

Investigating the effectiveness of perceived non-financial values on commitment and loyalty between distribution channels and manufacturing companies

Saeed Fakhrizadeh Mahabadi^a, Mohammad Mashhadizadeh^{b,*}, Morteza Raei^a

^aDepartment of Management, Mobarakeh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

^bDepartment of Management, Institute of Market and Business, Isf.C, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

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Abstract

Decision-making regarding the method of transferring goods to the place of purchase or consumption is among the important decisions that marketing managers always face. The importance of the decisions made regarding the distribution channels is that the company has to stick to these decisions for a long time, because it takes several years to establish a distribution system, and it cannot be changed easily. This issue has caused most marketing managers to pay special attention to the effectiveness of perceived non-financial values. The purpose of this article is to investigate the effectiveness of each of the non-financial perceived values on commitment and loyalty between distribution channels and manufacturing companies. A mixed-methods approach is employed to conduct this research. The qualitative section included the identification and extraction of the most important components associated with each dimension of perceived non-financial values. In the quantitative section, an examination of the conceptual model of these factors was carried out with the two concepts of commitment and loyalty. The statistical population in the qualitative part was university professors, senior managers and experienced consultants in the field of production and distribution, and in the quantitative section, all distribution field activists were included in the distribution sector in the city of Qom. To analyze qualitative data, the content analysis method was used, and for measuring quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, the structural equation modelling method was employed by using SPSS 26 and PLS 3 software. The findings obtained from the interview method showed that in total, there are 25 components in the form of three functional, emotional and social dimensions. The quantitative results also indicated a significant and positive relationship between the three dimensions of functional, emotional, and social performance with commitment and loyalty among distribution channels and manufacturing companies, and only the effect of some components on the aforementioned dimensions was not confirmed.

Keywords: Perceived non-financial values, Commitment, Manufacturing companies, Distribution channels, Loyalty
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*Corresponding author

Email addresses: saeedfakhrizadehm@gmail.com (Saeed Fakhrizadeh Mahabadi), mohammad49@iau.ac.ir (Mohammad Mashhadizadeh), m.raei@mau.ac.ir (Morteza Raei)

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1 Introduction

As markets continue to grow and become more complex, many organizations have recognized the excessive importance of their current customers. They strive to establish long-term relationships with their partners, alongside focusing on the production and distribution of products and services and meeting the needs of customers. They pursue innovative activities to improve the trust of their customers [15]. The main goal of organizations in new marketing arenas is to establish long-term and mutual relationships with interest groups, and most importantly with customers. In this view, customer loyalty and trust have the greatest impact on revenue, and gaining a share of the budget and keeping customers in the long term increases market share and profitability [32].

Distribution is one of the most critical elements of integrated marketing, and management in this area faces the most challenging decision-making stage, as selected channels can impact other marketing decisions. Another reason that can be given for the importance of distribution channel decisions is that after making a decision, the company must stick to it for a long time. Because it takes several years for a distribution system to be optimally established, and it cannot be changed easily [16]. This issue has caused most companies to pay attention to the reputation of the company and its brand to communicating with manufacturers.

In fact, marketers believe that a key element that significantly influences customers' purchasing decisions is their understanding of the company's role in society and how they interact with their shareholders and stakeholders. The company's brand is a key element of its reputation, but the main point is that a company can have different mental images and may also have multiple brand names. In contrast, the reputation of a company reflects the overall attractiveness of a company to all its components, including employees, customers, investors, reporters, and the general public [18].

In any case, the distribution channel in the business landscape, which is also called the marketing channel, is the route that the business decides to take to provide its goods or services to customers. This path can either be a direct interaction between the business and the customer, or it can involve multiple interconnected intermediaries such as wholesalers, distributors, retailers, etc. Therefore, the distribution channel in the business landscape can also be referred to as a set of interdependent intermediaries that help make a product available to the end customer [7]. When a producer simultaneously uses more than one distribution channel to reach the end user, it is said that they are employing a dual distribution strategy. They may open showrooms to sell the product directly while using online marketplaces and other retailers to attract more customers. A perfect example of goods sold through dual distribution is smartphones [19].

