



ISSN: 0976-3376

Available Online at <http://www.journalajst.com>

ASIAN JOURNAL OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Asian Journal of Science and Technology
Vol. 16, Issue, 06, pp. 13773-13781, June, 2025

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE IMPACT OF BRAND EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIP BENEFITS ON CUSTOMER LOYALTY

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 18th March, 2025

Received in revised form

19th April, 2025

Accepted 24th, 2025

Published online 30th June, 2025

Keywords:

Brand Experience, Relationship Benefits, Customer Loyalty.

ABSTRACT

Customer loyalty is one of the most important businesses KPI for managers of companies and organizations. In fact, making customers loyal is one of the solutions to reduce future advertising and marketing costs. The main objective of this study was to investigate the role of brand experience and relationship benefits on customer loyalty. In this article, a questionnaire was used to measure the research variables. Based on the research literature, relationship benefits were measured through three variables: confidence, social, and special treatment benefits. The sample of this study included 384 customers of the Digikala online store. Structural equation modeling and AMOS software were used to examine the relationships between the research variables. The results of this study showed that there is a significant relationship between brand experience and relationship benefit dimensions. Also, the relationship between relationship benefit dimensions and customer loyalty has been confirmed. Finally, a significant relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty has been confirmed through relationship benefits.

Citation: Seyed Aliakbar Banialhossini and Maksuda Sultana. 2025. "The Impact of Brand Experiences and Relationship Benefits on Customer Loyalty", *Asian Journal of Science and Technology*, 16, (06), 13773-13781.

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INTRODUCTION

Customer loyalty is a concept that has always occupied the minds of managers and business owners. They are always looking for a way to retain existing customers. The interest in customer retention and customer loyalty increased significantly with the work of Reichheld and Sasser (1990), who found that a 5% increase in customer retention could increase firm profitability from 25% to 85% (Gupta *et al.*, 2006). Of course, that is a wide range, but it underscores those minimal increases in customer retention rates can have outsized effects on profitability. Building and maintaining strong, long-term brand-customer relationships is fundamental for brands (Rader, 2018). The concept of loyalty has existed for centuries. For example, Dick and Basu (1994) have stressed customer loyalty in terms of having the capacity to establish a relation between one's attitude towards an entity (brand, service, store, seller, etc.) and repeat purchase (Rowley & Dawes, 1999). Customer loyalty is a principle that gained prominence in today's companies, with loyal buyers becoming a key to success in an organization (Arslan, 2020). Loyal customers buy and pay more and can be considered as a word-of-mouth advertising tool for the company. As a result, today's organizations are trying to identify and manage effective methods of creating loyalty, which they call loyalty programs (Kim *et al.*, 2021). To build customer loyalty, a company typically focuses on creating value and improving benefits such as redeemable points, discounts, free items, coupons, and special treatment for members through loyalty programs (Gabel & Guhl, 2022).

Previous research has shown that factors such as customer satisfaction, service quality, trust and perceived value can influence customer loyalty (Dam & Dam, 2021; Yesitadewi & Widodo, 2024; Sani *et al.*, 2024; Cankül *et al.*, 2024). Brand experience is an important and deciding factor in customer loyalty, too. Positive experience with both the company and with the brand creates an affective tie between the customer and the company, and it encourages heightened satisfaction and repeat purchase (Zha *et al.*, 2024). In the brand management literature, brand experience is generally defined as "the consumer's subjective, internal reactions (emotions, feelings and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of the design and identity, packaging, communications, and a brand environment" (Brakos *et al.*, 2009). Brand experience usually occurs post-consumption of the product or service and may vary from one consumer to another. Various studies proved that the longer the brand's history, the more social power the brand has, and the more consumers consider the brand more trustworthy (Joshi & Garg, 2021). Brand experience can influence customer loyalty by influencing emotions, perceptions, and long-term relationships. A positive brand experience—whether through product quality, customer service, marketing interactions, or sensory elements—creates stronger emotional connections and makes customers more likely to repurchase and recommend the brand (Shahid *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, brand experience is expected to increase customer loyalty by creating practical relationship benefits among customers. Every consistently positive experience will attract customers, make them trust a company more, and result in a relatively low defection rate to their competitors (Prior *et al.*, 2024). In addition

