The Study of Fans’ Brand Loyalty in Iranian Professional Football League

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Abstract

The study aims to examine winning brands influence on fans’ brand loyalty in Iranian professional football league. A ten-minute pen and paper questionnaire was distributed to fans of five superior teams of Iranian professional football league in 2009-2010 seasons. Team’s association questionnaire developed by Gladden and Funk (2001) was used for data collection. Reliability of the questionnaire was estimated by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. A structural equation model (SEM) test with maximum likelihood estimation was performed to test the relationships among the research variables using 912 participants. The findings showed three dimensions of brand associations influenced on fan’s brand loyalty of which the attitude was the most important. Benefits and attributes were placed in the second and third rank respectively. In addition, the obtained model of this research highlighted strong interactional effects between the three mentioned dimensions of brand associations.

Keywords: winning brand, brand loyalty, brand associations, football fans;

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, Sport managers use marketing strategies and quality management especially through emphasize on new concept of “voice customer” (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). Following such strategies, managers consider brand of teams as the basis of marketing strategies for attracting customer loyalty and fans loyalty in particularly (Gladden and Funk, 2002). According to these strategies, many professional sport clubs are trying to strengthen their teams’ brand and promote them even in the other countries. For example, Manchester United football club set off outlets for selling its’ memorabilia and goods in some countries in Asia on the basis of strong brand. Brand is a name, term, expression, sign, mark, symbol, design or combination of them which is used to introduce the products and services to sellers or a group of vendors and distinct them from other competitors. Brand is sellers’ commitment to present specific services and advantages to the customers (Cotler, 2006, P 482).

1.1 Brand association dimensions

According to Aaker’s, a superior brand can mean better quality of the products for the customers. When a customer buys a product with a superior brand, she/he believes that she/he gains something valuable in return of payment (Heidarzadeh and et al, 2007). Keller, the author of the famous book of “Brand Strategic Management”, suggested:

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“the successful and powerful brand has two human characteristics; heart and mind. There for, powerful and successful brands can affect the people’s heart and mind.”

Construction of a powerful brand is; awareness of brand, brand loyalty and perceived quality lead to creation certain value for a brand which is very important for the companies (Dunne and Moulden, 2009: p 8). In addition, having a powerful brand and establishing it in customers’ mind is a big reason to select a product or service by customers. Brands create a particular personality for costumers through including them in a certain group. For example, wearing a shirt of certain team is a sign that shows a person belongs to the group of respective team’s fans. Consumers do not pay attention to whole characteristics of a brand immediately. But, they just regard a part of them before they decide to buy special options (brands) (Sulterland, 2004: P 30).

The brand associations are everything that is connected with the brand in its customers’ mind (Aaker, 1991). Brand associations could be observed in the variations shapes and characters of a product and service or other aspects of them in the consumers’ mind. The importance of brand association to acquire competitive advantages has been studied by many researchers. According to Chen’s classifications, product associations and organizational associations are the most referring classification of brand associations. The brand associations are effective factors for purchasing decisions that these effects are illustrated by customers’ brand loyalty. Moreover, brand associations create value for companies and customers (Chen, 2001). Also, in sport industry, it is very important factor for perceiving customers’ brand associations and attracts customers’ loyalty (Gladden and Funk, 2001).

According to the Keller’s customer-based brand equity model attributes, benefits and attitudes have been considered as the dimensions of brand associations (Keller, 1993). On the other hand, brand associations’ dimensions. According Gladden and Funk, (2001) brand associations’ dimensions are the best descriptive variables of brand loyalty concept. The attributes show the customers’ mind about the product or service. And they are reasons for purchase and consumption of product or service (Keller, 1993). The subscales of attributes that create connection among fans and a particular team are successes, star players, head coach, management, logo design, stadium, product delivery and tradition (Gladden and Funk, 2001; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2004; Capella, 2001). Thus, a team is supported by the fans because of its winnings, star players, famous coach, stadium, etc.

Benefits are personal values that connect customers to brand attributes and provide the main needs and wants of customers (Keller, 1993). Gladden and Funk (2001) suggested benefits as customer’s mind concepts and values in relation to products or services. In sport industry, the subscales of benefits dimension that relate fans to particular team include; escape, fan identification, peer group acceptance, nostalgia and proud in place (End and et al, 2003; Funk, Ridinger, Moorman, 2004; Gladden and Funk, 2001; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Wann and et al, 2004). The attitudes are consistent and positive or negative feelings of individuals about a product or service. They can conduct consumer behaviors (Funk, 2001, P 128). Attitudes are stable desired or undesired reactions of customers to a brand that are constructed by brand image in customers’ mind. Gladden and Funk (2002) stated that the subscales of attitudes consist of; importance, knowledge and affective reactions. Funk (2001, P 13) believed importance, awareness, information, and effective interactions to a team are powerful predictive factors of fans’ commitment to the professional baseball teams.