The importance of relationships between distribution channels and manufacturing companies has caused the discussion of perceived non-financial values and its three main dimensions, i.e., functional, emotional and social value, to be more and more considered [30]. In a general definition, perceived value can be considered as a consumer's overall evaluation of the desirability of a product based on perceptions derived from its reception and transactions [11]. On the other hand, the functional value dimension expresses the extent to which the distributor-manufacturer relationship achieves the common goals of the parties, such as achieving profit or market growth and effectiveness and efficiency [10]. On one hand, the emotional dimension pertains to the psychological and emotional consequences of the product, as well as the product's ability and capability to evoke emotions and create appealing situations. On the other hand, the social dimension indicates the desirability resulting from the perceived quality by the customer and their expected performance of the product or service [20]. Therefore, it is natural that attention to perceived non-financial value can play a crucial role in enhancing commitment and loyalty among stakeholders in a business relationship.

The commitment in relationships between distribution channels and manufacturing companies refers to the explicit willingness of channel members to maintain participation and collaboration. It indicates the partner's dedication to fulfilling tasks according to prior agreements and the inclination to preserve the relationship. In fact, commitment refers to the belief and conviction of both parties in the continuous relationship to ensure maximum effort from both sides to maintain the relationship [10]. On the other hand, loyalty indicates a deep commitment to buy a superior product or service again in the future, which will continue to buy from that brand despite environmental influences and competitors' marketing actions to change behaviour [24]. Therefore, the realization of both commitment and loyalty in business relationships can be considered as a winning card for both parties in the deal and can be prioritized in line with achieving overarching goals.

Considering that the distribution network is an important part of the economic system of any country, which has a direct impact on the economic developments of that country in determining the function and structure, it is necessary to heed the structures and connected links in it. In fact, the distribution network is the link between producers and consumers and consists of agents who interact with each other and perform the act of distributing goods. Therefore, considering the importance of the mentioned issue, in this research, an attempt has been made to investigate the

effectiveness of the dimensions and components of perceived non-financial values on commitment and loyalty between distribution channels and manufacturing companies.

2 Theoretical framework and research background

The business distribution channel can be divided into direct channels and indirect channels. Indirect channels can be divided into one-level, two-level, and three-level channels based on the number of intermediaries between producers and customers, which are explained below for each of them [27]. Direct selling is one of the oldest methods of selling products. It does not involve the insertion of an intermediary, and the manufacturer is in direct contact with the customer at the point of sale. Some examples of direct channels are peddlers, retail stores, website order fulfilment, etc. Direct channels are usually used by manufacturers who sell perishable goods and high-priced goods, and whose target audiences are geographically concentrated [29]. On the other hand, when a manufacturer engages an intermediary to sell its product to the end customer, it is said to be using an indirect channel. Indirect channels can be classified into three types [7]:

- One-level channel (producer to retailer and retailer to customer),
- Two-level channel (producer to wholesaler, wholesaler to retailer, retailer to customer),
- Three-level channel (producer to agent, agent to wholesaler, wholesaler to retailer, retailer to customer).

On the other hand, the Internet has revolutionized the way manufacturers deliver goods. Apart from traditional direct and indirect channels, manufacturers now use marketplaces such as Amazon (Amazon also provides warehousing services for manufacturers' products), Digikala, and other intermediaries such as aggregators to provide goods and services. The Internet has also led to the elimination of unnecessary intermediaries for products such as software that are distributed directly over the Internet [2]. The existence of this variety of distribution channel choice has caused it to be considered as one of the strategic decisions in the success or failure of businesses. For example, although direct sales eliminate intermediary costs and provide more control to the producer, they increase internal workload and raise the costs of conducting business. In any case, four factors should be considered before deciding on the choice of distribution channel [6]:

1. Market characteristics: These characteristics include the number of customers, their geographical location, buying habits, taste and capacity and frequency of purchases, etc. Direct channels are suitable for businesses that are their target audience [26]. In cases where customers are geographically dispersed or reside in another country, manufacturers are advised to use indirect channels.
2. Product characteristics: Product cost, technicality, perishability, and their standard or customization play a major role in choosing a distribution channel for them [17]. Perishable goods such as fruits, vegetables, and dairy products cannot be transported over longer channels because they may perish during transit. Producers of these goods often choose direct or single-level distribution channels, while non-perishable goods such as soap, toothpaste, etc., require longer channels because they need to reach customers living in geographically diverse areas.
3. Competitive characteristics: The choice of distribution channel is also influenced by the channel chosen by competitors in the market. Usually, businesses tend to use the same channel used by their competitors. But some businesses use a different distribution channel than their competitors to differentiate and attract customers. For example, when all smartphones were sold in the retail market, some companies partnered with Amazon and used the scarcity principle to launch their smartphone as Amazon exclusive.
4. Business characteristics: Financial strength, management expertise act as important factors in deciding the path that the product takes before being available to the end user [26]. A business with a lot of capital and good management expertise (people with sufficient knowledge and expertise in the field of distribution) can establish distribution channels for itself, but a business with financial stability and low management expertise must rely on third-party distributors. The comparison between long and short-term channels in terms of the four mentioned factors is shown in Table 1.

