



Analyzing Luxury Car Brand Abandonment in Sanctioned Markets: A Phenomenological Approach in the Iranian Context

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ABSTRACT

This research proposes a novel model for analyzing customer abandonment within the luxury car market. This model aims to quantify the impact of such abandonment on a brand's image. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, the research leverages the experiences of experts and luxury car importers to investigate brand abandonment and develop a conceptual framework. While focusing on the Iranian market, the study excludes established luxury brands present in J.D. Power's top ranks (e.g., Toyota, Honda) due to their widespread popularity. Instead, the research targets importers and legal representatives of niche luxury car brands (excluding Honda and Hyundai) operating in Iran. Additionally, university professors in the field of business management are included as participants. Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method. Data saturation was achieved through in-depth interviews with eight experts. Based on the identified components of the brand abandonment model, a questionnaire with 70 items across four dimensions was designed to validate the model with further expert input. The research findings confirm the validity of the proposed model for describing brand abandonment.

Keywords: Luxury car brand abandonment, Brand image, Brand Equity, Customer abandonment, Phenomenological approach, International sanctions

Introduction

The automotive industry is fiercely competitive, with brands, particularly luxury brands, investing heavily in cultivating a desirable image. This focus stems from the established link between perceived brand value and brand image strength (Keller, 1993; Shrestha *et al.*, 2023). In export markets, luxury brands prioritize comprehensive product support, including sales monitoring and robust after-sales services (Kuhn *et al.*, 2008; Yan, 2019). However, Iran's international sanctions have significantly disrupted traditional communication channels between car importers and major luxury brands. Consequently, access to traditional brand values and services has substantially diminished. This has created a significant gap between the quality and timeliness of after-sales services, particularly for spare parts, and the high standards set by these luxury car brands. Furthermore, car importers have not implemented a strategic plan to promote sales and maintain the global brand positioning of these luxury brands for an extended period. Additionally, there has been a halt in new car imports from these brands for several years.

Given this unique market context, this research proposes a model to analyze customer abandonment within the Iranian luxury car market. The model aims to quantify the impact of such abandonment on brand image. Employing a phenomenological approach, the research leverages the experiences of experts and luxury car importers to investigate brand abandonment and develop a conceptual framework.

Literature Background

Brand Equity and Brand Image

Brand equity from the customer's point of view is the different effect of brand perception on the consumer's reaction to the marketing activities of that brand (Keller, 1993) and the brand image shows the way of thinking and mentalities of people regarding the brand (Shrestha *et al.*, 2023). Consumers acquire mental images either directly from their experiences or indirectly based on advertisements or other information sources (Aldhamiri *et al.*, 2024).

The brand image is the way consumers perceive that brand (Kuhn *et al.*, 2008; Yan, 2019). Brand image generally consists of several concepts: perception, because brand is something that is perceived; Cognition, because brands are cognitively evaluated, and attitude, because consumers continuously form attitudes about that brand after perceiving and evaluating what they have perceived (Agmeka *et al.*, 2019; Ryu *et al.*, 2019). Brand image shows people's way of thinking and mentalities regarding the brand (Keller, 1993). In fact, consumers acquire mental images either directly from their experiences or indirectly based on advertisements or other information sources (Kumar, 2024).

Keller (1993) identified four stages in his famous pyramid model for brand development:



Figure 1. Pyramid model of customer based brand equity (CBBE)

According to Keller, to create and manage a brand that customers support, there are 4 steps that must be followed in a specific order. Together, these 4 steps form his pyramidal CBBE model. This pyramid represents 4 basic questions that customers ask about the brand, which includes:

Identity (Salience): This stage focuses on creating brand awareness and establishing a distinct brand identity in the minds of consumers. A clear connection is essential between the brand and the perceived quality of its products (Kuhn *et al.*, 2008; Yan, 2019).

Meaning: This stage involves defining and communicating the brand's core values and what it stands for. Two key components are "performance" (meeting customer needs) and "imagery" (fulfilling social and psychological needs). Performance encompasses product characteristics, reliability, service quality, style, and price (Keller, 2001; Song *et al.*, 2019). Imagery is shaped by direct brand experiences and indirect influences like word-of-mouth (Keller, 2001).

