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Sociological Analysis of Branding of Professional Football League Players

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A) conception and design of the study
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Abstract

The role of branding the sports performance of Iranian professional football League players was investigated by adopting a survey-based research strategy. Players with a history of competing in the Iranian Football League made up the statistical population for the study. 200 players were selected from this population as the study sample. The questionnaire data obtained were analyzed using IBM® SPSS® Amos TM 23 software. The validity and reliability of the questionnaires were acceptable and a good fit. The results showed that the structural equation model used is a strong theoretical model for studying the branding of Iranian League players, and that such branding has a significant positive effect on sports performance. Therefore, sports clubs need to understand the power of branding players to increase their athletic performance in sports expertise, competitive style and fair play. On the other hand, the most important aspect of branding is branding the whole club, rather than each product or player, since each individual product can benefit from the income belonging to the brand family of the club or organization. It is suggested that professional and strategic methods can help players and motivate them to acquire the necessary skills to grow branding.

Key words: Sport clubs, brand identity, brand loyalty, brand commitment, performance

Introduction

The advent of the sociology of sport (though not the name itself) dates back to the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1970s, the sociology of sport came to be regarded as an organized and legitimate field of study. The North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) was formed in 1978 to study the discipline. Its research center, the Journal of Sport Sociology, was established in 1984 (NASSS, 2021). The sociology of sport began to emerge as a formally recognized sub-discipline of sociology in the second half of the twentieth century. There were several earlier examples of sociological attention to the field of sport (Howard, 1912; Veblen, 1934). The history of the sociology of sport is relatively well documented (Nixon, 2010). This field of study discusses the positive impact of sport on individuals and society as a whole economically, financially and socially. Sociology of sport tries to observe the actions and behavior of sports teams and their players from the perspective of a sociologist (Macri, 2012). A major obstacle facing sociologists of sport, particularly those who wish to influence sport itself and its role

in contemporary society, is the sub-discipline's reputation for viewing sport largely and, in some instances, exclusively in negative terms (Bairner, 2009). The sports industry is a driving force in the economy, as well as an active element in the formation of personal identity. It is also of great importance at both micro – and macro-economic levels and is a market in which any activity is focused on sports. In this market, businesses offer products to their buyers which include sporting goods, services, people, places, or ideas (Hosseini, 2019). Brands have played a central role in markets since merchants first marked their products as a guarantee to customers living beyond face-to-face contact. In the last 20 years, liberal globalization has changed the economic role of branding. Branding is the main activity of capitalism today, so it must be included in any serious effort to understand contemporary society and politics (Holt, 2006).

The concept of the athlete's brand is derived from the integration of multifaceted structures and different aspects of their lives. Nowadays, athletes are no longer just a promotional machine or a means of increasing sales; they are considered a cultural product that, like all brands, can have an independent place in the market and achieve unique sales (Arai et al., 2014).Existing research focuses primarily on sports teams as a brand and ignores the branding of professional sports leagues. Professional sports leagues are required to establish and use their own trade associations to sustain and assist affiliated teams (Kunkel, Funk, et al., 2014). In this regard, sports industry managers are looking for new concepts, such as customer relationship management (CRM), environmental conflict resolutions (ESR), communication marketing and customer database management, communication and market estimation, all of which are new and important tools in the branding concept, with an emphasis on effective customer service and product delivery procedures (Neergaard & Ulhři, 2007; Pashaie et al., 2020). Internal branding has recently been introduced as a successful organizational factor in providing brand commitment to meet customer expectations of the brand and is determined by various communication activities (Drake et al., 2005). The concept of organizational branding is associated with multiple points of contact for stakeholders of the brand (Zhao et al., 2017). Branding is a general concept for creating a brand that is used to connect and differentiate a product from other products (Power & Hauge, 2008). A number of researchers have seen steady growth in branding among large corporations (Asmoningsih, 2016; Berens, 2005; De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001).

