

Full Length Research Paper

Study of effective factors of fans' brand loyalty in Iranian professional football league

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The purpose of this study was to examine the effective dimensions of brand association in Iranian Professional Football League. A descriptive- survey study was a kind of practical research. A sample of Iranian professional football league fans (n = 797) participated in this research. Gladden and Funk team's brand association questionnaire used to collect the data. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested for this research (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83). This questionnaire consisted of five parts with a total of 61 questions. SPSS software (15th edition) was used for analyzing the data. Using statistical test; Pearson correlation, linear and multiple regressions showed strong correlation between three brand associations' dimension factors: attributes, benefits, and attitudes of brand association with the fans' brand loyalty ($p = 0.01$). According to the results of multiple regressions, the brand association's dimensions; benefits and attitudes were appropriate indicators of brand loyalty among fans.

Key words: Brand associations, brand loyalty, fans, football league.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the value of a company was measured based on the use of its tangible attributes, facilities, and equipments. Recently, however, it has suggested that the real value of a company is somewhere inside the potential costumers' minds (anonymous, 2009). Although the value of a product just measures its monetary worth, a brand introduces the product and reveals its distinguished aspects (Cupferer, 2006).

According to the definition of American Marketing Association (1960), a brand is 'a name, term, symbol, design, or their combination whose aim is the introduction of products or a seller or a group of sellers' services to customers and also make their products distinguished from other competitors (Mohammadian et al., 2009).

Brands are often considered as one of the worthiest assets of a company. Based on the common belief that strong brands are known as a competitive privilege, establishing a strong brand has become an important priority for many companies (Bekhradi, 2009). A brand

adds some factors to a product or service, a quality which makes it distinctive compared to other. These distinctions can be functional, logical, tangible, or even intangible (Mohammadian et al., 2009).

According to results of Aaker's research, the top brands were known as unconsciously high quality of products or services for their customers. When the customer buys a product with a top brand, he/she believes that he/she has bought something worthy (Heidarzadeh et al., 2007). To make a strong brand, Aaker offered that brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived quality of brand help create certain worth for a brand, which is very important for the companies. If the customers are loyal to brand, they will pay more for it. So marketing activities will be more influential and the company achieves a stable competitive privilege (Dunne and Moulden, 2009). Thus, new organizations are going to identify, measure, and apply the methods and effective patterns to create loyalty among customers.

Moreover, fans as the customers spend much money on the symbolic aspects of a product or service (Alizade, 2008). Brand is the most symbolic aspect in the sports industry. Therefore, focusing on the fans' brand loyalty in

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sport teams is the key to achievement to choose successful marketing strategies in this industry. Crowd funding, describes the collective cooperation, attention and trust by people who network and pool their money together (Ochoa et al., 2009), and it easily occurs among sport team fans. Therefore creation of loyalty among fans is a top priority for many sport organization, since loyal fans are paid attention to as both financial sources and appropriate instruments for advertising.

Brand associations

Brand associations and brand recall explain what causes customers purchase decisions and their loyalty to brand. According to existing research, the product and organizational associations are two most referring classification of the brand associations (Chen, 2001).

Rio et al. (2001) introduced the brand associations as a key to getting formation and management of brand equity. So, the strong brand equity indicates that the customers have a good recall and a positive feeling related to brand in their minds. The examination of brand associations among the fans' of sports teams is important to provide a framework which is established. The brand associations are vital factors to create brand loyalty and brand equity.

Brand associations' dimensions

Keller's customers-based brand Equity model (1993) is established based on Aaker's brand equity in which three factors: attributes, benefits, and attitudes, are considered (Keller, 1993). These dimensions are the descriptive variables for the concept of brand loyalty.

Attributes

Attributes describe a brand. They explain what a consumer thinks about a brand or how the relationship between a brand and its purchase or consumption (Amirshahi and Abasian, 2007).

In the sports industry, the researchers have reported that the attributes which relate to the fans of a particular team or club consist of team success, team players, head coach, team management, logo design, stadium, tradition, and product delivery (Bauer et al., 2004; Capella, 2001; Gladden and Funk, 2001, 2002).

Benefits

Benefits are the personal values that a consumer considers as important characteristics of a brand. According to customers' thoughts, the benefits are advantages that will

be obtained by a special brand (Amirshahi and Abasian, 2007). The benefits factors that have been offered by researchers concerns fans of a particular team including; escape, fan identification, peer group acceptance, nostalgia, and pride in place (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Funk et al., 2004; Wann et al., 2004).

