

Enhancing sport brand preference in football: A psycho-branding model

Mejora de la preferencia por las marcas deportivas en fútbol: Modelo de psico-marca

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Given the great significance of psychological concepts in explaining consumers' behavior in sport settings, the aim of this study was to provide a sport psycho-branding model including self-definitional needs, brand equity, and brand preference.

Methods: A field study was conducted at 521 FC Persepolis football fans in Iran to fulfil the research objectives. Data was collected by distributing a valid and reliable questionnaire at weekday home competition of FC Persepolis team. The research sample was selected through convenience sampling from the fans who attended the games of FC Persepolis from January to February 2022.

Results: A Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling revealed that: (a) self-definitional need principles were significantly related to the brand equity of FC Persepolis team, and (b) the brand equity was a significant predictor of fans' brand preference. The findings highlight the significance of the fans' psychological needs in improving the brand positioning of football teams.

Conclusions: The proposed sport psycho-branding model includes self-definitional principles to facilitate the development of brand equity and the brand preference through an integrated model in football setting. This may be the first attempt to study these constructs through an integrated model in the branding process of a football team.

KEYWORDS

Branding; Football Fans; Psychological Involvement; Sport; Team Identity.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: El objetivo es proporcionar un modelo de psicomarca deportiva que incluya necesidades de autodefinición, valor y preferencia.

Método: Se realizó un estudio en 521 seguidores del FC Persepolis (Irán). Los datos se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario para conocer la competencia local semanal del equipo. La muestra se seleccionó por conveniencia entre los seguidores que asistieron a los partidos del FC Persepolis de enero a febrero de 2022.

Resultados: Un modelo de ecuación estructural de mínimos cuadrados parciales reveló que: 1. los principios de necesidad de autodefinición (prestigio, similitud y distintivo de identidad) se relacionaron significativamente con el valor de marca del equipo FC Persepolis; 2. el valor de marca es predictor significativo de la preferencia de los aficionados. Destaca la importancia de las necesidades psicológicas de los aficionados para mejorar el posicionamiento de marca de los equipos de fútbol.

Conclusiones: El modelo incluye principios de necesidad de autodefinición para facilitar el desarrollo del valor de la marca y su preferencia a través de una representación integrada en el entorno del fútbol, lo que puede ser el primer intento de estudiar estos constructos mediante un arquetipo integrado en el proceso de marca de un equipo de fútbol.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Marca; Aficionados al Fútbol; Implicación Psicológica; Deporte; Identidad de Equipo.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an attractive industry, the sport has experienced a significant growth over a short period (Schilhanek, 2012). Because the brand is a strategic property that creates sustainable competitive advantages (Keller, 1993), managing sport brands has been considered as an outstanding paradigm in the sport market (Doyle, Filo, McDonald, & Funk, 2013), and establishing strong brands has become a management priority (Torelli & Rodas, 2017). Successful branding strategies require a clear understanding of brand building from the fans' perspective. A strong fan-team connection is more likely to form when the fan's psychological demands are closely tied to the perceived image of a sports team. Because the focus of branding activities has shifted to ensuring emotional values (Goodyear, 1997), this issue has been of great importance for the sport marketers to identify the

affective and psychological needs of the sport fans in professional sports to establish attractive brands.

The goods and services possess psychological values that may equal or even exceed their functional value (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017). Along with the mere functional features of products and services, consuming brands provides crucial psychological values (Ariely & Norton, 2009; Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008); therefore, a vast array of psychological needs of consumers should be discussed by sports consumer behavior academic research (Funk, Alexandris, & McDonald, 2016). Various psychological drivers for consumption, such as self-development (Belk, 1988), have been discussed in previous researches. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) believe that people are seeking to develop a sense of identification with attractive groups to address their internal needs. Brands are specifically regarded as a means to meet consumers' needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Fournier, 1998). The focus on the self-definitional needs, brand equity, and brand preferences through an integrated model, can be promising to improve the branding process in the field of the sports industry.

While prior studies have explored the role of psychological concept in marketplace (Ariely & Norton, 2009; Gao, Wheeler & Shiv, 2009; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Loughran Dommer *et al.*, 2013; Duclos *et al.*, 2013; Lee & Shrum, 2012; Mead *et al.*, 2011; Wan *et al.*, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2012), a few studies have undertaken the psycho-branding concepts in a football setting. Because the brands are symbolic means that facilitate self-expression and simultaneously guarantee social identification (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998), the explanation of the specific identity of the sports brands that meet the expectations of the fans can be considered as a key strategy to encourage fans to join the sports teams. As the theoretical framework, the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) was followed to direct our perception of how sports fans join sports teams. The PCM represents a theoretic framework to understand consumers' affiliation to sports brands (Filo *et al.*, 2008; Funk, 2002; Lock *et al.*, 2012). According to PCM, the external factors, and internal factors, such as psychological demands, communicate each other to designate fans' perception of sports brands. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) argued that the attractiveness of an organization depends on the ability and potentiality of that organization to address at least one of consumers' self-definitional needs (Identity distinctiveness, Identity prestige, Identity similarity). Failing to incorporate self-definitional need principles in the conceptualization and operationalization of sports branding provides a potential gap to fully understand the branding process in the sport domain.

