

IPHONE USERS' PERCEPTION OF BRAND IMAGE, INNOVATION, AND PRODUCT QUALITY IN BUILDING LOYALTY AMONG MALIKUSSALEH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Smartphones have evolved beyond communication tools to become symbols of personal expression and social status, with the iPhone being a prime example. This study aims to explore how iPhone users perceive brand image, innovation, and product quality, and how these elements shape their loyalty toward the brand. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the iPhone's brand image is perceived as a symbol of prestige and self-identity, innovation is seen as a key differentiating factor, and product quality is highly rated in terms of durability and security. These three aspects synergistically reinforce user loyalty to the iPhone brand. The results emphasize the importance of consumer experience-based marketing strategies and provide practical implications for companies to maintain a strong brand image, relevant innovation, and high product quality to sustain customer loyalty, particularly among young users who act as digital trendsetters.

Keywords: *brand image, innovation, product quality, brand loyalty, iPhone, consumer perception, qualitative research*

1. BACKGROUND

Smartphones play a significant role in everyday life, not only as communication devices but also as a reflection of the user's modern lifestyle and social status. Among the many smartphone brands on the market, the iPhone holds a unique position as a product with a loyal user base and strong brand perception. Apple's brand image, consistent product innovation, and high quality are key draws for consumers. It's no surprise that iPhone users often demonstrate a high level of loyalty, even when faced with relatively high prices or more affordable alternatives. Many previous studies have quantitatively examined brand loyalty in the context of technology products, emphasizing the direct influence of variables such as satisfaction, price, and trust on loyalty.

However, research that deeply explores how consumers' subjective perceptions of elements such as brand image, innovation, and product quality shape their loyalty is rare, particularly among iPhone users in academic settings. This is crucial because the campus environment reflects a young, technology-adaptive population that tends to be trendsetters in the use of digital products. According to a 2024 report by Statista, iPhone users among the 18–24 age group have increased by 12% globally in the past two years. In Indonesia, a 2023 survey by the Katadata Insight Center showed that students are the most active user segment in changing devices and are highly responsive to technological innovation. This fact demonstrates that young people, particularly students, play a crucial role as trendsetters in the adoption and perception of digital products. The novelty of this study lies in the qualitative approach used to in-depth explore how

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iPhone users at Malikussaleh University interpret brand image, evaluate innovation, and perceive the quality of the product they use. This research not only seeks to fill the gap in the literature regarding user perceptions in local and institutional contexts but also provides practical insights for experiential marketing strategies. The purpose of this study is to understand iPhone users' perceptions of brand image, innovation, and product quality, and how these three aspects shape their loyalty to the smartphone brand.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

2.1 Brand Image

Brand image is a consumer's perception of a brand, formed through experiences, marketing communications, and interactions with the product. According to Keller (2003), brand image is a perception stored in consumers' memories and reflects the associations they form with the brand. A strong brand image can create an emotional connection between consumers and a product, ultimately contributing to brand loyalty. Recent research also shows that in the digital era, brand image is increasingly shaped by user experience and consumers' emotional engagement on social media (Gürhan-Canli, Hayran, & Sarial-Abi, 2020; Algharabat et al., 2020).

2.2 Innovation

Product innovation in the smartphone context refers to updates to features, designs, and technological systems offered by manufacturers to consumers. Kotler & Keller (2016) state that product innovation is a crucial factor in maintaining competitiveness and attracting consumer attention. In the case of the iPhone brand, innovation is often considered a key element that differentiates Apple from other competitors, both in terms of design aesthetics and user experience.

2.3 Product quality

Product quality plays a strategic role in influencing consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. According to Pratama and Lestari (2021), good product quality, such as durability, functionality as expected, and reliability, significantly drives consumer loyalty to a brand. Products with high quality, both in terms of performance, durability, and after-sales service, tend to build customer satisfaction and loyalty. This finding is also echoed by Hemsley-Brown & Alnawas (2021), who emphasize the importance of perceived service quality in shaping a positive brand image and user loyalty.