to brand experience, establishing appropriate relationship with customers and creating relationship benefits for them can also be effective in creating customer loyalty. Relationship benefits in various forms can affect customer sentiment and ultimately customer loyalty (Shukla & Pattnaik, 2020). Relationship benefits are the conditions that a company can create in the relationship between itself and its customers. In these conditions, the company tries to develop and maintain its relationships with its customers. Therefore, it tries to understand the needs and demands of its customers and based on that, it bases its communication system (Park & Park, 2023). This allows the company to establish a transactional relationship with customers to maintain and strengthen ongoing relationships with them. In other words, it can be said that it is the benefit that a company offers customers as a service provider in various types, such as establishing a long-term relationship with the customer and maintaining the relationship for a certain period. In a business environment of infinite competition, relationship benefits are recognized as an important variable (Sheen & Sheen, 2022). Academic research shows that there are three types of relationship benefits. First, the confidence benefits indicate trust between consumers and companies. In this scenario, the service provider is trusted by the customer. He is convinced that buying involves little risk and will be handled in a proper manner. Hence, he feels less apprehensive when buying. Trust and confidence factors evoke a sympathy and trust between the company and the buyer, and develop customer commitment and loyalty (Channa *et al.*, 2022; Coelho *et al.*, 2018; Park & Kim, 2003; Koritos *et al.*, 2014; Kang *et al.*, 2014). Second, social benefits indicate a kind of friendship and intimacy between the customer and the company members. In this case, the customer believes that he knows the company and its members well and that the company members know him. The greater the degree of familiarity of the company members with the customer, the greater the perceived social benefits.

In some cases, knowing the customer's name and other information, including his interests and preferences, can also help create a sense of intimacy and friendship (Channa *et al.*, 2022; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011). Finally, special treatment benefits are the third dimension of relationship benefits, which include special discount offers, reduced service times for specific customers, and other additional plans or services. In this situation, the company tries to instill a sense of value in customers by providing special services. This way, customers become committed to the company and their loyalty increases (Channa *et al.*, 2022; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002; Dagger *et al.*, 2011). Accordingly, and in light of the above, this study examines the impact of brand experiences and relationship benefits on customer loyalty. In this study, brand experiences are used as an independent variable, relationship benefits are used as a mediator variable, and customer loyalty is used as a dependent variable. In the next section, the hypotheses' theoretical and scientific foundations will be presented first. The next step is to review the key constructs and hypotheses in the literature. The methods and results of the study are presented below. Finally, this study discusses the theory and managerial implications, its limitations, and areas for further study. In this research, we try to provide new and innovative perspectives on research variables such as customer loyalty, relationship benefits, and brand experiences. Also, we strengthen the current discussion in these areas. Managers and decision-makers from various industries, including Digikala (as a research area), will gain important insights into customer needs and desires, enabling them to develop more effective strategies with customer loyalty as a priority. Our research provides practical recommendations for the digital or online retail sector to improve its competitive advantage by validating the important elements influencing customer loyalty. By examining relationship benefits as a mediating variable, this research fills a research gap in this field and helps to improve the understanding of the relationships between the research variables. Finally, our study provides company professionals with essential tools and insights to develop deeper customer relationships, increase profitability, and promote long-term loyalty. The following section of this study analyzes the existing literature. The following section presents the research hypotheses and the proposed research model as a subsection of the literature review. Next, we briefly overview the research

methodology and present the empirical findings. Finally, we conclude by engaging in a discourse and presenting the study's contributions.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Brand experiences and customer loyalty: Customer loyalty is one of the most essential factors affecting the future of businesses. Various businesses are always looking for ways to increase customer loyalty to increase sales (Al-Maamari & Abdulrab, 2017). Loyalty means a persistent intention of a customer to buy/repatronise a service/product in future regularly. As a result, repeat purchase with a same brand/same portfolio of brands will follow even when a switch opportunity for a behavior is present (Ashiq & Hussain, 2024). There can be a variety of factors that affect customer loyalty. One such important one is brand experience. Brand experience is one of the most important drivers for repeat buying behavior. Once a positive encounter with a brand, repeat buying turns into a high chance, and an affective tie with a brand is developed (Huang & Chen, 2022). Besides, "brand experience not only have an impact on past-based satisfaction judgments but have an impact on future-based consumer loyalty" (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, customers are likelier to purchase from the brand and recommend it to others. A positive brand experience will also significantly reduce the likelihood of product substitution in the future (Yu *et al.*, 2020; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021). Ong *et al.* (2018) uncovered that individual customers' actual brand loyalty is affected by several types of brand experiences. In a work titled *The Dynamics of the Relationship between Customer Interaction, Brand Experience, and Customer Loyalty*, Rasool *et al.* (2021) concluded that a strong relation between brand experience and customer loyalty holds. Afiftama and Nasir (2024) conducted a study to investigate the role of brand trust, brand image, and customer experience towards brand loyalty. In this study, it was discovered that brand image can have a significant role in shaping brand loyalty and can contribute a lot towards customer loyalty. Accordingly, and considering the above, the first hypothesis of the present study was formulated as follows:

H1: Brand experiences have a significant impact on customer loyalty.

Relationship benefits: The term "relationship marketing" was first used by Leonard Berry in 1983 (Bitner, 1995). Since then, companies have realized that building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers can have a significant impact on their marketing capabilities and ultimately their performance (Ibrahim & Rasheed, 2024). According to Turchian *et al.* (2022), relationship benefits can be divided into three parts: Confidence benefits, social benefits, and Special treatment benefits.

