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Influence of Perceived Legitimacy and Perceived Value of Professional Association Members on Attitudinal Loyalty

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Abstract: This article explores the discoveries related to organizational legitimacy, focusing on its three key types: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. It examines how perceived value plays a crucial role in the generation of legitimacy and its direct impact on attitudinal loyalty. The study, based on a survey of 156 members of the Professional Association of Economists of Seville, demonstrates the significant influence of perceived value and legitimacy on the three dimensions of organizational legitimacy and attitudinal loyalty. Based on the findings, the paper recommends a management approach that emphasizes perceived value to reinforce legitimacy, which in turn strengthens loyalty. Another important contribution of our work is that it fills a gap in the literature related to professional association membership loyalty and its antecedents. Further research is suggested to investigate the causes and effects of legitimacy in different organizational contexts.

Keywords: professional associations; organizational legitimacy; perceived value; attitudinal loyalty; PLS-SEM



Received: 7 November 2024
Revised: 19 December 2024
Accepted: 21 December 2024
Published: 25 December 2024

Citation: Sánchez-del-Río-Vázquez, M.-E., Rodríguez-Rad, C., Orta-Pérez, M., & Revilla-Camacho, M.-Á. (2025). Influence of Perceived Legitimacy and Perceived Value of Professional Association Members on Attitudinal Loyalty. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(1), 4. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15010004>

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1. Introduction

Professional associations are an engine of the professions, as they foster the professional development of their members through the benefits and services they offer (Hammond & Moore, 2018; Fernandez & Castellanos, 2024; Potnis et al., 2024). In addition, member-focused professional association initiatives can enable members to access professional networks, resources, tools, or opportunities, and they can facilitate the inclusion of ideas and diversity among members and professional contacts and provide emotional support or loyalty in ways that benefit both the members and the professional association itself (Clouse et al., 2023; Gáll, 2024; Potnis et al., 2024). But the impact of these associations on the future of the sectors is more important than the individual benefits of the members, hence the struggle not only to recruit members but also to build member loyalty (Holt et al., 2023). On the other hand, given that attitudinal loyalty is an indicator of “true loyalty”, which refers not only to continued membership but also to recommendations to others, it is key to the greater use of the professional association’s services (Rodríguez-Rad & Sánchez-del-Río-Vázquez, 2023). Guiding the management of professional associations towards this attitudinal loyalty of members is therefore fundamental for their success. Consequently, a need to delve into the background of the attitudinal loyalty of members of a professional association prompted this work.

This paper is based on two lines of research that have attracted a great deal of attention in recent years. The first deals with organizational legitimacy, while the second refers

to the concept of customer value. Legitimacy and value creation are the two key terms of this work; both concepts are approached from the perspective of the customer, the main recipient of the value generated and the primary source for judging and conferring legitimacy to organizations (Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020).

Organizational legitimacy refers to the degree to which an organization is perceived to comply with social rules, values, norms, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). Institutional theory researchers support the idea that legitimacy is considered a fundamental intangible asset for stakeholder management (Amani, 2024; Blanco-González et al., 2021, 2023a; Payne et al., 2021), as it is achieved through the acceptance and desirability of the activities by these groups and facilitates their access to the necessary resources (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022; Díez-Martín et al., 2022; Miotto et al., 2020). Hence, legitimacy is of a perceptual nature and is socially constructed (Haack et al., 2021; Hadani, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024) as it depends on the stakeholders' judgment criteria (Díez-Martín et al., 2022; Etter et al., 2018). It is particularly concerned with the relationships that the organization establishes; hence, it contributes to the understanding of the growth and survival of organizations (Blanco-González et al., 2023b; Díez-Martín et al., 2022) and becomes a goal. Several studies have shown the direct relationship between legitimacy achievement strategies and organizational success (Tornikoski & Newbert, 2007), and it has even been found that the lack or erosion of legitimacy leads to organizational failure (Chen et al., 2006). In this sense, from a theoretical point of view, some researchers defend the relationship between legitimacy and loyalty; however, there is not enough research to prove this relationship (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022). On the other hand, this theory has mainly been used in the framework of non-profit organizations, since for this type of organization achieving legitimacy is fundamental to its ability to achieve its objectives; therefore, it is a priority to seek legitimacy rather than efficiency (Morales et al., 2005). Moreover, legitimacy becomes especially important when it is not easy to measure the technical effectiveness of organizations (Wells, 2001).

The service-dominant logic paradigm, on the other hand, states that "value is created through the actions of multiple actors, often without evidence of their interrelationship, who contribute to each other's well-being" (Lusch & Vargo, 2014, p. 13). Therefore, value is always co-created (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This co-creation of value is a clear sign of the importance of the (active) role of the customer, as it precisely reflects the proactive participation of the customer in the creation of value in collaboration with the company (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2016; Azzari et al., 2024). Although research on value co-creation has increased in recent decades, the concepts still have to be consolidated (Azzari et al., 2024; Mujahid et al., 2023). In addition, the value perceived by the customer is considered a key factor in making purchasing decisions and forming value judgments about organizations (Gallarza et al., 2011; García-Salirrosas et al., 2024; Leroi-Werelds, 2019); so, the creation of value for the customer should be the reason for the firm's existence and a key factor for success (Islam et al., 2024). This approach is in line with the postulates of institutional theory, for which one of the keys to survival is to ensure that organizations are infused with value. If this happens, the organization will gain legitimacy. Value, therefore, can confer legitimacy. As discussed above, managerial action generates legitimacy through stakeholder management; hence, legitimacy is related to organizational value creation processes (Haase, 2020). However, business research has "largely overlooked the importance of the legitimacy-based institutional environment for the implementation of customer orientation strategy" (Luo et al., 2008, p. 203), and no marketing research has been found that incorporates legitimacy as one of the consequences of organizational value. Furthermore, the existing literature shows value as a predictor of loyalty; however, this relationship may be complex. Hence, we follow the suggestion of Zauner et al. (2015) and also analyze the link between perceived value (PV) and loyalty.

With this paper, we strive to provide guidelines for the practice of professional association management to increase members' attitudinal loyalty. Consequently, this study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How does perceived value impact the attitudinal loyalty of members of a professional association?

RQ2: How does legitimacy impact the attitudinal loyalty of members of a professional association?

RQ3: How does perceived value impact the legitimacy of members of a professional association?

To answer these questions, this research conducted an online survey that was responded to by members of the Professional Association of Economists of Seville (PAES). The method of partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was applied to examine how perceived value shapes the legitimacy of the PAES and its direct impact on the attitudinal loyalty of its members. To this end, the research also explored the findings related to organizational legitimacy, focusing on its three key types: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. Furthermore, it postulates that the legitimacy of a specific professional association (i.e., the PAES) will be conditioned by the legitimacy accorded to professional associations in general. Therefore, a negative perception of the legitimacy of professional associations may infect the perception of a specific professional association and negatively affect the attitudinal loyalty of its members.

