Investigating the effect of brand identity and character on brand loyalty of football team fans

Mohammad Keshtidar*, MohammadAli Sahebkaran and Mahdi Talebpour

Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences,
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad,
Azadi Square, Mashhad,
Razavi Khorasan Province, Iran
Email: mkeshtidar@birjand.ac.ir
Email: Msahebkaran@yahoo.com
Email: Mtalebpour@um.ac.ir
*Corresponding author

Maziyar Kalashi

Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences,
Razi University,
University Street,
Taq Bostan, Kermanshah, Iran
Email: Kalashi.maziyar@gmail.com

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of brand identity and character on brand loyalty between Esteghlal and Persepolis team fans in Mazandaran province. This study was carried out using a descriptive correlation approach. The participants of this study consisted of 385 fans in a randomised cluster, at three geographical areas namely; west, central and east provinces. The participants answered questioners on brand identity and also a customer loyalty questionnaire. To perform descriptive statistics, the software package of spss21 was utilised and in order to perform confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling (SEM) Amos21 was utilised. The results showed that brand personality with impact factor of 0.56 (t = 4.76) has greater relations with brand loyalty, than brand identity by the impact factor of 0.28 (t = 2.28), in the view point of fans.

Keywords: brand personality; brand identity; brand loyalty; fans.


Biographical notes: Mohammad Keshtidar currently works at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and helped to develop sports at universities in Iran. He obtained his PhD in Sport Management in Iran as well as other educational and research activities related to sport management and sport marketing. This
includes collaboration with and consulting for various sport organisations and personalities in Iran, which has provided a better framework for sport management research in Iran.

MohammadAli Sahebkaran is a PhD student of Sport Management at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. He received his BA (2011) in Physical Education and his MA (2013) in Sport Management from the Guilan University, Iran. He is currently working on sport economics and marketing under the supervision of Mehdi Talebpour, an Associate Professor of Sport Management.

Mahdi Talebpour currently works at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and helped in the development of sports at universities in Iran. He received his PhD in Sport Management in Iran as well as other educational and research activities related to sport management and sport marketing. This includes collaboration with and consulting for various sport organisations and personalities in Iran, which has provided a better framework for sport management research in Iran.

Maziyar Kalashi is a PhD student of Sport Management at the Razi University. He received his BA in Physical Education and Sport Science in 2011 from the Guilan University and his MSc, majoring in sport management from the Shahid Beheshti University of Tehran in 2014. He is researching in sport economic and marketing.

1 Introduction

Today, sport has become a profitable industry in developed countries and sports managers are looking for solutions they can benefit from potentially which would propel them towards achieving their economic and fitness goals. One aspect of sport economy is marketing its arising issues. Marketing in football clubs and the football industry are focused on service issues and sport customer (supporters and fans). So on the one hand due to the inherent characteristics of services, brand is considered the most important aspect of marketing services (Kapferer, 2004) and on the other hand, supporters spend more on symbolic and identity creating aspects as the most important aspect in each club brand. Hence, awareness on the relationship of the brand with the fans behaviour such as customers of a company or organisation has been influential in optimising marketing programs, particularly in the field of brand management and advertising effectiveness and supports the spending of resources which leads to increase in customers and market share (Cutler, 2006).

In such circumstances the most successful managers are those that have the sports economy as their priority. On the other hand, any sport team could be considered as brand and fans for their customers. Therefore, managers can use strategies of the field of branding. A good example is utilising confidence level in the brand through social responsibility, consumer satisfaction and high quality service to customers (Filo and Funk, 2008). According to the stated remarks, it can be concluded that these days the missing link in Iranian football clubs is that these clubs managers and marketing planners’ lack knowledge of the relationship between the club supporters as a strong potential in marketing programs, who have been described as the twelfth man in the green rectangle. This is because supporters’ crowding stadiums and cheering their
favourite teams, not only raises the charm and excitement of the game, it psychologically has a significant impact on the performance of teams and players, but also brings numerous financial benefits for the club. In addition, fans of sports teams that feel psychologically dependent act as reference consumers (Jalalifarabani, 2013). Since the brand is the most important aspect of marketing services (Kapferer, 2004). Brand is of today, a competitive game pillar and element that must be carefully crafted and managed to ensure that organisations and companies rely on people to be able to create different products and activities to achieve profitability (Ebrahimi et al., 2012). Also trademarks or brands are part of the company’s intangible assets which greatly contribute to their success in the marketplace and enhance their value (Saaksjarvi and Samiee, 2011) and can also have a close relationship with their customers. Therefore, knowledge of the relationship between brand and customer behaviour can help organisation managers in the context of effective management.