Confidence benefits: Confidence benefits involve psychological assurance that arises when a customer experiences a relation with a company. Trust and familiarity generate a feeling of comfort and erode uncertainty, and make them comfortable with a company's service (Gwinner *et al.*, 1998). In addition, customers have more defined expectations in relation to the company's products, thus limiting the degree to which surprise or concerns can occur (Gremler & Gwinner, 2015). Brand experiences are important in building confidence benefits. Good and consistent brand service-actual reliability, clarity in communications, and good quality products-all serve to reassure the customers of trust and less uncertainty. When the brand is repeatedly able to live up to the promises it makes, customers feel more secure in their choices, thus creating loyalty. Confidence is further strengthened by an emotional bonding with active brand experiences wherein the customers relate to the reliability and value of the company. Xu *et al.* (2011) conducted a study titled *The Impact of Brand Experience on Relational Benefit: The Role of Brand Familiarity, Brand Image and Brand Personality*. The results of this study showed that brand experience can be indirectly related to relationship benefits and brand familiarity, brand image and brand personality can act as mediators between them. Dandis *et al.* (2023), in a study titled "The effect of brand experiences and relational benefits on loyalty", also showed that relational benefits and their dimensions (confidence, special treatment and social benefits) have a positive effect on willingness to pay more (WPM), effects of word of

mouth (WOM) and repurchase intention (RI). Referring to brand experiences, the present study showed that behavioral and intellectual experiences have positive and significant effects on willingness to pay more (WPM), effects of word of mouth (WOM) and repurchase intention (RI). Based on this and considering the above, the second hypothesis of the research was formulated as follows:

H2: Brand experiences have a significant impact on confidence benefits.

Social benefits: As one of the important dimensions of Relationship benefits, social benefits represent the customer's feeling of being recognized by the company and building friendly relationships with them. This feeling is strengthened when the person is recognized, especially, sometimes by name, by company members. This means that if company members get close enough to the customer to know their name, they can create a sense of value and trust in them (Tourchian *et al.*, 2022). This type of connection creates a sense of belonging. It also leads to greater enjoyment of the individual's interaction with the company. An important factor in forming this feeling can be brand experiences. It can be said that brand experiences are significant in creating a sense of social benefits because they help customers to have meaningful interactions with the brand and, ultimately, with the company. Companies that try to have a close emotional connection with customers and respond effectively will create a sense of confidence in them by creating a positive brand experience. In such circumstances, customers feel valued and appreciated, creating a sense of attachment and trust. Paramita *et al.* (2021), drawing on the underlying motivation framework, showed that brand experience increases consumers' motivation to participate, socialize, and perceive the benefits of others on a brand page regardless of an individual's propensity to socialize online. Furthermore, as consumers engage in social interaction on a brand page, they are more likely to engage in positive WOM about the brand. Therefore, scientific research has also shown that a positive brand experience will strengthen customer relationships with the company and ultimately improve relationship benefits. Based on the above arguments, the third hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H3: Brand experiences have a significant impact on social benefits.

Special treatment benefits: Special treatment refers to the particular attention and personal benefits that show a customer his or her preferred status, considered special in regard to others (Gwinner *et al.*, 1998). This may consist of special offers, special treatment in terms of speed, privileged discounts, which all enhance experiences and satisfaction from the customer side. The way a brand treats the customer experience will be a major differentiator in special treatment benefit delivery. If the businesses extend some VIP perks, early access to products, or other benefits to customers, then customers feel valued and attach more with them. Such a scenario will enhance the loyalty of customers, making them stick with the company longer. Scientific research has also shown this. For example, Nadeem *et al.* (2021) showed that brand experience has a positive impact on consumer engagement, while consumer engagement is positively related to brand loyalty and satisfaction, which in turn leads to the creation of shared value. Also, Pina & Dias (2021), showed that brand experience has a positive impact on consumer-based brand equity. Sensory and emotional experiences showed a greater impact on all dimensions of brand equity. Multi-group analysis also shows that intellectual experience stimulates consumers' brand equity in consumers with positive brand behavior. Based on the above arguments, the fourth hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H4: Brand experiences have a significant impact on special treatment benefits.