1.2. Fans Brand loyalty

Loyalty is the result of interactions between outside negative changes in the environment and inside commitment of individuals (Heere and Dickson, 2008). Oliver (1999, P 34) defined brand loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand set purchasing, despite the situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior”. So, the prominent character of a brand is illustrated by the amount of its customers’ loyalty. In sport industry, a sport team can be regarded as a brand and the fans are considered as the customers. So, fans’ brand loyalty to sport teams is similar to customers’ brand loyalty to other industries (Logger, 2010). Although most of the others in which customers have little loyalty to low quality brand, the fans of professional sport teams are very loyal to their team even if their favorite team doesn’t play well (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). Fans’ brand loyalty is the fans’ positive attitudes to a brand, fans’ brand attachment, and his/her purchasing intention in the future. So, if the fans will be loyal to a brand, they will pay attention for it and the marketing program will be successful. In addition, fans brand loyalty brings constant competitive advantage (Dunne and Moulden, 2009). According to Pareto’s principle, the”20-80” rule, 20 percent of loyal fans provide 80 percent of revenues resources (Mullin and et al, 1993).
Moreover, loyal fans aren’t just costumers and supporters, because they are a part of unique product of the club, as if, they are overwhelmed by their teams play. Fans’ brand loyalty that forms based on team identification (Richardson, 2004) can explain special behaviors of fans’. Not only, they wear the color of the team, but also sometimes dye their bodies the same color (Vaezmosavi, 2007, P 301).

Fans brand loyalty facilitates clubs' marketing process, because it plays an important roles; First, brand loyalty ensures a more stable following even when the core product's performance falters (i.e. the team has a losing season). Second, brand loyalty creates good opportunities to have brand extensions beyond the core product (Gladden and Funk, 2001). And third, Supporting of teams and clubs by more loyal fans is a guarantee for constant incomes by increasing market share and attracting more sponsorship investment. Thereby, Successful companies prefer to advertise their products through teams which have more fans. Nowadays, relationship of teams with their fans is getting deeper and closer than the past. Managers of clubs and leagues focus on importance of the fans brand loyalty as an imperative factor to get competitive advantage (Bauer and et al, 2008). Also, they must perceive fans’ psychological relationship and involvement with their favorite team (Wann and Schrader, 2000). Managers should pay more attention to loyal fans and brand to acquire long-term sustainable advantages (Dick and Basu, 1994). There is a correlation between the brand mental image and brand awareness with the amount of present and future purchasing of brand (Heydarzade et al, 2009). And awareness of brand strong has relationship between brand associations with the degree of customers’ brand loyalty (Seyedjavandin and Shams, 2007).

According to Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2004; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2005, the image of brand associations' dimensions was structured based on brand equity and these were essential factors for attracting loyal fans to team brand. There are significant and positive relationships between attributes and benefits dimension with fans’ brand loyalty (Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008). Gladden and Funk (2001) developed team associations model by studying 929 professional sport fans. Finding showed a significant relationship brand associations’ dimensions (attributes benefits and attitudes) with fans’ brand loyalty. The concept of brand loyalty could be described through brand associations’ dimensions (attributes, benefits and attitudes). These dimensions are good predictors of fans’ brand loyalty (Lin, 2007; Erdener and et al, 2008). In Iranian sport industry, there is a big gap in academic studies about fans’ brand loyalty. Consider to the role of fans’ brand loyalty, the researchers decided to study fans’ brand loyalty in the Iranian professional sports industry. So, researcher surveyed the influence of brand associations’ dimensions on brand loyalty among the fans of Iranian professional football league as the most popular sport league of Iran. Thus, the following hypnoses were drawn; a) Brand associations’ attributes affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, b) Brand associations’ benefits affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, and C) Brand associations’ attitudes affects fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran. The results of this study provided good guidelines for the executives of the clubs to select appropriate strategies to attract fans brand loyalty in order to help the clubs develop.

