

Influence of Brand and Perceived Quality on Customer Behavior in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Ethical Marketing Mix

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Abstract

Purpose: The recession caused by the outbreak of the coronavirus, in addition to reducing the purchasing power of consumers has drastically changed the way consumers behave. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the mixed effect of Corona marketing of sports businesses on loyal behavior with the mediating role of the brand and perceived quality relationship.

Methods: The available sampling, 400 Internet customers were selected randomly as the statistical sample of the research based on the minimum statistical sample required in path analysis research. To measure the validity of the content, 15 marketing experts were surveyed, which is based on the CVR= 0/89, which is approved. To determine the reliability of the model, two criteria of combined reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.85$) and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.79$) and Average Variance Extracted (0/67) and Smart-PLS were used. R², Q², GOF was used to evaluate the adequacy of the model. The results showed that ethical pricing and ethical promotion have more effect on brand image and product quality. Product quality also has the highest impact on customer loyalty.

Results: The results of factor analysis of the data showed that creating loyal behavioral patterns requires the development of ethics marketing mix is new in that the components of product promotion and ethical pricing have the greatest impact on the brand-customer relationship, so it is recommended to sports business owners as part of the corona virus outbreak.

Conclusion: Most of the economic power of households is focused on the supply of basic goods by providing clear rules and regulations, as well as adhering to the obligations of online sales procedures as an indicator of e-commerce growth, to provide a platform for strengthening purchasing behavior.

Keywords: Ethical Marketing, COVID-19, Brand Image, Marketing Mix, Loyalty, Perceived Quality.

Introduction

In the literature, the term “ethics” refers to a set of moral norms, principles or values, and the nature and grounds of morality that guide people’s behavior such as moral judgments, standards and rules of conduct (Sherwin, 1983). The terms “unethical” or “ethical” describe an individual’s subjective moral judgment of right/wrong or good/bad. By nature, moral sentiments can be either neutral or negatively/positively valanced. Ethics in marketing transpires from marketing executives’ relationships with organizational members, consumers, rivals, and the sides and include public opinion in the exchange process” (Brunk, 2012). On the other hand, business ethics is a vital topic for scholars and practitioners. Considering previous business ethics research, a plethora of research has focused on the relationship between ethical management and ethical activities. Ethics is also closely related to social responsibility because social responsibility relating to ethics includes social relationships within society, in which enterprises work (Lee & Jin, 2019). Consumers in current society continue to demand more high-quality products, and they display a preference for brands that are socially reputable even at higher prices when evaluating similar products. Ethical marketing practices provide managers and marketers with a guideline concerning what they should do when they face an ethical problem. Gaski defined “ethical marketing as a code of morals and conduct used in marketing practices”. Some scholars define it as “the systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions”. Marketing continuously involves ethical and moral activities. Ethical marketing practices include product-related ethics, price-related ethics, place-related ethics, and promotion-related ethics

(Fournier, 1998; Papista & Dimitriadis, 2012; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

Providing a code of ethics on products, online appraisal and satisfaction analysis platform launches by the consumers, and the inspections which are conducted in accordance with the ethical business charter by the unions are the most relevant efforts actualized by the sales managers. In response, these efforts have emphasized the regard for ethical marketing features and consumer rights as one of the fundamental features of reputation or notoriety in online stores within the international market (Creyer, 1997).

Ethical marketing is a manner of marketing philosophy than a mere strategy, which dominates all aspects of marketing by features of promoting honesty, fairness, integrity, trade secret privacy, confidentiality, and commitment in sales and advertising (Nafei & Saiednia, 2020). Accordingly, the Islamic manner of marketing is similarly established on features that include human dignity, moral norms, communication of awareness, and moderation (Rahimi & Aramoon, 2018). The latest pandemic-era studies in Iran signify the imperative need for changing the marketing values and norms and promotion of ethical marketing in the sporting goods industry to conceive a win-win strategy for all three components of the customer, business, and environment (Koozechian, Sardari, Ehsani, & Amiry, 2021; Solimani, Barani, Inanloo, & Khojasteh, 2020).

With the advent of third-generation organizations in the late 20th century, social networks marketing emerged as one of the best marketing strategies in the present day as online marketing requires the least cost and renders the most efficiency in response (Cortez, 2020). Online marketing’s trend has grown rapidly in the course of last

year as a result of the circumstances within the lifestyles of individuals and the enforcement of governmental restrictions for minimum movement and strict observance of health protocols during the pandemic and further rendered drastic changes in the customer behavior patterns (replacing virtual shopping for the physical equivalent) and online sales channels for such stores (virtual communication)(Vafainia, 2020), all of which have necessitated an emphasis on the observance of ethical behaviors by employees and sales managers serving at sports organizations in the form of responsibility, fair behavior, and professional ethics(Izadi, Moradi, & Abdollahi, 2017).

Consumer-brand relationship quality is a comprehensive concept that reflects the intensity, depth, continuity, and effect of the relationship between a consumer and brand. Consumer-brand relationship quality could be identified to include brand effect, brand identification, intimate relationships, brand trust, interdependence, satisfaction, and brand commitment(Chanavat & Bodet, 2009). Previous models of such a relationship posit a hierarchy of common components such as a cognitive, an affective, and a conative component. These processes are involved in establishing and maintaining the relationship between consumers and brands. Key factors that affect consumer-brand relationship quality include purchasing experience, emotional experience, act experience, cognitive beliefs, and brand commitment. A consumer's unilateral affective relationship with a brand is more like a fan's love for a sports star or a singer than the love that occurs in a personal relationship. To improve the consumer-brand relationship and reinforce a company's moral aspect and ethical relationships with customers, it is necessary to consider factors that are unique to consumer-brand relationship quality.