The review of branding models in the football context illustrates that a few studies have incorporated self-definitional need principles in the football setting. However, in previous studies the effect of different psychological concepts such as brand distinctiveness (Carlson *et al.*, 2009), self-brand congruity (Lam *et al.*, 2012; Tuškej *et al.*, 2013), brand reputation (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010) or brand prestige (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Tuškej & Podnar, 2018) on brand identification have been confirmed, a few studies have investigated the role of self-definitional needs in brand equity creation of football teams. Also, mentioned studies have mostly been conducted in western countries, and studying such critical marketing concepts in Asia-based sport context has not been fully studied yet.

Because the FC Persepolis in professional football league of Iran is at its infancy stage of professionalization with a great potential to create successful brands, the emphasis was given to the mechanisms of the branding process among FC Persepolis fans in Iran based on self-definitional need principles, brand equity, and brand preference. FC Persepolis is one of the most popular football clubs in Asia (AFC, 2020), reached the AFC Champions League final for the second time in three years (from 2018 to 2021). FC Persepolis is a professional football club based in Tehran, Iran. At the Asian Football Confederation Champions League competitions, Persepolis has the records of the most attendances (11 matches among 20 matches with the most attendances) and five matches with the most attendances. FC Persepolis has also broken the record of 100,000 attendances in four matches at AFC Champions League (Asian Club Championship and AFC Champions League records and statistics, 2020). Moreover, Persepolis has won a record of thirteen Iranian league titles. While this football team with such enthusiastic fans has remarkable potency of becoming an attractive brand, this club is severely engaged in financial and economic problems crisis. The club is owned by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports as a governmental sector, and this may be the main barrier of becoming a profitable brand. It should be taken in granted that there have recently been many efforts to privatize the club with no success due to the large debt the club has accumulated. Beside these challenge as well as branding problems, psychologically attached fans of this team (as a significant asset), convinced us to conduct this study to find out if these psychological concepts can help the club to improve the brand equity and ultimately develop brand preference.

Because prior works have not examined the empirical relationship between self-definitional needs and brand equity in sport contexts, we focus- for the first time- on these psycho-branding terms in football setting to provide a deeper understanding of brand development by concentrating on the role of fans' psychological internal needs. Addressing this gap, we propose a model to understand the

role of self-definitional principles in leveraging the brand equity and ultimately increasing brand preference. Thus, this research provides a further step in this scope.

This study was set up 1) to test an integrative model to explain the effects of the identity similarity, identity distinctiveness, and identity prestige on the brand equity in the football setting, and 2) to examine the relationship between the brand equity and brand preference in the football setting.

In the next section, a brief overview of the literature on self-definitional need, brand equity, and brand preference is provided. The relationships examined in the paper are then discussed, and testable hypotheses are developed. The author subsequently describes the research methodology and presents the findings. In the final section, the author discusses the findings, the implications, and limitations, and provides future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

2.1. Self-definitional Needs

Based on social identity theory, Pratt (1998) argues that perceiving organizations as self-referential or self-defining patterns is basic for brand identification. Brands are special tools that help customers satisfy their self-defining needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Fournier, 1998). Symbolic nature of Brands (McEnally & de Chernatony, 1999) allows customers to identify their own identity in the brands. Brand associations and brand identity are rooted in mental representation of the consumers' identity (Gaustad *et al.*, 2019). Consumers are attracted to an identity that satisfies at least one of their three basic self-definitional need that includes identity similarity, identity distinctiveness, and identity prestige (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Identity attractiveness is rooted in consumers' perceptions. Offering attractive social identities by certain companies, help consumers satisfy important self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). If the identity of a sport team has appropriate attributes that are similar to consumers' identity, distinctive from other competitors, or prestigious than other competitors; consumers will find the team attractive (Koo, 2009). Helgeson and Supphellen (2004) argued that consumers prefer brands that are consistent with their sense of self. Consumers who are closely connected to a brand resist against changing the brand image that is consistent with their selves (Gaustad *et al.*, 2019). Koo (2009) found that identity distinctiveness, identity prestige, and identity similarity, as the elements of self-definitional needs, affect the identification of the Korean football fans with their favorite teams. According to the effective role of

self-definitional needs in shaping the cognitive and behavioral consequences, it is necessary to study the influence of this concept on other sport marketing elements. The satisfaction of self-definitional needs by a brand is one of the main rewards that persuade the consumers to enter voluntarily into relationships with that brand (Marin & Ruiz, 2007). Football teams have to establish an identification strategy with a proper team identity to satisfy fans' self-definitional needs including identity similarity, identity distinctiveness, and identity prestige (Koo, 2009). Besides considering the fans' basic utilitarian needs (such as success, star players), football teams should try to benefit from to addressing fans' self-definitional needs (Currás-Pérez *et al.*, 2009). The main reason justifying researchers' concentration on the potential link between self-definitional needs and brand equity, is the importance of this psychological notion in directing fans' behaviors and attitudes in supporting football teams.