Confidence benefits on Customer Loyalty: Confidence benefits reduce uncertainty by increasing customer trust and ultimately increase customer loyalty (Gupta, 2022). When a customer feels that they are receiving quality and consistent service with after-sales service and appropriate relationship, they are likely to form a strong emotional connection with the brand. This trust strengthens long-term

relationships and increases customer loyalty (Lubis, 2021). In such a situation, the customer is expected to make repeated purchases and encourage others to buy. In addition, confidence benefits can increase customer satisfaction and commitment and make the customer remain loyal to the company in different situations (Gupta, 2022). Various studies have also shown this. For example, Gupta (2022) showed that relational benefits promote extra-role and intra-role behaviors of consumers. In particular, confidence and social benefits directly and indirectly affect civic virtue and consumer loyalty. The results of the study by Lee *et al.* (2021) also showed the positive effect of relational benefits, including confidence benefits, on customer loyalty. Accordingly, the fifth hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H5: confidence benefits have a significant impact on customer loyalty.

Social benefits on Customer Loyalty: When a company's customer feels recognized and valued by the members of that company, a sense of belonging and dependence on the brand is created in him. In fact, it can be said that social benefits will increase customer loyalty by strengthening close connections between the customer and the members of the company. In addition, strong social ties between the customer and the company strengthen word-of-mouth advertising and increase the company's customers. New customers also tend to stay with the company and make repeat purchases when they feel the same as previous customers. Liu *et al.* (2014) showed that relationship benefits affect customer loyalty and customer satisfaction with employees affects customer loyalty. Mulia *et al.* (2021) also concluded that customer intimacy not only directly encourages customer loyalty, but also affects the factors that determine customer loyalty itself, such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, perceived risk, trust, and satisfaction. In other words, customer intimacy has both direct and indirect effects on loyalty. Accordingly, the sixth hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H6: Social benefits have a significant impact on customer loyalty.

Special treatment benefits on Customer Loyalty: The benefits of special treatment arise when customers receive high-value service at a reduced price and personalized service and special offerings. In such a case, a high level of preference with the company and a feeling of belonging to the company is increased, and a feeling of being special arises in them. One of the most common ones in such a case is to make a significant discount or deliver service in no waiting period or in less time in contrast with a general period. Apparently, such terms will produce a feeling of belonging and enhance customer loyalty. Feeling special will enhance customer satisfaction and repeat purchases, and such a feeling is enhanced when high-value service at a reduced price is received by them. In contrast, such a feeling of being special can enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty in a specific direction. By delivering continuous special treatment, companies can establish long-term loyalty and reduce the opportunity for switching over to a competitor. Saputra *et al.* (2023) have conducted a study titled "The Effect of Special Treatment Benefits and Confidence Benefits on Customer Loyalty through Customer Trust". According to such a study, it can be seen through its conclusion that special treatment benefits and confidence benefits have a strong impact on consumer trust and, in consequence, enhance loyalty. Maheswari & Hidayat (2021) also showed that special treatment benefits and confidence benefits affect consumer commitment and loyalty. Accordingly, the seventh hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H7: Special treatment benefits have a significant impact on customer loyalty.

Relationship benefits as a moderating variable: Brand experience through regular quality of service, emotional bonding, and positive interaction creates the trust of customers and reduces anxiety. These good experiences raise the level of customers' confidence in the company's ability to deliver reliable service and, consequently, strengthen their loyalty (Daffy, 2019). Confidence benefits represent psychological reassurance; the customer is more comfortable and less likely to seek alternatives; therefore, he or she is more attached to the

brand. Previous research has often found trust and confidence as key factors for durable customer loyalty to emerge (Soliha *et al.*, 2021; Lau & Lee, 1999). Accordingly, H8 proposes that confidence benefit is a mediator between brand experiences and customer loyalty.

H9 and H10, in addition, propose that social and special treatment benefits serve as a mediator between brand experiences and customer loyalty. Social benefits, such as creating interpersonal relationships and valuing customers as persons, contribute towards creating deeper emotional relationships with the brand. These develop trust and satisfaction, and these serve a key basis for creating customer loyalty (Gwinner *et al.*, 1998). On the other hand, privileges of special treatment involve offering personalized service, reward, or privileges, and these make a customer valued and exclusive, and hence have a direct contribution towards creating customer loyalty. Rane *et al.* (2023) confirm these hypotheses because studies have proven that positive experiences with a brand build strong social ties and preferential treatment, and hence build customer loyalty. Keeping in consideration, eighth to tenth hypotheses of the study are as below:

H8: Confidence benefits mediate the relationship between brand experiences and customer loyalty.

H9: Social benefits mediate the relationship between brand experiences and customer loyalty.

H10: Special treatment benefits mediate the relationship between brand experiences and customer loyalty.