Two essential features of brand are its identity and character. Brand identity is of utmost significance in the field of marketing such that a number of studies have considered it (Burrman et al., 2009; Da Silveira et al., 2013). The brand identity is the essence of the brand (Borges et al., 2014). In fact, the brand identity expresses what the brand represents and what is to be committed to clients. One way to create customers’ loyalty to brands is the development of suitable identity for brand through which it can express itself to the customers identify and can be distinguished from other competitors (Dehdashti et al., 2012). Of course, identity of a sport team includes features that satisfy the essential needs of the fans. In other words, characteristics and identities of a team and its fans are similar and on the other hand, this team identity should have the values that distinguish them from other competitors and yet has a higher prestige than their competitors. In this case, the team’s fans perceive their favourite team as attractive and are able to share same identity as their team and therefore show more commitment to their beloved team (Jaberi et al., 2014).

Brand character is a set of human qualities that are attributed to the brand (Aaker, 1997). If the brand has a character in the consumer’s mind it will enhance consumer preference and usage (Bazargan, 1999), the strength of the relationship of consumers and the brand (Groppel-Klein et al., 2006), loyalty, brand preference and feeling. (Fournier, 1998) The main challenge in terms of brand loyalty is the brand loyalty concept and its measurement (Failo and Funk, 2008). Many scientists and researchers believe that brand loyalty is the consumer’s sentiment for repeated purchases of a particular brand, notwithstanding there may logically exist other alternatives (Bauer et al., 2008).

In general, brand loyalty can be classified into both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty is related to repeated purchase behaviour and consumption of the product or service in the long-term shows that attitudinal loyalty is related to psychological commitment to the product or service provided (Wang et al., 2011; Gladden and Funk, 2007; Lin, 2010).

Numerous studies have been conducted on brand loyalty. Bristow and Sebastian (2001) by studying the brand loyalty among fans of the Chicago Cubs baseball team concluded that the number of childhood fans who saw or heard their club or team games were more than other fans. He noted that usually loyal fans and most likely the buyers of the assets of the clubs were more that the fans with less loyalty; as a result it can be mentioned that, professional teams and clubs, with good history and good players have loyal fans that these legendary fans even with their team’s removal or undesirable results
still continue to support and remain loyal to it (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). Brown and Dacin (1997) showed that consumer attitudes toward an organisation partly are a reflection of their attitudes to the organisation’s products. Also, researches proved that if organisations have high reputation in the field of their products and services, customers consider it as a credible source that contains a supportive and effective message (Brown and Dasin, 1997).

Gladden and Funk (2002) in an extensive research study of 909 professional sports fans, by providing a model in this regard said that the dimensions of brand associations (brand identity), i.e., assets interests and attitudes there is a relationship with the loyalty of fans and these factors. In many cases they are useful predictors of the amount of brand loyalty among their fans (Gladden and Funk, 2002). In addition, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) refer to a sense of unity and excitement created by sports, which can increase the efficiency of activities in the field of clubs social marketing. This will enable them have impact on fans to make them accept voluntary and desired behaviours. Also, unlike other types of organisations, professional clubs, have numerous valuable resources that facilitated their link to many customers, including supporters and media organisations (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). Ansari et al. (2014) in a study under the title ‘the relationship between the brand personality and brand loyalty through the quality of services’ which was done on Melli Bank concluded that in service companies you can increase brand loyalty through improved service quality and brand personality perceptions.

The results of Adinehfar and Gayem’s (2016) study demonstrated that brand personality had positive and significant impact on brand loyalty. Ebrahimipor et al. (2015) study results under the tile of the relationship between brand identity and loyalty of Esteghlal and Persepolis teams fans showed that there is a significant positive relationship between brand identity and brand loyalty. Hosseini et al. (2017) in his study entitled ‘assessing the impact of brand equity based on football fans’ brand loyalty’ which was done as a case study on Foolad Khuzestan Football club concluded that brand identity had a significant effect on brand loyalty.