2.2. Identity Prestige and Brand Equity

Brand prestige refers to the credible position that a consumer supposes other individuals have of the brand. Integrating customers with the prestigious brand makes them perceive themselves as having the positive image of the brand (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Prestige is a key driver of the attractiveness of a company's identity (Cheney, 1983; Pratt, 1998). The concept of prestige is the general credibility of an organization and the level of credit that individuals outside the organization attribute to that organization (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). In other words, Prestige is the amount of respect, admiration, and reputation that others have for one organization in their minds. Getting identified with a prestigious brand develops the individual's self because this affiliation allows consumers to feel as having the worthwhile attributes of the brand that makes it prestigious for society (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Therefore, when an individual find that others have a positive feeling of a brand, this may also help him/her to interpret him/herself positively, and this ultimately increases the individual's self-concept (Yoon *et al.*, 2006). Many researchers agree on this notion that the prestige of an organization enhances individuals' desire for identifying with that organization (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Many people perceive a brand as an individual and are willing to be associated with that positive and credible brand. Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that individuals are often identified cognitively with victorious groups and individuals, which, in turn, leads to the improvement of their self-esteem. Also, Arnett *et al.* (2003) indicated that perceived organizational prestige is positively related to organizational identification. Therefore, identifying with high prestige organizations can be considered as a key factor for consumers to elevate their self- esteem (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

The perceived prestige of an organization positively affects its identity attractiveness (Pratt, 1998). Bhattacharya *et al.* (1995) consider prestige as an important predictor of organizational success. Highly prestigious sports organizations and teams are perceived as successful organizations, and consequently, fans feel proud of their relationship with them. The perceived image of a prestigious brand can develop customers' pride (Ahearn *et al.*, 2005; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). People expect to satisfy their various needs by consuming unique products and brands. Some of the needs that a brand can satisfy are the need for distinctiveness and credibility. The more distinct, and credible the brand is, the more attractive it will be to the customer (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). People tend to be distinct and distinct brands will receive more emotional, attitudinal, and practical support from customers (He *et al.*, 2012). A prestigious brand is not only of good quality but also more important for self-defining purposes. Researches have emphasized the positive relationship between brand identity and customer satisfaction (Chun & Davies, 2006; He *et al.*, 2012). Studies have demonstrated that characteristics such as brand reputation and global brand identity that are closely relevant to brand identity have a positive relationship with brand equity (Hansen *et al.*, 2008). Fink *et al.* (2002) found that "the need for social prestige, self-esteem, and strong feelings that individuals achieve by attachment with successful teams", are among the main predictors of the identification of fans with sports teams. Brand prestige, along with brand distinctiveness help fulfill consumer's self-definitional principles (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). A prestigious brand not only has good quality but also is used for self-expression purposes (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2014; Chun & Davies, 2006; He *et al.*, 2012). Prior researches introduced identifying with prestigious organizations as a key way to satisfy consumers' self-enhancement need (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Findings of Carlson *et al.* (2009) also showed that identity prestige is effective on fan identification, shopping, and the attendance of supporters in stadiums. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) found that prestigious brands will be perceived as more attractive by customers. According to Tuškej and Podnar (2018), companies need to be perceived more prestigious than the competitors. Wang and Tang (2018) argued that the team brand prestige finally leads to the brand equity of sports teams. While previous researches indicated that prestige is a major predictor of organizational success (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995), the driver of fan identification, shopping and the attendance of supporters in stadiums (Carlson *et al.*, 2009), a source of pride (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005., Dutton *et al.*, 1994), the driver of identification with organizations (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Arnett *et al.*, 2003), a few studies have investigated the role of identity prestige of football teams in brand equity of the teams.

People tend to develop self-esteem by joining groups or teams perceived positively; a social group with positive attributes provide a positive self-perception for group members (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Smidts *et al.*, 2001). According to Currás-Pérez *et al.* (2009), brand prestige can correspond to a positive image that an individual believes other people have of the brand. In a similar way, football team prestige may also refer to the positive image perceived by sport fans. Based on these considerations, when a football team behaves in a prestigious manner, it is more likely that supporters will perceive it more valuable. Thus, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 1. Identity prestige of football teams has a positive effect on team brand equity.

2.3. Identity Similarity and Brand Equity

One of the self-definitional principles is the similarity identity that motivates individuals to achieve a self-consistency in various situations (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). In social identity theory, the concept of Identity Similarity is one of the key factors in persuading individuals to join a group. People are willing to join groups that possess common features with their characteristics. According to Brewer (1991), assimilation (identity similarity) is one of the major needs for individuals. Assimilation or similarity refers to the individual's demand to feel affiliated or integrated within a group based on his/her common similarities with the reference group. In marketing setting, consumers are interested in joining a brand with similar identity that helps them create a certain self-consistency or similarity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). This issue can be examined as one of the factors affecting the attractiveness of a sports team that consequently provide sports fans with the opportunity to get more identified. The concept of identity similarity in various studies has been considered as one of the major factors affecting fan-team identification in sport marketing researches (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Fisher (1998) demonstrated that similarity could play a key role in the sports brand attractiveness and identification of fans with their favorite teams. The attitudes and behaviors of sports fans towards their favorite team have a very close relationship with the Perceived similarity identity of sports fans (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). Therefore, it seems that if sports fans perceive the overlap between their identity and the identity of the sports teams, they will show higher loyalty to these teams and will ascribe greater value to these sports brands. Dutton *et al.* (1994) highlighted the relationship between identity similarity and identity attractiveness. Consumers perceive a company's identity more attractive when it is congruous with their own identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Assimilation and differentiation have been proposed to be the two major social needs for humans (Brewer, 1991). O'Reilly *et al.* (1991) argued that people prefer joining organizations perceived as similar to themselves. Findings of Wang and Tang (2018)