Football is one of the most attractive and popular kinds of sporting event. It is a sporting phenomenon that affects many economic, social and even political issues of countries and, due to its extraordinarily wide influence, numerous athletes and spectators, large financial investments and wide media coverage, it offers features that go far beyond those of other sports (Pourhoseyn et al., 2020). So, The success of sports champions depends on consumers contributing to the revenue of sports leagues and clubs through various consumer behaviors (Mason, 1999).The field of sport, product development is usually accomplished through modifications to the rules or small changes in the structure of the competition (Stewart et al., 2005).The competitive nature of sports markets requires that sports organizations attract and retain a significant number of consumers (James et al., 2002). In modern marketing, "needs and demands" are often created by modern marketeers (Kunkel, Doyle, et al., 2014). This is true of both sports marketing and marketing through sports, so that new opportunities can be created and existing opportunities can be sought out (Javani, 2018). Therefore, one of the issues raised in sports marketing is the ability to create a successful brand and to make a difference. The best strategy for creating a strong brand is to create a different perception of the concept. In addition to just being different, the most important step in the process of developing a famous brand is to differ from one's competitors (Aaker, 2013). A brand is an understanding that comes from experiencing or gaining information about a company or organization (Baek et al., 2010).

The branding of sport leagues represents an emergent area of scholarship (Kunkel, Doyle, et al., 2014). Recently, academics and sports professionals have considered the concept of branding in the Iranian sports industry. Today, the branding of sports personalities, just like the branding of various other products, has proliferated and become very important (Chachakami, 2016). Branding has many benefits for players, including famous players being able to increase their salaries, increasing the cost of transfers from one team to another and ensuring that their fans continue to support them, even when their sports careers are in decline (Gladden & Funk, 2002). Branding in sports can be the most important tool that sports organizations need in order to find new opportunities for growth and development. Branding in sport can be defined as a product or service such as a sport (football or basketball), an event (World Cup or Olympic Games), a person (athlete or coach) or a sports organization (club or federation) that can be perceived and recognized as a brand. Sports customers also understand these things in different ways. The important thing is that the image created by the brand in the mind of the audience and its perception by the audience defines the value of the brand. Brands are inspiring and symbolize the values that lead to brand image and brand reputation in people's minds (Arai et al., 2014).

Numerous examples suggest that star players are capable of influencing a team's brand (Pifer, 2012). Previous studies in the field of branding have shown that branding has a positive effect on the selection of a product with a specific brand among other brands in the market, and the tendency to pay more for the same product but with a different brand (Asmoningsih, 2016; Keller et al., 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Rein et al., 2006). The results of research by (Chachakami, 2016) showed that sports performance, physical attractiveness and lifestyle have a positive effect on the image of the athlete's brand (Ali Daei[1]). In research (Sajjadi, 2013) on the factors of brand awareness characteristics, three factors have a positive effect on loyalty: head coach, management and badge. The results of research by (Moharramzadeh, 2013)) showed that loyalty to a sports team is able to produce positive statements and even strengthen branding at a national level. The results showed that internal branding has a positive effect on the behavioral aspects of employees in delivering the brand promise (Punjaisri et al., 2008). Moreover, another study confirmed the role of the positive moderation of a competitive environment in the workplace and job satisfaction of employees on the relationship between internal branding and brand identity and commitment (Azizi, 2011). Studies have shown that internal branding has a positive effect on employee brand commitment (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006; Punjaisri et al., 2008). Bormann and Zeppelin believe that brand identity is a prerequisite for brand commitment and brand loyalty (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). The results of the study show that internal branding positively affects the attitudes and aspects of behavior of employees in delivering and fulfilling brand promises to customers Punjaisri et al., 2009). The system of brand management indirectly affects brand performance at the employee level through identity, commitment and brand loyalty (Soltani, 2018). Mahmoudian et al. (2020) show that three attributes of an athlete's brand image (e.g. marketable lifestyle, athletic performance and attractive appearance) positively influence fan loyalty.