Attitudes

Attitudes are mental and psychic states or tendencies that are gained through organized experience; and they affect situational person's responses directly (Sharafaldin, 1998). According to Gladden and Funk report, attitudes include distinctive and important factors; importance, information, direct experience, and its value in customers' perspectives (Gladden and Funk, 2002). In the sports industry, the researchers have mentioned the attitude factors which relate to fans of a particular team as follows: importance, knowledge, and effective reactions (Funk and Pastore, 2000).

Brand loyalty

Oliver defined brand loyalty as profound committed to renewed purchasing of a product or preferring a service regularly in the future and repetition of brand purchasing regularly against situational influences and attempts which may cause changes in customers' behavior (Oliver, 1999).

Nowadays, sports managers utilize marketing concepts like "voice customer" which is the sum of beliefs that have been extracted in total quality management (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). It is the main reason to attempt to establish a net of fans' brand loyalty by the team's chief executive, Brett Yormark in Brooklyn to plan long-term processes for moving up at Atlantic Yards (Sulzberger, 2010).

Gladden and Funk (2002) studied the relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty among 929 fans of professional sports in a vast research. They developed a model and presented that there was a correlation between the brand associations' factors (attributes, attitudes, and benefits) and brand loyalty among the fans. Bauer et al. (2004) and Bauer et al. (2005) studied effects of brand in German professional sports teams industry. The findings showed that the image of brand association's dimensions resulted in brand equity and are essential factors to succeed in absorbing the fans' loyalty. In another study, they reported that there is a positive relationship between the brand association's dimensions and fan's brand loyalty.

Erdener et al. (2008) examined the relationship between the brand associations and fans' loyalty in professional sports by using Gladden and Funk model (2002). They reported that the brand association's

Table 1. The descriptive results of research variables.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Attributes	104.47	10.45	56	125
Benefits	63.4	7.21	27	75
Attitudes	39.8	4.57	19	45
Brand loyalty	18.14	2.67	4	20

dimensions are good predictors for fan's brand loyalty. The factors that help people decide to be loyal to a team brand are; human factors, perceived excitement, functional factors, and commitment. The brand is supported because of the star players, owners, and excitement, but they are temporarily influencing factors on fans' brand loyalty. Functional and commitment factors culminate in creation of long-term loyalty among fans. Anonymous (2009) reported these results by studying 2099 fans.

In addition, in Iran, some researcher studied the relationship between such factors in other industries, and they reported the same results. Seyedjavadedin and Shams (2007) surveyed the effects of sport shoes brand among youth. The results showed that there was a powerful relationship between awareness of brand, brand associations and brand loyalty among customers. Also, the results of Heydarzade et al. (2009) supported the correlation between mental imagination, awareness, and present and future buying of the brand.

Still, the effective factors on sports team fans' brand loyalty have been examined. Unlike much study abroad, unfortunately, this field is not paid appropriate attention to in Iran. Thus, this survey aims to study the relationship between brand associations' factors and fans' brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran. It may be a valuable guide to make strategic decisions by club's managers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design

This research is a practical and explanatory survey that examines correlation among the variables.

Population

The participants of this research are the fans of five top teams the ninth professional football league of Iran (Sepahan Isfahan, Zob Ahan Isfahan, Esteghlal Tehran, Pirozi Tehran and Terakhtorsazi Tabriz). The main reason for selecting these teams is their popularity; like Terakhtorsazi Tabriz's team that is very popular among Azeri people. To obtain the appropriate sample, a pilot study has been done. Then, the size of the sample is determined through utilizing its information and the statistics formula:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 S^2}{D^2} = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.72)^2}{(0.05)^2} = 797$$

Method/procedure

In the present research, we used Gladden and Funk (2002) brand associations' questionnaire. To determine the reliability of the questionnaire in Iran, a questionnaire confirmed by some professors of economics and sport management department was distributed among a sample of 30 participants and then by using Cronbach's alpha, its reliability was estimated about 0.83.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the scores of respondents in relation to attributes, benefits, attitudes and brand loyalty. Many of the fans got high scores. Also, Figure 1 illustrates the variables based on teams.

To obtain coefficient we used Pearson coefficient that shows a significant relationship between the brand associations' factors (attributes, benefits, and attitudes) and fans' brand loyalty (Table 2). As it is observed, the benefits have high degree of correlation with the fans' brand loyalty ($p = 0.01$). Then attitudes and attributes were placed as next priorities. Totally, according to obtained significant correlation coefficient, there was a relationship between brand associations' factors and the fans' brand loyalty ($p = 0.01$).