Accordingly, our research strove to meet these specific objectives:

- To analyze the effect of the perceived value by the members on the legitimacy granted to a specific professional association (i.e., the PAES), in its cognitive, pragmatic, and moral dimensions; so far, this is an issue that has not been addressed in the framework of professional associations.
- (1) To assess the impact that the legitimacy of professional associations has on the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy of the PAES.
 - (2) To determine the effects that the different dimensions of the legitimacy of the PAES have on the attitudinal loyalty of members towards the PAES. This question will make it possible to focus efforts aimed at the legitimation of organizations, correcting problems related to the benefits perceived by the client, the moral correctness of actions or, in more serious cases, the organization's very right to exist.
 - (3) To analyze the influence of perceived value on member attitudinal loyalty, both directly and indirectly through the three types of member legitimacy. Weighing the relationships will allow us to identify which constructs are most relevant to the achievement of attitudinal loyalty, helping to allocate resources more efficiently.

To date, the literature has mainly focused on analyzing how members' motivations and benefits encourage them to join and engage with professional associations (Potnis et al., 2024). Very few studies attempt to validate what concrete measures professional associations can develop to achieve such engagement (e.g., Potnis et al., 2024) or some of the antecedents of commitment (e.g., Clouse et al., 2023). With the exception of our research, Rodríguez-Rad and Sánchez-del-Río-Vázquez (2023), which analyzes attitudinal loyalty as an influencer of members' use intentions regarding professional association services and benefits, we have not found a further study on this topic of attitudinal loyalty in this field. Therefore, we believe that this new paper is an important contribution that fills a gap in the literature related to professional association membership loyalty and its antecedents. In addition, the literature has paid little attention to clients' perceptions of the legitimacy of the organizations with which they interact; this is still an under-researched area of professional membership; therefore, our study also aims to fill this gap.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Concept of Perceived Value

Value creation is the core of marketing, the concept on which the discipline has been developed since its origins (Gallarza et al., 2020). Both academia and business have shown great interest in this topic (Correa et al., 2021; Tran & Vu, 2021), as it is considered a strategic imperative to create and maintain a competitive advantage (Cankül et al., 2024; Chen & Chen, 2010; Islam et al., 2024; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Ullah, 2021). Therefore, value creation becomes a sine qua non condition for organizations in the 21st century (Zauner et al., 2015).

On the other hand, in marketing it is natural to focus on the customers' perspective, even more so when it is the customers who evaluate what they receive from the organizations they interact with for their purchase decisions and the formation of value judgments about the organizations (Gallarza et al., 2011; Leroi-Werelds, 2019). Perceived value is the subjective and global evaluation of the benefits received in relation to the sacrifices made for a product or service (Almeida et al., 2022; Cankül et al., 2024; Baidoun & Salem, 2024; Femina & Santhi, 2024). What the consumer offers is not only about monetary sacrifice, but also about the time and effort spent in buying and using products and services, i.e., opportunity costs (Baidoun & Salem, 2024). Given that consumers make their own assessment based on personal characteristics and the specific purchase experience (Morris, 1999), value is subjective and is not determined by the organization (Leroi-Werelds, 2019). It can be understood as a trade-off between what one 'gives' and 'gets' in the customer's eyes (Almeida et al., 2022).

This evaluation arises from the interaction between the consumer and an object, either a product, a service, or a company (Leroi-Werelds, 2019), and is experiential, i.e., it is conditioned by the specific situation the consumer is dealing with (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). The experience encompasses the moments prior to the use of the product or service, including search, purchase, and delivery; therefore, it is not only assessable by actual buyers, but also by those who have searched for information about the product or have contacted or received any communication from the company (Cronin et al., 2000). In other words, perceived value can occur both throughout the purchase process and in the pre-purchase phase (Baidoun & Salem, 2024).

It is clear, therefore, that value is judged by the consumer, is subjective in nature, and is not determined by the organization (García-Salirrosas et al., 2024; Leroi-Werelds, 2019). Each consumer will make his or her own assessment of value, depending on his or her personal characteristics and the specific purchase experience (Morris, 1999). The context in which such a situation occurs, whether related to location, timing, or temporal interaction, has a significant impact on this value assessment (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

Perceived value is a core differentiator (García-Salirrosas et al., 2024), which becomes pivotal to customer decision making and, in turn, to company performance (Islam et al., 2024). Hence, the study of its consequences can be considered a critical aspect of customer value theory as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable competitive advantage, although it has not yet been fully developed (Zauner et al., 2015). Given its relationship to purchase intention, it can be considered as a reliable measure of purchase or behavioral intentions (Baidoun & Salem, 2024; Ragab et al., 2024). Its influence on satisfaction, purchase, or behavioral intentions has been extensively proven (Cankül et al., 2024; Baidoun & Salem, 2024), but many other factors that could be a consequence of customer perceived value remain to be explored. Furthermore, its significant influence on loyalty substantially explains its impact on business success (Chan & Raharja, 2024). Accordingly, the existing literature shows value as a predictor of loyalty; however, this relationship may be complex,

suggesting that future research should focus on the link between perceived value and loyalty (Zauner et al., 2015).

2.2. Organizational Legitimacy

Organizational legitimacy has come to be recognized as the dominant approach to understanding organizations (Greenwood et al., 2017). On the other hand, we can say that the survival of a firm depends on its legitimacy (Chaney et al., 2015; Blanco-González et al., 2023b; Díez-Martín et al., 2022; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022; Miotto et al., 2020; Pascual-Nebreda et al., 2022; Odou et al., 2023), and this has become one of the leading topics for the field of business management. Sociological and business research has amply shown the key role of legitimacy in determining the survival and growth of organizations (Blanco-González et al., 2023b; Díez-Martín et al., 2022; Zhang & Borden, 2024). More legitimized organizations gain better access to resources (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022; Díez-Martín et al., 2022; Miotto et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2012) and a higher probability of survival (Díez-Martín et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2012), due to their ability to influence stakeholder behavior (Amani, 2024; Blanco-González et al., 2021, 2023b; Payne et al., 2021).

The most generalized definition of legitimacy was formulated by Suchman (1995), who defined it as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity in society are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (p. 574). In 2017, he reformulated this definition by stating that “organizational legitimacy is the perceived appropriateness of the organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms and definitions”, eliminating desirability because of its possible confusion with the reputation (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 9).