Response: This stage explores customer reactions to the brand, including both judgments and feelings. Judgments cover aspects like perceived quality, credibility, consideration for purchase, and perceived superiority over competitors (Keller, 2008). Feelings encompass emotional responses associated with the brand and how it makes customers feel about themselves.

Relationship (Resonance): This final stage represents the strongest level of brand equity, achieved when a deep connection exists between the consumer and the brand. Consumers with high brand resonance demonstrate loyalty, strong identification with brand values, and a willingness to invest in the brand relationship (Dirsehan & Kurtulus, 2018). Resonance requires a high level of brand awareness and familiarity (Keller, 2001, 2008).

Brand Crisis and Damaged Brand

Brand equity and image are significantly impacted by brand crises (Elhajjar, 2023; Youn *et al.*, 2024). A crisis is an unexpected event that disrupts operations, threatens an organization's goals, and can lead to financial losses and reputational damage (Paydas Turan, 2022).

Crisis situations often result in negative publicity that harms a brand's image in various ways, impacting its physical perception, financial standing, and emotional connection with consumers (Johansson *et al.*, 2012). These negative



effects can be short-term or long-term, potentially leading to decreased sales, reduced marketing effectiveness, eroded brand trust and loyalty, and even industry-wide repercussions (Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Gao *et al.*, 2013; Chan & Palmeira, 2021; Leung & Seah, 2022).

Two main theoretical perspectives exist regarding brand crises:

Brand Responsibility Theory: This theory categorizes crises based on perceived responsibility. These categories include:

Victim: The brand is not responsible for the crisis.

Accidental: The crisis is unforeseen and the brand did not play a causal role.

Intentional: The brand's actions or inactions significantly contributed to the crisis (Singh *et al.*, 2020; Elhajjar, 2023).

Brand Equity Theory: This theory classifies crises into two main types:

Performance-Related: Crises stemming from product defects or deficiencies.

Value-Related: Crises arising from social responsibility issues, unethical behavior, poor executive performance, or negative business results (Bravo *et al.*, 2013; Chan & Palmeira, 2021; Elhajjar, 2023; Youn *et al.*, 2024).

Brand Abandonment

When a brand consistently fails to deliver on its promises and loses its appeal, it suffers from brand damage, which can be seen as an extended form of brand crisis (Huang *et al.*, 2016). Over time, brand damage erodes brand loyalty and trust (Zou & Li, 2016; Sameeni *et al.*, 2024; Wang *et al.*, 2024), potentially leading to market share loss and even business closure (Quamina & Singh, 2023; Shankar *et al.*, 2024). However, isolated incidents or short-lived performance issues typically have minimal impact on brand image, as consumers are generally forgiving of occasional mistakes (Elhajjar, 2023; Youn *et al.*, 2024).

Brand damage can be caused by internal factors, such as inconsistent brand communication or strategic missteps (Jabeen *et al.*, 2022), or external factors like vandalism or misinformation (Andersen *et al.*, 2023).

Key Differences between Damaged Brand and Brand Abandonment

While the overall concept and effects on the brand are similar, a key distinction exists between a damaged brand and a brand experiencing abandonment. Brand crises typically occur unexpectedly and suddenly, like a safety defect discovered in a car manufactured by a reputable company. Brand abandonment, however, unfolds gradually, as in the case of a company consistently providing poor after-sales service over an extended period.

The primary focus of this research is to define and explore the concept of brand abandonment as a distinct marketing concept. The research proposes a definition based on expert opinion:

"A brand is considered abandoned when it not only ceases to offer products to its target market for an extended period but also discontinues all promotional activities and fails to provide after-sales services under the quality supervision of the main company."

This abandonment can occur for various reasons, including production facility closures due to bankruptcy or lack of profitability, or the discontinuation of product imports into a specific market due to a severed relationship between the brand owner and its distributor representative. In this research, the focus is on abandonment caused by international sanctions imposed on Iran.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This research employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the phenomenon of luxury car brand abandonment in Iran. Phenomenology aims to understand and describe lived experiences from the perspective of individuals within a specific context (Riedmeier & Kreuzer, 2022). This approach is well-suited for this study as it delves into the subjective experiences of participants regarding brand abandonment.