Figure 1 The research conceptual model (see online version for colours)
Due to the professionalism of the sport and the possibility of privatisation of the country, especially the premier league football teams, there seems to be a greater focus on viewers and fans of the team as major customers. Therefore, it is essential to assess the presence and the continued loyalty of the customers in sports competitions. However, very few studies have investigated this topic in sports teams and these studies and the lack of investigation on the relationship between personalities, brand identity and brand loyalty in sports teams have been considered and attempt has been made in this study to assess the personality and brand identity of Persepolis Esteghlal teams and their loyal fans. In addition, based on the review of the basics and history, the researcher is trying to show that the main variables for default and conceptual model are summarised in Figure 1.

2 Research methodology

The present study is carried out utilising a descriptive and correlational approach and its statistical population consisted of Esteghlal and Persepolis fans in Mazandaran Province. Sample size due to the limited study population was calculated with Cochran formula; at least 384 people were calculated, but 450 questionnaires for the local cluster in three regions, East, Central and West provinces were distributed and in total 385 questionnaires were usable. Personal Information questionnaire encompasses features such as age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, income, favourite team, amount of presence in the stadium and watching the games of their favourite team through mass media (TV, radio, internet, etc.). For the measurement of identity dimensions and brand personality, the identity questionnaire was used. The identity questionnaire consisted of nine questions in three dimensions of brand identity, brand advantage, brand name, brand logo and reputation. Brand personality questionnaire also with nine questions involved competency and excitement. Loyalty questionnaire with two attitudinal (two questions) and behavioural dimension (two questions) was used to measure the loyalty of the supporters of Esteghlal and Persepolis in the Mazandaran province. In addition, all the options in the five level Likert scale from the option (5 strongly disagree) to option (1 strongly agree) were classified. The questionnaire reliability was measured by using ten management professors and sports medicine specialists’ comments and after applying all suggestions and corrections, test reliability was determined with Cronbach’s alpha test (brand identity 0.721, brand personality 0.83 and customer loyalty 0.72). KS statistical technique was used to determine the natural state of the data distribution as well as to analyse the data from the confirmatory factor analysis; path analysis in Amos21 and SPSS21 software was used.

3 Research results

Demographic characteristics of subjects in Table 1 show that 322 people (83.6%) of all fans, are male and 63 (16.4%) are women and also 258 participants (67.5%) of fans, are single and 125 participants (32.5%) are married. The age group of most people (77%) was between 20 to 30 years and the highest percentage was dedicated to 21–25 age groups (41.3%). In addition, the highest frequency was related to undergraduate
education level, recorded at 49.6% (191 people). Collectively, these data suggest that the level of education of team s’ fans (about 90%) was BA or lower than that. Likewise, many studied fans in terms of monthly personal income were in the class of less than 500 thousands tomans (217 people) and 80% of fans, had income less than 1 million tomans per month. Most part of the participants was university students who comprised nearly 50% of the fans. Employees shaped smallest population (13%) and Persepolis fans were more than Esteghlal (61%). In addition, 297 fans (77.1%) in a season did not go to the stadium and 8.6% on average between 6–10 times were present at the stadium and the least (6.5%) were present at the stadium between 1–5 times. 162 fans, were following up the games by watching through mass media (TV, radio, internet, etc.) (42% of all fans), among these 11.2% of the people watch 25–30 games, 26.4 % watch 5–25 games, only 4.4 participants pursue the game results by the internet and other social networks.

Table 1  Demographic characteristics of subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal characteristics</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Fan</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 500 thousands</td>
<td>500-1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1 Develop a structural model of research variables

Then, the effects of the main variables in the model, based on the results of the application have been studied (Table 2).