Sports performance can be described as players' performance of individual sports, achievements and capabilities, unique competitive characteristics, fair play and a competitive relationship with other players (Chachakami, 2016). The factors that affect the development of a sport or the performance of a player or sports team are very different. Factors that are very effective in the quality of sports performance include: economic, social, and cultural conditions; climate; sociological, managerial, physical and psychological factors of athletes such as their personality type, motivation, mental state, stress and anxiety, which affect athletic self-confidence and self-confidence; the relations' type between athletes and coaches and sports managers in terms of intimacy and friendship, etc. (Schinke et al., 2018; Serrano et al., 2013).

Sports brand research focuses primarily on sports teams as a brand. Although the literature focuses on teams, league branding is becoming increasingly important as professional sports leagues face increasing competition from spectators, as well as other entertainment opportunities. The brand managers of the respective league, in their desire to choose the preferred code, are looking for leverage from their brand associations to create brand equity to prevent a large number of entertainment choices available to viewers (Kunkel et al., 2009). From a socio-historical perspective and considering the different sociological perspectives used to study national sports phenomena, the sociology of sport is still a relatively new field of study within general sociology (Amestica, 2016). However, despite its social significance, sociological analysis of branding of sport has rarely been subjected to empirical study and coordinated theoretical development outside of universities and business schools. The sociology of sport can be considered in two dimensions: the scientific and academic structure, and the social structure of the people. Very few studies have been conducted on the first dimension of the field. However, sports organizations that have realized the power of branding through its implementation have been able to attract significant attention and interest in the community to encourage a large number of people to participate in their activities, thus generating significant incomes. Branding players gives them the significant potential to enter the business and commercial sectors and to easily achieve this advantage within the framework of their sports career. Sources have discussed the impact of branding on brand support behaviors in employees. However, the fact that the branding of League players can influence their athletic performance is largely based on the hypothesis that when players understand and commit to the inherent brand values, they will act in a way that realizes the expectations of the club and the brand. Due to the importance of the subject in this research, researchers seek to analyze the sociology of the branding of Iranian professional football league players.

The hypotheses proposed in this study are as follows:

H1: There is a relationship between branding and brand identity.

H2: There is a relationship between branding and brand loyalty.

[1]Ali Daei is an Iranian former professional footballer, football manager, and businessman. He was the world's top international goal scorer with 109 goals. Following his retirement, Daei served as a member of the FIFA Football Committee between 2007 and 2013. In 2014, he was inducted into the Asian Football Hall of Fame.

H3: There is a relationship between branding and brand commitment.
H4: There is a relationship between branding and sports performance.
H5: There is a relationship between brand commitment and sports performance.
H6: There is a relationship between brand loyalty and sports performance.
H7: There is a relationship between brand identity and sports performance.

Material and methods

Study design and participants

The present study of sociological analysis of branding of professional football league players is a correlation type study, by which data were collected in the field. To collect the questionnaire data, coaches and former players of the Iranian national team were involved in assisting and gaining access to the community of players. Due to the prevalence of Covid-19 and the pandemic restrictions, physical (face-to-face) meetings were avoided as much as possible to fully comply with health protocols. Questionnaires were distributed electronically and online.

The study utilized a combination of both purposive and convenience sampling. In purposive sampling, the researcher recruits people who can provide the desired information by virtue of knowledge or experience. The statistical population of the study in 2020–2021 consisted of players who had a history of playing in the Persian Gulf Pro League (formerly known as the Iran Pro League – the highest division of professional football in Iran) and the Football Azadegan League (also known as League 1 – the second highest division of professional football in Iran). Convenience sampling is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling. With convenience sampling, members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria (e.g., accessibility, geographical proximity, availability, willingness to participate) are recruited. In this instance, recruitment of 2020-2021 players was essentially determined by the researcher's own professional network. Hence, not all members of the target population had an equal chance of participating (Etikan et al., 2016). Sample size must be carefully considered because it is strongly influenced by statistical techniques (Rahi, 2017). Hence sample size is very much dependent on the type of analysis (Collis & Hussey, 2013). For SEM, a sample size of 200 is reasonable (Comrey & Lee, 1992). In light with these arguments, sample size for this study was selected by following most important rule of thumb quoted in academic literature.