Different disciplines have tried to conceptualize and measure organizational legitimacy under a scientific framework. Therefore, researchers have developed typologies for its measurement and analysis, which have coincided in many aspects, but have differed in others. Among the reasons for these different typologies, we find both the scientific theories, within the framework of which the researchers who create them operate, and the purpose and methodology of the studies. It is not surprising, therefore, that different terms have arisen for measuring organizational legitimacy, which makes the researchers' work difficult, especially when conducting empirical research. In this project, we adopt the widely accepted taxonomy proposed by Suchman (1995), which refers to the identification of three dimensions for legitimacy (Figure 1):

- Pragmatic (useful): Pragmatic legitimacy, also called exchange legitimacy, is based on the practical benefits that the organization offers to its public. For Bitektine (2011), it is the overall value that the organization generates for the customer and is based on the evaluator's self-interest. It is shaped by three aspects: (a) direct benefits on the individual, social, and global welfare of the consumer; (b) long-term or indirect benefits on the individual, social, and global welfare of the consumer; and (c) the consumer's belief that the company puts the focus on the consumer's own self-interest. In other words, if the needs of consumers are satisfied by the products and services offered by the organization, the pragmatic legitimacy is achieved by the organization (Anić et al., 2024). Hence, when an organization acts in accordance with stakeholder interests, they grant it pragmatic legitimacy (Zhang & Borden, 2024).
- Moral (just): the organization does “the right thing” and promotes social welfare. There is moral legitimacy if the organization and its activities have been normatively and positively evaluated. Under current societal values and appropriate norms, stakeholders evaluate organizational behaviors by assessing whether they are “the right thing to do” or promote the welfare of society (Zhang & Borden, 2024). It has

four aspects to consider: (a) organizational outputs and products; (b) techniques and processes; (c) organizational structures; and (d) leaders' charisma and fit with moral values. Actions in accordance with an altruistic motivation that seek to improve social welfare trigger moral legitimacy (Handelman & Arnold, 1999).

- Cognitive (appropriate): the organization is inevitably part of the environment. Cognitive legitimacy is gained when, on the basis of a shared understanding of society or its historical background, the organization's behaviors are seen as inevitable or necessary (Zhang & Borden, 2024). The organization's right to exist is not questioned and is taken for granted. Therefore, the history and prevalence of the organization are the antecedents of cognitive legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011), as it is the stakeholder's knowledge about the organization that generates cognitive legitimacy, regardless of whether that knowledge is negative, positive, or neutral (Shepherd & Zacharakis, 2003). It is a more subtle and lasting legitimacy than the previous ones (Suchman, 1995), as it is not based on an active evaluation by stakeholders (Pollack et al., 2012). It is based on cognition rather than on interest or evaluation. Cognitive legitimacy relates to the definition and meaning of organizational activities (Bridwell-Mitchell & Mezas, 2012) and to how they help solve problems. If they are commonly accepted and considered useful by their environment, providing a framework for daily routines, the organization is accepted (Scott, 2008). When organizations are understandable, they gain cognitive legitimacy (Shepherd & Zacharakis, 2003). When organizations are generally accepted as appropriate, they gain cognitive legitimacy (Khair, 2010).

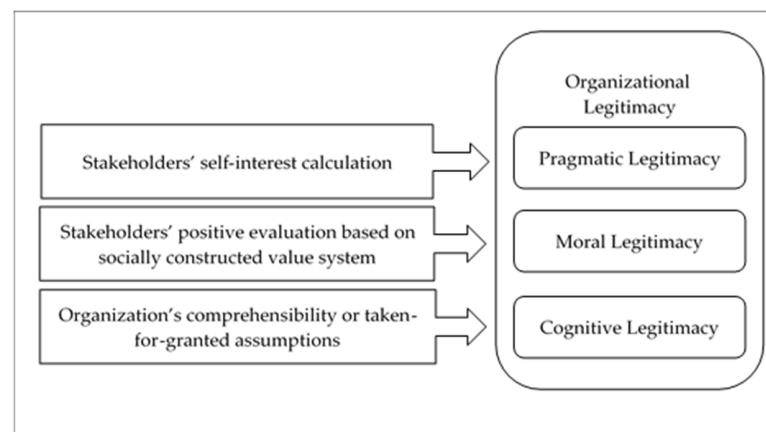


Figure 1. Fundamentals and dimensions of organizational legitimacy.

It is important to highlight that legitimacy arises from generalized perception. By reflecting the degree of collective approval of an organization, it can be considered an intangible resource of the organization (Amani, 2024; Payne et al., 2021; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Organizations do not operate in a vacuum and need the continuous approval and support of key stakeholders in the surrounding social system (Zhang & Borden, 2024). Individual subjective perceptions must therefore be aggregated and objectified. In light of the above, it should be noted that managers need to understand that the profile of their customers influences how they will assess the legitimacy of the organization they manage. This assessment is essential for organizations, because legitimacy is a resource that increases the likelihood of survival (e.g., it favors product acquisition, access to finance, and access to customers). Knowing the profile associated with each type of legitimacy assessment will make it easier for strategic efforts, which are decided by management and aimed at achieving the type of legitimacy, to be in line with the profile of the customers.

Legitimacy was originally considered to be a dichotomous concept, where the alternatives for organizations were to be legitimized or to not be legitimized (Scott, 2008), without

the possibility of an intermediate state. Other studies argue that legitimacy can be considered a continuous variable, whereby higher or lower levels of legitimacy can be achieved (Deeds et al., 1997). In our research, we follow this second line of thought. It should be noted that the literature offers different ways of measuring each dimension of legitimacy. Starting from the three dimensions proposed by Suchman (1995), i.e., pragmatic, moral, and cognitive, it is worth highlighting the contribution of Cruz and Isabel (2012) for the study of the legitimacy of the European Higher Education Area in the Community of Madrid (Spain) and that of Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020), who developed a questionnaire to measure legitimacy from the consumer's perspective. The process by which people form their judgments to evaluate the legitimacy of organizations may vary according to each person and the social context in which they live (Suchman, 1995). Thus, understanding the characteristics of individuals that influence their evaluation of an organization's legitimacy becomes a guide for organizational decision making in line with the cognitive needs of its evaluators, which consequently enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of its managers.

2.3. Attitudinal Loyalty

Oliver (1999) defined loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future” (p. 34). This definition suggests two categories of loyalty: attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. Behavioral loyalty is constructed from observable indicators (e.g., purchase proportion, purchase frequency, repeat purchase behavior, purchase sequence, etc.), while attitudinal loyalty is considered as a behavioral intention (e.g., intention to repeat, recommend, increase business with the company, or customer price tolerance) (Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2021; Femina & Santhi, 2024; Matsuoka, 2022). The psychological attachment and attitudinal advocacy that customers have towards a brand would be attitudinal loyalty (Femina & Santhi, 2024; Hollingshead et al., 2023; Ragab et al., 2024). Attitudinal loyalty refers to a certain desire to continue with the relationship, while behavioral loyalty refers to the concept of repeated patronage (Zhao et al., 2010). Consequently, in this research, attitudinal loyalty is operationalized as intention of returning or continuance and referring.