Consumer-brand relationship quality is an association that is built through a process in which consumers and brands, as two equal parties, contribute to and interact with each other in a marketplace(Park & MacInnis, 2018).

Perceived product quality has been variously defined in academic fields. Perceived product quality has been defined as the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority, a special type of association, and the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of the product. Perceived quality is different from actual or objective quality, product-based quality, and manufacturing quality(Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 2009; Suttikun & Meeprom, 2021). A perspective from argumentation is that perceived product quality is the consumer's perception of the overall components of a product, such as performance, features, reliability, conformance, dedicated design, durability, serviceability, and aesthetics(Boisvert & Khan, 2021; Suttikun & Meeprom, 2021).

The terms of loyalty is applied in diverse situations; therefore, the definition of loyalty differs depending on the situation. Recent studies of loyalty have used "a behavioral index, an attitudinal index, or a combined index incorporating behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive aspects according to the nature of the research". From a behavioral perspective, loyalty can be determined only by purchase behavior. With a focus on the outcome of such behavior(Uysal & Okumuş, 2021). Brand loyalty is defined as "the likelihood of a customer repurchasing a certain product or service or recommending it to others; it is argued that customer loyalty results in continuous purchase behavior". Brand loyalty is classified as affective loyalty and action loyalty. The best means of measuring brand loyalty is to measure affective loyalty. Brand loyalty is

considered one of the critical corporate tools to achieve survival and growth. Gaining loyal customers has become a major marketing goal and an essential basis to develop a competitive edge (Hwang, Choe, Kim, & Kim, 2021; Xu et al., 2021).

Ostensibly, entering a brand-new cycle of life and a cautious, yet ominous coexistence with COVID-19 (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020) necessitates and further ensures the observance of business and virtual network ethics in the use of social networking platforms such as Instagram (Nafei & Saiednia, 2020), Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, etc. as business tools (Vafainia, 2020). Thus, Soleimani et al. (2020) maintained in an examination of the sports customer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic that determining the right combination of the marketing mix and heeding the personality traits of individuals by online sports stores in virtual networks is a pervasive strategy that has been weighed in marketing studies of this era. In a sports industry where several business competitors as sports club owners, investors, media, sponsors, athletes, coaches, spectators, and fans are attempting to build market share for their business, acknowledging the features of ethical commerce is highly relevant in devising an impressive image and a sustainable economic share (Laczniak, Burton, & Murphy, 1999). Remarkably, the essence of most sports enterprises are services that encourage consumption behavior and purchase within the two-way observance of ethical and responsible practices, while ethical trade and sales constitute the core of the customer-product relationship strategy. On a final note, the most relevant outcomes of this strategy are the attainment of a long-term relationship and an efficient market share within the industry (Izadi et al., 2017). Given that the results of studies on consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic designate

the emergence of two prominent features of price-sensitiveness and risk-averseness in buying behavior, marketing managers are burdened with two significant concerns: heeding the customer purchasing power loss during the pandemic, one that could even extend into the post-pandemic era, and building an honest and dependable environment for customers to ensure their virtual shopping quality is the corresponding to that of physical shopping experience (Vafainia, 2020). According to Fazel et al. (2017), the ethical brand and trademark of the product must act as the basis of ethical marketing as the impact of the product's desired mentality is actualized via the product's ethical brand and trademark, both of which reflect the product's social responsibilities and render distinguishment in competition if based on the values of the given society and culture (Fazel & Harandi, 2017). The necessity of deliberation upon this issue stems from the reality that ethical brand and trademark are a subset of ethical marketing, which define and further reveal certain ethical rules, as well as valid and invalid behaviors in the form of product quality - perceived price within brand and trademark characteristics. These components are in absolute compliance with the main elements of the marketing mix and signify fair exchange with the customer, and naturally, adherence to the ethical features of the product and service (Fazel & Harandi, 2017).

The outcomes of this phenomenon have been evident in sports. The sports industry's capacity as a socio-cultural phenomenon to gather masses that happen to maintain complex social relations within social networks affirms that the role of sports enterprises no longer focuses solely on economic pursuits, but rather on its responsibility in the face of associates and customers in particular (Naghavi, Ramazaninejad, & Keshkar, 2018);

Accordingly, this mission was well perceived during the COVID-19 pandemic (Solimani et al., 2020). Health experts' insistence on the necessity of engaging in physical activities and the establishment of specialized channels for bettering the physical fitness levels as a preventive strategy against the adverse consequences of COVID-19 are further evidence for the above claim, respectively (Galmiche et al., 2020). Altogether, the above circumstances have directed marketing managers towards implementing a set of ethical values in marketing channels by operationalization of affiliate marketing, as well as targeting the quality of their services and products by building an efficient bond between the customer and the brand. Accordingly, the marketing managers adopt this target as a strategy that distinguishes them from their rivals, and further use it to strengthen the loyalty of current customers (He & Harris, 2020). Still, the ever-increasing complexity and growth of this phenomenon have laid the ground for inefficiency and failure of organizations in securing their presence within the competition cycle, which has further led marketing professionals to adopt ethical approaches as valid alternatives to traditional and conventional methods, adhering to a behavior-oriented approach as their primary business strategy (Izadi et al., 2017). Yet, predicting the structural and relational features of social networks renders a crucial impact in maintaining two-way customer-organization interactions within this novel marketing approach as accurate evaluation of the in-person behavioral features is infeasible. As a result, the ethical formulation of sales channels has significantly promoted consumer engagement and interest in goods and services (Nafei & Saiednia, 2020).