Measures

A five-point Likert scale was employed to collect data on the main components of the research from the questionnaire (Punjaisri et al., 2008), comprising the five main constructs: 1) branding – 8 items, 2) brand loyalty – 3 items, 3) brand commitment – 4 items, 4) brand identity – 3 items) and 5) performance – 3 items.

To determine the validity of the questionnaire, five university professors specializing in sports management reviewed the questionnaire in terms of content and form and made suggestions for better clarification of some questions. After the comments were summarized, the final questionnaire was prepared for the study.

To examine internal consistency and reliability, Cronbach's alpha value and the overall correlation of all factors were examined. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was higher than 0.7 which indicates acceptable internal consistency. On the other hand, the value of the total correlation item of the observed variable is greater than 3%. The questionnaire of 21 main questions was finally approved. The reliability of the study using Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole questionnaire was 0.80.

Data analysis

The data, having passed through various screening stages, which included analysis of missing data and outliers. The scale forms collected from the professional football league players were checked, and the forms that were filled incorrectly or incompletely were excluded from the analysis. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is increasingly a method of choice for concept and theory development in the social sciences, particularly the marketing discipline. In marketing research there increasingly is a need to assess complex multiple latent constructs and relationships (Hair et al., 2014). The data was analyzed with structural equation model (SEM-AMOS) by using covariance approach. Generally SEM consists of two models include: measurement model and structural model. Prior to structural modeling study has to assess the measurement model of latent construct for their dimensionality, validity, and reliability by going through the process named as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). It has been recommended by different researcher in the field of service marketing (Samar, 2018; Udo et al., 2010).

Firstly, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in order to determine the power of the predefined operating model with a set of observed data. To assess measurement model fit we used several indices. Chi square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df < 3.0), Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (0.05 < RMSEA < 0.08), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI > 0.90) and Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI > 0.90) were used as the absolute fit indices. Comparative Fit Index (CFI > 0.90) was used as the relative fit index and Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI > 0.50) as the parsimony fit index (Pashaie et al., 2021).

Secondly, structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed to test hypotheses about the relationships between observed variables and latent variables. To evaluate construct validity standardized factor loadings (≥ 0.50), average variance extracted (AVE ≥ 0.50) and composite reliability (CR ≥ 0.70) were calculated.

Statistical analysis was performed with IBM® SPSS®. Structural equation modeling with Amos™ 23 software. In the light of the obtained values, the measuring tool can be considered reliable for this study.

Results

Measurement model

At this stage of the research, in order to modify and improve the fit of the model, we proceed in two stages: 1) elimination of observational variables with weak and insignificant factor load; 2) elimination of observational variables with multiple alignment.

According to the research model and the appropriateness of the items, no item is removed from the theoretical model and all weights are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Overall, therefore, we concluded that the model's constructs were reliable and valid, so the next step was to examine the structural model results, as shown in Figure 1.

All factor loadings exceed 0.60. The next step is to examine composite reliability as well as convergent and discriminant validity that reliability and validity were analyzed before employment of structural modeling. As the study is quantitative in nature, usually Cronbach's (α) has been recommended to ensure reliability. Table 1 shows composite reliabilities (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and the squared interconstruct correlations. The composite reliabilities ranged from .80to .86, which is considered very good. AVE is a measure of the convergent validity of the model's constructs and should be .50 or higher (Hair et al., 2010). Convergent validity is defined as the extent to which a specified set of indicators for a construct converge or share a high proportion of variance in common. For this model the AVEs ranged from .55 to .70, so all constructs exhibit convergent validity.