In recent years, many domestic and foreign studies have focused on the effectiveness of non-financial perceived value and its components on the two concepts of commitment and loyalty. For example, the study of Rastgar, Maleki Minbash Rozgah and Gazvini [23] showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between social media marketing activity and customer intention directly and indirectly through perceived value. On one hand, Doshmankosh

Table 1: Comparison of long and short channels in terms of market characteristics [9].

Factor	Long channels	Short channels
Market characteristics	This proposal is targeted at non-commercial consumers and users.	This proposal is targeted at business users.
	Customers are geographically dispersed.	Customers are geographically concentrated.
	Customers do not need extensive technical knowledge.	Customers require extensive technical knowledge.
	Regular service is not required for this offer to work.	Regular service is required for this offer to work.
	The order quantity is small.	The order quantity is large.
Product characteristics	The product is durable.	The product is perishable.
	The product is standardized.	The product is complex.
	The product is cheap.	The product is expensive.
Competitive characteristics	The competitor uses indirect channels and the manufacturer is satisfied with its performance.	The competitor uses direct channels and the manufacturer is satisfied with its performance.
	The competitor uses the direct channel and the manufacturer thinks it is more profitable to choose indirect or long channels.	The competitor uses indirect channels and the manufacturer thinks it is more profitable to choose short channels.
Business characteristics	The business believes that channel control is not important.	Business believes that channel control is important.
	This business has a small production line.	This business has a wide product line.
	The business lacks sufficient resources to perform the distribution channel function.	The business has sufficient resources to perform the distribution channel function.

Kour Abaslou, Saebnia and Hossein-oghli Khiavi [12] stated that brand personality has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty, and perceived value has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty. The results of the study by Paran, Ramezani Gotbabadi and Farhadi [21] showed that the image of the company has a positive and high effect on the perceived value. In addition, trust in the company and trust in the employees both have a significant effect on the quality of the services provided and the perceived value of the customer, but the extent of the effect of the trust of the company on the perceived value is much higher than the trust of the employees on the perceived value. Salehi Sadagiani, Ghasemzadeh Gouri and Bakhtiari [25] in investigating the impact of perceived brand value, consumer involvement and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty, showed that perceived brand value, consumer involvement and customer satisfaction have a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty.

Regarding foreign studies, Abdelmoety, Aboul-Dahab, and Agag [1] showed that value communication and ethical standards are the key drivers of retailer commitment to perceived value, which in turn leads to customer citizenship behaviour. On the other hand, Setyaningrum [28] conducted a study on increasing customer loyalty through product innovation and perceived value, based on which innovation and perceived value can increase customer satisfaction and thereby affect customer trust. In other words, customer satisfaction acts as a bridge between innovation and perceived value, with customer loyalty and trust. Gogoi [14] also demonstrated that customer trust has a positive and significant relationship with perceived value and loyalty. Additionally, perceived value has a meaningful impact on loyalty, mediating the mentioned relationship. The research conducted by Ghanadiof, Sanayei, and Emami [13] determined that the customer's perception has an effect on the customer's ownership commitment, and the customer-seller relationship also plays a significant role in this. On the other hand, Pham [22] stated that non-financial performance plays a fundamental role as a mediator in the relationship between comprehensive quality management and financial performance. Special attention should be paid to it for long-term benefits.

By all means, reviewing the theoretical foundations and background studies in this field led to the identification of many underlying components and factors in the interactions between distribution channels and manufacturing companies. Of course, to clarify as much as possible and achieve a comprehensive model, efforts were made to extract other overlooked factors by conducting interviews with experts and specialists in this field. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these factors on each of the concepts of customer commitment and loyalty under investigation was examined, with detailed explanations provided in the subsequent sections.