Participants

The target population for this study consisted of individuals with expertise in the Iranian luxury car import industry. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants, focusing on:



Importers of luxury car brands (excluding Honda and Hyundai)

Legal representatives of these luxury car brands in Iran

University professors specializing in business management

It's important to acknowledge that while Honda and Toyota are popular car brands in Iran, they are generally not considered luxury brands. Therefore, to maintain focus on the luxury car market segment experiencing abandonment due to specific factors, these brands were excluded from the participant pool.

Data Collection

Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with participants. This approach allowed for exploration of key themes while also providing flexibility for participants to share their unique experiences regarding luxury car brand abandonment in Iran.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. This process involved:

Focusing on participant experiences: Closely examining participants' descriptions and perspectives.

Coding: Identifying and labeling key themes and concepts within the transcripts.

Theme development: Grouping related codes into broader categories to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Following the identification of key components related to the brand abandonment model (**Table 1**), a questionnaire was designed to validate the model based on expert opinions. This questionnaire included 70 items across four dimensions and utilized a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "very little" to 5 = "very much"). Partial least squares (PLS) analysis using SmartPLS software was used to analyze the questionnaire data.


Findings

Following the in-depth interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed data. This analysis yielded 60 initial codes representing key themes and concepts related to the phenomenon of luxury car brand abandonment in Iran. Through a process of categorization based on similarity and interconnectedness, these codes were ultimately grouped into four distinct categories. These categories, which form the foundation of the brand abandonment model, are presented in **Table 1**:



Table.1. Results of the phenomenological method for designing the brand abandonment model

Categories	Codes (Descriptions)
Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of the luxury car brand (Company) and effects	Lack of commitment of brand owners to foreign customers due to political sanctions
	Lack of supervision of the main brand on the performance of car import representatives
	Failure to provide original automobile parts
	Abandonment due to behavior of the company brand
	Increasing the price of car after-sales services in Iran compared to other countries
	Formation of fake representative representatives
	Failure to provide the services of the brand owner company to customers who bought from fake representatives
	Creating a challenge for the customer due to being abandoned by the company in the after-sales service department
	Obtaining car parts from an unreliable seller and the possibility of obtaining fake parts
	Obliging the consumer to go to a different repair shop
	Referring to an untrained and inexperienced repairman
	Deprivation of the right to choose from the customer due to abandonment
	Imposing more costs on the customer due to the provision of cars from a third country by dealers



Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of representatives

Damage to the luxury car brand due to abandonment

Failure to pay attention to the climatic standard of luxury cars produced for Iran due to sanctions
Increase in car depreciation and erosion due to the lack of car production based on Iran's climatic standard
Not informing the representatives about the calls of the brand owner company
The existence of the damage of not being able to replace the used luxury car with similar models due to the price increase
Buying non-original parts at an exorbitant price
Lack of easy access to purchase or supply parts
Psychological uncertainty to the brand in case of abandonment
Depriving customers from buying their favorite brand
The need for high purchasing power to buy the latest models of luxury car brands
Increasing the cost of maintaining a luxury car
Losing the luxury car customer's desire to change and update the car
Acting to obtain representation by agents only for the purpose of import profit
Failure to provide after-sales service by representatives
Lack of commitment of representative to the main brand
Lack of power of representatives to maintain cooperation with the main brand
representatives focus on continuous communication with the main brand
The lack of focus of the representatives of the representatives on continuous communication with the main brand
Failure of representative to enter the after-sales service and network sector
Lack of proper networking by the representative
The effect of representative's work experience on imported car brand power
Wrong policies of representatives
The effect of representatives' performance on the customer's brand perception
The lack of durability of the representative in the conditions of sanctions and their capability for customer support
Importation of luxury cars by representatives without regard to consumer sentiments
Importing luxury cars by representatives without considering the concerns of consumers
Distortion of the brand image in the minds of customers
The possibility of distorting the position of the luxury car brand in international markets
Reducing the impact of car quality and after-sales service on brand mentality
Reducing the effect of brand association on luxury car purchase intention
The negative effect of abandonment on the purchase intention of new customers
Extending the return period of the former brand image
The consumer does not differentiate between the performance of the representative and the original company
Reducing customer loyalty to the original brand
The negative effect of decreasing brand loyalty on brand trust
The possibility of reducing the power of the brand globally due to conservative politics
The existence of organized advertisements against the non-commitment of some brands to the Iranian market
Not providing a space of confidence for the customer regarding the non-interruption of services in case of political changes
Reduction in the sales rate of the brand owner company due to customer abandonment
The negativity of the customer's mind from the image of the luxury car brand due to abandonment
The lack of importance of brand history in case of abandonment
Deciding to sell the car in case of abandonment
Loss of customers' commitment to the manufacturing company and brand owner
Possibility of losing the commitment of luxury car consumers