Table 1. Correlation between variables

	CR	AVE	B	BI	BC	P	BL
Branding (B)	.81	.55	1	.87	.81	.82	.89
Brand identity (BI)	.80	.62		1	.87	.98	.90
Brand commitment (BC)	.86	.62			1	.81	.97
Performance (P)	.79	.71				1	.91
Brand loyalty (BL)	.80	.70					1

Note: CR – composite reliability, AVE – Average Variance Extracted.

Hypothesis testing

Structural Equitation Model (SEM) was performed to analyze the hypothesized direct relationships between the constructs. The final SEM results reveal a model with acceptable fit with the data (χ^2/df = 1.55; GFI = 0.9; AGFI = 0.9; PNFI = 0.79; RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.93).

Finally figure 2 shows SEM results for the dataset model. Fitness indices for the structural measurement model do reach acceptable levels for goodness of fit. The observed factor loadings for all were above 0.5, although fitness indices were sometimes below the recommended level. Therefore, modification indices were examined in order to identify redundant items. They were then correlated with the improvement of the model's goodness-of-fit indices. In the model stage of standard estimation of structural equations, after determining the existence of a significant relationship between dependent and independent variables, the effect of each of the independent variables on the

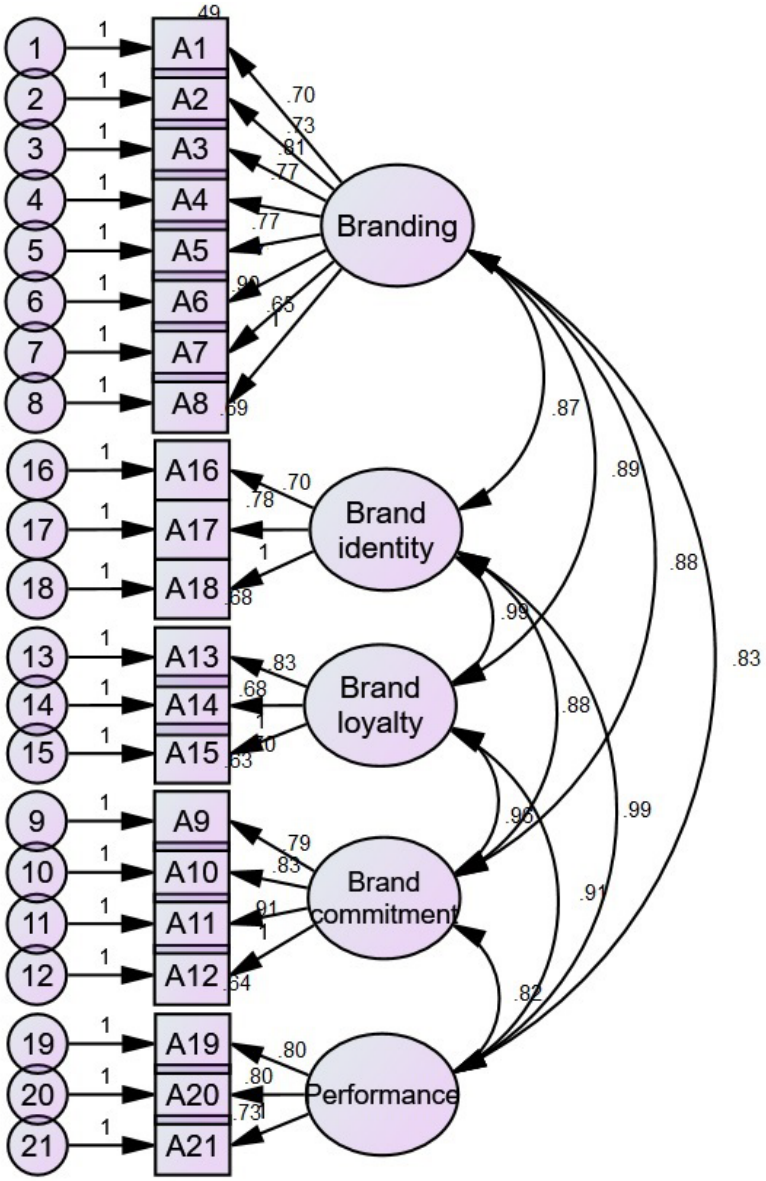


Figure 1. Research measurement model

dependent variable is shown (Figure 2). Therefore, the leading role of professional football league players in sports performance was confirmed.

