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## Presenting a paradigmatic model for improving customers' mental image of Tehran chain stores

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### Abstract

The present study was conducted based on the paradigm of pragmatism and with a combined approach of induction and deduction. To achieve the study's objectives, a qualitative research design was used. This research is of an applicable-developmental type and aims to present a paradigmatic model for improving customers' mental image of Tehran chain stores. In terms of data collection, the research is classified as a non-experimental (descriptive) study conducted with a cross-sectional survey approach. The participants were managers of chain stores, and sampling was carried out using a theoretical method; meaning that individuals were selected based on their information adequacy and capacity to enrich the categories, and theoretical saturation was achieved by conducting 21 interviews. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. The indicators affecting customers' mental image of the store were extracted using the data-driven theory method and MaxQDA24 software and then prioritized using the fuzzy Savaray method. The results of the research model showed that causal conditions (customer experience management, co-creation of value with the customer, customer orientation and service quality) affect the central phenomenon (customers' mental image of the store). The mental image of the store, along with contextual conditions (marketing mix) and intervening conditions (store social responsibility), affects strategies and actions (internal branding and branding strategy). Ultimately, the aforementioned strategies lead to outcomes such as customer loyalty, satisfaction and trust, which reflect the dynamics and multidimensional function of mental image in promoting long-term customer relationships with the store.

### Keywords:

Customer image,  
store image,  
customer  
experience  
management,  
customer value co-  
creation,  
chain stores

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## Extended Abstract

### Introduction

In recent years, chain stores with various brands have grown significantly in the country, and a fierce competitive arena has been created to attract and retain customers (Torkanloo et al., 2025). In such circumstances, customers' purchasing behavior is more influenced than ever by their perceptions and mental images of the stores. Therefore, branding and efforts to improve the store brand are a decisive factor in success (Solati et al., 2024). Sales managers and chain store owners have well understood that improving the store's mental image in the minds of customers can pave the way for improving the overall brand image and increasing the willingness to buy. By improving the store's image in the minds of customers, the likelihood of customer retention and return will increase (Sudirman & Muis, 2025). In this regard, understanding customers' mental perceptions and understanding how their attitudes towards the store are formed is considered a major prerequisite for developing effective marketing strategies and customer experience. Continuing to be present in such a dynamic market requires targeted investment in branding and creating differentiation in brand identity (Yuan & Yang, 2024). On the other hand, consumers' needs, preferences, and decision-making patterns have also undergone profound changes and have reached a more complex level than in the past. In response to these changes, large chain stores are trying to satisfy a diverse range of customers by offering a wide range of goods and brands (Jiang & Wu, 2023). However, this product variety alone does not guarantee success; because the main focus should be shifted from the brand of the goods to the store brand and the image that the customer has of the entire shopping experience. Therefore, in the current competitive conditions, retailers must improve their image among customers in order to defend their position in the market (Nakamori et al., 2024). In Iran, with the emergence of new structures and the use of new technologies in the retail sector, a fierce competitive environment has been formed between stores to attract the attention and trust of customers. Customers in this market, based on their mental impressions and associations, have a specific idea about each store, which creates a mental image of the store within their perception (Berah moghadam et al., 2024). According to this view, consumers keep a set of real or mental beliefs about each store in their memory and are confident in the accuracy of those beliefs. In such circumstances and given the increasing competition, it is necessary for the country's chain stores to adopt a customer-centric approach to marketing in order to recognize their current position and plan to achieve the desired situation (Raispour et al., 2025). Statistics show that customers play a key role in the continuation of competition and profitability of chain stores. Global studies indicate that an increase of only 5% in customer retention rates can increase company profits by 25 to 95% (Jones et al., 2025). Successful branding has caused a change of about 15% in customer retention. Also, consumers who are loyal to brands make up 65% of the company's business and spend 43% more on brands they are loyal to (Stephens et al., 2025). According to statistics from the National Chain Store Association, the turnover of the country's retail industry was estimated at about 920 trillion, of which the share of chain stores Chains accounted for 10 percent, and the rest belonged to small and traditional retailers (Bormeideh et al., 2024). Also, in the retail industry, which also includes chain stores, the average customer retention rate globally has been reported to be about 63 percent, while the overall average for other industries is about 75 percent (Aghakhani Bezdi Langari & Hassani, 2023). In such a situation, the gap between the actual perception of customers and the marketing approaches of chain stores increases, and the need for a scientific analysis of this gap and a solution to it is highlighted. Accordingly, the aim of the research is to identify the components affecting the mental image of customers, explain the cognitive and behavioral mechanisms

that shape this image, and present a native paradigmatic model to improve the perception of customers of chain stores in Tehran. This aim has been formulated in order to answer a fundamental question: How is the pattern of improving the mental image of customers in chain stores in Tehran explained and what elements and relationships shape it?