Customer loyalty is vital for organizations (Femina & Santhi, 2024). Without consumer loyalty even the best-designed business models will soon crumble (Perera et al., 2019). Early marketing research focused exclusively on behavioral loyalty, but soon changed course, as such loyalty may be motivated by situational demands rather than by a positive attitude toward the brand, which could lead to “false loyalty”. It is possible that repeat purchases are due to convenience or monetary incentives; thus, the study of attitudinal loyalty is required to capture the reasons behind the purchases (Chen & Chen, 2010). Therefore, behavioral loyalty alone seems insufficient to capture what is referred to as “true” loyalty (Kumar & Shah, 2004; Watson et al., 2015), and it is necessary to consider attitudinal loyalty to speak of “true” loyalty (Dandis & Al Haj Eid, 2022; Kumar & Shah, 2004; Watson et al., 2015; Royo-Vela & Sánchez, 2022). Moreover, Kursunluoglu (2011) states that even customers who do not buy the brand again may recommend it based on their attitudinal loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty entails affective and cognitive aspects of loyalty (Härtel & Russell-Bennett, 2010; Srivastava & Kaul, 2016) and is based on the emotions that the brand evokes (Revilla-Camacho et al., 2017).

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Formulation

3.1. Perceived Value and Organizational Legitimacy

As we have already mentioned, the customers are the evaluators of what they receive from the organizations with which they interact, so that the value perceived by the customer becomes a key factor in making purchasing decisions and in forming value judgments about

organizations (Gallarza et al., 2011; Islam et al., 2024; Leroi-Werelds, 2019). Consequently, the creation of value for the customer should be the firm's reason for existence and a key factor for success (Islam et al., 2024). This approach is in line with the postulates of institutional legitimacy, for which one of the keys to survival is to get organizations to provide value. If this occurs, the organization will gain legitimacy. Value, therefore, can confer legitimacy.

In turn, the literature also shows the multidimensional nature of value (Gallarza et al., 2017), and although there is no consensus on the exact components of the construct, one of the most widely accepted typologies is the four-dimensional view of customer perceived value (PERVAL) offered by Sweeney and Soutar (2001), which is applicable to various categories and stages of experience. Hence, customers can extract value from the organization in relation to emotional value, where utility is derived from feelings toward the brand. Social value relates to value extracted from the social credibility of the brand, while financial value and quality value are more functional and relate to value for money and perceptions of brand excellence, respectively (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

Based on institutional theory, legitimacy is conceived as a sustained competitive advantage, as it generates a feeling of security and trust among individuals that increases their willingness to accept the actions and decisions of more legitimate organizations (Amani, 2024; Díez-Martín et al., 2021). But, to increase legitimacy, their actions must be individually and socially beneficial (Handelman & Arnold, 1999). Consumers, following Sweeney and Soutar (2001), will perceive the financial and quality value brought by the company. This value is related to the direct benefits they expect the brand to bring them, which allows them to infer that it is related to the perceived pragmatic legitimacy of the organization. If the firm creates financial and quality value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), it will be useful to the customer, which will result in greater pragmatic legitimacy. On the other hand, customers will also perceive the social value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) generated by the organization, which will probably lead to a greater perception of moral legitimacy. Finally, an emotional value will be established (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), which will allow them to establish stable ties with the organization, generating a favorable perception of the organization's right to exist and permanence, a quality that defines cognitive legitimacy. In other words, the performance of activities must enrich and create value for consumers if they are to positively affect the legitimacy of the firm (Cronin et al., 2000). An activity that does not create value will be perceived as useless and therefore will not generate consumer support (Handelman & Arnold, 1999). Research asserts that if the firm cares about consumers' interests it will gain greater pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy (Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020).

Along these lines, Amani (2024) shows, for example, how the green perceived value of packaging reflects customers' feelings that the packaging is socially acceptable and responsible, consequently influencing brand legitimacy, as brands that are understood to be legitimate adhere to regulatory, normative institutions and socially constructive systems of values.

Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses in order to assess the influence of each of the dimensions of legitimacy:

- H1.** *Perceived value positively impacts the pragmatic legitimacy of the PAES.*
- H2.** *Perceived value positively impacts the cognitive legitimacy of the PAES.*
- H3.** *Perceived value positively impacts the moral legitimacy of the PAES.*

To further explore the legitimacy of the PAES, and taking into account the effect that the legitimacy of professional associations, in general (as a collective legitimacy), may have on the legitimacy of a specific professional association, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4. *The legitimacy of professional associations positively impacts the pragmatic legitimacy of the PAES.*

H5. *The legitimacy of professional associations positively impacts the cognitive legitimacy of the PAES.*

H6. *The legitimacy of professional associations positively impacts the moral legitimacy of the PAES.*

3.2. Legitimacy and Attitudinal Loyalty

Given that the main benefits of brand loyalty are increased frequency, purchase volume, and positive word-of-mouth communication about the organization, as well as reduced consideration of competitors by the customer, a primary goal for marketers is to create loyal customers, especially in highly competitive environments (Kaewkhav et al., 2023). A “true” loyal customer is one with a positive attitude towards the repurchase of a brand (Kumar & Shah, 2004; Watson et al., 2015). Hence, a number of scholars consider attitudinal loyalty to be indispensable for the accurate assessment of loyalty (Dandis & Al Haj Eid, 2022; Kumar & Shah, 2004; Watson et al., 2015; Royo-Vela & Sánchez, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

As noted before, on the basis of institutional theory, it is claimed that legitimacy is a key driver of organizational survival and growth (Blanco-González et al., 2023b; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022; Díez-Martín et al., 2021, 2022; Miotto et al., 2020; Pascual-Nebreda et al., 2022; Odou et al., 2023; Zhang & Borden, 2024). Specifically, legitimacy has been shown to influence stakeholder behavior by facilitating access to critical resources, such as financial acquisition, social identity, and committed and productive employees (Díez-Martín et al., 2021, 2022; Miotto et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2021). Legitimacy prompts consumers to favor companies that behave in the way they believe to be appropriate (Blanco-González et al., 2023a; Odou et al., 2023; Randrianasolo & Arnold, 2020), and most stakeholders only seek to deal with organizations that are perceived as legitimate (Blanco-González et al., 2023a; Deephouse et al., 2017; Pascual-Nebreda et al., 2022). Legitimacy, therefore, can be considered a possible precursor of loyalty (Anić et al., 2024; Blanco-González et al., 2023a; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022; Handelman & Arnold, 1999).