Abandonment due to the behavior and performance of the luxury car manufacturing country	Creating doubt for loyal customers due to abandonment
	Policies of the brand manufacturer country
	The cultural influence of the country related to the manufacturing company in the minds of foreign customers
	The behavior of the country producing the brand towards sanctions

Questionnaire Development and Analysis

Building upon the core components of the brand abandonment model identified in **Table 1**, a questionnaire was designed to assess the model's validity through expert opinion. This questionnaire comprised 70 items across four dimensions, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("very little") to 5 ("very high"). Partial least squares (PLS) analysis with SmartPLS software was employed to analyze the questionnaire data. **Figure 2** showed standard model of the study.

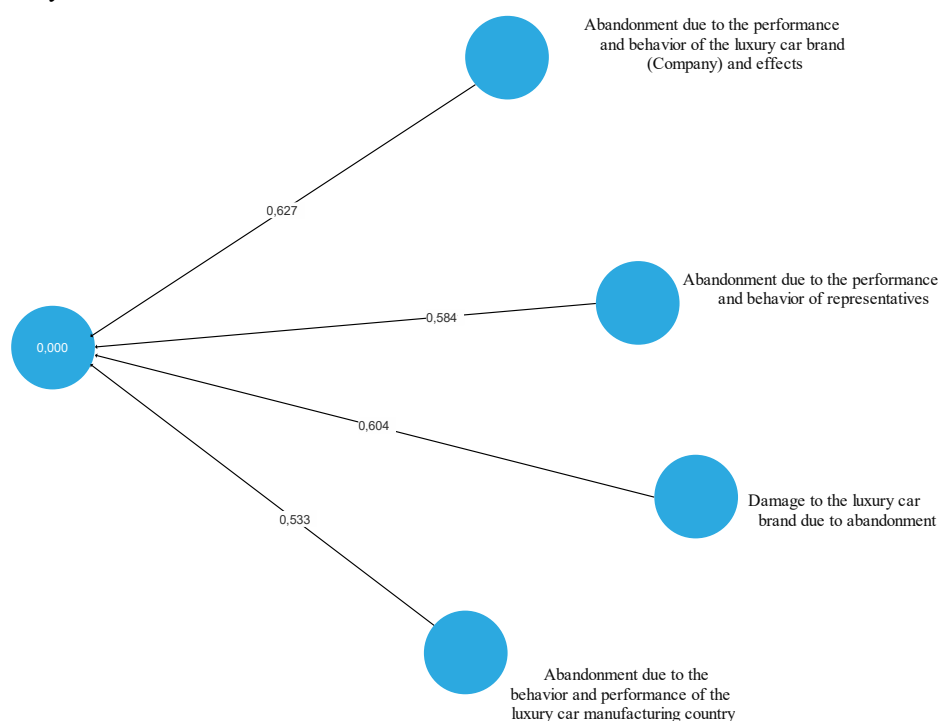


Figure 2. Standard model of the study

The analysis examined both the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model evaluation focused on whether the observed variables accurately captured the underlying research constructs (variables). Construct validity, assessed through convergent validity and discriminant validity, was used for this evaluation.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity examines the extent to which the observed variables load onto their respective constructs. In this study, each factor loading within the measurement model was required to be statistically significant (greater than or equal to 0.50) to demonstrate convergent validity. **Table 2** presents the results of the convergent validity analysis.