Every aspect of the sports industry, from organizations in charge of competitions to

sporting goods manufacturers and suppliers, has been extensively overshadowed by the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic in the course of the last year. As a result, all stadiums and sports venues are devoid of spectators and athletes, fitness club activities ceased, and all sporting events at any level are postponed until further notice (Ratten, 2020). These circumstances have increasingly engaged sports marketing professionals in the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Rizvandi, Afroozeh, & Jalilvand, 2020). Purportedly, production-service businesses are the most significant areas affected by COVID-19 (Koozechian et al., 2021). As such, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely narrowed the consumer buying behaviors (Vafainia, 2020) and the marketing strategies of organizations (in addition to a drastic decline in the consumers' buying power within the ensuing economic recession. According to the European Small Business Alliance (ESBA), a minimum decrease of 20% is anticipated in the sales power of manufacturing and service organizations by March 2020. Hence, the business-to-consumer (B2C) and the business-to-business (B2B) approaches are two of the marketing strategies recognized and introduced by sustainable business experts (Cortez, 2020; Lee & Jin, 2019), both of which are based on the observance of ethical standards that exceed the temporary benefit-cost equation in the marketing process and facilitate the attainment of the marketing and sales department's aims by establishing a bond of honesty and trust (Charkhtab Moghadam & Esmaeili, 2020). The most significant reason that brings this issue to the fore is rooted in the reality that during the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in the consumer preferences and behaviors have compelled organizations within a similar industry to obtain varieties of standard signs and marks (types of ISO) for customer retention and

further resolve policies that could recognize the future and ambush needs of customers to establish a solid bond between the brand and the consumers while adhering to the principles of business ethics and social responsibility at the same time (Lee & Jin, 2019).

As sports industries continue to develop ethical marketing practices such as a marketing mix, it will be very meaningful to study consumer perceptions of the activities, consumer-brand relationship, perceived product quality, and brand loyalty. In this study, we chose the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality as mediating variables. We examined the mediating effects of these two variables and assumed that a company's ethical marketing practices are related to the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality and that the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality affect brand loyalty. Hence, with regard to the prevailing approaches of online businesses, it appears that the pandemic-era sports marketing mix must be arranged to observe the principles of ethical marketing to fill the gaps caused by the absence of physical shopping while conforming to behavioral purchasing patterns in customers. Moreover, the arrangement must facilitate the marketing mix to retain current customers and gain a solid share of the competitive market by establishing a two-way bond that promotes honesty in sales. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop an ethical marketing model based on the business brand value-consumer behavior (B2C) approach.

Materials and methods:

The present study is a correlational study in which the data were collected descriptively and operated in the form of correlational research of structural equations. The available sampling, Internet customers were selected randomly as the statistical sample

of the research based on the minimum statistical sample required in path analysis research. For this purpose, according to the minimum number of statistical samples required for each variable in research of structural equation type ($5 \leq n \leq 10$) (Lee & Jin, 2019), after identifying the virtual address of sports stores and joining Virtual networks, electronic questionnaire link with two methods, identifying customers on the virtual page of the store and sending the questionnaire link on the personal page of users and also embedding the questionnaire on the virtual page of the store with the coordination of the store manager and asking clients to participate in completing the questionnaire were done. The title of expectations from the online purchase of sports products was completed, and finally, after removing incomplete questionnaires from the total number of questionnaires received (483) and ensuring the adequacy of the number of questionnaires, 400 correct electronic questionnaires were used. Demographic characteristics section (gender, age, level of education, income and purchase history) and a researcher-made ethical marketing questionnaire based on reviewing library documents and studying Rajabudri (2020), Charkhtaboghaddam et al. (2020), Nafei et al. (2020), Kianpour et al. (2020), He and Harris (2020), Lee et al. (2019), Locke Zinc et al. (2019) and Elizabeth et al. (2019) were set up in the form of a marketing mix: ethical product (5 items), ethical location (4 items), ethical pricing (4 items) and ethical promotion (5 items) and individuals were asked to answer the questions according to the current situation of the society and considering the limitations resulting from the outbreak of Covid 19 based on their previous experiences and real and reasonable expectations from the products offered in the virtual stores.

In this stage, in order to identify the ethical requirements related to online sales and consumer behavior, first, studies conducted in the field of ethical marketing were reviewed to identify the most important ethical values desired by the consumer. These ethical values were determined, respectively, for the component of the ethical product, including product quality, safety standards, environmental requirements, packaging, warranty and brand, for the component of the ethical place including clear sales method and policy, participation rate, transparency in the transaction, for the pricing component including illegal pricing, fraudulent pricing and fraudulent pricing, and the promotion component with characteristics such as legitimate advertising, lack of sales policies based on deception.

Also a modified version of the Customer Relationship Questionnaire - Jane Brand (2018), Falk Product Quality Questionnaire (2010) and Jane et al. Loyalty Questionnaire (2019) which is set as a five-point Likert scale (1: Strongly Agree to 5: Strongly Agree) were used.

Before distributing the questionnaires, the mentioned ethical components were included in the initial questionnaire and were given to 10 sales agents and representatives of reputable sports brands to reflect their sales experiences and other ethical values from their point of view. Finally, in order to localize research tools in the field of sports industry, first an ethical marketing questionnaire were sent to 10 knowledgeable sports management professors in the field of marketing and after applying the suggestions of the expert group and ensuring the validity of the questionnaire (internal reliability) was confirmed in a pilot study. To determine the reliability of the model, two criteria of combined reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.85$) and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.79$) and Average Variance Extracted (0/67) were reported. In order to analyze the data, after ensuring the research model fit index based on three indicators (structural fit, measurement fit and overall fit of the research model) (Davari, 2016) the data with the use of partial least squares technique was analyze - Internal reliability coefficients of research questionnaires d using software (Smart PLS-3) and SPSS 22 software.