Even though from a theoretical point of view some researchers, such as those mentioned above, defend the relationship between legitimacy and loyalty, there is not enough research that proves this relationship (Anić et al., 2024; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022). Business management research argues that companies committed to corporate social responsibility (CSR) achieve greater legitimacy (Blanco-González et al., 2023a; Hadani, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024), both in institutional contexts with strict rules and regulations for CSR and in contexts where no one is obliged to contribute and all the CSR actions are voluntary in nature (Jasinenko et al., 2024). Once an organization initiates a CSR practice, customers consider it to be legitimate for its social value and therefore respond positively to the organization (Smith et al., 2023). Therefore, some studies in the field of CSR demonstrate the relationship between legitimacy and loyalty. In this way, Kim and Higgins (2013) show how moral legitimacy influences loyalty, and Lee and Shin (2010) specifically find a positive relationship between consumers’ knowledge of CSR activities (specifically, corporate social contribution and contribution to the local community) and their purchase intention. For their part, Handelman and Arnold (1999) argue that institutional theory provides the theoretical umbrella for a broad set of “social marketing” actions developed by firms to achieve consumer legitimacy, evidencing that legitimacy is a mediating variable between

strategic action and consumer support in the form of higher repurchase intention and more positive word-of-mouth communication (i.e., attitudinal loyalty) if the firm is perceived as a legitimate retailer. Therefore, legitimacy is necessary to gain consumer support. In this line, [Odou et al. \(2023\)](#) focus on offering local products as a strategy to increase legitimacy and demonstrate the positive impact of legitimacy on customers' patronage intentions. Focusing only on the relationship between legitimacy and customer behavior, again in the retail domain, and considering legitimacy as a single construct, [Chaney et al. \(2015\)](#) demonstrate how the greater the store's legitimacy, the greater the purchase intention and the recommendation of the store (attitudinal loyalty). [Blanco-González et al. \(2023a\)](#) show that legitimacy influences shoppers' intention to revisit the store, and [Del-Castillo-Feito et al. \(2022\)](#) find a positive and significant connection between legitimacy and attitudinal loyalty in the ICT sector. Now focusing on the different dimensions of legitimacy, [Yang et al. \(2021\)](#) study how the pragmatic and social dimension, without considering the cognitive dimension, are positively related to the intention to revisit the store in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently, also in the framework of retail and COVID-19, [Anić et al. \(2024\)](#) have studied the relationship of the three dimensions of legitimacy (moral, pragmatic, and cognitive) with attitudinal loyalty, hence encouraging research to clarify the impact of the different dimensions of legitimacy on loyalty. Motivated by the scarcity of studies on legitimacy in the field of tourism, [Fiuza et al. \(2024\)](#) find that legitimacy can be measured as a first- or second-order factor, composed of three dimensions, and contrast its positive relationship with the attitudinal loyalty of residents in relation to the Brazilian Oktoberfest tourism event. [Zhao and Zheng \(2023\)](#) point out that while in the marketing field the concept of consumer brand acceptance attitude has been more discussed, in the management field acceptance refers to the understanding and legitimacy of an organization or company. These researchers highlight how brand acceptance can trigger consumers' emotional attachment to the brand and their active recommendation of it to other groups.

Finally, the fact that there is no widely consensual way of measuring customer loyalty ([Matsuoka, 2022](#)), which sometimes makes it difficult to compare the results of different research studies, and the scarcity of research on the topic ([Anić et al., 2024](#); [Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022](#)), increase the impact of the three dimensions of legitimacy (moral, pragmatic, and cognitive) on attitudinal loyalty; this encourages us to propose the following hypotheses:

H7. *Pragmatic legitimacy of the PAES positively impacts attitudinal loyalty.*

H8. *Cognitive legitimacy of the PAES positively impacts attitudinal loyalty.*

H9. *Moral legitimacy the PAES positively impacts attitudinal loyalty.*

3.3. Perceived Value and Attitudinal Loyalty

This paper has already emphasized that attitudinal loyalty represents a psychological attachment ([Femina & Santhi, 2024](#); [Hong & Cho, 2011](#); [Ragab et al., 2024](#); and it is manifested in positive word-of-mouth communication ([Chan & Raharja, 2024](#); [Gallarza & Saura, 2006](#); [Keiningham et al., 2018](#); [Ragab et al., 2024](#); [Snip, 2022](#)). In addition, [Kotler et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest redefining loyalty as brand recommendations. [Rodríguez-Rad and Sánchez-del-Río-Vázquez \(2023\)](#) highlight the importance of perceived value and attitudinal loyalty in the field of professional associations.

The empirical evidence accumulated over the years has shown how perceived value helps explain consumer behavior ([Baidoun & Salem, 2024](#); [Islam et al., 2024](#); [Ragab et al., 2024](#); [Solakis et al., 2022](#); [Yang et al., 2016](#)). Moreover, it has been found to be a better predictor of behavioral intentions than satisfaction or quality ([Cronin et al., 2000](#)). In this

line, the meta-analysis from De Matos and Rossi (2008) found that perceived value is the second most highly correlated driver of word-of-mouth communication.

At this point, it is necessary to remember the difference between behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty, so that the latter reinforces the former (Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that a large number of researchers have supported perceived value as a driver of recommendations or positive word-of-mouth communication (Alrwashdeh et al., 2020; Brochado et al., 2022; Tonder et al., 2018). In this vein, Femina and Santhi (2024) reveal how consumers' perceived value of luxury cars influences attitudinal loyalty, which in turn influences behavioral loyalty.

If we also remember that there is no agreed way to measure customer loyalty, it is not uncommon to find other studies that prove this relationship with different measures of attitudinal loyalty. For example, Cankül et al. (2024), Chen and Chen (2010), and Matsuoka (2022) add the intention to return/repurchase to the willingness to recommend the organization/brand. Chen and Chen (2010) and García-Salirrosas et al. (2024) measure attitudinal loyalty by word of mouth and preference; Paulose and Shakeel (2022) also add the willingness to join a loyalty program, and Jin et al. (2013) focus on the attachment to the organization.

Additionally, within the framework of the hospitality industry, Kandampully et al. (2015) conduct a summary review of what is already known about customer loyalty in order to understand the factors that underpin it. Among other discoveries, they highlight that value is inextricably linked to customer loyalty, as it is essential to induce positive responses from consumers.

Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H10. *Perceived value of the PAES members will positively affect the members' attitudinal loyalty to the PAES.*

Based on a review of the academic literature, we propose a conceptual framework that we hope will be useful for future studies aimed at understanding the influence of perceived value and legitimacy on the attitudinal loyalty of members of professional associations. Likewise, we hope to shed light on the management of these associations.

The proposed conceptual framework is thus established and is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

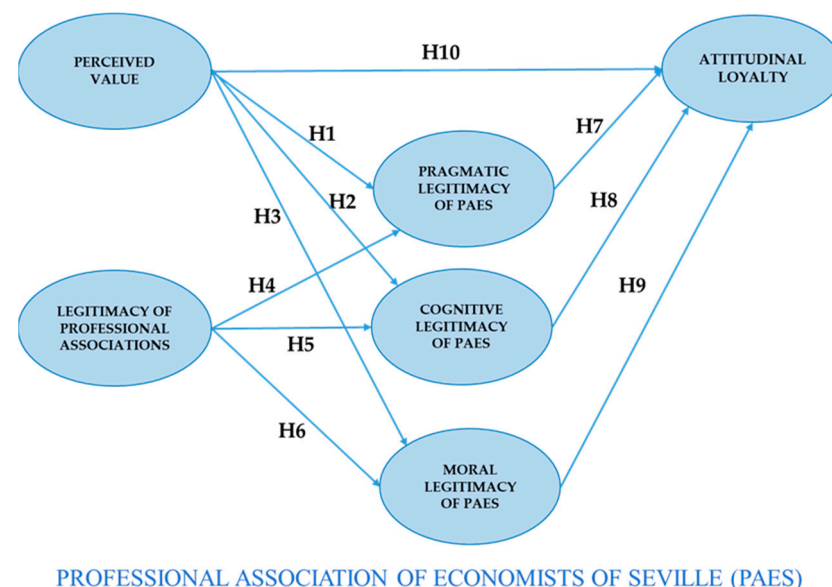


Figure 2. Conceptual model.