indicated that self-Congruity of sports fans affects identification with the sports team Brand. Schneider (1987) emphasizes that individuals are attracted to organizations that share common characteristics. Generally, an irrelevant and incoherent brand, which shows inconsistent identity, values and features, may not motivate fans to gain self-integrity via their link with the football team (Currás-Pérez *et al.*, 2009).

Therefore, according to the literature review, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 2. Identity similarity between fans and their football teams has a positive effect on team brand equity.

2.4. Identity Distinctiveness and Brand Equity

Research on social identity has recognized the importance of distinctiveness in the development of brand identification. As one of the three elements of self-definitional principles, differentiation refers to the expectation of an individual to be distinguished from others in the social group (Currás-Pérez *et al.*, 2009). Coincident with Brewer's (1991) need for differentiation, Dutton *et al.* (1994) defined distinctiveness as the second self-definitional need principle for individuals. In addition to the need for similarity (identity similarity), individuals need to demonstrate different identity or values than others to guarantee the unity of their self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Brand distinctiveness will be perceived through the comparison of one brand's identity with other competing brands (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). When football team identity is recognized more distinctive than that of the competitors, its values for fans may increase, because the connection with the distinctive brand will help consumers increase the psychological difference with consumers of other competing brands (Kim *et al.*, 2001). Consuming a brand is a way of creating distinctiveness; therefore, this distinctiveness creation needs more investigation in consumption settings (Berendt *et al.*, 2018). Tajfel and Turner (1986) emphasized that individuals need to differentiate themselves from others. People are willing to be associated with a group or individual that differentiates them from others with distinctive values (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005). In organizations with high-performance levels, differentiation can be considered as an effective tool for attracting customers (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). Brands with positive identities that are distinguishable from competitors are more identifiable to customers (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). In previous studies, identity distinctiveness has been defined as an effective factor in fan-team identification, fans' purchasing, and the presence of supporters in stadiums (Carlson *et al.*, 2009). In general, brands with unique identity can create values for both brands and customers (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005). Therefore, differentiation, like

similarity, is considered as one of the key factors in the attractiveness of the organization identity, which in turn can affect the attitude of spectators and sports fans to sports teams as attractive brands. If a sports team as a corporate brand displays unique features, it will be able to create specific values in the minds of fans and provide a base for fans to join the sports teams. The distinction is a significant organizational feature from an identity attractiveness perspective (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Brand distinctiveness helps to fulfill consumer's self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Customers perceive themselves as different from their reference social groups by consuming certain brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Kim *et al.* (2001) argued that distinctive identity increases brand attractiveness. Therefore, if a consumer realizes that others have a positive impression of the brand, they will understand themselves positively (Yoon *et al.*, 2006). Human beings tend to be different, and the distinct brands will receive more emotional, attitudinal, and practical support from customers (He *et al.*, 2012). According to Kim *et al.* (2001), when the identity of a brand is interpreted by consumers as more distinctive than that of the competing brands, its attractiveness will ultimately enhance, because the relationship with the distinctive brand will help individuals to develop the psychological difference with consumers of other brands. Based on literature review, the following hypothesis was developed:

Hypothesis 3. Identity distinctiveness of football teams has a positive effect on team brand equity.

2.5. Brand Equity and Brand Preference

Watkins (2014) defines sports brand equity as the value underpinned in the memory of sports consumers. Today brand equity is recognized as an essential element that helps companies and organizations to achieve competitive advantages (Tong & Hawley, 2009). The value of the brand affects the company's future advantages, corporate revenues, and marketing effectiveness (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Increasing brand equity reduces the vulnerability of companies to competitors' marketing activities. More familiarity with the high-equity brand makes consumers to demonstrate more loyalty to that brand (Buil *et al.*, 2008). Also, a high level of brand equity affects customer satisfaction, re-purchasing intention, and loyalty levels (Kim *et al.*, 2008). According to Cobb-Walgreen *et al.* (1995), brand preference and purchase intentions were the critical consequences of brand equity. The study of Chen and Chang (2008) also revealed that brand equity was an important contributor to brand preference and purchase intentions. The findings of Helgeson and Supphellen (2004) revealed the relationship between brand equity and brand preference. Wang (2015) also found that service-brand equity, directly and indirectly, affects brand preference. Buil *et al.* (2013) explored that brand equity has a positive effect on consumers' brand preference. Higher brand equity results in

greater preference and purchase intentions (Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995). Furthermore, consumer-based brand equity is critical in establishing consumer preference (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010). Strong brands make higher overall preference (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003), and customers are interested in purchasing brands with higher perceived value (Aaker, 1996). Moreover, Tolba and Hassan (2009) found a significant relationship between brand equity and brand preferences.