Table 1. Internal reliability coefficients of research questionnaires

Components	Cronbach's alpha
Ethical Marketing	0.79
Customer Relationship	0.73
Loyalty Questionnaire	0.89
Perceived Quality	0.71
Brand loyalty	0.81

Results:

Demographic characteristics of the research samples are reported in Table 2. Most of the online shopping behavior was related to men (68%), also the age group of 30 to 39 years had more online shopping behaviors than

other age groups. In the variable of education level, students and people with a bachelor's degree had the most visits to online stores in the past year, which in terms of repetition of the behavior of this statistic includes 3 - 5 times the shopping behavior (67%).

Table2. Demographic characteristics of research statistic samples

Gender	N=400	Number	percent
	male		273
female		127	32%.
Age Category	20 -29	182	45%.
	39 - 30	124	31%.
	49 - 40	62	15%.
	Over 50	32	8%.
Education	Diploma - Student	102	25%.
	Bachelor student	215	54%.
	Master and above	83	21%.
Purchase experience in last year	1- 2 times	52	13%.
	3-5 times	268	67%.
	Over 5 times	80	20%.

After drawing the research model in the software, based on the relationships between obvious and hidden variables, the research model fit was evaluated based on three indicators: measurement fit, structural fit and overall pattern fit. In the first step, in order to ensure the fit of the measurement indices of the research model, the reliability of the indices according to the three criteria of Fornell and Larker (1981) (factor load coefficients, combined reliability and convergent and divergent validity according to the mean of extractive variance) was investigated (Davari, 2016).

The reliability coefficient of structures (Cronbach's alpha) and the factor load values of the obvious variables as the first criterion of the study indicated that according to the factor load of the items (more than 0.4) (Table 2), the model has a good measurement fit. is. The second criterion for evaluating the reliability of structures is the Dillion-Goldstein coefficient or the combined reliability (internal consistency index of the model) of the structures (<0.7).

In order to ensure the fit of the structural

part of the research model, the first criterion is to pay attention to the significance coefficients of Z, the values of which are reported based on the self-regulation analysis in Table 2. As it is known, all t-values obtained for the observed variables are greater than ($t < 1.96$), which indicates the significance of all items and relationships between variables at the 95% confidence level.

Values (R^2), (Q^2) and (f^2) are other criteria for examining the structural fit of the research model. The main criterion in evaluating the structural model is the coefficient of determination, which refers to the amount of variance explained by exogenous structures. According to the values reported in Table 4, the R^2 coefficients of the research variables indicate the effect of exogenous variables on the endogenous (dependent) variable. Therefore, considering the criterion values of 0.19, 0.33 and 0.67 for weak, medium and strong effect for the coefficient of determination (Davari, 2016), respectively, it can be concluded that the obvious structures of the research (mixed dimensions). Marketing have a moderate and strong

impact on hidden structures (consumer-brand relationship and product quality). Also in the study of Q^2 values for research variables, according to the criteria values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 for weak to strong effect (Davari, 2016), attention to the coefficients of research variables, indicates a

strong predictive power in this criterion. Impact size index (f^2) shows the intensity of the relationship between research variables. Paying attention to the values of this index for research variables confirms the optimal effect of the exogenous variable and has a structural fit of the research model (Table 4).

Table3. Investigating the measurement fit of the research model

	α	t	FL	CR	AVE
Ethical product					
The safety features of this store are correctly listed on the package.			0.66 0.71		
The products of this store comply with environmental standards (ECO)	0.76	6.72	0.59	0.88	0.72
This store prevents the sale of products with the possibility of social risks.			0.7		
This store has replacement and retrieval services in case of selling defective goods.			0.76		
The characteristics of the products of this store are honestly stated in the virtual page.					
Ethical pricing					
This store does not use deceptive pricing strategy (counterfeit).			0.75		
This store does not use deceptive pricing strategy (counterfeit).	0.86	8.39	0.81	0.81	0.81
Increasing the price and profit of the products of this store is based on the quality of the products.			0.64		
This store does not change its price by colluding with other stores.			0.66		
Ethical place					
It is possible to buy the products of this store immediately and directly			0.69 0.72		
This store refuses to do dishonest things to increase sales.	0.74	6.41	0.74	0.79	0.67
This store refuses to advertise counterfeit products instead of the original products.			0.71		
This store does not use the general sale of its products in critical situations					
Ethical promotion					
The store does not use an unrealistic brand magnification strategy to sell.			0.82 0.74		
This store does not use hypocritical or exaggerated advertisements.	0.81	8.51	0.84	0.84	0.83
The sellers of this store do not ask for additional fees or bribes in exchange for the sale.			0.73 0.71		
This store is committed to all its professional obligations.					
The store does not do seductive things like gifts and shopping cards for sale					
Consumer-brand relationship					
I enjoy talking about the brands of this store with others.			0.81 0.72		
The store receives feedback on its customers' buying behavior.	0.73	9.62	0.71	0.91	0.86
I do not worry about buying the products of this store.			0.69		
The brand features of this store well fulfill my purpose of purchase.			0.77 0.74		

I believe that no brand products will replace the products of this store.						0.76
I recommend buying the brands of this store to friends and acquaintances.						
I see a clear advantage between the products of this store and other stores						
Perceived Quality						
This store offers quality products.						0.71
The quality of design and construction of the products of this store is better than other stores.	0.71	5.81				0.73 0.82 0.86
The quality of the received product corresponds to the presentation characteristics in cyberspace.						
I prefer to pay a higher price for the high quality of the store's products.						
Brand loyalty						
The brands offered are very valuable to me in this store.						0.74
I do not think of any other brand other than the brands in this store.	0.89	6.26				0.71 0.86
I will buy from the brands of this store in the future.						0.81 0.83

Note: LF= Factor loadings, C.R. = variance extracted composite reliability; A.V.E. = average