Table 2  The results of the final research outputs model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression weight</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>C.R.</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.276</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.276</td>
<td>Brand identity →</td>
<td>Brand loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.555</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.396</td>
<td>Brand personality →</td>
<td>Brand loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.557</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brand identity →</td>
<td>Brand name and logo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.707</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1.426</td>
<td>Brand identity →</td>
<td>Brand benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.546</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>1.250</td>
<td>Brand identity →</td>
<td>Brand name and logo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.726</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brand personality →</td>
<td>Brand excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.885</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>16.40</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>1.215</td>
<td>Brand personality →</td>
<td>Brand competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.660</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brand loyalty →</td>
<td>Attitudinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.731</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.417</td>
<td>Brand loyalty →</td>
<td>Behavioural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.706</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.169</td>
<td>Brand identity ↔</td>
<td>Brand personality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Investigating the effect of brand identity and character on brand loyalty

Confirmatory factor analysis showed that all aspects of this investigation other than the brand name and logo of the brand identity, dimension of brand excitement on brand personality and attitudinal dimension of the on brand loyalty have the amount of t and acceptable load factor (Figure 1) which is significant at the 0.05 level and this significance of regression weights (loadings) represents how the variables in the model are convergent (Table 2).

Also surveying other results indicated that personality brand which is (0/555) more than brand identity of (0/276) has effect on loyalty to the brand. Among factors discussed in brand personality, brand competency dimension in brand identity and the dimensions of brand benefits, brand loyalty has the highest influence effective.

In order to achieve the perfect model fit, several acts can be carried out; its first step is done in the first and second type of factor analysis and items with factor loadings less than 5.0 were excluded from the final model and in the second stage with regard to the software suggestions to modify the model, concerned amendments were made and eventually the final fit parameters of the model were in good condition.

Table 3  Indices of fit for research structural model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indices</th>
<th>CMIN/DF</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>AGFI</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>IFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amounts</td>
<td>1.903</td>
<td>0.963</td>
<td>0.947</td>
<td>0.980</td>
<td>0.990</td>
<td>0.990</td>
<td>0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired level</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>&gt; 0.9</td>
<td>&gt; 0.9</td>
<td>&gt; 0.9</td>
<td>&gt; 0.9</td>
<td>&gt; 0.9</td>
<td>&lt; 0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: CMIN/DF: normalised chi-square/degrees of freedom; GFI: goodness of fit index; AGFI: adjusted goodness of fit index; NFI: normalised fit index; IFI: incremental fit index; CFI: comparative fit index; RMSEA: the root mean square error of approximation.

According to Table 3, the last model fit indicators show the final research model fits very well for variables of this study. In other words, fit indices confirmed the model. The final model is provided after fitting is represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2  Research structural equation model (see online version for colours)
Based on structural equation model (Figure 2), with regard to brand identity affecting the brand loyalty, subscales of the benefits of the brand, brand name and logo and brand credit, respectively, the coefficient effect 0.71, 0/56 and 0/55 has the most impact on brand loyalty on Esteghlal teams Persepolis from the fans’ perspective who were from Mazandaran province. Regarding brand personality; subscales of excitement and competence with coefficient of 0/88 and 0/76 respectively, were effective. Also in brand loyalty, attitude and behaviour subscales, respectively, with effect coefficient of 0/73 and 0.66 were effective. At the second and major level of structural model, brand personality with a coefficient of 0.56 compared to brand identity with impact factor of 0/28 had great effect on the loyalty of Esteghlal and Persepolis Mazandaran fans. In addition brand identity factor with coefficient of 0/71 has a high influence on brand personality factors.

4 Discussion and conclusions

The studies in the field of brand loyalty and factors affecting the formation of brand loyalty generally focuses on external factors essential to developing loyalty, such that in order to create more loyalty we should focus on external factor affecting brand loyalty (fans and supporters). Considerably, it should be noted that loyalty comes from its roots and within organisations and clubs. Collection of key factors that come from within the organisation and in this study originated from football clubs and influence their customer loyalty; such that it can be placed into two dimensions of brand (identity and personality) and the factors which are shaping the identity and sport brand identity are variables such as players and coaches, the club’s logo and colours, etc. which will affect the degree of loyalty, persistence in favour of a sports fan’s club and increasing fans sporty feelings.