2. Methodology

This research aims to study the effects of brand associations’ dimensions (attributes, benefits, and attitudes) on fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran. This study is a survey- descriptive one. The participants were the fans of 5 top ranking teams of professional football league of Iran in the 2009-2010 seasons. The 912 numbers of fans participated at the study. And data were collected by using Team Association Questionnaire (2001) that was developed by Gladden and Funk in 2001 which contains 61 questions by using Likert scale; from completely agree to completely disagree respectively.According to 12 sport marketing experts and professors’ ideas, the questions which concerned to subscales of stadium, star player, tradition, and effective reactions were omitted because of special traits of Iranian fans and clubs. For example, many clubs of Iran don’t own dedicated stadiums, just a few teams have star player, many of teams don’t have a long story, and there is weak communication between fans and teams.

For this study, the validity, reliability and localization were done by the researchers. First, the questionnaire was reviewed by 12 sport marketing experts. And the questions which concerned to subscales of stadium, star player, tradition, and effective reactions were omitted. From experts’ point of view, measurement of these items is impossible in Iranian football clubs. Because, Iran football clubs don’t have own dedicated stadiums; there is poor communication channels between fans with their favorite clubs; fans don’t care to star players, and many teams don’t have famous player. Then, the cronbach’s alpha coefficient was estimated in brand attributes 0.75, brand benefits 0.89, brand attitudes, and brand loyalty 0.94. Using the obtained questionnaire, data was collected in stadiums of selected teams. Data was analyzed using structural equation model (SEM). The structural equation model is the most appropriate
method to examine the multi-relations among the dependent and independent variables (Mcauity, 2004). And it is a good method to examine the effects between observed variables and latent variables (Ghasemi, 2010). So, to analyze the hypotheses of this study which consist of the cause and effect relationships between brand associations’ dimensions and fans’ brand loyalty, structural equation model (SEM) was utilized. Therefore, Amos Graphics software was used to investigate this study model.

3. Results

The means and standard deviations of the sample are illustrated in table 1. The means for each construction was a good amount compared with its maximum and minimum. The standard deviations ranged from 1.34 for logo design to 6.99 for management and head coach.

| Table 1. Descriptive Statistics | Minimum | Maximum | Mean  | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| LO                              | 2.00    | 14.00   | 9.38  | 1.34           |
| SU                              | 4.00    | 22.00   | 12.06 | 2.34           |
| PD                              | 5.00    | 28.00   | 17.10 | 2.57           |
| KN                              | 3.00    | 19.00   | 13.11 | 2.32           |
| IM                              | 5.00    | 19.00   | 13.58 | 1.89           |
| ID                              | 3.00    | 23.00   | 13.06 | 2.38           |
| MHC                             | 10.00   | 56.00   | 36.79 | 6.99           |
| PG                              | 6.00    | 38.00   | 24.51 | 3.86           |
| PIP                             | 3.00    | 23.00   | 14.01 | 1.77           |
| ES                              | 3.00    | 23.00   | 11.74 | 2.92           |
| L1                              | 2.00    | 18.00   | 9.07  | 1.66           |
| L2                              | 2.00    | 14.00   | 9.22  | 1.51           |

LO= Logo, SU= Success, PD= Product Delivery, KN= Knowledge, IM= Importance, ID= Identification, MHC= Management and Head Coach, PG= Peer Group Acceptance, PIP= Pride in Place, ES= Escape, L1= Loyalty 1, L2= Loyalty 2.

The Correlations of Estimates matrix are reported in table 2. The inspection of this matrix showed that correlations between the investigated constructions were moderate.

| Table 2. Correlations of Estimates (output) |
|-------------------------------------------|
| LO | SU | PD | ES | KN | IM | ID | PG | MHC | PIP | L1 | L2 |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|----|----|
| LO | 1.00          |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |    |    |
| SU | .058          | 1.00 |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |    |    |
| PD | .001          | -.016 | 1.00 |    |    |    |    |     |     |    |    |
| ES | .091          | -.073 | .006 | 1.00 |    |    |    |     |     |    |    |
| KN | -.012         | .004 | .086 | .008 | 1.00 |    |    |     |     |    |    |
| IM | .023          | -.267 | -.074 | .030 | -.040 | 1.00 |    |     |     |    |    |
| ID | -.078         | -.002 | .584 | -.010 | .081 | .018 | 1.00 |    |     |    |    |
| PG | -.049         | -.277 | -.509 | -.036 | -.065 | .013 | -.477 | 1.00 |     |    |    |
| MHC| -.355         | .010 | -.380 | -.169 | -.045 | .020 | -.314 | .522 | 1.00 |    |    |
| PIP| -.431         | -.295 | -.005 | -.084 | .026 | .041 | .045 | .419 | .626 | 1.00 |    |
| L1 | .021          | .001 | -.001 | -.063 | .000 | .002 | -.381 | -.001 | .063 | .040 | 1.00 |
| L2 | .163          | .366 | -.049 | -.056 | -.122 | -.009 | -.045 | -.236 | -.022 | -.299 | .004 | 1.00 |