3 Research method

A mixed method was used to conduct the present research. In this way, initially, relying on literature review and research studies, some factors related to perceived non-financial values were identified. Then, to strengthen these factors, especially in identifying those related to interactions between distribution channels and manufacturing companies, a semi-structured interview method was used. The statistical population in the qualitative section consisted

of experts and relevant professionals, including university professors, senior managers, and experienced consultants in the field of production and distribution. They were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Finally, 20 experts participated in this section, most of whom had doctorate degrees, and the content analysis method was used to check their answers.

After finishing the qualitative phase and identifying the most important components and dimensions of non-financial perceived value, it was time to examine these factors with the two concepts of commitment and loyalty, which were used to investigate this issue using the field method and questionnaire tools. To check the validity of the designed questionnaire, the face validity method and Cronbach's alpha reliability test were used, and based on the results, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained for all variables was higher than 0.7 and was approved. The statistical population in this section consisted of all participants in the distribution sector in the city of Qom. In the end, the responses of 326 individuals were collected through non-probability sampling and analyzed using the structural equation modelling and partial least squares approach with SPSS 26 and Smart PLS 3 software. It should be noted that the tests examined in the fit section included factor loading, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, mean, and variance extracted. The divergent validity test and structural fit tests, including the determination coefficient and the GOF test, were also conducted. After their confirmation, the research model was examined in the form of significant coefficients and the path under consideration.

4 Findings

The examination of factors extracted from the literature and theoretical foundations, along with the results obtained from the analysis of participants' interview responses, revealed that a total of 25 components were considered in the form of three dimensions: functional, emotional, and social, to present a comprehensive model of perceived non-financial value. An interesting point regarding the participants in the qualitative section was their extensive work experience and studies, all of whom had over 8 years of experience. This indicates their comprehensive perception and understanding of the subject under investigation. As mentioned in the methodology section, after completing the qualitative part and to examine the effectiveness of factors related to perceived non-financial value, an initial conceptual model was drawn, consisting of the mentioned dimensions and components, along with the two concepts of commitment and loyalty. This is presented in Figure 1.

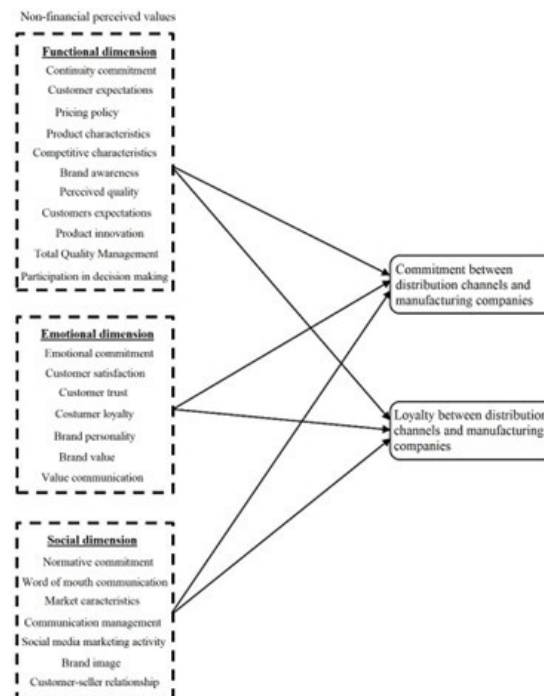


Figure 1: Initial conceptual model

Next, in order to check the above conceptual model, a questionnaire tool was used, which included two sections of demographic questions and specialized questions related to each of the variables. Considering that distribution field

activists are often from different spectrums, in order to get to know the people participating in this sector, a summary of their descriptive statistics is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The results of descriptive statistics of the demographic characteristics of the participants

Component	Grouping	Frequency	Frequency percentage
Gender	Man	309	94.8
	Female	17	5.2
Age	Under 30 years	62	19.0
	31 to 40 years	135	41.4
	41 to 50 years	75	23.0
	50 years and above	54	16.6
	Diploma	27	8.3
Education	Associate degree	32	9.8
	Bachelor	166	50.9
	Master	80	24.5
	Ph.D.	21	6.4
Work experience related to the cooperation of distribution channels and manufacturing companies	Under 2 years	28	8.6
	2 to 5 years	52	16.0
	6 to 10 years	126	38.7
	11 years and above	120	36.8
Total		326	100.0