The hypothesis for each path in this study is presented accordingly in the following paragraphs:

Hypothesis (H1): There is a positive significant relationship between branding and brand identity ($\beta = 0.6$; $CR = 9.03$; $p < .001$) in support of H1. Therefore, hypothesis H1 is supported and held true. The research outcome confirms that branding is significant in controlling, checking brand identity. This implies that, from the perspective of the respondent, sports clubs should channel a proportion of their spending into improving their branding.

Hypothesis (H2): There is a positive significant relationship between branding and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.67$; $CR = 8.12$; $p < .001$) in support of H2. The summary of the result of the analysis relating to the relationship between branding and brand loyalty is that a purposeful and careful implementation of the elements of achieving a high degree of sports performance. The outcome of this research shows a strong support for hypothesis H2 as demonstrated in the final structural measurement model.

Hypothesis (H3): There is a positive significant relationship between branding and brand commitment ($\beta = 0.55$; $CR = 10.74$; $p < .001$). This result allows us to estimate the possible brand potential and to predict the risk of abandoning one brand for other brands.

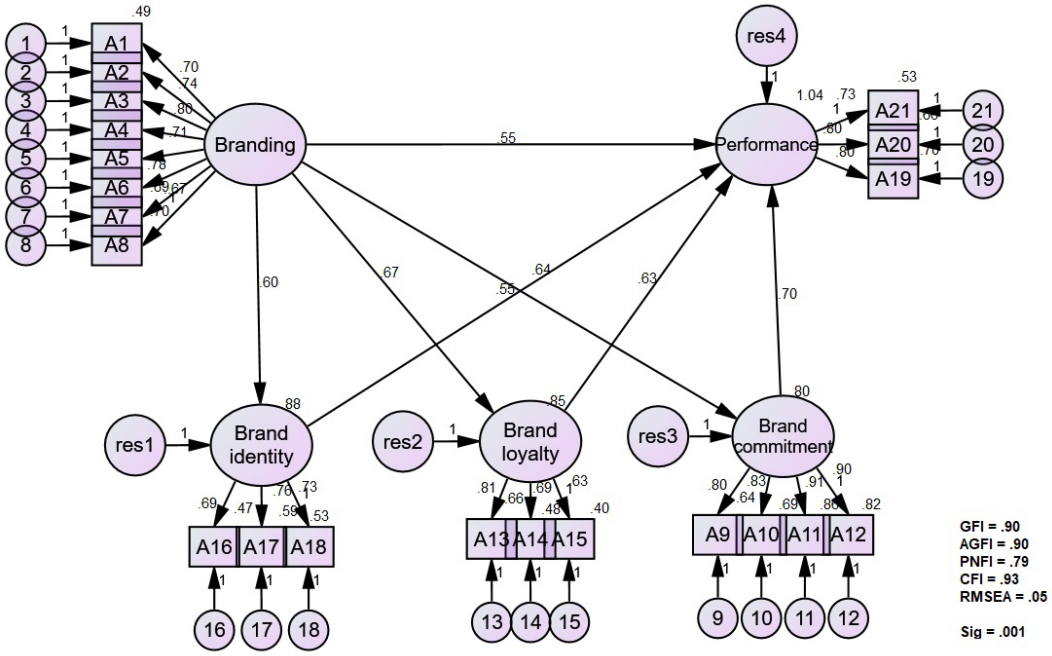


Figure 2. Initial structural measurement model for the entire research constructs and goodness-of-fit for structural model