Table4. Investigating the divergent validity of model indices by Fornell and Locker method

Constructs	AVE	Product	Price	Place	propagation	Consumer-brand	Quality	Loyalty
Product	0.72							
Price	0.81	0.452						
Place	0.67	0.129	0.361					
propagation	0.83	0.108	0.136	0.512				
Consumer-brand	0.86	0.071	0.071	0.153	0.278			
Quality	0.74	0.134	0.068	0.079	0.149	0.439		
Loyalty	0.83	0.152	0.142	0.093	0.088	0.081	0.619	

In examining the structural fit of the research model, the first criterion is to pay attention to the significance coefficients of Z, the values of which are reported based on the self-regulation analysis in Table 2. Considering that the value of t-values obtained for the observed variables is greater than ($t < 1.96$) (Table 2, Figure 2), it can be stated that all items and relationships between variables are significant at the 95% confidence level. Values (R^2), (Q^2) and (F^2) are other criteria for examining the structural fit of the research model.

The main criterion in evaluating the

structural model is the coefficient of determination, which refers to the amount of variance explained by exogenous structures. According to the values reported in Table 5, R^2 coefficients indicate the effect of exogenous variables on the endogenous (dependent) variable. Therefore, according to the criteria values of 0.19, 0.33 and 0.67 for weak, medium and strong effect, respectively, for the coefficient of determination (Davari, 2016), it can be concluded that the four variables of marketing mix, the relationship Consumer-brand and product quality have a moderate and strong impact on the final structure of

the research (brand loyalty). Also in the study of Q^2 values for research variables, according to the criteria values of 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 for weak to strong effect (Davari, 2016) attention to the coefficients of research variables, indicates a strong predictive power in this criterion. Impact size index (f^2) shows the intensity of the

relationship between research variables. Paying attention to the values of this index for the marketing mix and the variable of the consumer-brand relationship and product quality, confirms the favorable effect of the exogenous variable and has a structural fit of the research model (Table5).

Table5. Investigating the structural fit of the research model

Constructs	R^2	Q^2	F^2
Consumer-brand	0.62	0.46	0.38
Product quality	0.62	0.43	0.36
Brand Loyalty	0.65	0.52	0.41
Ethical product	-	0.36	0.29
Ethical pricing	-	0.38	0.27
Moral place	-	0.4	0.26
Ethical promotion	-	0.39	0.31

Finally, the overall fit of the research model was calculated based on the GOF index. For this index, the three values of 0.01, 0.25 and 0.36 are weak, medium and strong value. This criterion is obtained by calculating the product of the average of the subscription values in the coefficient of determination (R^2) in which the value (communality) enters only the first-order hidden variables into the following calculation(Davari, 2016).

Therefore, since the value of this index (GOF) for the current research model was **0.507**, so the good fit of the research model is confirmed.

$$GOF = \sqrt{\text{communality} \times \overline{R^2}} = \sqrt{0.649 \times 0.63} = \mathbf{0.507}$$

Table 6. Summary of the path analysis

Hypothesis	P	Standardized Coefficients
Ethical product had significant effect on Consumer Behavior	0.031	0.68
Ethical pricing had significant effect on Consumer Behavior	0.002	0.66
Ethical place had significant effect on Consumer Behavior	0.001	0.72
Ethical promotion had significant effect on Consumer Behavior	0.004	0.69
Ethical product had significant effect on perceived product quality	0.000	0.59
Ethical pricing had significant effect on perceived product quality	0.001	0.63
Ethical place had significant effect on perceived product quality	0.000	0.71
Ethical promotion had significant effect on perceived product quality	0.001	0.81
Consumer behavior had significant effect on brand loyalty	0.0004	0.73
perceived product quality had significant effect on brand loyalty	0.000	0.79

Notes: n.s. (non-significant); *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < -0.05$; b (Unstandardized) Coefficient; CBRQ: Consumer-Brand