Table 2. Convergent Validity results of the components of the research questionnaire

Categories	Codes (Descriptions)	The factor loading	t-value
Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of the luxury	Lack of commitment of brand owners to foreign customers due to political sanctions	0.804	4.586
	Lack of supervision of the main brand on the performance of car	0.865	13.522

car brand (Company) and effects	import representatives	
Failure to provide original automobile parts	0.797	9.954
Abandonment due to behavior of the company brand	0.936	10.362
Increasing the price of car after-sales services in Iran compared to other countries	0.942	4.568
Formation of fake representative representatives	0.827	9.465
Failure to provide the services of the brand owner company to customers who bought from fake representatives	0.661	8.804
Creating a challenge for the customer due to being abandoned by the company in the after-sales service department	0.923	3.514
Obtaining car parts from an unreliable seller and the possibility of obtaining fake parts	0.639	11.125
Obliging the consumer to go to a different repair shop	0.554	14.273
Referring to an untrained and inexperienced repairman	0.588	9.395
Deprivation of the right to choose from the customer due to abandonment	0.695	5.354
Imposing more costs on the customer due to the provision of cars from a third country by dealers	0.779	16.326
Failure to pay attention to the climatic standard of luxury cars produced for Iran due to sanctions	0.852	4.897
Increase in car depreciation and erosion due to the lack of car production based on Iran's climatic standard	0.596	10.027
Not informing the representatives about the calls of the brand owner company	0.854	9.231
The existence of the damage of not being able to replace the used luxury car with similar models due to the price increase	0.558	5.463
Buying non-original parts at an exorbitant price	0.771	12.332
Lack of easy access to purchase or supply parts	0.784	6.852
Psychological uncertainty to the brand in case of abandonment	0.927	18.216
Depriving customers from buying their favorite brand	0.654	4.831
The need for high purchasing power to buy the latest models of luxury car brands	0.603	13.791
Increasing the cost of maintaining a luxury car	0.669	9.285
Losing the luxury car customer's desire to change and update the car	0.564	3.247
Acting to obtain representation by agents only for the purpose of import profit	0.884	16.257
Failure to provide after-sales service by representatives	0.682	7.248
Lack of commitment of representative to the main brand	0.651	5.641
Lack of power of representatives to maintain cooperation with the main brand	0.891	11.654
representatives focus on continuous communication with the main brand	0.709	4.367
The lack of focus of the representatives of the representatives on continuous communication with the main brand	0.553	3.852
Failure of representative to enter the after-sales service and network sector	0.945	9.214
Lack of proper networking by the representative	0.866	21.456
The effect of representative's work experience on imported car brand power	0.652	13.216
Wrong policies of representatives	0.889	4.259
The effect of representatives' performance on the customer's brand perception	0.603	7.339

Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of representatives



Damage to the luxury car brand due to abandonment	The lack of durability of the representative in the conditions of sanctions and their capability for customer support	0.571	6.201
	Importation of luxury cars by representatives without regard to consumer sentiments	0.746	8.847
	Importing luxury cars by representatives without considering the concerns of consumers	0.584	10.278
	Distortion of the brand image in the minds of customers	0.806	4.322
	The possibility of distorting the position of the luxury car brand in international markets	0.913	18.331
	Reducing the impact of car quality and after-sales service on brand mentality	0.587	9.475
	Reducing the effect of brand association on luxury car purchase intention	0.774	14.256
	The negative effect of abandonment on the purchase intention of new customers	0.684	8.259
	Extending the return period of the former brand image	0.743	13.588
	The consumer does not differentiate between the performance of the representative and the original company	0.714	11.227
	Reducing customer loyalty to the original brand	0.769	8.255
	The negative effect of decreasing brand loyalty on brand trust	0.693	3.254
	The possibility of reducing the power of the brand globally due to conservative politics	0.754	4.285
	The existence of organized advertisements against the non-commitment of some brands to the Iranian market	0.869	17.546
	Not providing a space of confidence for the customer regarding the non-interruption of services in case of political changes	0.562	12.878
	Reduction in the sales rate of the brand owner company due to customer abandonment	0.782	4.101
	The negativity of the customer's mind from the image of the luxury car brand due to abandonment	0.584	7.554
	The lack of importance of brand history in case of abandonment	0.809	13.211
	Deciding to sell the car in case of abandonment	0.828	5.369
	Loss of customers' commitment to the manufacturing company and brand owner	0.584	4.637
Possibility of losing the commitment of luxury car consumers	0.647	10.289	
Creating doubt for loyal customers due to abandonment	0.762	7.842	
Abandonment due to the behavior and performance of the luxury car manufacturing country	Policies of the brand manufacturer country	0.944	18.251
	The cultural influence of the country related to the manufacturing company in the minds of foreign customers	0.873	9.139
	The behavior of the country producing the brand towards sanctions	0.932	13.236



