

# **Designing a Model of Brand Equity for Sports Industry of Iran: Football Premier League (A Case Study)**

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## **Abstract**

Today's sports have been affected by the globalization process in the world, particularly in Asia. The sports organizations are undergoing major changes. So, professional football is becoming a distinct business in this continent including Iran. Regarding this issue and the importance of brand equity in the economic success of clubs, this research has been conducted to designing a model of brand equity. Using descriptive analytic methods, the quantitative data were collected from various sources. The population consisted of 10 experts and all spectators of 6 Premier League Teams who were present at the stadium. The sample size was 720 subjects who were randomly and equally selected from the fans. Based on the perspectives of brand equity and using the views of experts and fans, finally, the researchers provided a model of brand equity for teams in the Football League in season of 2012-2013. Using factor analysis and structural equation model, the dimensions of brand equity of Football according to their factor loading included: brand loyalty (0.96), brand awareness (0.93), brand Associations (0.89), and perceived quality (0.74).

Keywords: brand – brand equity- Sports – Football

## **Introduction**

In today's world, it seems unlikely anyone to advocate the Classic Perspective in sports. However, the prevailing perspective in today's sports is a multidisciplinary approach which has been proposed recently. It considers sport and especially football a part of economy, society, and culture (Rosca, 2010). According to this perspective, football is a tool in the service of economic development. Therefore, sport and then football is considered an industry that adds value to goods and services. So, if we accept that sport and especially football is an industry, like other industries, it should provide products for sale (Pitts et al 1994). Here the customers-fans- are important.

Therefore, in the wonderful competitive world of sports, no one disputes the importance of customer in the survival of organizations. The customer plays an important role in conducting the brand management strategies by loyalty and repeating the purchases of brand. Researchers have investigated this role from various dimensions. All researches conducted in this field have concluded that all brands should try to establish a strong and durable correlation between customer, his/her attitudes, and his/her mentality. The attitude should be able to guide and control the behavior of fans (Ross et al 2006, Gladden et al, 1998, Gladden and Funk 2002, Kapferer 2004, Keller et al 2008, Chen 2007, Walsh 2008, Yun 2007, Koo 2009). Therefore, the backgrounds that affect fans' attitude should be emphasized.

These records are the basis of brand equity concept which leads to the loyalty of fans in sports, especially football. This is a phenomenon that due to its wonderful results have attracted the attention of club managers and sports marketing. It will lead to increased participation of fans at stadiums, increased ticket sales, media and sponsors attention, television broadcasting rights, merchandise sales, royalties, and etc (James and trail , 2005; Keller, 2003; Shank, 2005; Kerr, 2009; Schilhaneck, 2008; Ramos, 2007; Gao et al, 2009; Bauer et al, 2008).

## **Literature**

Today, sports organizations operate like economic enterprises. They should compete in an environment that profitability has an important role in it. Therefore, the study of brand equity is necessary for them. In this way, they may more efficiently use their financial and non-financial (including brand) resources.

The concept of brand equity was provided by Aaker (1996). In the assessment of brand, he focused on the customer. Aaker considers customer-based brand equity as a set of advantages and disadvantages that creates connection between customer and brand or its symbol; or, he considers it as a collection of assets and liabilities relating to the name and symbol that determine the value of product or service. Aaker determined the dimensions of brand equity including: brand loyalty, brand Associations, brand awareness, and perceived quality. After Aaker, Professor Keller (2003) provided his customers based brand equity based on the knowledge of customer. Keller considers the customer-based brand equity as the consumer's different response due to different consumer knowledge. He stated that brand knowledge includes two dimensions: brand awareness and brand image. The awareness of brand is associated with the strong link between signs and symptoms in the memory and is reflected by the ability of consumer to recognize the brand under different conditions. The brand awareness is divided into active awareness (brand recall) and passive awareness (brand recognition).

Recall is the ability to remember the brand when the consumer is confronted with a product category; it is mainly due to previous experiences of customer. Recognition refers to consumer's ability to identify the brand among competing brands. Keller (2003) considers brand image in relation with brand Associations in consumer memory. However, if these strong, favorable, and unique brand Associations are consistently offered to the consumer with the promotion of goods or services, they will lead to the creation of brand equity. After this process, powerful brand equity will be created that include dimensions of brand awareness, Associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Schilhanek 2008).

Brand equity acts like a differentiator agent of team's brand from competitors. It has many economic and financial benefits for the clubs; it attracts spectators and sponsors and increases broadcasting rights and merchandise and ticket sales (Richelieu & Pons 2008). The success in football is an important determinant of brand equity power and affects significantly the spectators' participation in the stadium (Bauer et al, 2008). It has direct and positive effect on production sales of team (Gladden and Milne, 1999) and leads to great economic success. Robinson and Miller (2003) also confirmed the effect of team's head coach on brand equity and subsequently an increase in revenue from merchandise sales, sponsorship, and increased attendance at stadium. Swieter (2002) divided the share of strong brand equity outcomes in the income of the clubs as visiting the stadium (25%), the right of media broadcasting (32%), sponsorship (24%), and commercial activities such as the sale of goods (7%).

The powerful brands in the world of football gain many interests from domestic market and international market. Instead of focusing on short-term gains, these brands emphasize on long-term and strategic interests in football. Using marketing strategies, they have dominated most of the football market. Real Madrid, Barcelona, Manchester United, AC Milan, and Bayern Munich are the strongest brands in the world of football. For being pioneer in entering the international market, powerful brands such as Real Madrid and Manchester United have gained high income. Even if these brands do not gain high profits, they will be successful because they are introduced to various markets and fans. Although different clubs in different countries have begun marketing their own brand because of high profitability of foreign markets, they should know that it will not be easy to compete with the pioneers and other powerful brands. This should especially be considered by managers of football clubs in Iran. With the starting of privatization process and saturation of domestic market, it seems necessary that clubs think about entering the foreign markets. There are two dominant brands in the market of Iran's football: Esteghlal and Persepolis. However, with professionalization of football and attention to the private sector, Iran's football is moving towards multi-polarity. The teams such as Sepahan Isfahan, Tractor Tabriz, and Foolad Khoozestan play an important role in league.