4. Research Method

The focus of the work is on organizations belonging to the so-called third sector, specifically professional associations. The choice of these organizations is justified for several reasons: (1) They are a special type of organization whose purposes are the regulation of the practice of the professions, the exclusive institutional representation of the professions when they are subject to compulsory membership, the defense of the professional interests of their members, and the protection of the interests of the consumers and users of the services of their members (Law on Professional Associations, 2/1974, art. 1). (2) The professions with compulsory membership represent a very important sub-sector within the services sector, generating 8.8% of gross domestic product and accounting for 6.1% of total employment, with more than one million members, which would represent 30% of university employment (data referring to 2018, according to Conflegal). (3) The National Markets and Competition Commission (CNMC) in Spain has been making recommendations for regulatory amendments to boost competition in the professional services sector, due to the restrictions on access to and exercise of professional activities that hinder innovation, improvement of quality, and competitiveness of services, to the detriment of consumers and users.

An empirical study was carried out in order to contrast the proposed hypotheses, namely to check whether the relationship between the variables established by each hypothesis was significant or not. In other words, it must be confirmed both that the relationship between the variables exists and that the direction of the relationship is the one proposed in the hypothesis. Our empirical study was carried out, based on an electronic questionnaire sent to the members of the PAES through the official channels of the association

For the collection of information, a questionnaire was created using the Google Forms tool, chosen among other options because it was an accessible method for the population under study and because it guaranteed the anonymity of the participants, who were not asked for any personal data.

All the constructs were measured with 5-point Likert scales formed by indicators extracted from the theoretical review carried out. Therefore, a 4-indicator scale used in previous studies (Martin & Brown, 1990; Lassar et al., 1995; Yoo et al., 2000; Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010; Mohammed & Al-Swidi, 2019) was used to measure perceived value. The legitimacy of professional associations in general was measured based on a 6-item scale adapted from Chung et al. (2016). The three legitimacy-configuring dimensions, pragmatic, moral, and cognitive, were measured based on the scale recently proposed by Randrianasolo and Arnold (2020) and specifically designed for consumers as a source of the legitimacy of organizations. This scale is based on contributions made by Suchman (1995), Handelman and Arnold (1999), and Chung et al. (2016). Finally, attitudinal loyalty was measured with a 4-indicator scale, adapted from studies by Lassar et al. (1995), and Yoo et al. (2000).

In the first phase, a pilot survey was undertaken to refine the questionnaire, measure the response time, and eliminate some questions that were considered redundant or confusing. Once the data collection instrument had been refined, the field phase began, which took place during the month of January 2021 and for which we had the essential collaboration of the PAES. As a result of this process, a total of 156 valid questionnaires were obtained from a total of 1212 members, which represents a percentage of 12.87% of the total, a figure that is considered adequate for this type of exploratory study.

Regarding the descriptive study of the sample, 75.6% of the participants were men and 21.2% were women, both percentages being similar to the actual gender distribution in the census of the PAES. With respect to the types of members, 70.5% were practicing members and 18.6% were non-practicing members, with the remaining 10.9% being emeritus

members (4.5%), unemployed (3.8%), novices (1.35%), and pre-members (1.25%). The data on age and length of service in the association are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Age and seniority.

Length of Membership		Age	
Less than 1 year	6.4%	24–29 years	2.6%
2 to 5 years	20.5%	30–39 years	10.9%
6 to 10 years	10.3%	40–59 years	71.2%
More than 10 years	62.8%	More than 60 years	15.3%

Source: the authors.

5. Results

IBM SPSS 26 and SmartPLS 4 statistical software (Ringle et al., 2022) were used for data analysis. PLS-SEM is a method for analyzing complex interrelationships between constructs and indicators (Hair et al., 2019). Compared to other methods, PLS-SEM offers a lot of flexibility in terms of modeling and data requirements. The main reasons for choosing PLS-SEM are as follows (Hair et al., 2019): on the one hand, the study focuses on the prediction of the dependent variable; on the other hand, the PLS-SEM feature of higher statistical power is quite useful for exploratory research examining less developed or still developing theories (Hair et al., 2019).

Data analysis begins with the assessment of the measurement model. The assessment of the measurement model involves the analysis of the individual item's reliability (loadings), the internal consistency or reliability of the scale (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), its convergent validity (AVE), and its discriminant validity (HTMT). Tables 2 and 3 show the values of all these measures for the model, which is composed entirely of reflective indicators.

Once the analysis of the measurement model is completed, it is time to analyze the structural model. First, the possible existence of multicollinearity between the antecedent variables of the endogenous construct is tested. According to Hair et al. (2019), there are indications of multicollinearity when the VIF indicator is greater than 5. After that, bootstrapping (5000 samples) is performed, which provides the t-values that allow the evaluation of the statistical significance of the proposed relationships. The empirical evidence reveals that there is statistical significance in nine of the ten hypotheses proposed in the model (Table 4). Hence, it is confirmed that perceived value is an antecedent of the three dimensions of the legitimacy of the PAES, that the legitimacy of professional associations significantly affects the three dimensions of the legitimacy of the PAES, and that both pragmatic and moral legitimacy affect attitudinal loyalty. A direct relationship between perceived value and attitudinal loyalty is also evident. The only relationship that could not be confirmed was the one between the cognitive legitimacy of the PAES and attitudinal loyalty; so, hypothesis H8 must be rejected.

Finally, a blindfolding process is performed to evaluate the predictive capacity of the model. Its results, and the explanatory analysis of the coefficient of determination (R²), are shown in Table 5.

Table 2. Convergent validity and reliability of the measurement model.