LO= Logo, SU= Success, PD= Product Delivery, KN= Knowledge, IM= Importance, ID= Identification, MHC= Management and Head Coach, PG= Peer Group Acceptance, PIP= Pride in Place, ES= Escape, L1= Loyalty 1, L2= Loyalty 2.
The examination of measurement model was shown in figure 1. Standard results, regression weights and correlations among observed and latent variables were illustrated in figure 1, table 3, and table 4 respectively.

According to table 3, the Regression weights of all constructions were significant (P<0.001). The Regression weights for subscales of attributes were estimated; product delivery 0.69, logo 0.50, management and head coach 0.40, and success 0.30. For benefits' subscales; identification 0.62, pride in place 0.55, peer group acceptance 0.50, and escape 0.42 were obtained. The Regression weights of importance 0.71 and knowledge 0.58 were measured as subscale of attitudes. Also the Regression weights between loyalty and attitudes were 0.93. In the table 4, the correlations among attitudes and benefits 0.94, attitudes and attributes 0.62, attributes and benefits 0.95 were illustrated.
Table 3. Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

|                          | Estimate | S.E.   | C.R.   | P  | Standard Estimate |
|--------------------------|----------|--------|--------|----|--------------------|
| Loyalty                  | <---     | Attitudes | .790   | .055| 14.275*** .933     |
| MHC                      | <---     | Attributes | 4.110  | .456| 9.022*** .396      |
| PG                       | <---     | Benefits  | 1.301  | .097| 13.412*** .500     |
| IM                       | <---     | Attitudes  | 1.000  | .066| 15.249*** .709     |
| L1                       | <---     | Loyalty    | 1.000  |     | .682               |
| L2                       | <---     | Loyalty    | .813   | .053| 15.294*** .612     |
| KN                       | <---     | Attitudes  | 1.000  |     | .576               |
| ES                       | <---     | Benefits   | .822   | .073| 11.215*** .416     |
| PIP                      | <---     | Benefits   | .655   | .046| 14.205*** .548     |
| ID                       | <---     | Benefits   | 1.000  |     | .621               |
| SU                       | <---     | Attributes  | 1.039  | .139| 7.480*** .298      |
| LO                       | <---     | Attributes  | 1.000  |     | .501               |
| PD                       | <---     | Attributes  | 2.637  | .218| 12.101*** .691     |

LO= Logo, SU= Success, PD= Product Delivery, KN= Knowledge, IM= Importance, ID= Identification, MHC= Management and Head Coach, PG= Peer Group Acceptance, PIP= Pride in Place, ES= Escape, L1= Loyalty 1, L2= Loyalty 2.

Note: ***= P<0.001

Table 4. Correlations: (Group number 1 - Default model)

| Attitudes | Benefits | Estimate |
|-----------|----------|----------|
| <---      |          | .935     |
| Attitudes | Attributes | .619     |
| Attributes | Benefits | .953     |

The adequacy of structural equation models were investigated by using goodness of statistics (Ghasemi, 2010). Some of most applying good of fit statistics were presented in table 5 that verified the adequacy of the hypothesized model. CMIN (chi-square) 38.23, NFI 0.98, RMSEA 0.1, and CFI 0.99 estimated that all indices verified the hypothesized modal. Also p-value .28 indicated that the result of model was significant.