According to the theoretical foundations and hypotheses of this study, the conceptual model is considered as follows:

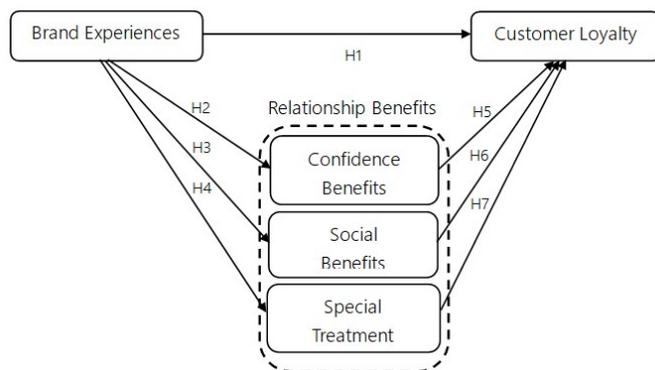


Figure No.1. Conceptual research model

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the selection of items was done after evaluating academic research and reputable articles. This study used items that have been used in previous studies related to each of the main variables. To measure relationship benefits, the items presented in the research of Tourchian *et al.* (2022) were used. In this study, relationship benefits were presented in three components: confidence benefits, social benefits, and special treatment benefits (Tourchian *et al.*, 2022). Also, the items for measuring brand experience were extracted from the research of Brakus *et al.* (2009). In order to measure customer loyalty, the items presented in Chandrashekar *et al.*'s research (2007) have been used. The complete set of all variables and measurement items used in the study is presented in the appendix (Appendix 1).

Data collection and sampling: The data for this study were collected from customers of Iran's largest online store (DigiKala). In this study, an online and offline survey questionnaire was used over a four-week period in January 2025 based on a Likert scale. The final survey consisted of two parts. In the first part, a summary of the objectives of this research project was provided to the participants, and in this part, it was stated that the information provided by them would remain confidential. After distributing and collecting the questionnaires, finally 384 complete questionnaires were eligible by cleaning the data

(removing duplicates, outliers, missing values, normality test). Table No.1 shows the demographic status of the respondents. Based on the findings of the study, it was determined that 52% were male and 48% were female. Also, 22% were under 18 years old, 21% were between 19 and 30 years old, 21% were between 31 and 40 years old, 22% were between 41 and 50 years old, and finally 14% were over 51 years old. In terms of education, 22% had a diploma or lower diploma, 22% had a post-diploma, 38% had a bachelor's degree, and 18% had a master's degree or higher. Also, in the specialized sector, among the employed people, 13% had work experience between 5 and 10 years, 19% had work experience between 10 and 15 years, and 68% had work experience over 15 years.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics ($n = 384$).

	Items	Percentage
Gender	Male	52
	Female	48
Age	Under 18 years	22
	19-30 years	21
	31-40 years	21
	41-50 years	22
	Above 51 years	14
Education Qualification	High School or Below	22
	Associate Degree	22
	Bachelor's Degree	38
	Master's Degree or Above	18
Work Experience	5-10 years	13
	10-15 years	19
	Above 15 years	68

Data analysis method: Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the model hypotheses. For this purpose, AMOS-24 software was used. SPSS Statistics 25.0 software was also used to examine and analyze descriptive and demographic data. Structural equation modeling examines the overall fit of the model as well as the relationships between components. It also examines and displays the relationship between the hypothesized paths and examines the ability to measure the reliability and validity of the data. SEM was used in this study because it can well link complex concepts and also evaluate and predict different variables well (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Also, to examine the mediating role of variables, the Sobel test is used in SPSS software, which is one of the most common methods for examining the mediating role of variables in various studies (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Descriptive statistics of measurement scales: The values of Estimate, t-value related to the items of each of the research variables are presented in Table No. 2. As can be seen, by running the model in the measurement mode (Figure No. 2), the values related to Estimate of all the examined items were calculated above 0.5. This value indicates a strong relationship between variables and items (Bielby & Hauser, 1997). Also, the t-value of all items was calculated to be greater than 1.96, which indicates the existence and confirmation of a relationship between the item and the variables (Hair *et al.*, 2021). The average of all items varied between 2.32 and 4.35. As is clear from this table, the value of the CR index, which indicates reliability, was reported to be greater than 0.7 for all variables, indicating the reliability of the research instrument (Ahmad *et al.*, 2016). AVE values in all variables are higher than 0.7, which indicates that the constructs are conceptually valid and acceptable (Shadfar & Malekmohammadi, 2013).

As can be seen in this figure, the final conceptual model of the research is drawn in the form of Amos software. The oval shapes are the main variables and the square shapes are the items or clauses. Also, the numbers on each of the lines indicate Estimate. The results of the model fit examination are presented in the table below:

Table 2. Validation of the measurement model of variables

		Estimate	t-value	Mean	CR	AVE
Brand Experience	BE1	0.89	8.50	3.42	0.977	0.783
	BE2	0.91	8.90	4.35		
	BE3	0.87	8.40	3.24		
	BE4	0.79	7.20	3.24		
	BE5	0.85	8.10	4.12		
	BE6	0.92	9.00	3.25		
	BE7	0.94	9.20	3.25		
	BE8	0.88	8.60	3.56		
	BE9	0.87	8.50	3.24		
	BE10	0.94	9.30	3.45		
	BE11	0.89	8.70	3.25		
	BE12	0.86	8.30	3.74		
Customer Loyalty	CL1	0.93	9.10	3.25	0.914	0.729
	CL2	0.81	7.50	3.24		
	CL3	0.89	8.80	3.25		
	CL4	0.91	8.90	2.45		
	CL5	0.85	8.10	3.28		
	CL6	0.76	6.90	3.74		
Confidence Benefits	CB1	0.81	7.40	3.25	0.944	0.740
	CB 2	0.93	9.00	3.23		
	CB 3	0.86	8.20	3.47		
	CB 4	0.81	7.50	3.23		
Social Benefits	SB1	0.91	8.90	4.23	0.955	0.842
	SB2	0.94	9.10	3.25		
	SB3	0.93	9.00	4.23		
	SB4	0.89	8.60	3.25		
Special Treatment Benefits	ST1	0.81	7.30	3.24	0.924	0.709
	ST2	0.86	8.20	2.32		
	ST3	0.85	8.00	3.24		
	ST4	0.87	8.30	3.23		
	ST5	0.82	7.60	3.45		

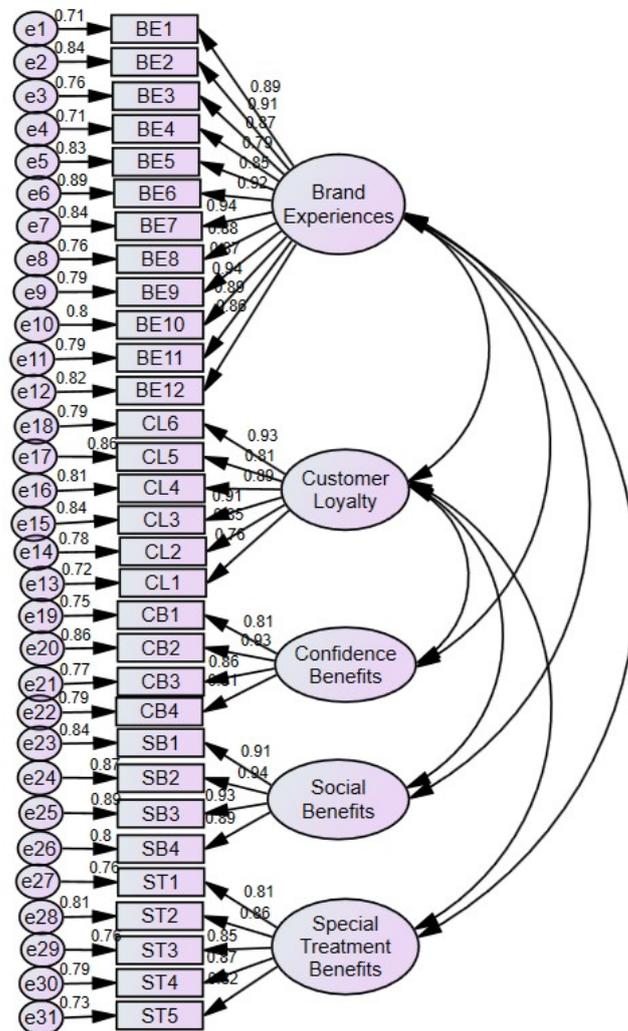


Figure 2. Fitted measurement model based on standard coefficients

Table 3. Model fit indices in measurement mode

Index	TLI	NFI	IFI	CFI	χ^2 /df	GFI	RMSEA	RMR
Reported amount	0.902	0.946	0.953	0.952	2.89	0.97	0.062	0.052

Table 4. Fitness indicators

Index	TLI	NFI	IFI	CFI	χ^2 /df	GFI	RMSEA	RMR
Reported amount	0.94	0.98	0.98	0.94	2.59	0.98	0.044	0.000