Note: GFI – Goodness-of-Fit Index, AGFI – Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index, PNFI – Parsimony Normed Fit Index, CFI – Comparative Fit Index, RMSEA – Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation, Sig – Significance level

Hypothesis (H4): There is a positive significant relationship between branding and sports performance (β = 0.55; CR = 9.65; p < .001). Therefore, branding and sports performance is a cross-team strategy that incorporates brand thinking where it can deliver the best return. The framework applies creative brand rules and fundamentals throughout a measurable performance funnel to maximize revenue potential and increase brand lifetime value.

Hypothesis (H5): There is a positive significant relationship between brand commitment and sports performance (β = 0.7; CR = 8.66; p < .001). The outcome of this research shows a strong support for hypothesis H5 as demonstrated in the final structural measurement model; brand commitment is a comprehensive and flexible tool for effectively measuring the psychological links between customers/users and brand, product or service.

Hypothesis (H6): There is a positive significant relationship between brand loyalty and sports performance (β = 0.63; CR = 9.2; p < .001). The outcome of this research shows a strong support for hypothesis H6 as demonstrated in the final structural measurement model.

Hypothesis (H7): There is a positive significant relationship between brand identity and sports performance (β = 0.64; CR = 7.55; p < .001). In general, it emerged that brand identity has the greatest impact on sports performance. In fact, when a sports club's brand is well-known, its players have more trust in the club.

It can be concluded that there is a positive and strong relationship between the structures and that all research hypotheses are confirmed at the level of 99%. Also, the regression coefficients in the research model are significant at the level of 0.001. Given that the CR index or critical ratio obtained for the relationships defined in the model is greater than 2.58, it can be concluded that all relationships are significant at the confidence level of 0.99.

Discussion

A thorough knowledge of the community or "sociology" will lead us to first explain the correct strategy and plan and then be able to be more successful in sports marketing. Thus, emphasizing the importance of "sports sociology" refers to the biggest parameter of sports brand success, which is brand value from the perspective of sports customers. The sports industry is considered as the sixth most money-making industry in the world. Of course, in some developed countries, the sports industry ranks first to third. So it can be said that sport is a very powerful brand. Branding in sports can be recognized as the most important tool for organizations to create and expand new business opportunities. Sports organizations that have realized the power of branding have been able to significantly

increase their fan base, attract more participants to their sport, and increase their income through its implementation. However, few studies, if any, have been conducted to understand the internal branding process from the viewpoint of athletes, who are the end receivers. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the sociology of branding of Iranian League players. So this have been the subject of curiosity. It identifies the relevant mechanisms and describes how internal branding affects athletes' performance. The challenges of its success are uncovered and discussed. Finally, managerial implications and future research directions are provided. The results of this test showed that the research model is a good fit. Based on these facts, the results of testing the research hypotheses derived from the model are as follows:

The results showed that the branding of Iranian League players has a positive and significant effect on their athletic performance. It is the sports brand that determines all sports marketing activities and it is a powerful and important tool for influencing and controlling the market that improves performance. This determines the sporting performance of League players, now and in the future. The results of this part of the study are consistent with other findings (Azizi, 2011; Mahmoudian et al., 2020; Salehi & Arbatani, 2013). For large sports businesses, branding is accepted as an important factor in the success of the business. However, a club's brand commitment is an extension of the same position as a firm. In fact, this commitment is a tangible advantage that makes a product (players) or service desirable. If the players use the services of a particular club and renew their contract with the same club every year, it can be said that they are loyal to the brand of that club, and if the players are loyal, it can be said that the club is loyal in terms of branding; it scores highly in brand loyalty. In fact, clubs, as economic enterprises, try to develop and improve the position of their brand (their players) in comparison with their competitors in the target market. Moreover, the qualities of good athletic performance (players' performance of individual sports achievements and abilities, unique competitive characteristics, fair play, and competitive relationship with other players) are tangible and intangible; a player can establish a good brand identity by improving and stabilizing the mental image they wish to create in the minds of the fans.