Table 5. Model fit indices

| Model           | CMIN     | DF | P  | CMIN/DF | NFI Delta1 | TLI rho2 | RMSEA | AIC    | CFI    |
|-----------------|----------|----|----|---------|------------|----------|-------|--------|--------|
| Default model   | 38.230   | 34 | .283| 1.124   | .985       | .997     | .011  | 150.230| .998   |
| Saturated model | .000     | 0  |    |         |            |          |       | 180.000| 1.000  |
| Independence model | 2556.696 | 66 | .000| 38.738  | .000       | .000     |       | 2604.696| .000   |
4. Conclusion

The findings of structural equation model for investigating of three hypotheses; a) Brand associations’ attributes affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, b) Brand associations’ benefits affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, and C) Brand associations’ attitudes affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran verified the cause and effect relationships between brand associations’ dimensions (attitudes, benefits, and attributes) and fans’ brand loyalty. According to table 3 and table 4, there were good correlations among all latent and observed variables. So, three dimensions of brand associations were capable predictive for fans brand loyalty. Moreover, results of table 5, goodness of fit indices confirmed the adequacy of hypothesized model. So, the influence of brand associations’ factors on fans’ brand loyalty and also the interactional effects of them illustrated on structural model were verified significantly.

By extracting from Gladden and Funk’s model (2002), the attributes’ subscales were included; logo, success, management and head coach, and products delivery which were examined in the first hypothesis. Findings showed these subscales were influential in creating attractive associations and good images of the club in fans’ mind. However, attributes dimension affected fans’ brand loyalty indirectly through attitudes dimension.

According to the first hypothesis, attributes help teams to attract and keep their fans’ loyalty. The subscales of famous coaches and managers, design of attractive logo, successes and win championships increase the fans’ brand loyalty. Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2004; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Lin, 2007; Erdener, Gultekin, Ekrem, 2008, showed the same results about attributes.

Although, attributes dimension was highlighted as the most influential factor on fans’ brand loyalty in majority studies; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Lin, 2007; Erdener, Gultekin, Ekrem, 2008. In this study it is placed in the third rank after attitudes and benefits. It seems likely that this difference refers to losing of subscales include; dedicated stadium of teams, star player, tradition, and effective reactions commercial products like goods and products in Iranian football clubs.

Based on the Gladden and Funk’s model (2002), in the second hypothesis benefits dimension was examined through four subscales; escape, peer group acceptance, identification, and pride in place. Benefits dimension influenced Iranian fans’ brand loyalty indirectly. But this dimension affected both attributes and attitudes dimensions strongly and directly.

The result of the second hypothesis showed that the benefits’ subscales affected fans’ brand loyalty positively. Also, the other researcher’s findings like Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2004; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Lin, 2007; Erdener, Gultekin, Ekrem, 2008, confirmed this relationship, too. Besides, benefits’ subscales like; patriotism, proud of place (city), escape from daily problems, team identification and acceptance peer groups were elements concerned with fans’ brand loyalty.

Based on the findings, although the attitudes dimension had the highest coefficient on brand loyalty directly, the benefits dimension had the most cumulative effects (directly plus indirectly) on the fan’s brand loyalty (table 3). Because of, the other brand associations’ dimension i.e. attributes and attitudes were affected by benefits, too.

Consider to benefits subscales, offering attractive matches and entertainment programs and provide intra-group and inter-groups connections among fans could enhance Iranian fans brand loyalty.

In the third hypothesis, the attitudes dimension was divided into subscales of knowledge and importance. The effects of attitudes dimension on brand loyalty were examined through these subscales. Findings showed it was the only dimension that affected fans’ brand loyalty directly in Iranian football league. Findings of this study were adapted to studies of Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, P. 2004; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Lin, 2007; Seyedjavandin and Shamas, 2007; Heidarzadeh and et al, 2009, in which they reported the significant relationship between attitudes’ subscales and the degree of fans brand loyalty.

According to finding, Iranian fans support the team and were loyal to its brand through the influences of team knowledge and team importance. So, giving information to the fans and creating team importance in mind of fans make to raise the degree of fans’ brand loyalty.

In addition, this model showed the dimensions of brand associations had interactional affect on each other (figure 1). But some of subscale Influenced brand loyalty more strongly than the others between fans of Iranian professional football league. Subscales of importance (0/71), products delivery (0/69), and identification (0/61) were the most effective respectively. Totally, findings of this study verified influencing brand associations’ on fans brand loyalty in Iranian football leagues. It is influential to manage the brand club successfully and appropriate to select the best strategies to earn incomes by acquiring their fans’ brand loyalty.
Therefore, managers and officials are recommended to use this influencing framework to allocate their limited sources and setting optimum strategies of branding in Iranian professional football league. Also, the executives of Iranian clubs should notice these elements, and use them to improve the promotion of their brand for earning advantages like earning more revenue because of attendance of more fans in the stadium, selling more tickets, increasing the purchasers of the club’s brand products, absorbing investment, and increasing the price of club’s shares.

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