Drawing from the review above, we developed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. Brand equity of football teams has a positive effect on team brand preference.

The research streams discussed in this section collectively result in the following conceptual structure that navigates this research (Fig. 1)

2.6. Research Model

According to the existing literature, a hypothesized model, including self-definitional needs principles (identity similarity, identity distinctiveness, and identity prestige), brand equity, and brand preference, was developed (Fig. 1). The research model has the capability to extend the literature on the effect of self-definitional needs on brand equity, presenting a great justification of how the brand equity and brand preference develop in a football setting.

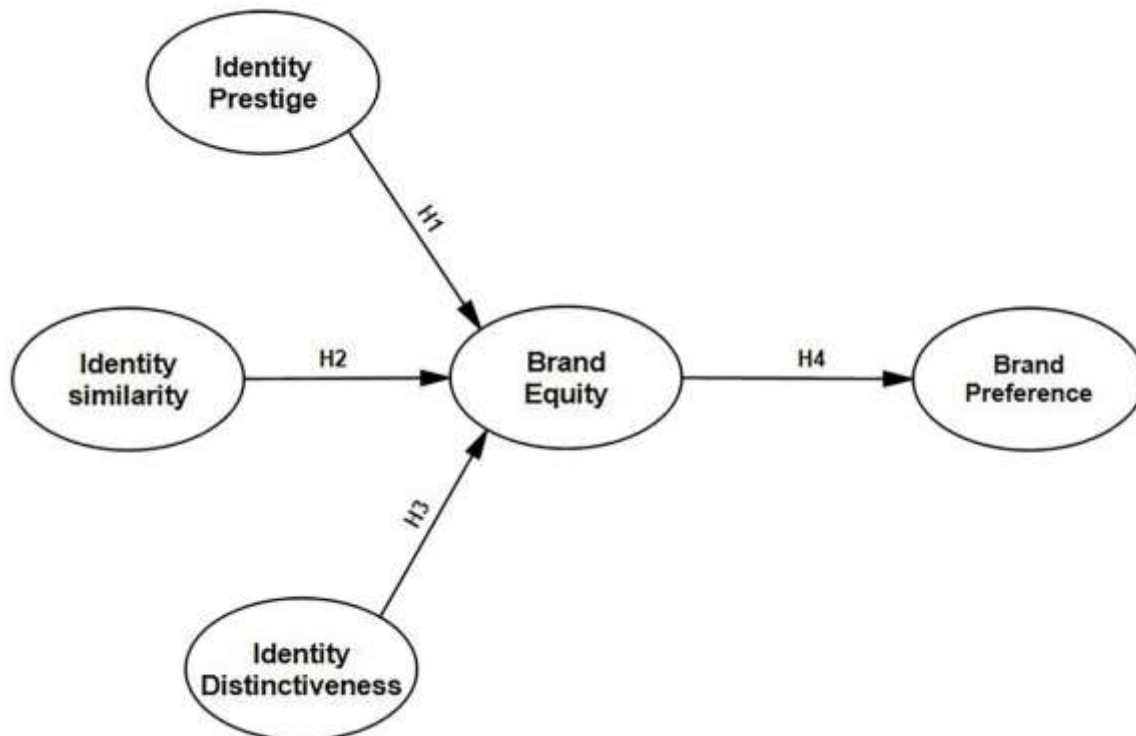


Figure 1. Research model

3. METHODS

3.1. Participants

A total of 521 football fans of FC Persepolis football team in Iranian premier league participated in this study. Of 600 surveys distributed, 546 were returned. The questionnaires with too many missed questions or explicit bias were discarded. 521 valid questionnaires, with an effective response rate of 87%, were collected. Approximately 53% were aged between 18, and 22 years, 40.3% married and 58.6% unmarried. Over half of the respondents had up to college level education (55.9%), while 43.7% had graduated.

3.2. Measures

The survey instruments were adopted from validated scales used in previous studies. Brand equity was a 4-item scale borrowed from Yoo and Donthu (2001). Self-definitional need principles (identity similarity, identity distinctiveness, and identity prestige) were measured using a 9-item instrument adopted from Bhattacharya and Sen (2003). Brand preference was measured by a 4-item instrument adapted from Chen and Chang (2008). The adapted version of this scale was found to be both valid and reliable scale for measuring brand preferences in football setting (Jaberi et al., 2019). A Likert-type seven-point response scale from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (7) was employed for data collection. Because these scales were used in a non-English-speaking setting, a back-translation method was applied (Reynold, Diamantopoulos, & Schlegelmilch, 1993).

3.3. Reliability and Validity

To be assured of content and face validity, two steps were fulfilled. Firstly, based on the experts' suggestions, the survey was revised and changed slightly to fit scale with the research context. The next step involved a pretest conducted to resolve the possible problems with the survey design and the wording of items. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of 20 football fans, and the feedback of this study was applied to improve the original drafting and the order of the items. Based on the participants' comments, several items were modified to enhance clarity. Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability (CR) was estimated to test the reliability of the scales. The factor loadings of items and the average variance extracted (AVE) were investigated to calculate the convergent validity.