Relationship Quality; PPQ: Perceived-Product Quality; and BL: Brand Loyalty

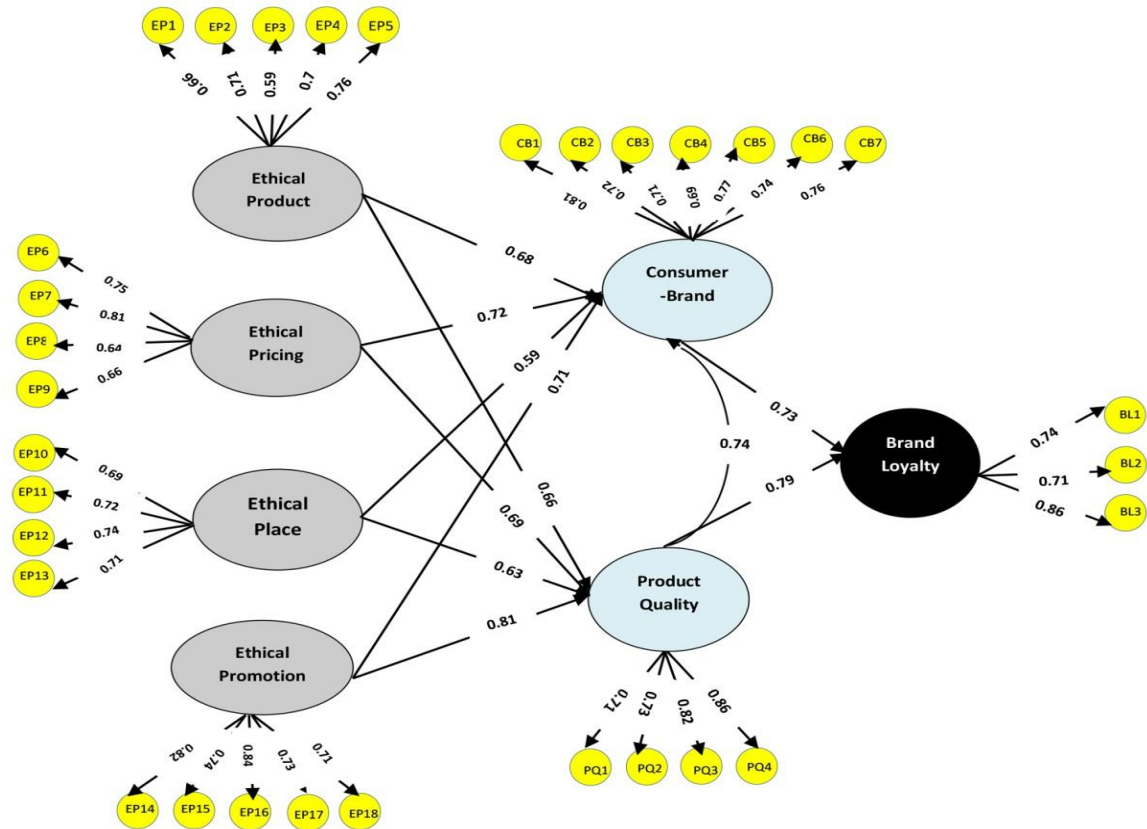


Figure 1. Path analysis of the research model based on the relationship between structures in the standard case

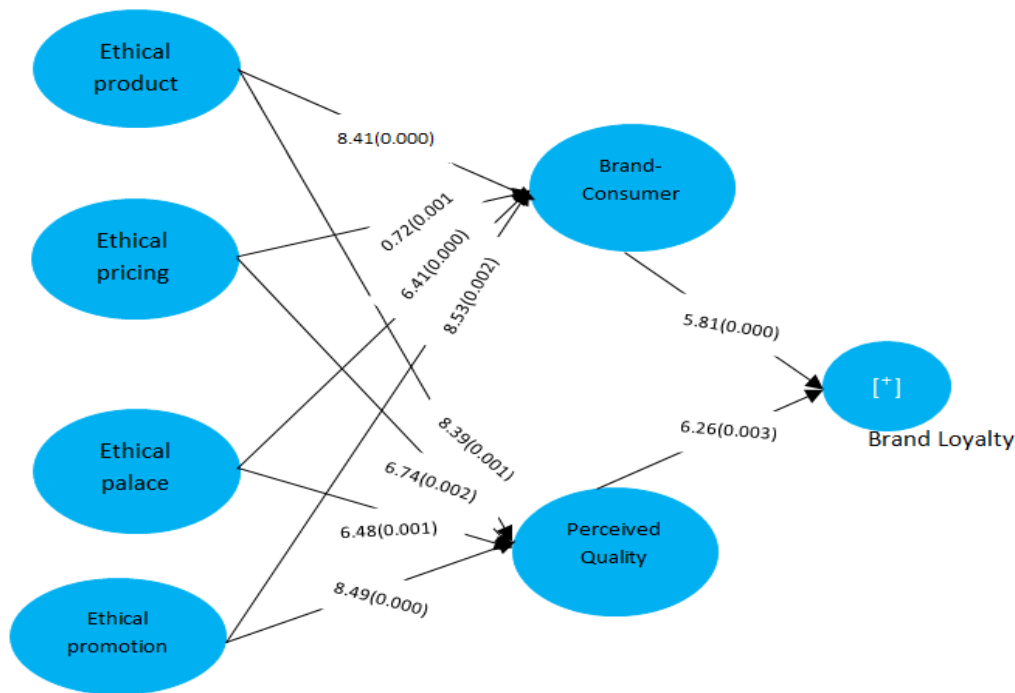


Figure 2. Path analysis of the research model in t-value mood

Discussion

The emergence of innovative business strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic has paved the way for genius and creativity in the marketing philosophy of business managers (Mataruna-Dos-Santos, Faccia, Helú, & Khan, 2020). Emphasis on customer orientation and social responsibility through institutionalizing ethics in all marketing processes from production to sales has received more and more attention from marketing experts (Rajab Dori, Salari, & Amiri, 2020). Therefore, organizations could employ this strategy to make up for their failure to predict new consumer behavior patterns and the recessions that resulted as the consequences of the Coronavirus outbreak (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). Hence, in the present study, we investigated the impact of marketing mix on the relationship between customer-brand and product quality from an ethical perspective based on the economic outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research theory originated from the reality that the crisis of social

distance and isolated living in the COVID-19 era significantly activated online shopping channels in addition to raising the necessity for engagement in sports at home (Wang, Hong, Li, & Gao, 2020).

The results indicate that all marketing mix strategies based on ethical issues are closely related to the consumer-brand relationship. Product-related ethical issues have a positive effect on the consumer-brand relationship quality as well as perceived product quality. Thus, consumers are willing to purchase a product characterized by a high level of product safety and quality, well-designed packaging and brand, and eco-friendliness. During product evaluation, consumers' attitudes toward a company are formed in consideration of ethical issues. Product-related ethical issues are crucial when consumers evaluate perceived product quality. The results support the proposed research model statistically and significantly. That is, the corporate marketing mix strategy from ethical issues had an important function in generating a consumer-brand relationship and perceived

product quality. The path outcome for product-related ethics and the consumer-brand relationship quality accurately reflects the results found in the extant literature. Price-related ethical issues are critical when a consumer is focused on building a strong relationship with a corporation and its brand. This evaluation is often based on whether the company is using predatory pricing strategy, illegal pricing, and fraudulent pricing. An unethical pricing strategy has a negative effect on consumer attitude formation, which includes relationship building with a brand.