In order to predict fans' brand loyalty based on brand associations' factors used linear regression. According to the results of Table 3, benefits offer about 34% and attitudes offer about 9% of fans brand loyalty in Iranian professional football league.

Based on the results shown in Table 3, the benefits allocated 34% of loyalty variance by itself ($F = 221.223$, $p = 0.01$). Plus the attitudes caused to move up the mentioned variance up to 43% ($F = 156.262$, $p = 0.01$).

According to the results, the observed F in the level of $P < 0.01$ was significant, so the regression equation is significant Table 4. Thus the regression test was trusted on revealed relations among variables in the study.

The multiple regressions were used to study the brand loyalty prediction by using brand associations' factors. Based on Table 5 and β coefficient, the results showed that the best predictive factors of brand loyalty were benefits ($\beta = 0.399$, $p < 0.01$) and then attitudes ($\beta = 0.345$, $p < 0.01$) that were placed at the next step. So, by adding one unit of brand associations' benefits, the degree of fans' brand loyalty will be increased to about 0.399 ($p < 0.01$), and by adding one unit of brand associations' attitudes, the fans' brand loyalty will be

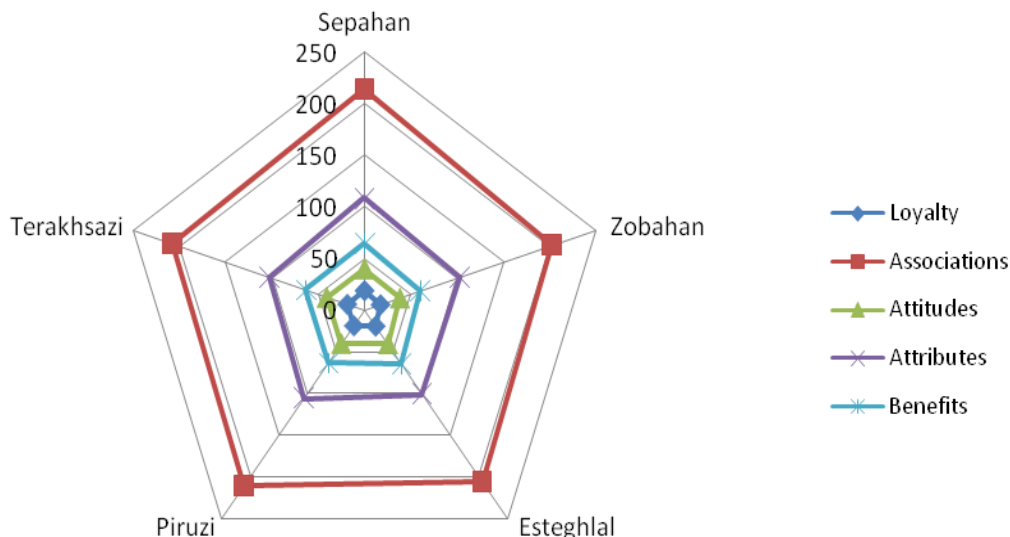


Figure 1. Radar plot.

Table 2. The obtained results of Pearson correlation test.

Independent variable	Coefficient and level of significance	Index of loyalty
Attribute	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.365
	Level of significance	0.001
Benefit	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.581
	Level of significance	0.001
Attitude	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.5752
	Level of significance	0.001

Table 3. Results of multiple regressions coefficients that predict brand loyalty based on brand associations' factors.

Stage	Multiple correlation coefficient	Square of correlation coefficient	Square of adjusted correlation coefficient	Standard deviation
First	0.591	0.394	0.348	2.00
Second	0.657	0.429	0.432	1.8

Table 4. Significant of multiple regression tests.

Stage	F	Sig
First	221.223	0.001
Second	156.262	0.001

increased to about 0.345 ($p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

The attributes of brand association which were studied

based on Gladden and Funk (2002) consist of eight subscales: team success, team players, head coach, team management, logo design, stadium, tradition, and product delivery. The results indicate that having these subscales is essential for clubs to create attractive associations and appropriate image of the brand in their fans' minds. The clubs can absorb and keep the fans loyalty to their brand by relying on their attributes. This way, they could get the profit of privilege of having fans like earning more money because of more fans attendance in stadium, selling more tickets, increasing the purchase of products, absorbing the investment, and increasing the price club's share.

Table 5. The prediction of brand loyalty variable based on attitudes and benefits of brand associations loyalty = fixed coefficient (2.10) + benefits (0.399) + attitude (0.345).