The results show that commitment, loyalty , and brand identity have a positive and significant effect on players' athletic performance, which is in line with previous research findings (Keshtidar et al., 2018; Mahmoudian et al., 2020; Soltani, 2018). Because the brand management system (commitment, loyalty, and brand identity) builds a shared understanding of the brand in the club, it enables fans to fulfill the brand agreement (club players) at the time of service. Therefore, various sports organizations have realized that achieving success in sports marketing activities and creating a brand image in the minds of their customers is not possible only by targeting external customers. Marketing and branding can be one of the competitive advantages of clubs in gaining customer satisfaction. Internal marketing and internal branding both pay special attention to athletes and try to live up to the promises that organizations make to customers through athletes and attract more customers to the organization. Internal branding is increasingly seen as an important policy for ensuring the delivery of the brand promise by athletes by shaping their behaviors and attitudes toward the brand. Athlete brand image management has become a popular topic among sports marketing scholars, and loyalty has long been recognized as a key consideration in marketing strategies focused on customer retention. While the importance of the loyalty construct is widely recognized, the conditions and variables that foster loyalty for a specific service may vary. Although many theorists hold a commitment to be an essential part of this process, the link between commitment and loyalty has received little empirical attention.

Conclusion

We can conclude the sociology of branding is the smartest topic. Because the result will be a win-win for the brand and the player and that sports brand performance as an indicator is used to evaluate the ability of a brand to deliver value to sports customers. So professional players need special programs and techniques to be able to plan for their future and continue their activities in the field of sports. The findings of this study show that the professionalism and popularity of football in Iran have caused sponsors to go less to other sports and less government aid to other sports. While creating a valuable sports brand is a way of gaining success in brand-based organizations. Therefore, short-term and long-term professional and strategic methods can help players and motivate them to acquire the necessary skills to grow to brand. To implement this effective program, each player must be valued in terms of professional, personal, educational, social, and media And be determined economically. Also, according to resource-based theory, it can be suggested that only one of these strategies should be implemented in an organization to gain success since the simultaneous emphasis on the two approaches would impair the ability to accrue maximum benefit. On the other hand, the identity of the player is increasingly vital to a sports club for any business, especially for service

organizations where the attitude and behavior of the players spearhead the brand image and strengthen it. Since branding seeks to create a shared understanding of a brand in a sports club, the acceptance of the club's values and goals by the players leads to their desire to achieve and ultimately increases their commitment and loyalty to the club. Therefore, every sport, federation, and the club must find a way to distinguish itself from its competitors, as the brand will be a strong competitive advantage among competitors in today's highly competitive market. A strong brand (player) allows a club to offer new products and services and the opportunity to increase its revenue. A club with a strong brand stands up to threats from and the influence of rivals. In times of crisis, the positive image of a player among fans ensures that the mistakes and fluctuations in the club's fortunes do not have a significant impact on the way the player performs. A strong brand helps the sports organization attract loyal customers, and these customers trust the organization and the quality of its services and remain loyal. The current research will assist league brand managers in creating favorable brand associations and, hence, attracting and retaining consumers. Given that no research is without its limitations, there were limitations in the selection of the community, since there are many prominent players, but due to the specific bias of the players, there was a possibility of bias in answering questions (e.g. Esteghlal, Persepolis, Azerbaijan Tractor, Sepahan, etc...). Therefore, we conclude that sports clubs need to understand the branding power of players to increase their athletic performance in sports expertise, competitive style, and fair play. The most important innovation in branding, however, would be to brand the whole club, not every product or player, since each product can benefit from the income belonging to the brand family of the club or organization.

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