2.4 Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is the tendency of consumers to continue using and recommending a brand repeatedly as a result of satisfaction and positive experiences obtained, Yulianto, A., & Pratama, A. (2022). Loyalty is not only based on functional satisfaction, but also on the emotional connection built between consumers and brands. Iglesias and Ind's (2020) study shows that active consumer participation in shaping brand meaning can strengthen brand loyalty profoundly. In the context of the iPhone, many users show high loyalty despite the product's premium price, which indicates that perceptions of brand image, innovation, and quality play an important role.

2.5 Previous Research

Several previous studies have explored the relationship between these variables. For example, research by Putra and Ayu (2021) showed that brand image and product quality significantly influence smartphone consumer loyalty. Meanwhile, a study by Kurniawan (2022) emphasized the importance of continuous innovation in creating competitive advantage and maintaining customer loyalty in the technology industry. However, most of these studies use a quantitative and general approach. This research employs a qualitative approach to delve deeper into iPhone users' perceptions, particularly in academic settings like Malikussaleh University, a topic that has not been widely explored in previous studies. Thus, this research not only strengthens existing theories but also enriches the literature with a more exploratory and contextual approach.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design to explore in-depth iPhone users' perceptions of brand image, innovation, and product quality in shaping brand loyalty. The study population was

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Malikussaleh University students who use iPhones, with purposive sampling based on the criteria of at least one year of use. The number of informants was adjusted until data saturation point was reached. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, with interview guidelines as a supporting instrument and the researcher as the main instrument. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques through the stages of coding, grouping themes, and interpretation. Data validity was tested using triangulation and member checking. The research model used is conceptual, developed from the relationship between brand image, innovation, and product quality to brand loyalty based on relevant theories.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, the iPhone brand image is perceived as a symbol of prestige, exclusivity, and self-identity. The majority of respondents stated that they felt more confident and were perceived as following technological trends when using an iPhone. This finding aligns with Keller's (2003) theory that brand image forms emotional associations in consumers' memories. Second, innovation is seen as a key attraction. The latest features, elegant design, and consistent operating system are the primary reasons respondents continue to use the iPhone despite the availability of alternative products. This supports Kotler and Keller's (2016) view that product innovation is a strategy for maintaining customer loyalty in a competitive technology market.

Third, all informants rated product quality highly, particularly in terms of device durability, system security, and after-sales support. This view aligns with Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) theory, which states that service and product quality influence consumer satisfaction and loyalty. These results also demonstrate consistency with research by Putra and Ayu (2021), which found that brand image and product quality influence smartphone user loyalty. However, unlike previous general quantitative studies, this study highlights the emotional aspects and personal meaning of user experience. This reinforces the importance of a qualitative approach in understanding digital consumer behavior contextually. These findings also align with international studies such as those conducted by Khan, Rahman, & Fatma (2020), which found that user experience and emotional engagement are key determinants of brand loyalty in the digital era. Theoretically, this research contributes to a richer understanding of brand loyalty by emphasizing user perception and experience. Practically, these results offer implications for technology companies: maintaining brand image, enhancing innovation relevant to user needs, and maintaining service quality to foster loyalty, particularly among the student segment, which acts as a digital trendsetter.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study shows that iPhone users' perceptions of brand image, innovation, and product quality significantly contribute to their brand loyalty. The iPhone's brand image is viewed as a symbol of status and identity, the innovation offered is considered consistent and relevant, and the product quality is perceived as high in terms of durability, security, and service. These three aspects mutually reinforce and shape user loyalty, even amidst relatively high prices. These findings reinforce previous theories and emphasize the importance of a consumer experience-based approach in understanding brand loyalty, particularly among college students. Based on these results, it is recommended that companies continue to maintain a strong brand image, increase innovation that meets the needs of young users, and maintain product and service quality. Future researchers are advised to expand the research context to different populations or use a mixed methods approach to obtain a more comprehensive picture. This study has limitations in terms of the number of participants and the local context. Further studies are recommended involving a broader population and a mixed methods approach.

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