Accordingly, creating an ethical shopping atmosphere in virtual networks can inject appropriate added value into the declining economy of the Corona era by attracting customers (Ratten, 2020). However, ethical product promotion and ethical pricing had the highest impact on hidden research structures. The results are compatible with those of He & Harris (2020), Ratten (2020), Lee and Jin (2019), Vafaenia (2020), Kouzechian, et al. (2020), Charkhtab Moghaddam and Ismaili (2020), and Nafeie et al. (2020). These studies have emphasized that the conditions created by the coronavirus are very sensitive and new solutions should be sought for more sales. Researchers have also emphasized that paying attention to ethical issues can affect customer loyalty. Which is in line with the results of our research. Among the items related to the pricing component, the most notable customer preferences were not using deceptive pricing strategy, “not acknowledging the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and fair pricing.” This issue suggests that sports store policies in pricing and avoiding any false, deceptive, or fraudulent sales practices based on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic shape positive customer attitudes toward a better store brand value and repetitive purchase

behavior (Lee & Jin, 2019). When consumers are provided with products they want, they not only prefer ethical acts through honest distribution channels but also wish to receive products that are customized for their own companies. These desires imply the importance of establishing a sound ethical approach to achieving proper and customized distribution. Some factors such as the degree of sales policy, level of partnership, and degree of transparent transaction in place-related ethical issues also considerably influence relationship-building with consumers and product quality evaluation.

Promotion-related ethical issues have a positive effect on the consumer-brand relationship quality and perceived product quality, where the latter two can be reinforced directly only when a company's promotion-related ethics are high. The results of the study are consistent with Lee & Jin(2019) and Matar Una-Dos-Santos et al(2020) . To build a relationship with the consumer, the company should hone authentic communication. When truthful and accurate information about a product, such as its price through advertising, is communicated, the consumer is likely to exhibit high trustworthiness in the corporation and its brand. Factors such as advertising under legal legislation and degree of misleading or deceptive aspects are thus critical when building a strong relationship with the brand; they also improve product quality. Our findings identify factors that should be considered when building a relationship that involves ethical marketing practices, relationship quality, and brand loyalty. The factors of product-, pricing-, and promotion-related ethics—areas of ethical marketing practices—can be used to evaluate the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality. Attending to product promotion strategies requires creating an

accurate and reliable image and recognition of the sports stores' brands by customers, which is vital to both sides of the business owners, and that is believed to be a major concern for both business owners and customers (Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al., 2020). Inserting accurate information about the product's features, not utilizing false advertisements, predicting the guaranteed net cost, and compensation and retrieval of the product in case of defects or non-compliance with the particularized specifications is a solution that differentiates successful brands in the competition cycle (Lee & Jin, 2019). According to Park (2018), the key factors in strengthening the customer-product relationship are customers' previous experiences of purchase, satisfaction at the time of use, and the commitment of stores and sports brand representatives to their warranties. In this regard, the managers of many successful manufacturing and service organizations consider the effectiveness of a marketing strategy even more than advertising, assuming that customers are more sensitive to the price of products during the Coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, by spending more allocated budgets, they set up the research & development department to maintain their competitive advantage (Vafainia, 2020). Wang (2020), in his survey of pandemic-era marketing models, stated that despite the 1.6% increase of China's GDP index in 2019, the COVID-19 prevalence decreased by 6.8 percent in the first three months. Hence, in this situation, no organization could claim to hold a larger share of competition. Instead, companies are merely looking for a survival mechanism. Innovation capacity to improve product quality, as well as access channels is considered as the key mechanism for organizational growth and reconstruction. Hence, the importance of ethical considerations in the online business

processes is based on full information and mutual trust (Lee & Jin, 2019). It is clear what reconstructs mutual trust and reliance in service businesses (the category in which sports stores also fall into) is the existence of a space full of identities and stable moral commitments that promotes the eternal principle in ethics-oriented businesses (Charkhtab Moghadam & Esmaeili, 2020). If a company improves its relationship quality through improved product-related ethics, we expect a corresponding effect on brand loyalty through brand and emotional relationships with consumers than a direct effect on brand loyalty. Management- and marketing-related ethics typically involve resolving problems that individuals experience in social life; these problems relate to specific circumstances within corporate management. Within the sphere of corporate ethics, ethical marketing practices involve the relationship between moral beliefs and behavior and corporate marketing practices.

We also confirmed that a company's place-related ethics influence brand loyalty through the mediators of the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality. Pricing-related ethics, place-related ethics were also found to affect brand loyalty directly. That is, the level of brand loyalty increases when the company's place-related ethics are high. Place-related ethics were found to have a significant relationship with both the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality. A company's place-related ethics are (in)directly influenced by building brand loyalty through the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality. Consumers tend to consider issues such as place-related ethics (e.g., ethical acts through honest distribution channels and customized distribution) when they are evaluating corporate brand. This finding implies that

reinforcing place-related ethics can improve both the consumer-brand relationship and product quality. Vafaenia et al maintain that more troublesome issues will occur in the post-pandemic era as the changes in buying behavior patterns of customers during the pandemic will introduce new marketing requirements to satisfy institutionalized shopping behaviors, given that the recession caused by the pandemic promotes price-sensitivity. Therefore, considering the two factors of fair pricing and allocating money to promote products through popular and honest advertising will play a significant role in creating a smooth virtual economy, which is compatible with ethical pricing and ethical promotion in the present study. Our research is in line with Vafaenia et al.