Table 2 displays the results of the convergent validity assessment. As evident from the table, all factor loadings surpass the 0.50 threshold at a 95% confidence level. This indicates that each observed variable significantly contributes to its designated construct, thereby establishing convergent validity for the measurement model. The correlation matrix of the categories is shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Correlation matrix between categories

N	Categories	1	2	3	4
1	Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of the luxury car brand (Company) and effects	1			
2	Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of	0.314	1		

representatives					
3	Damage to the luxury car brand due to abandonment	0.145	0.264	1	
4	Abandonment due to the behavior and performance of the luxury car manufacturing country	0.158	0.127	0.189	1

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity assesses the extent to which the research constructs are distinct from each other. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix of the categories within the brand abandonment model. As evident in the table, all correlation coefficients fall below 0.90, indicating a lack of substantial overlap between the constructs. This finding supports discriminant validity, suggesting the research categories are sufficiently distinct for meaningful analysis.

Table 4. CV Com and CV Red

Categories	CV Com	CV Red
Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of the luxury car brand (Company) and effects	0.238	0.238
Abandonment due to the performance and behavior of representatives	0.326	0.326
Damage to the luxury car brand due to abandonment	0.453	0.453
Abandonment due to the behavior and performance of the luxury car manufacturing country	0.135	0.135

Table 4 displays the results of the CV-Community and CV-Redundancy tests for discriminant validity. Positive and statistically significant values greater than zero in these tests indicate that the model's constructs are distinct from one another (Hair *et al.*, 2017). This finding further strengthens the evidence for discriminant validity within the brand abandonment model.

Results and Discussion

Context of Brand Abandonment in Iran

The Iranian luxury car market presents a unique case study for brand abandonment due to the country's international sanctions. These sanctions have significantly disrupted traditional communication channels between car importers and brand owners, hindering access to after-sales services and brand values (e.g., quality standards, timely parts availability). This has resulted in a substantial gap between the quality of after-sales services currently offered and the established standards of luxury car brands.

Proposed Model for Analyzing Customer Abandonment

In response to this situation, this research proposes a model for analyzing customer abandonment of luxury car brands in Iran. This model aims to assess the impact of abandonment on brand image. The model utilizes a phenomenological approach, drawing on the experiences of luxury car importers and industry experts. Through this approach, the research offers a conceptualization of luxury car brand abandonment based on these lived experiences. A key outcome of this research is a refined definition of "abandoned brand" as a marketing concept. This definition, informed by expert consensus, characterizes an abandoned brand as one that:

Ceases offering products to its target market for an extended period.

Discontinues all promotional activities.

Fails to provide after-sales services that meet the quality standards of the main brand.

Various factors can contribute to brand abandonment, including:

Closure of production facilities due to bankruptcy or lack of profitability.

Disruption of the relationship between a brand owner and its distributor representative, preventing products from reaching a specific target market. In the context of this study, international sanctions are a primary driver of this disruption.

Opportunities for Future Research

This research lays the groundwork for future studies that can leverage the proposed brand abandonment model for further exploration. Here are some potential areas for future investigation:

Impact on Brand Image and Equity: Employing a qualitative research framework, future studies could examine the model's effectiveness in measuring the effects of abandonment on brand image and brand equity within the luxury car market.

Relationship with Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid: Future research could explore the connection between the brand abandonment model and Keller's brand equity pyramid. This analysis could provide valuable theoretical insights into the specific ways abandonment impacts brand equity within the luxury car segment.

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