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Examining the Fan Interaction Model, Fan Identity and Brand Image of Selected Teams of Iran's Premier Football League

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Abstract

Purpose: The general purpose of the current research was to test the fan interaction model, fan identity and brand image of the selected teams of the Iranian Premier League (study: fans of Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractorsazi and Sepahan).

Methodology: The present research was descriptive of the correlation type and based on structural equation modeling with the partial least squares approach, and in terms of its purpose, it is considered a part of applied research. The current research community is the fans of Iran's premier football league. Meanwhile, four teams (Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractorsazi and Sepahan) were selected as the top four teams of the 2019-20 league respectively. Due to the fact that the size of the statistical population is unlimited, stratified random sampling was used. In this research, the scale of fan interaction with the brand was used from the Desart questionnaire (2017), the brand image of Tim Bauer et al. (2008) and the team identity of Mile and Ashworth (1992). Structural equation modeling with partial least squares approach and Smart PLS version 3 software were used for data analysis.

Findings: The results showed that fan interaction has a significant positive effect on the brand image and identity of team fans.

Conclusion: Finally, the research model had a strong fit and can be used as an operational model in the Iranian Premier League to attract more football fans.

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Detailed abstract

Purpose: One of the most valuable assets of a sports club (such as a football club) is its brand, and even among the most prominent symbols of a country's brand, the logo and color of its top football teams can be mentioned. A careful review of the sports marketing literature shows that attention has always been paid to sports consumers due to the unique relationships these people have with their favorite teams. In fact, sports fans are one of the most important group of sports consumers, whose great interest in fandom, team identity, and emotional attachment to sports clubs is often known by the term "fan engagement" in sports marketing literature. Interaction with the brand indicates that the more persistent and active the fan is, the more he cares about the brand of his favorite club and the more effective interaction he will have with the club, the more loyal he will be and he will show this loyalty by repeatedly accompanying his favorite team. Interaction is a multidimensional concept that reflects an emotional state in consumers who are enthusiastic about the brand and is determined by the level of active and enthusiastic interaction of consumers. In fact, this concept is intertwined with the passion that football fans show for their team; Therefore, understanding the importance of consumer brand interaction on brand perception (as brand image) for soccer fans can provide important insights. On the other hand, fans' unique identification with sports clubs is a common phenomenon in team sports. This is important not only in direct team-fan relationships, but also in team-supporter relationships, because Identity fans tend to support not only the club but also its sponsors. With a broader view, through the identification of fans with sports clubs and the resulting sense of local and national pride, sports are a powerful tool for mediation, increasing the cohesion of the population and strengthening the recognition of regions. Therefore, identification is not only an important communication factor between a team and its fans, but also has a wider social meaning. Therefore, it has been recently noticed in several fields such as social psychology, economics and marketing. Considering the emotional connection that exists between fans and sports teams, one of the most important predictors of the behavior of sports fans is their identity, which seems to mediate the relationship between interaction and loyalty. They define identity as a strong emotional and psychological connection between the team and the fan. Considering that identity plays a key role in the behavior of sports fans, it can be stated that fans with high identity understand less the negative aspects of the obstacles to attending the stadium and are also more willing to watch their favorite team's game closely; Therefore, it is imperative that sports marketers attempt to thoroughly investigate the effects of fan identity on the development of loyalty. One of the consequences of fans' identification with sports teams is their perception of brand equity, which is known in the form of team brand image, which includes two types of attributes, product-related attributes (such as coach, success, star players) and features unrelated to the product (eg logo and color, club history and tradition, modern stadium, fans). The general purpose of the current research was to test the fan interaction model, fan identity and brand image of the selected teams of the Iranian Premier League (study: fans of Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractorsazi and Sepahan).

Methodology: The current research is a descriptive research of the correlation type and based on structural equation modeling, and in terms of its purpose, it is considered a part of applied research. The data of this research was collected in the field and using a questionnaire. The current research community is the fans of Iran's premier football league. In the meantime, four teams (Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractorsazi and Sepahan) are respectively selected as the top four teams of the 2019-20 league. Due to the fact that the size of the statistical population is unlimited, stratified random sampling was used. In this research, the Dessart questionnaire (2017) was used to measure the fan's interaction with the brand. This questionnaire contains 6 questions. Also, Bauer, Sauer Nicola, Exler (2008) questionnaire with 12 questions was used to measure team brand image, and Mile and Ashworth (1992) team identity questionnaire (1992) with 3 questions was used to measure team identity. They answered the items from 1 (very agree) to 5 (very disagree). Structural equation modeling with the partial least squares approach

was used to test the model due to the non-normality of the data distribution. Also, in this research, SPSS software version 26 and Smart Pls software version 3 were used for data analysis.

Findings: The results showed that fan interaction has a significant positive effect on the brand image and identity of team fans.

Conclusion: Finally, the research model had a strong fit and can be used as an operational model in the Iranian Premier League to attract more football fans. Consumer engagement with the brand (as well as engagement with related social media) should be used as a strategic part of organizations' integrated marketing communications. In this way, positive experiences may be obtained by the interaction of fans with other teams or groups of fans, which leads to an increase in the fans' identification with the team and other results such as more participation in the future. The key limitation of this study is related to generalizability. The context tested in this research provides a perspective of a single sport. The research model may not be applicable to many other team sports; Therefore, it is necessary to examine this model in the context of other team sports. Also, it is suggested that sports marketers develop more strategic and aggressive marketing-communication strategies in an effort to attract new consumers to their sport while encouraging existing fans to consume more—focusing on improving fan interactions through media and fan forums. Finally, thanks are given to all those who participated in this research.