As seen in table 2, the participants were from different age groups, education and work experience, each of them had a specific view on the interaction between the distribution channels and the producer participant. On one hand, to determine the effectiveness of perceived non-financial value on commitment and loyalty, the output data from the SPSS software were entered into the PLS software. Through the two options of the algorithm and bootstrapping, the results from the first part were analyzed to assess the goodness of fit and structural model, and the results from the second part were used to examine the relationship between the variables within the research model in terms of significant and standardized coefficients. The results of the goodness of fit of the research model showed that the factor load obtained for all items or questions was higher than 0.7 and was approved. On the other hand, to check the reliability of the research tool, three tests of Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) were used, the results of which are shown in Table 3.

The findings from table 3 indicated that the values of Cronbach's alpha and the combined reliability of the variables of the research model were higher than 0.7, and also the extracted average variance of all variables was higher than 0.5. Therefore, all three criteria have been approved, and it can be concluded that the reliability of the research variables was appropriate. On the other hand, Fornell and Larcker's criteria were used to check the divergent validity. The method of calculating divergent validity is that the square root of the average variance extracted of a construct must be greater than the correlation of that construct with other constructs that are shown on the right and bottom of that construct. Therefore, due to the fact that the coefficients in the main diameter are higher than the relationships between variables with other variables, the divergent validity of the measurement model was also confirmed.

Next, to check the fit of the structural part, two tests of the coefficient of determination and GOF were used, the first one is the degree of predicting the behaviour of the dependent variables by the independent variables, and the second one shows the goodness of fit of the overall model. The values of the coefficient of determination obtained for the two variables of commitment and loyalty were equal to 0.867 and 0.793, respectively, which shows that the independent variables of this research have been able to predict the behaviour of the dependent variables to a great extent, and the criterion of the coefficient of determination is at an optimal level. On the other hand, the obtained value for the GOF statistic was 0.723, which, according to the standard provided for this statistic, indicates a strong goodness of fit for the research model.

After confirming the pre-tests related to examining the validity of the research conceptual model, the examination of the final model in terms of significant and standardized coefficients was conducted in two scenarios. For this purpose, bootstrapping was used, according to which, if the significance coefficient of the relationship between two variables is outside the range of (-1.96 to 1.96), the relationship is considered significant, and the standardized coefficient results are then examined to determine the direction and strength of that relationship. However, if the relationship between the two variables is not significant, the examination of standardized coefficients will not be applicable. Since the main focus of the current study was on the relationship between the main dimensions of non-financial perceived value with the two variables of commitment and loyalty between distribution channels and manufacturing companies, the impact

Table 3: Reliability values of research constructs

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	Average (AVE) Variance Extracted
Brand awareness	0.807	0.886	0.721
Value communication	0.719	0.798	0.569
Word of mouth communication	0.781	0.863	0.678
Brand value	0.784	0.808	0.612
Customer trust	0.769	0.783	0.680
Customer perception	0.768	0.801	0.506
Customer expectations	0.760	0.814	0.594
Brand image	0.789	0.876	0.702
Commitment	0.777	0.816	0.759
Continuity commitment	0.760	0.847	0.586
Emotional commitment	0.720	0.830	0.558
Normative commitment	0.748	0.858	0.670
Customer-seller relationship	0.740	0.804	0.579
Customer satisfaction	0.760	0.815	0.596
Pricing policy	0.726	0.864	0.510
Brand personality	0.736	0.832	0.624
Social media marketing activity	0.791	0.876	0.702
Communication management	0.793	0.830	0.620
Total Quality Management	0.793	0.814	0.597
Participation in decision making	0.791	0.877	0.704
Product characteristics	0.745	0.807	0.584
Product innovation	0.772	0.822	0.622
Loyalty	0.774	0.813	0.569
Customer loyalty	0.787	0.875	0.701
Market characteristics	0.761	0.862	0.676
Competitive characteristics	0.742	0.852	0.658
Perceived quality	0.779	0.861	0.601