Stage		Non standard coefficient		Standard coefficient	t	sig
		β	SD error			
First	Fixed coefficient	5.34	0.882		6.05	0.00
	Benefit	0.205	0.014	0.591	14.87	0.00
Second	Fixed coefficient	2.1	0.926		2.27	0.023
	Benefit	0.139	0.016	0.399	8.94	0.00
	Attitude	0.187	0.024	0.345	7.73	0.00

The results of studies by Gladden and Funk (2002); Bauer et al. (2004); Bauer et al. (2008); Erdener et al. (2008); Anonymous (2009), the subscales of brand associations attributes have been considered as the related factors to fans' brand loyalty of a team or club. Therefore, the presence of well known people as the players, coaches and or managers of club, designing an attractive logo, having an equipped and modern stadium, winning the championship, and other mentioned factors discussed as the subscales of brand associations' attributes bring about an increase in fans' brand loyalty in Iranian professional football clubs.

According to Table 2, there is a positive and strong relationship between benefit factors and fans' brand loyalty in Iranian professional football clubs. Based on Gladden and Funk's model, we examined the benefits of brand association through five subscales; escape (getting away daily routine), fan identification (identifying with especial team), peer group acceptance (interest of family and friend), nostalgia (interesting to region), and pride in place. According to findings, promotion of these subscales causes to increase fans' brand loyalty in clubs.

The findings of other researches, that is, Gladden and Funk (2002) Bauer et al. (2005), Erdener et al. (2008), and anonymous, concern the existence of relationship between benefits of brand associations and brand loyalty among fans. Thus, we can infer that the subscales of brand associations' benefits (escape, fan identification, peer group acceptance, nostalgia, and pride in place) are a part of related element to the fans' brand loyalty of the clubs.

Based on results, focusing on some variety aspects of brand association benefits like presenting attractive football plays, entertaining programs, paying attention to accepted customs and traditions in the city or area of the club, and providing the atmosphere in which the fans could connect with peer groups easily are necessary when choosing the strategies.

According to the results, there is significant correlation between attitudes of brand association and fans' brand loyalty (Table 2). Also, this positive correlation shows that there is an increasing relationship between brand associations' attitudes and fans' brand loyalty.

The results of this study are supported by findings of

Gladden and Funk (2002), Bauer et al. (2004), Bauer et al. (2008), Seyedjavadedin and Shams (2007), and Heydarzade et al. (2009). These researchers also have reported a direct relationship between attitudes of brand association and fans' brand loyalty among consumer, costumer and fans of sports.

According to mentioned results, fans support and are loyal to a particular team through attitudes of brand association. Therefore, it means to show the degree of awareness and information about clubs, and degree of importance and worth which they regard as their favorite clubs. So, delivering the information to the fans and planning various ceremonies to increase interactions with fans and promoting clubs' prestige and importance will cause to enhance fans' brand loyalty to the clubs. Also it will be affect the successful management of the clubs.

Based on the obtained β coefficient, the benefits of brand associations with a high ratio (0.349) and attitudes of brand association with a lower ratio (0.093) declared the degree of fans' brand loyalty. Therefore, both factors have allocated about (0.0432) degree of fans' brand loyalty. These results indicate the importance of benefits of brand associations and then attitude factors as effective factors of fans' brand loyalty. It observed that the five considered subscales of benefits factors; escape, fan identification, peer group acceptance, nostalgia, and pride in place, have had the most influences on the fans' brand loyalty. Also, with a low ratio, the attitude factors are effective on fans' brand loyalty.

It is necessary to mention that attributes of brand associations are the most effective factor of fans' brand loyalty in many abroad studies. But in Iran, this factor was not very effective. Lack of some attributes' factors like private stadiums, commercial products and goods as well as European teams and clubs, attention to club brand, designing club's logo, and other deficiencies in the strategies of club's brand management cause these differences.

In European and American countries, the innovative and creative architecture of the stadiums and the ways of delivering the services cause to absorb more fans every year. Also, the existence of commercial products belong to a club, marketing activities, selling memorabilia, shirts and the other clubs things with teams' brand are

considered as the basis for earning money and absorbing more fans. Unfortunately, in Iran, the section which has enormous potential is neglected.

So, based on the mentioned results, to choose the best strategies, short-term planning and adopting the approaches, these factors are general guides which reveal the investment points for earning loyal fans. They can be helpful tools for managers and officials to allocate their restricted resources to get the most profits.

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