3.4. Procedure

A field study along with a quantitative approach was conducted at the fans of the most popular football team in Iranian professional football league to fulfill this study. A fan perspective approach adopted to test the research model by incorporating knowledge and experience of the FC Persepolis football fans in Iran. Four matches held in January to February 2022 were selected for data collection. Data was collected at weekday home competition of FC Persepolis football team through convenience sampling method of fans who attended the games from January to February 2022. Surveys were distributed among fans before the match in Azadi stadium. A cover letter of explanation with detailed information about the research objectives was attached to each survey. The questionnaire took 9-11 minutes to complete.

3.5. Data Analysis

Because of using constructs with three or fewer indicators (Reinartz *et al.*, 2009), the Partial Least Squares Path Modelling (PLS-PM) approach was used to estimate the proposed relationships in the research model. To analyze the scales and the research model, we applied smart PLS 2.0 (Ringle *et al.*, 2005).

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

PLS-based SEM involves two steps: measurement properties and structural model. In the first step, the internal consistency, indicator reliability, convergent reliability, and discriminant validity were calculated to examine the measurement properties (Hair *et al.*, 2011). Structural model and hypotheses testing results is the second part of PLS-based SEM approach.

4.1. Measurement Properties

Examining the internal consistency of measures has been argued to be the first criterion for assessing measurement model in PLS-SEM (Hair *et al.*, 2016). Internal consistency was assessed by estimating coefficient α and composite reliability (Chin, 1998), and indicator reliability was evaluated by using indicator outer loading. Both values were recommended to exceed the threshold of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2011). The average variance extracted was used to evaluate the convergent reliability (Chin, 1998), which has been suggested to exceed the threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The estimate of coefficient α above 0.70, and the composite reliability above 0.70, in table 1 indicate the proper internal consistency (chin, 2010). The item loadings were higher than the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Henseler *et al.*, 2009), and the AVE for each construct ranged from 0.65 to 0.74 (Table 1), which were higher than the suggested threshold of 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2016). These estimates showed proper convergent validity for all constructs.

The result of the reflective measurement model constructs has been presented in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, the values of indices all reach the acceptable amount and indicating a good model fit.

Table 1. Results of measurement properties.

Construct	Items	OL (>0.70)	α (>0.70)	CR (>0.70)	AVE (>0.50)
Identity similarity	My sense of who I am matches my sense of my favorite team.	0.84 ^a	0.83	0.88	0.74
	I find that my values and my favorite team’s values are similar.	0.83 ^a			
	I recognize myself in my favorite team.	0.79 ^a			
Identity Distinctiveness	My favorite team has a distinctive identity.	0.81 ^a	0.81	0.87	0.72
	My favorite team stands out from its competitors.	0.85 ^a			
	My favorite team provides a unique identity.	0.92 ^a			
Identity Prestige	My favorite team helps elevate the image of myself.	0.89 ^a	0.81	0.89	0.69
	My favorite team enhances my self-esteem.	0.91 ^a			
	My favorite team is a first-class, high quality sport team.	0.86 ^a			
Brand preference	I feel that my team’s brand is appealing to me.	0.89 ^a	0.85	0.86	0.66
	I prefer my team to other teams of its kind.	0.78 ^a			
	I prefer the logo, color and features relevant to my favorite team.	0.83 ^a			

	In think that there are justifying reasons to prefer my favorite team.	0.83 ^a			
Brand equity	I consider myself to be loyal to favorite team.	0.82 ^a	0.84	0.84	0.65
	The likely quality of my favorite team is extremely high.	0.88 ^a			
	Some characteristics of my favorite team come to my mind quickly.	0.81 ^a			
	I am aware of my favorite team unique features.	0.92 ^a			

Notes: a: P< 0.05. OL= Outer Loading. α = Cronbach’s Alpha. CR= composite reliability. AVE= Average variance extracted

4.2. Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing Results

In the second step, structural equation modeling was conducted to estimate the t-value for hypothesis testing. The results presented in table 2 revealed that all the proposed hypotheses were empirically confirmed. The findings revealed a positive and significant effect for identity prestige ($\beta= 0.37$; $t= 7.65$; $p<0.001$) on team brand equity, confirming hypothesis 1, Identity similarity showed a positive and significant relationship with team brand equity ($\beta= 0.33$; $t= 9.58$; $p<0.001$), which supported hypothesis 2. For hypothesis 3, identity distinctiveness had positive impact on team brand equity ($\beta= 0.43$; $t= 9.58$; $p<0.001$). A positive relationship was also found between team brand equity and brand preference ($\beta= 0.62$; $t= 16.46$; $p< 0.006$).

Table 2. Structural model test results for hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Path	coefficient	t-value	P	Result
H1	Identity prestige → Brand equity	0.37	7.65	***	Supported
H2	Identity similarity → Brand equity	0.33	6.05	***	Supported
H3	Identity distinctiveness → Brand equity	0.43	9.58	***	Supported
H4	Brand equity → Brand preferences	0.62	16.46	0.006	Supported

*** $p < 0.001$.

According to findings in Table 2, all the proposed hypotheses were found to be statistically significant. All of the structural relationships, t values, and path coefficients, have been presented in Figure 2. As illustrated in Figure 2, all proposed hypotheses were supported by the data.

