the total benefits gained and the costs incurred. This discernment of the difference is reliant upon the customer's understanding of the product and the associated costs. In essence, perceived customer value denotes the satisfaction derived from fulfilling a potential customer's needs through a product or service. Consequently, when a customer repeatedly purchases the same product, it is indicative of their recognition of the benefits derived from it. Therefore, marketers should prioritize emphasizing the delivery of such value to customers in their promotional messaging.

3.3. Research Limitation

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, due to the survey's exclusive focus on Iran, the generalizability of the results may be restricted, and caution is necessary in extending the findings to other countries. Secondly, the survey participants were specifically centered on one brand within Iran, potentially influencing the outcomes of this study. A more comprehensive understanding of grocerant transformational leadership could be achieved in future research endeavors by considering such behavioral nuances.

4. CONCLUSION

The present research investigates the effects of attachment, experience, and brand image on perceived quality, perceived value, and their impact on brand loyalty. Data was collected using a standard questionnaire from a statistical population comprising 386 consumers of the Mashad Leather brand in Iran. The distributed questionnaires yielded 386 valid responses, which were subject to data analysis. In the inferential statistics section, structural equation techniques and the partial least squares method were employed for statistical analysis, facilitated by SMART PLS software.

The research findings revealed that brand attachment, brand experience, and brand image significantly influence perceived quality, emphasizing the crucial role of these factors in shaping consumers' perceptions. Additionally, the study demonstrated a significant relationship between perceived quality and perceived value, indicating that the perceived excellence of the products strongly influences how consumers assess the brand's worth. Furthermore, the results suggested that perceived value plays a vital role in determining customer loyalty, highlighting its significance in fostering enduring relationships with consumers.

The implications of these findings offer valuable insights for the managers of the Mashad Leather brand, providing a strategic understanding of how to enhance consumer loyalty. By leveraging the identified factors, managers can devise effective strategies to strengthen brand attachment, enhance brand experience, and cultivate perceived value among consumers, thereby fostering increased loyalty and sustained patronage for the Mashad Leather brand.

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