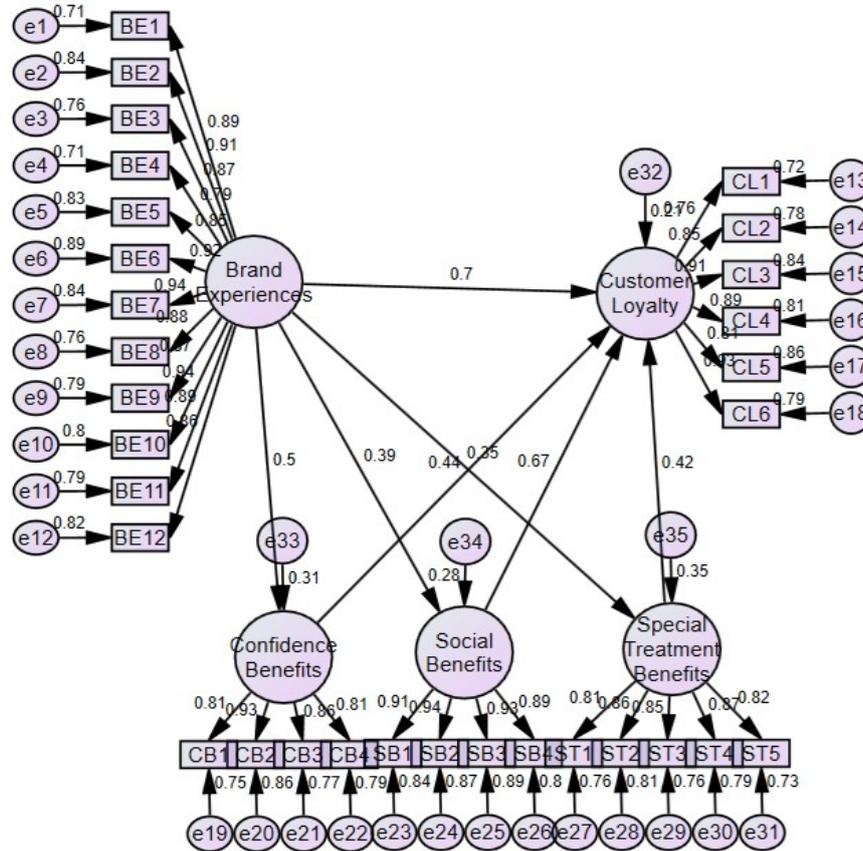


Fig. 3. Structural model analysis

Table 5. Hypothesis results

		Estimates	S.E	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	BE →CL	0.70	0.100	7.000	0.000	Accepted
H2	BE →CB	0.50	0.080	6.250	0.000	Accepted
H3	BE →SB	0.39	0.070	5.571	0.000	Accepted
H4	BE →STB	0.35	0.060	5.833	0.000	Accepted
H5	CB →CL	0.44	0.090	4.889	1e-05	Accepted
H6	SB →CL	0.67	0.10	6.70	0.000	Accepted
H7	STB →CL	0.42	0.080	5.250	0.000	Accepted

According to Table No. 3, all the fit indices of the studied model are reported at the desired level. For example, the Chi-square index was calculated at 2.89 degrees of freedom, which is at the standard level. Also, the RMSEA index was calculated at 0.062, which is at the standard level (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the model fit is confirmed in this section.

Structural model analysis: In this section, we use SEM (Figure No. 2, Figure No. 3) to assess the hypothesized paths based on model fit. Table No.4 shows that the SEM model based on the available data has a good fit with these data (RMSEA= 0.44, χ^2 /df=2.59). Based on the results, regarding the hypothesis testing, it can be stated that the effect of the variables of brand experiences on customer loyalty (β =0.7, t-value=7), brand experiences on confidence benefits (β =0.50, t-value=6.25), brand experiences on social benefits (β =0.39, t-value=5.71), brand experiences on special treatment benefits (β =0.35, t-value=5.83), confidence benefits on customer loyalty(β =0.44, t-value=4.88), social benefits on customer loyalty (β =0.67, t-value=6.70), and special treatment benefits on customer loyalty (β =0.42, t-value=5.25) is confirmed. Because in all these relationships the t-value is reported to be greater than the

standard value of 1.96 (Shadfar & Malekmohammadi, 2013). Table No. 5 shows a summary of the results of examining the relationships related to each hypothesis:

Mediating role analysis: In this section, in order to examine the mediating role between the variables under study based on the research hypotheses, the Sobel test has been used in SPSS software. The results of this study are presented in the following table. In examining hypotheses H8, H9, H10, it can be stated that in the relationship between brand experiences and customer loyalty, confidence benefits (t-value = 3.85), social benefits (t-value = 4.28), and special treatment benefits (t-value = 3.90) play a mediating role. Because the value of the Sobel test statistic in all these relationships is calculated to be greater than the standard value of 1.96, which indicates confirmation of the mediator role in this test (Mittinty & Mittinty, 2024).

Table 6. Sobel test

		Estimates	S. E	t-value	p-value	Decision
H8	BE →CB→ CL	0.22	0.057	3.851	0.0006	Accepted
H9	BE →SB→ CL	0.261	0.061	4.284	0.0001	Accepted
H10	BE →STB→ CL	0.147	0.038	3.902	0.00049	Accepted

DISCUSSION

This research shows how customers' brand experiences can influence customer loyalty through perceived relationship benefits. At the beginning of this study, customer experience of the brand was considered as the independent variable, relationship benefits as the mediating variable, and customer loyalty as the dependent variable. In this study, based on the study of Tourchian *et al.*, 2020, relationship benefits are defined and measured in three subcomponents: confidence benefits, social benefits, and special treatment benefits. Various studies, such as (Ong *et al.*, 2018; Brakus *et al.*, 2009), have examined and confirmed the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty. In the meantime, limited researches have investigated the role of the customer's perceived advantages of communication with the company, in the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty, and this study tried to investigate this research gap. For this purpose, the researcher focused on the role of relationship benefit components (trust, social, and special treatment benefits) in the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty. In fact, the researcher has examined how the components of relationship advantage can strengthen or weaken the relationship between the two main variables with a mediating role, in order to create a better understanding of the role of relationship advantages. This study contributes to a better understanding of the role of relationship benefits in creating a bridge between brand experience and customer loyalty.