As previously stated the goal of this study was to investigate the influence of brand personality and identity on brand loyalty from the perspective of Esteghlal and Persepolis fans. The results of data analysis showed that brand personality has a greater impact than brand identity on the loyalty of these two teams’ fans. This result on the one hand means that investigation on brand personality factors such as club logo, coach, players and so on can reinforce and even increase longevity and loyalty of fans to these clubs. On the other hand, investments carried out in this field have been effective and fruitful. According to Heslop et al. (2010) and Louis and Lambert (2010) positive brand personality will bring consequences such as strengthening customer preferences, increase in customer sentiment, improved reliability and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, many studies have emphasised that brand personality has favourable consequences such as improving the perceived value and creating customer loyalty (Kang and Sharma, 2012; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2010). Brand loyalty, is one of the consequences of brand personality and brands that have a unique character, in the minds of customers can be differentiated from competitors and creating strong emotional bonds with customers ultimately leads to commitment and loyalty to it (Arora and Stoner, 2009; Karjaluoto et al., 2016).

A significant issue of other results of this study is the low rate of brand identity effectiveness on loyalty of fans, which shows that senior managers and marketing managers of the two clubs need to strengthen and improve or even change brand identity variables such as name, team logo, choice of colours and design of team uniform, etc. and pay special attention to them, because strong brand identity will have a positive and
significant impact on brand loyalty and a strong brand identity stems from the roots of loyalty (Dehdashti et al., 2012). On the other hand, Da Silveira et al. (2011) unlike many directors who say that brand identity should be constant over time believe that in highly dynamic and constantly changing environment of today, the brand identity must also be dynamic and over time we should develop the brand identity that fits the environment. They are based on a range of backgrounds in terms of brand identity, it is obvious that brand identity is a quite dynamic process and should over time through mutual effects of brand managers and other social effects (as consumers) be developed. Thus, according to the results of this study it can be concluded lack of change and insufficient attention to the brand identity variables of the two clubs is one of the main reasons for low rate of brand identity effects of both Esteghlal and Persepolis on fans loyalty.

The results are more accurate and detailed studies show that the credibility of the brand has the lowest amount of influence on brand identity (as one of its dimensions) and this result shows that managers of these two clubs should pay attention to the method of choosing coach and head coach in order to take steps to improve their local clubs and eventually increase the loyalty of their fans. Consequently, increasing the fans’ loyalty can bring many direct and indirect material and spiritual effects and benefits for the club and resolve a lot of their financial problems.

The results of this research with regard to brand loyalty showed that the level of behavioural loyalty towards attitudinal loyalty in comparison with attitudinal loyalty is greater. Behavioural loyalty is related to repurchase and recommendation to others, but attitudinal loyalty means brand preference, purchase intent and customers long-term commitment to brands and also is their tendency to positive recommendation advertising for brands. Usually repurchase is regarded as a way to measure brand loyalty, but some researchers have noted that repurchase is not necessarily true allegiance, because the consumer may buy a product or service repeatedly and show faithful behaviour, but the reason for that is something other than the brand attitude obligation (Azizi et al., 2012). A number of researchers focused on the priority of attitudinal loyalty over behavioural loyalty Dick and Basu (1994) specifically point out that proper attitude and repeat purchases, is a prerequisite for defining loyalty. They were able to consider loyalty as a relationship (attitude-behaviour) to identify factors that influence loyalty. Subir and Martell (2007) developed the results of Dick and Basu and separately examined behavioural and attitudinal loyalty and their results showed that attitudinal loyalty directly impacts behavioural loyalty, in other words, it is the prerequisite for behavioural loyalty. So according the above facts and despite the fans, behavioural loyalty is higher than attitudinal loyalty this result should be further investigated.

Generally it should be noted that investing in brands, especially brand identity and personality can increases the loyalty of fans of sports teams and as a result bring economic benefits and effects and great support for the club. According to the results of the current study we proposed to senior executives and marketing managers of Esteghlal and Persepolis teams by keeping the status quo in the brand personality variables perform meaningful actions to improve brand identity and intelligently increase the loyalty of the supporters of the two clubs.

At the end about the limitations of this study, lack of attention to intervening variables that can affect brand loyalty of the target population and limited knowledge of some of the respondents on matters related to research variables should be mentioned.
References


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