of the identified components related to each dimension was carried out in the second layer of the research model. The result of examining the conceptual model of the research in the case of significant coefficients is shown in Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 2, despite the significant relationship between all three dimensions of perceived value with dependent variables, the relationship of some components with the mentioned dimensions was not confirmed. In other words, it can be said that components such as customer perception and relational value have no role in influencing the mentioned dimension, and the influence of that dimension occurs without considering those component or components. After examining the conceptual model in the case of significant coefficients, it is time to investigate the model in the case of standardized coefficients, the result of which can be seen in Figure 3. According to the results, there is a positive and direct relationship between all variables, and considering each of the mentioned dimensions strengthens the commitment and loyalty between distribution channels and participating manufacturers.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The availability of the product and the ease of reaching the customer affect its demand at different levels. Distribution channels in the business landscape are a key element in all marketing strategies that revolve around the product. They help businesses reach their customers to maximize revenue as well as brand awareness. Therefore, it is very important to investigate the factors that increase the perceived value and, as a result, increase the level of commitment and loyalty of these channels to manufacturing companies.

The present research was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of dimensions and components of non-financial perceived value on commitment and loyalty between distribution channels and manufacturing companies. To conduct this study, a mixed method was used, which included both qualitative and quantitative parts. The results related to the qualitative section indicated that the components of continuous commitment, customer expectations, pricing policy, product characteristics, competitive characteristics, brand awareness, perceived quality, customer perception, product innovation, comprehensive quality management, and participation in decision-making from the functional dimension, emotional commitment components, customer satisfaction, customer trust, customer loyalty, brand personality, brand value, and value relationship from the emotional dimension, and normative commitment components, word-of-mouth communication, relationship management, social media marketing activities, brand image, market characteristics, and