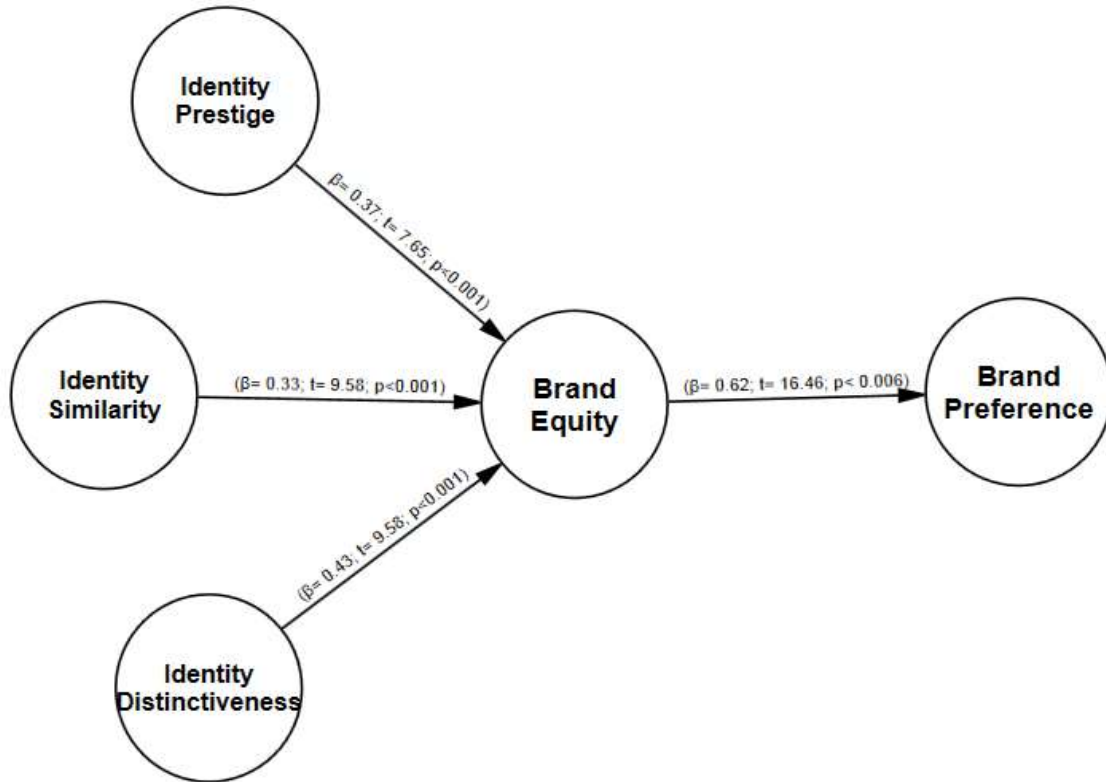


Figure 2. Structural model results

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to test a sport psycho-branding model including self-definitional needs, brand equity, and brand preference in a football setting. A Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling revealed that self-definitional need principles (identity distinctiveness, identity prestige, and identity similarity) were significantly related to the brand equity of FC Persepolis team, and the brand equity was a significant predictor of fans' brand preference. The results also indicated that identity distinctiveness has higher path coefficient on team brand equity than identity prestige, and identity similarity does. The higher path coefficient from identity distinctiveness to team brand equity demonstrated that identity distinctiveness is more effective in creating team brand equity. This study contributes to the burgeoning research on fan-team relationship by introducing self-definitional needs as critical principles for sports marketers to establish a deep relationship with sport fans. The

findings of this study support our basic proposition that self-definitional needs and brand equity interact to affect the brand preference in a sport setting. The current research supports the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) idea that internal factors, such as psychological needs are critical in designating fans' perception of sports brands (Filo *et al.*, 2008; Funk, 2002; Lock *et al.*, 2012).

The results showed that identity prestige of the FC Persepolis football team had a positive and significant effect on the team brand equity. This means that the prestige of sports teams can be defined as a strong predictor of team brand equity. Thus, with strengthening the prestige and credibility, the brand equity of football team brands will increase. This finding is in accordance with the findings of Hansen, Samuelsen, and Silseth (2008) and Wang and Tang (2018). In line with the previous studies that have been conducted in other organizations and market places, the result of this study emphasizes the relationship between identity prestige and brand equity in the football setting. Moreover, the findings revealed that the identity similarity had a positive and significant effect on the brand equity of FC Persepolis football team. This demonstrated that if fans perceive the overlap between their identity and the identity of football teams, they will display higher value for the brand of the football teams. This finding is similar to the findings of Currás-Pérez *et al.* (2009) and Gwinner and Eaton (1999). Therefore, by constructing and presenting an identity that is consistent with the identity of their supporters, football teams will be able to develop their brand equity. The results also indicated that the identity distinctiveness of FC Persepolis football team also had a positive and significant effect on the team brand equity. According to this finding, identity distinctiveness is considered as one of the essential factors affecting team brand equity. If football teams display unique features, they will be able to create certain values in the minds of fans, and this consequently results in higher brand equity. Consistent with the finding of this research, many scholars have emphasized on the effect of distinctiveness on customers' affective and behavioral reactions (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Carlson *et al.*, 2009; Osborne and Cowen, 2002; Kim *et al.*, 2001; He *et al.*, 2012). According to the research finding and based on literature review, providing a distinctive identity for football teams is critical in the process of brand equity development. This study was also set up to investigate the relationship between brand equity and brand preference from the fans' perspective. The results showed that the brand equity of FC Persepolis football team had a positive and significant effect on the brand preference, which was in accordance with the previous findings in other marketing contexts (e.g., De Chernatony *et al.*, 2004; Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004; Wang, 2015; Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995; and Chen & Chang, 2008).