Promotion-related ethics were found to have a direct influence on brand loyalty. Consumers tend to have positive brand loyalty when promotion-related ethics are strong. Improved promotion-related ethics were found to improve both the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality. Promotion-related ethics also affect brand loyalty through the mediating effects of the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality. The common belief that B2C transactions have distinct characteristics was verified in this study. We confirmed that ethical marketing practices (product-, pricing-, place-, and promotion-related ethics) affect brand loyalty through the mediators of the consumer-brand relationship and perceived product quality. Our research is consistent with the research of Vafaenia et al and lee and Jin (2019). They maintain that more troublesome issues will occur in the post-pandemic era as the changes in buying behavior patterns of customers during the pandemic will introduce new marketing requirements to satisfy institutionalized shopping behaviors, given that the recession caused by the pandemic promotes price-sensitivity.

Therefore, considering the two factors of fair pricing and allocating money to promote products through popular and honest advertising will play a significant role in creating a smooth virtual economy, which is compatible with ethical pricing and ethical promotion in the present study.

Accordingly, it is suggested that the concerns arising from the intangible challenges of online shopping be addressed through the provision of call centers, pre-purchase consultation, and post-purchase services in addition to increasing the number of regional and provincial franchises of the brands to build trust in customers towards the information available on the virtual sale channels of the sports stores and direct the ethical promotion of the product at the same time. Nevertheless, COVID-19 transportation restrictions to overcome social risks (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020) and the prevailing desire of customers to use virtual networks denote the great relevance of the location component in product access. Therefore, a detailed needs assessment of product access channels renders a positive impact on retaining current customers of sports stores.

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relationship and perceived product quality.

Lee et al.'s study (2020) was the only case inconsistent with the results of the present study. Potential causes behind this inconsistency include the development and culture-building for the employment of ethical product supply channels and implementation of legal penalties for fraudulent sales agents and channels in virtual networks. In Iran, despite the procurement and designation of general rules in the application of virtual networks for business owners, no candid compilation of ethical marketing rules is to be found to include both the customer rights and the scope of authority for business owners in the rendering of policies and procedures for product introduction (Nafei & Saiednia, 2020). Therefore, adopting an ethical marketing approach during the COVID-19 pandemic era necessitates selecting a customer-oriented marketing mix with features that prioritize the target instead of the product, engagement cost than the price, accessibility instead of location, and social communication instead of a promotion; a marketing mix which could recognize the needs and desires of the target group and devise a win-win strategy by subduing the trade challenges with the aid of social marketing principles and techniques (Naghavi et al., 2018). That is to say, a common ethical domain must be constructed in the form of ethical marketing norms and values as criteria for determining the extent of business development in the current situation at the national and perhaps global levels (Kianpoor, Moradi, & Piri, 2020).

The significant impact of product quality and customer-brand relationship on brand loyalty was another remarkable finding of the present study, which is also consistent with the results of studies by Soleimani et al. (2020), Amouzadeh et al. (2020), Nafeie et

al. (2020), Cortez (2020), Elizabeth et al. (2019), Lee and Jin (2019) and Jin (2019). This equation asserts that gaining customer trust and demonstrating honest behavior by provision of a quality product is a key act in establishing a long-term and solid link between customers and the business, particularly in network-based communication patterns. In support of the above findings, we may refer to the results of Amouzadeh et al.'s study (2020). Amouzadeh et al.'s study on the marketing of sporting goods through social networks denote that the integration of marketing strategies with the indisputable features of social networks is a distinct competitive lever that has served to establish a solemn bond between the supportive behaviors of fans and the club. In this context, it appears that attending to the reality of social responsibility criteria for stores through determinants such as environmental requirements, civil rights, community health, absence of social risks, and collaboration with charities may prove essential in delivering a popular image of the brand and the trademark (Nafei & Saiednia, 2020). For instance, China was the first country to encounter the COVID-19 economy extensively but the implementation of marketing creativity in two respective aspects of incentive for participation in purchase and innovation in participatory methods led the country to experience the least recession in the online commerce-dependent areas. According to Ritter et al. (2020), one of the most striking outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic is the change that businesses must implement in their marketing mix to adapt to customers. Therefore, selecting a customer-oriented sales strategy and accounting for consumer expectations ensure survival in the declining economy of the COVID-19 era.

Another item examined within the loyalty component was "willingness to pay higher

prices for a higher quality product,” which held the highest factor load (FL = 0.86) according to the statistical samples of the study. This dominance indicates that inclination towards quality and the fulfillment of shopping purposes have become the most significant concerns of the consumers during the pandemic, a result which was consistent with those of by Izadi et al. (2017), who reported that sporting goods consumers present display willingness to pay higher prices for the products of those companies with ethical sale behavior and social responsibility. In the same context, the results of the study by Cortez et al. (2020) designated that the three principal aspects of the COVID-19 era marketing were product and service promotion through an emphasis on quality, changes in the application philosophy of virtual networks (provision of health-related products), and evading the conception of an exclusively consumerist view of customers by the managers, all three of which are consistent with the components of the customer-brand bond and the promotion of marketing mix in the present study. In her status review of successful sporting goods manufacturers during the pandemic (2020), Vanessa Ratten maintains that heeding the customers' economic behavior, the proportionality of product features with cultural values of societies, and pondering the psychological traits of customers are the key to survival and escape from recession for successful enterprises affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Conclusion

Altogether, two categories must be regarded bases on the results of the present study: First, the purchasing power of the household during the pandemic is focused on the supply of essential goods, which decreases the purchasing power of the family in response. As a result, price-sensitivity has

shifted into a top priority for customers. Second, the tangibility feature of goods as one of the most influential motivators of purchasing behavior has been eliminated, which is due to the absence of candid rules and regulations, as well as the uncertain consequences of disregarding the online sale procedures as an indicator of e-commerce growth. Addressing this gap compels sporting goods store owners to gain the trust of the consumers by adherence to ethical marketing commitments such as fair pricing, withholding of counterfeit goods for sale, use of authentic advertising, and forgoing the use of any false and misleading information in cyberspace.

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