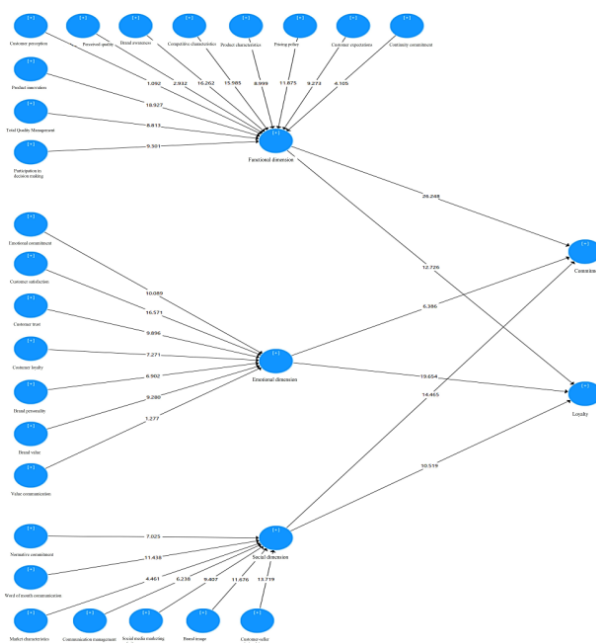


Figure 2: Testing the research model in the case of significant coefficients

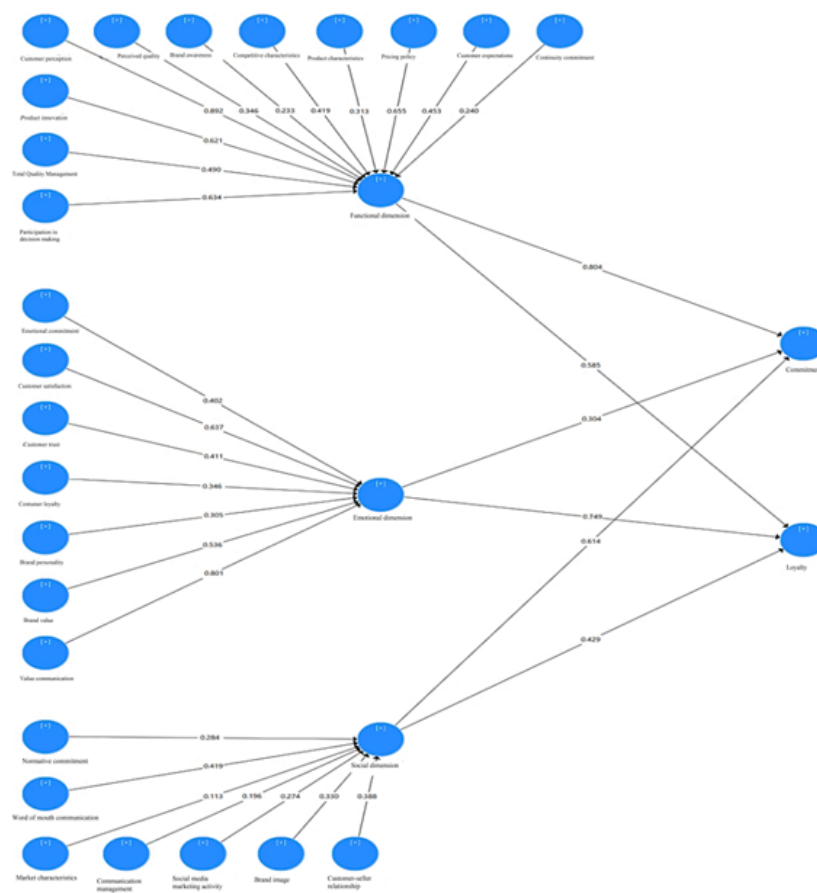


Figure 3: Testing the research model in the mode of standard coefficients

customer-seller relationship from the social dimension were the most important components forming perceived non-financial value.

The results obtained from the qualitative section are in line with the studies of Alizadeh, Moharramzadeh, and Elahi [3], Asadi, Khazaei Poul, and Tavakoli [5], Caber, Albayrak, and Crawford [8], as well as the study by Wang et al. [31]. All these studies, by referring to the three functional, emotional, and social dimensions, introduced and examined some of the identified components in the present study as part of the design of their conceptual model. Based on this, it can be said that considering these three dimensions and their related components to show the non-financial perceived value in business relationships is completely meaningful and can be implemented.

On the other hand, the results of examining each of the mentioned dimensions with the two variables of commitment and loyalty in the form of a quantitative part and with the help of questionnaire tools showed that the dimensions of non-financial perceived value had a positive and significant relationship with both concepts of commitment and loyalty and only the intensity of their influence has been different. In fact, the results of this section indicate that in the context of enhancing commitment, the functional, social, and emotional dimensions have the most significant impact in that order. However, in the context of loyalty, the emotional dimension plays the most prominent role, followed by the functional and social dimensions, in influencing the loyalty of distribution channels in their interaction with manufacturing companies.

In this regard, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar [4] examined the role of non-financial values in professional trade services through a three-dimensional model of perceived value (perceived company reputation, company credibility, and perceived relationship quality) and investigated the outcomes (satisfaction and loyalty). The results of their survey showed that the credibility and quality of company relationships affect all dimensions. Meanwhile, the perceived reputation only affects the perceived emotional value. The results of the study helped in understanding how to view satisfaction and loyalty as the results of perceived value and made it clear that apart from functional value, emotional and social values play an important role in the satisfaction and loyalty of customers of professional business services.

In any case, considering the loyalty and commitment of customers to manufacturing companies is important, and taking into account the commitment and loyalty of distribution channels is also a concern for marketing managers of manufacturing companies. This is because the responsibility of moving the products of manufacturing companies often occurs through the presence and activities of distribution channels. If companies cannot have proper interaction with distribution channels in the outsourcing part of their distribution, they may remain unsuccessful in achieving success. Therefore, considering non-financial perceived values should be at the top of the communication strategies of companies so that they can strengthen their relationships with them while establishing long-term relationships with distribution channels.

Given the results obtained from the present study, it is recommended that managers of manufacturing companies consider both micro and macro policies to improve the commitment and loyalty of their collaborators. This should be done by taking into account the components that make up the perceived non-financial values. Neglecting any of these components can have short-term or long-term impacts on the company's activities and create opportunities for other competitors to enter the target markets. Therefore, considering the components of each dimension of perceived value, namely functional, emotional, and social, should be outlined within the main goals of the company for its employees. This ensures that individuals, recognizing the importance of their roles in the future performance of the company, refrain from engaging in any behaviour contrary to the existing trends in the interactions between distribution channels and the manufacturing company.

In the end, it is recommended for future researchers to conduct similar studies in other business areas such as supply chain or service-oriented activities. This would help identify the most crucial components of perceived value in these domains and emphasize the importance of extracting such components in enhancing the performance of companies. Furthermore, by specifying the studied industry (e.g., food, petrochemicals, etc.), more precise and effective practical recommendations can be provided to managers and company executives based on the nature of their interactions and activities. It is also recommended that future studies employ prioritization methods and fuzzy Delphi techniques to determine the level and nature of the roles of the components constituting perceived non-financial value.

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