This finding shows that in a sport setting, like other marketing contexts, the brand equity of football teams has a positive and significant effect on brand preference.

The research model provides a lens for understanding the role of psychological needs that contribute to consumers' attitudes (brand equity) and consumers' behaviors (brand preference) in the football setting. This study contributes to sport branding literature in two significant directions: The first contribution lies in the examination of a psycho-branding model in a non-western sport context that extends our understanding of sports brand development in the Asian sport setting. However numerous studies have examined the antecedents of brand equity (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Wang & Tang, 2018; and Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), no researcher has investigated the role of self-definitional needs in predicting brand equity of football teams. Thus, the second and the major contribution of the research is in highlighting the dominant role that self-definitional needs play in determining the brand equity of football teams.

The findings demonstrated the significance of addressing customers' self-definitional needs in the process of brand building. This study also offered a platform for future researchers to move our knowledge of psychological concepts in the sports branding field forward.

Practical Implications

The findings of this research can be used as an orientation for the development of sports brands. The research model proposes strong reasons for sport marketers to address fans' self-definitional needs in sport branding process. The results persuade sport managers to take particular care over fans' self-definitional needs, because these internal needs are significant antecedent to brand equity and brand preference. The consumers' perception of the product is influenced by the values, beliefs, needs, and individual experiences. Hence, the study of the values and attitudes of the fans to leverage the brand equity will be of great importance. Greater awareness of the fans' inner psychological needs provides sport managers and sports marketers with the possibility of strategic planning to introduce proper team identity and consequently to develop brand equity. Brand equity, in turn, leads to the brand preference among football fans. Sport brand managers and marketers need to get a full understanding of how their fans perceive their brand identity. To apply efficient marketing strategies, satisfying the self-definitional needs of sport fans should be incorporated in sport marketing plans.

Sports brands require distinct features to be unique and recognizable in the minds of fans. Employing star players, famous coaches, distinctive symbols for the team, unique logos, along with

distinctive physical properties can distinguish football teams from their rivals and provide a platform for developing team brand equity.

Because the impact of brand identity on brand management has been confirmed in previous studies (Koo, 2009; Schilhaneck, 2012), having a comprehensive brand identity document for all football teams is inevitable. According to this fact that the creation and promotion of brand identity is the starting point in the branding process, sports managers need to look for key activities to introduce an identity that is consistent with fans' self-definitional needs. The appropriate brand's identity must then be determined and communicated to the customer in a way that reinforces the chance of creating powerful customer-brand relationships. Incorporating attractive and prestigious features in identity plan can be highlighted as a major step in boosting the values of football brands. For successful branding, sports managers have to consider fans' demands in designing brand identity patterns. Research findings can be considered as a basis for developing fan-oriented brand equity.

Research Implications

Conducting other experimental and longitudinal researches are required to provide a comprehensive understanding of psychological concepts in sports brand building. Also, this model was conducted in a single Asian country, Iran. Because the brand equity is environmentally sensitive (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), and it varies across different contexts (Ross *et al.*, 2008), Cross-validation or cross-country comparison is offered for future studies. Incorporating control and mediating variables in the proposed research model is recommended to address the issue in more detail. Accordingly, quantitative and qualitative studies with an open-end essay style question are proposed to explain the psychological and sociological aspects of the relationship between fans and sports teams in the process of sports brand building. Extending the model used in this research by including other psychological and sociological concepts can provide a better understanding of brand creation. Participants in this study consisted of football fans who are already involved with their favorite football teams. Therefore, conducting future researches from the perspective of potential fans with less previous involvement is recommended.

Research Limitations

The findings of this study bring forth several theoretical, managerial, and future research implications. However, the findings should be judged cautiously because of some restrictions. First, the research model has been conducted in the football setting in pro league of Iran as a relatively young league that is at the early stages of brand building; this makes generalization limited to the

research context. Thus, testing the model in other countries with the different cultural setting, to extend the level of generalization is offered. Second, the research model investigates only a few psychological marketing concepts. Future studies should incorporate more psycho-branding actions to improve the explanatory power of the psychological concepts in sports branding. Third, sports markets are not typically similar to other markets. In the other words, unlike other markets, sports markets are mostly in charge of delivering intangible products, so this unique nature of sport also makes it difficult to generalize the findings to other markets.

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All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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