### **Theoretical framework**

#### **Brand image**

Brand image is a multidimensional concept that reflects the perceptions, feelings, and accumulated experiences of the audience of a brand. This image is the result of a continuous process of interaction between the customer and the brand and shows how people mentally perceive the identity, value, and reputation of the brand (Tahir et al., 2024).

#### **Store Image**

The concept of "store image" was first introduced in the marketing management literature in 1958 by Martineau. He considered store image to be a set of customer perceptions formed by a combination of functional characteristics (such as the quality of goods and services, layout and price) and psychological characteristics (such as store atmosphere, employee behavior and customer emotions). Although this concept did not receive much attention in the early years, its importance has increased significantly in the last two decades with the rapid expansion of chain stores and changes in shopping patterns (Lang et al., 2023).

### **Research Methodology**

This study was designed based on the paradigm of pragmatism and with a combined approach of induction and deductive and was conducted with the aim of providing a paradigmatic model for improving customers' mental image of chain stores in Tehran. In terms of methodology, it is classified as non-experimental and descriptive research and was implemented in the form of a qualitative design and cross-sectional survey. In the qualitative section, the participant population included theoretical experts in the field of marketing management and empirical experts including senior managers, marketing managers, and customer experience managers in chain stores in Tehran, and ultimately 21 interviews were used as the basis for analysis.

### **Research findings**

The final result of the analysis was the identification of 6 selective codes, 12 central codes, and 63 open codes. The results of the research model showed that causal conditions (customer experience management, co-creation of value with customers, customer orientation and service quality) affect the central phenomenon (customers' mental image of the store). The mental image of the store, along with contextual conditions (marketing mix) and intervening conditions (store social responsibility), affects strategies and actions (internal branding and branding strategy). Ultimately, the aforementioned strategies lead to outcomes such as customer loyalty, satisfaction and trust, which reflect the dynamics and multidimensional function of the mental image in promoting long-term customer relationships with the store. It was also determined that the perceived risk index of purchasing from the store is in the first priority, the ethics index and adherence to ethical responsibility is in the second priority, the index of providing products and services based on customer needs is in the third priority, the index of establishing the possibility of mutual and reciprocal relationships with customers with a weight of 0.0864 is in the fourth priority, and the index of mental association of the store with customers is in the fifth priority.

### **Conclusion**

The research results are in line with domestic and foreign studies, and in the form of an integrated model, it explains the mechanism of customer image formation. Causal factors including customer experience management, value co-creation, customer orientation and service quality, like the findings of Torkanloo et al. (2025), Yuan & Yang (2024), and Mousavi & Fadai (2023), confirm the determining role of customer experience, interaction and recognition of real customer needs. In the context of factors, the marketing mix and social responsibility are introduced in accordance with foreign research, guiding perception and strengthening positive mindset. Customer image as a multidimensional construct including perceived value, risk, ease of purchase, and brand associations is presented in this study in a more coherent way than previous studies. Internal branding strategies and brand strategy show that employee alignment and clear policy-making play a direct role in shaping image. The final outcomes including trust, satisfaction and loyalty are also consistent with the results of previous research and emphasize that positive image strengthens purchasing behavior and customer relationship continuity.

The suggestions emphasize the importance of creating a lasting experience for customers through dynamic environmental design, targeted sensory stimuli, and professional employee behavior, and further consider it essential to provide a platform for two-way interaction for co-creation of value by utilizing behavioral data and customer participation in improving services. Also, strengthening the customer-centric approach by deeply understanding needs, providing personalized offers, and focusing on key customers is introduced as an effective factor in increasing loyalty. Improving the quality of services by improving physical standards, effective responsiveness, and strengthening empathetic behavior of employees, along with intelligent design of the marketing mix including product, price, promotion, and distribution, can create a coherent and attractive experience. Attention to social responsibility and institutionalization of ethical and environmental principles provide the basis for public trust and strengthening brand credibility, and ultimately focusing on improving the mental image of customers and developing internal and strategic branding strengthens organizational cohesion and a positive perception of the value and quality of Tehran chain stores.