	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Perceived Value		0.894	0.895	0.826
VP1. The Association of Economists provides greater value than other professional associations.	0.915			
VP2. The intangible attributes of the Association of Economists are sufficient reason to join the association.	0.907			
VP4. The Association of Economists provides extra added value to its members.	0.903			
Legitimacy of Professional Associations		0.850	0.861	0.570
LPA1. I believe that professional associations are necessary in society.	0.799			
LPA2. Professional associations comply with what society expects them to do.	0.827			
LPA3. Professional associations are an example of how an institution should behave.	0.768			
LPA4. Without the professional associations, the system would not work as well.	0.770			
LPA5. I believe that professional associations should not exist.	0.639			
LPA6. Belonging to a professional association brings prestige.	0.711			
Pragmatic Legitimacy of Paes		0.889	0.891	0.751
PLPAES1. The activities of the PAES benefit me.	0.899			
PLPAES2. The activities of the PAES benefit society.	0.850			
PLPAES3. The PAES places the interests of its members at the center of its activities.	0.881			
PLPAES6. The PAES shares the values of its members.	0.835			
Cognitive Legitimacy of Paes		0.824	0.828	0.743
CLPAES1. The PAES is part of Sevillian society.	0.878			
CLPAES2. Seville needs the PAES.	0.788			
CLPAES3. The PAES is a permanent fixture in Sevillian society.	0.914			
Moral Legitimacy of Paes		0.876	0.876	0.803
MLPAES1. The PAES acts honestly.	0.919			
MLPAES 2. The PAES is trustworthy.	0.931			
MLPAES 4. The PAES promotes social welfare.	0.834			
Attitudinal Loyalty		0.841	0.884	0.696
AL1. I will encourage others to participate in the activities of the PAES.	0.839			
AL2. I will talk about the positive aspects of the PAES to other people.	0.937			
AL3. I will recommend the PAES to anyone who seeks my advice.	0.935			
AL4. I will continue to be a member next year.	0.570			

Note: CA = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Source: the authors.

Table 3. Discriminant validity of the measurement model (HTMT ratio).

	AL	CLPAES	LPA	MLPAES	PLPAES	VP
AL						
CLPAES	0.731					
LPA	0.729	0.898				
MLPAES	0.821	0.860	0.749			
PLPAES	0.842	0.886	0.839	0.890		
VP	0.808	0.758	0.834	0.796	0.895	

Note: AL = attitudinal loyalty; CLPAES = cognitive legitimacy of PAES; LPA = legitimacy of professional associations; MLPAES = moral legitimacy of PAES; PLPAES = pragmatic legitimacy of PAES; VP = perceived value. Source: the authors.

Table 4. Results of the structural model.

	Path	Statistics t	p Value	Supported
H1: PV -> PLPAES	0.539	7.074	0.000	YES
H2: PV -> CLPAES	0.182	2.125	0.034	YES
H3: PV -> MLPAES	0.476	4.876	0.000	YES
H4: LPA -> PLPAES	0.349	4.387	0.000	YES
H5: LPA -> CLPAES	0.631	9.110	0.000	YES
H6: LPA -> MLPAES	0.309	3.144	0.002	YES
H7: PLPAES -> AL	0.275	2.556	0.011	YES
H8: CLPAES -> AL	0.024	0.302	0.763	NO
H9: MLPAES -> AL	0.279	2.964	0.003	YES
H10: PV -> AL	0.275	3.063	0.002	YES

Note: AL = attitudinal loyalty; CLPAES = cognitive legitimacy of PAES; LPA = legitimacy of professional associations; MLPAES = moral legitimacy of PAES; PLPAES = pragmatic legitimacy of PAES; VP = perceived value. Source: the authors.

Table 5. Effects on endogenous variables.

	R ²	Q ²	Direct Effect	Correlations	Explained Variance
PLPAES	0.694	0.680			
H1: PV			0.539	0.800	43.12%
H4: LPA			0.349	0.752	26.24%
CLPAES	0.603	0.588			
H2: PV			0.182	0.654	11.90%
H5: LPA			0.631	0.767	48.40%
MLPAES	0.541	0.521			
H3: PV			0.476	0.706	33.61%
H6: LPA			0.309	0.664	20.52%
AL	0.605	0.515			
H7: PLPAES			0.275	0.730	20.08%
H9: MLPAES			0.279	0.705	19.67%
H10: PV			0.275	0.706	19.42%

Note: AL = attitudinal loyalty; CLPAES = cognitive legitimacy of PAES; LPA = legitimacy of professional associations; MLPAES = moral legitimacy of PAES; PLPAES = pragmatic legitimacy of PAES; VP = perceived value. Source: the authors.

6. Discussion

The results obtained in this study confirm the effect that perceived value has on organizational legitimacy (hypotheses H1, H2, and H3). Specifically, this research shows the direct and significant relationship for all the dimensions of legitimacy (pragmatic, moral, and cognitive). As expected, the explanatory capacity is greater in the case of pragmatic legitimacy (43.12% of the variance explained), since it is precisely this dimension of legitimacy that is based on the perceived usefulness of the organization for the individual who values it. Therefore, if the member perceives that the professional association provides a high added value, he or she will legitimize it from a pragmatic point of view (it is useful). With respect to moral legitimacy, perceived value explains 33.61% of its variance, indicating that the individual not only considers the usefulness of the organization for his

own individual interests, but also considers its contribution to the welfare of society in general and the moral correctness of its actions and decisions. Finally, it should be noted that perceived value explains 11.9% of cognitive legitimacy, i.e., that which allows us to affirm that the professional association is already part of the social and cultural system in which it is inserted and that, therefore, it has earned the right to exist. It seems imperative, therefore, to focus on the creation of value as a fundamental element in obtaining the legitimacy of the PAES.

On the other hand, we can affirm the existence of a direct and significant relationship between the legitimacy of professional associations in general and the legitimacy of a specific organization, as postulated in hypotheses H4, H5, and H6. The perceived legitimacy of professional associations, therefore, significantly affects the legitimacy of the PAES, pragmatically (explained variance of 26.24%), morally (explained variance of 20.52%), and cognitively (explained variance of 48.4%). These results highlight the interdependence between the professional associations themselves, in such a way that a low legitimacy of professional associations in general, motivated by a generic problem or by issues totally unrelated to a specific association, can erode the individual association. This is especially relevant with regard to the cognitive legitimacy of the PAES, which is explained by almost 50% for collective legitimacy and only 12% for perceived value. Hence, if the legitimacy of professional associations were to be questioned, this could affect the very right to exist of a particular association. This leads us to think that professional associations should work in a coordinated and cooperative manner to guarantee their legitimacy and survival in the long term, avoiding confrontations and disputes which, when they become public opinion, have the capacity to erode the legitimacy of each and every professional association, and not only that of the one causing the legitimacy problem.

Finally, as postulated by hypotheses H7, H9, and H10, perceived value and pragmatic and moral legitimacy directly and significantly affect attitudinal loyalty to the organization, explaining altogether more than 59% of the variance. The relationship between perceived value and loyalty is not new in the marketing discipline, which advocates the creation and delivery of value as a key element in creating loyalty and establishing long-term relationships. What we can consider novel is the effect that pragmatic legitimacy (20.08% of variance explained) and moral legitimacy (19.67%) have on attitudinal loyalty, both effects being greater than that of perceived value (19.42% of variance explained). Therefore, increasing the perception of usefulness for the member (pragmatic legitimacy) and improving the perception of correctness and morality in the management of professional associations (moral legitimacy) will contribute to an increase in attitudinal loyalty, which in marketing is considered "true loyalty".

7. Conclusions

Little attention has been paid in the literature to clients' perceptions of the legitimacy of the organizations with which they interact, and our study fills this gap; moreover, it considers the under-researched area of professional membership. From the detailed analysis of the results, interesting conclusions can be drawn to help improve the management of professional associations in general and of economists' associations in particular.