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into the complex relationship between social benefits (SB), confidence benefits (CB), special treatment benefits (STB), and the relationship between brand experiences (BE) and customer loyalty (CL). In fact, this research showed that, in accordance with the studies of Rasool *et al.* (2021), brand experience can be effective in creating, developing and forming customer loyalty. Meanwhile, the hypothesis of the relationship between brand experience and social advantage has also been confirmed. Paramita *et al.* (2021), in their study, also pointed out the role of social benefits perceived by customers and their relationship with the brand. On the other hand, the investigations of this research showed that brand experiences can be effective on the advantages of customer confidence. According to Dandis *et al.* (2023), customers who have an effective experience of communicating with the company are more confident in the advantages of the company. Pina & Dias (2021) also concluded in their research that the benefits of special treatment can ultimately be influenced by the brand and branding experience perceived by customers, a topic that was also consistent with the results of this research. Other hypotheses of this research also address the role of relationship advantage components on customer loyalty. Lee *et al.* (2021) have stated that by creating a suitable level of perception in relation to the advantages of confidence, the level of customer loyalty can be improved. Mulia *et al.* (2021) also found that customers' perception of the social benefits of connecting with the company is effective in creating a sense of customer loyalty. Finally, Maheswari & Hidayat (2021) have considered the benefits of special treatment based on the level of customer perception of the amount of advantage and motivation created to develop and increase the level of loyalty. Therefore, a consistent literature can be observed in this section. However, as stated in this section, the mediating role of these components or relationship advantages in the relationship between brand experiences and customer loyalty is a topic that has been less directly addressed in

the research literature. This study showed that relationship advantage components can ultimately play a mediating role in the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty. A role that can provide marketing and customer relationship specialists with operational solutions and appropriate insights to understand the effects of customer perceived benefits on other performance indicators in the field of marketing and customers. Based on this, it is suggested that to create an effective connection between brand experiences and customer loyalty, companies should understand the perceived benefits of customer relationship and try to motivate customers to use these benefits so that they can play their role as a mediator in this connection.

CONCLUSION

As a result of this research, important findings have been obtained regarding the mediating role of relationship benefit components in the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty. This study examined the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty with the mediation of relationship benefits. These findings are especially useful for companies that provide services to their customers online, as they can gain a better understanding of the importance and position of relationship benefits and the type, extent, and form of interaction and communication between companies and customers. The results of this research have shown that by creating an effective level of perceptual relationship benefits among customers, their brand experiences can be driven towards creating customer loyalty. An issue that is considered as one of the performance indicators in many companies, especially online sales companies. This study provides management insights with a customer-centric approach that can be used in various industries, especially in the online sales sector of companies such as Digikala. Relationship benefits must be well defined by companies and marketing managers and implemented in such a way that these benefits are well understood by customers so that through this perception, customers can ultimately be motivated to strengthen the complex relationship of the brand experience as a pleasant experience in order to create customer loyalty. Therefore, by understanding the mediating role of relationship benefits discussed in this research in the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty, it is essential to implement initiatives that can ultimately enhance customer loyalty. It is important to mention that the confirmation of the mediating role of relationship advantages shows that these advantages can strengthen the relationship between brand experience and loyalty and also act in the direction of weakening this relationship. If customers do not perceive the benefit of appropriate relationship, they are likely to downplay the role of brand experience in customer loyalty (based on the confirmed mediating role of this research). Therefore, the use of solutions that come from a complete understanding of the desired advantages of customers along with programs to strengthen them can be effective in this regard.

Research limitations and further research directions: This study also had some problems. First, this study was conducted among customers of one of the most famous and well-known brands active in online sales in Iran. Therefore, expanding its results to other industries requires more extensive research. This research was conducted based on data from 384 customers, and future researchers can conduct a more accurate assessment in different geographic areas using big data and more dimensions. It is also suggested that the model presented in this study be examined in different industries to develop a better understanding of the relationship between research variables in industries.

Ethical statement: In this study, complete information about the objectives of this research was explained to the respondents, and there was no compulsion for them to participate in the research process, and participation was completely voluntary. Also, before distributing the questionnaires, a consent form was obtained from the respondents. It was also assured that the respondents' information would be

considered confidential and would only be used by the researcher for the purpose of data analysis in this study.

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