Important practical conclusions can be drawn from the results of our study. First, the results indicate that perceived value plays a crucial role in generating legitimacy. Therefore, economists' associations should focus their management on improving the perceived value of their members, since improving the perceived value contributes to the reinforcement of the three dimensions of legitimacy, and these dimensions greatly affect loyalty. Value creation will help to gain pragmatic legitimacy, i.e., it will increase the perceived usefulness of the association for the interests of its members. This value creation must begin with a

thorough understanding of the needs of its members, in order to create the most appropriate value propositions to meet their expectations. Transparency must be promoted by making the association's performance visible, demonstrating that the best strategies and procedures are chosen, and showing the results obtained and the benefits for the members. In this way, the association will be perceived as doing things well; that is to say, it will gain moral legitimacy. It is also essential to create value for society by contributing to the improvement of social welfare and carrying out honest and responsible management that enhances the profession and builds a relationship of trust between those in charge and the members themselves. The perceived value will contribute to the gaining of cognitive legitimacy, which may be the guarantee of the future viability of professional associations, especially those whose membership is not mandatory for practicing the profession.

Second, since the perceived legitimacy of professional associations has a strong influence on all three dimensions of the legitimacy of economists' associations, it would be desirable for the various professional associations to work together in a coordinated manner to increase the legitimacy of professional associations, which could lead to both an increase in the number of members and their participation in the activities they propose. The *raison d'être* of professional associations is to serve the interests of their members and society; so, it is essential to make clear the benefits they bring. Professional associations have an important role to play in assisting their members in their professional practice. However, the above considerations imply a major change in the way these organizations compete. They will have to attract and retain professionals on the basis of the value generated for their members, who will be free to decide on their membership. In this new competitive framework, survival will depend on the legitimacy that professionals confer on them, based on the usefulness of their members and the correctness of their actions and, therefore, on their own right to continue operating in the market. This question of legitimacy concerns not only the number of members, but also their participation in the activities organized by the professional associations, from elections to training courses.

Third, as we have seen, cognitive legitimacy does not lead directly to greater attitudinal loyalty. This fact is particularly significant and should be an important wake-up call for professional associations. When the cognitive legitimacy of professional associations is questioned, the very right of an association to exist may be affected. Therefore, members perceive that the mere existence of the professional association does not promote attitudinal loyalty. When the cognitive legitimacy of professional associations is questioned, a given association's right to exist may be affected. Since members perceive that the mere existence of the professional association does not promote attitudinal loyalty, cognitive legitimacy thus becomes a necessary condition for a professional association, but to promote the attitudinal loyalty of its members, it should preferably focus its efforts on enhancing moral legitimacy and pragmatic legitimacy, because it has been shown that there is a positive effect of pragmatic legitimacy and moral legitimacy on attitudinal loyalty. Hence, managers should be aware of the importance of developing pragmatic legitimacy. To do this, it is necessary to generate a superior value proposition in line with members' needs and expectations, to know exactly what they expect from the professional association and to try to achieve, as far as possible, an adequate response and, if possible, one that is above expectations. Steps must also be taken to improve moral legitimacy, which means ensuring that the professional association is perceived by its members as doing things right. This will lead to greater attitudinal loyalty, with numerous benefits for associations. On the one hand, members will stay longer in the association and generate more revenue for the association, which translates into higher member equity value. On the other hand, they would recommend the PAES to potential members, encouraging them to consider joining and to become active members of the association.

Finally, it is suggested that the PAES managers need to develop strategies that favor modern management tools aimed at enhancing the moral, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy of the professional association. Fluid communication that ensures that members are actively listened to will undoubtedly benefit pragmatic legitimacy, as they will perceive more clearly that the actions of the PAES benefit them. Transparency should also be promoted by making the actions of the PAES visible, demonstrating that the best strategies and procedures are chosen and showing the results obtained and the benefits for the members. This management philosophy will have a positive effect on members' attitudinal loyalty. Increased attitudinal loyalty will lead, on the one hand, to the intention to use the services that the organization offers to its members and, on the other hand, will facilitate the attraction of new potential members to the organization.

Professional associations of economists have historically had a predominantly male composition compared to the female presence. However, this structure is evolving, with a significant increase in the number of women joining as members. The growing participation of women in the workforce is driving changes in organizational structures, promoting gender equality (Díez-Martín et al., 2022). Education has played a crucial role in this transformation (Blanco-González et al., 2021; Cruz-Suárez et al., 2020; Castro, 2020), providing women with the skills and opportunities to enter fields previously dominated by men (Castaño et al., 2022; Pizarro & Arman, 2021). Legitimacy studies are offering evidence on the impact of gender on legitimacy evaluations (Blanco-González et al., 2023b). In this context, future research could explore the effect of gender on the legitimacy of professional associations, examining how these dynamics influence the perception and acceptance of such organizations.

Future research could benefit from the incorporation of moderating variables into the model, such as trustworthiness or reputation (Hadani, 2024; Mariconda et al., 2024). Adding such variables could provide deeper insights into the relationships between key constructs and enhance the understanding of their effects within the context of the study.

Future studies could explore the mechanisms for achieving legitimacy (Fisher et al., 2017), as well as the impact of legitimacy judgments based on validity and consensus on the loyalty toward these organizations (Haack et al., 2021). Such research could provide valuable insights into how organizations can strengthen their legitimacy and foster stronger member commitment.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.R.-R., M.-E.S.-d.-R.-V. and M.-Á.R.-C.; methodology, C.R.-R. and M.-Á.R.-C.; software, M.-Á.R.-C. and M.O.-P.; validation, C.R.-R. and M.O.-P.; formal analysis, M.-E.S.-d.-R.-V.; investigation, C.R.-R. and M.-E.S.-d.-R.-V.; resources, M.O.-P.; data curation, C.R.-R., M.-E.S.-d.-R.-V. and M.-Á.R.-C.; writing—original draft preparation, C.R.-R., M.-E.S.-d.-R.-V. and M.-Á.R.-C.; writing—review and editing, C.R.-R., M.-E.S.-d.-R.-V., M.O.-P. and M.-Á.R.-C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the local/national legislation stating ethic approval is not needed for this type of study. Specifically, this research refrained from any invasive procedures and the collection of sensitive information as stated in The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, and the Organic Law 3/2018 of 5 December on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights. Consequently, this research lies beyond the purview of intervention by the research committee at the University of Sevilla.

Informed Consent Statement: The questionnaire was sent to the members of the association by the president of the association. At no time did the researchers have access to personal data nor were

they requested for the study. Membership of the association is voluntary, as was participation in the study, so that those members who did not wish to participate did not do so.

Data Availability Statement: The availability of these data is subject to restrictions. The data are the property of the Seville Association of Economists and are only available to members of the Association of Economists and are therefore not available to the public. The data used for this study were obtained under licence. However, data may be obtained from the authors upon reasonable request and with the permission of the Seville Association of Economists.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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