Given the importance of brand equity, the domination of football on Iran's sport, the high interest of young people to football, and to help managers in understanding the concepts of marketing and branding, this study aims to provide a model of brand equity for Iran's football premier league.

## **Methodology**

Using descriptive analytic methods, the quantitative data were collected from various sources. By studying the literature and the patterns of team's Associations and brand equity and using

content analysis and experts' opinions, the questionnaire was designed and the data were collected and analyzed. Finally, the dimensions of brand equity were obtained from the perspective of fans. According to equity division of Aaker (1996), the combined model of Gladden and Funk (2002) and Keller (2003) was used. Also, various questionnaires (Ross 2006, Gill and Dawra 2007, Yoo and Donthu 2001, Tong and Hawley, 2009, Karlsson 2011, Washburn and Plank 2002) were used.

The stages of designing questionnaire

The first stage: collecting questions from various sources: studying the texts and patterns of brand equity and using the opinions of football fans and experts, a large amount of concepts were collected.

The second stage: refinement based on conceptual sharing: with the help of experts and independently, the shares, repetitions, case studies, and inappropriate answers were excluded from raw response list.

The third step: improvement based on factor analysis: a pilot questionnaire was prepared using the index in the second stage and were distributed among the pilot sample (n = 300). Using factor analysis, the questions that had low factor loading were excluded. In this way, 18 parameters were extracted for the final questionnaire of brand equity.

The study population consisted of two groups: 1) 10 experts on the subject of research. These individuals had experience in the field of sports management, especially football and were the members of faculty. They had administrative positions in football and have conducted multiple works in sport management. This population was regarded for developing the indicators for each dimension, exploring other variables influencing the brand identity, and confirming the validity of survey instrument. 2) All spectators of Iran's Football Premier League who participate at stadium. Based on the background, championship, the number of fans, and the times of participating in the Premier League, the Esteghlal, Perspolis, Sepahan, Tractors, Foolad, and Malavan teams were selected as population. The sample size was determined based on statistical relationships; then, by simple random sampling and with equal proportion, the questionnaires were distributed among the 300 fans at the first stage and 720 fans at the second phase. Given the nominal rate (0.4) and real rate (0.3) of questionnaire return, 2500 questionnaires were distributed in the games of these teams.

*Demographic description of collected samples*

According to the analysis made in the descriptive analysis of the data, the demographic description of the observations in the field of education, age, occupation, and income is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics for demographic variables

Education	Diploma or less	Associate Degree	Bachelor	Master degree or higher	
	281	189	171	79	
Age	20 or less	21 to 30	31 to 40	Higher than 40	
	78	388	185	69	
Occupation	Student	Employee	Self-employed	Unemployed, etc.	
	213	133	185	189	
Income	Less than 400	400-600	600-800	800-1000	Higher than 100
	436	129	103	46	6

### Data Analysis

In the first stage, researchers faced with this question: what are the dimensions of brand equity in a professional soccer team? For answering this question, the triple stages of designing questionnaire was conducted to extract the final indicators. Then in the second stage, this question was proposed: whether the designed dimensions for brand equity of football are confirmed by the football fans? In this phase, the exploratory test of data was conducted to study the data adequacy (KMO) and to conduct confirmatory factor analysis. The results (loyalty 0.80, brand awareness 0.87, brand Associations 0.86, and perceived quality 0.77) were significant (Bartlett's P = 0.001) and confirmed the adequacy of data (Tinsley, 2000 ).

#### *The reliability and validity of research tool*

The measurement model specifies how the latent variables (exogenous and endogenous) are related to observed variables and how they can be assessed by them. Therefore, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used for the criteria. Inter -class correlation coefficient and its 95% confidence interval were used for main and sub categories. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The reliability of brand equity's criteria and categories

The main category	Reliability (ICC), CI= .95	Subcategory	Reliability (ICC), CI=.95	Criteria	Reliability
Brand Equity	0.94 0.93 to 0.95	Loyalty	0.89	Attitudinal	0.91
			0.87 to 0.93	Behavioral	0.94
		Awareness			0.93
		Associations			0.92
		Perceived quality			0.94

The results of confirmatory factor analysis to assess construct validity (convergent and divergent validity) in the form of factor loadings and average variance extracted is presented as the following:

One of the best indicators to demonstrate the validity is the using of extracted variance average and comparing it with  $R^2$ . Given the data presented in Table 3, these points can be noted: 1. all correlation coefficients are significant between equity criteria at 0.01. All variances explained by each sub-criterion are greater than 0.5. That means the convergent validity between all these measures is suitable. 2. All explained variances for each sub-criterion are greater than estimated  $R^2$  which means the divergent validity is adequate between all sub-criteria.

Table 3: The correlation and determination (R) coefficients, average extracted variance (AVE), and the critical ratio (CR) of brand equity criteria

	Attitudinal loyalty	Behavioral loyalty	Awareness	Associations	Perceived quality	AVE
Attitudinal loyalty	1	(0.74) 0.86	(0.81) 0.90	(0.72) 0.85	(0.48) 0.69	0.84
Behavioral loyalty	15	1	(0.79) 0.89	(0.79) 0.89	(0.53) 0.73	0.85
Brand awareness	15	15	1	(0.77) 0.88	(0.58) 0.76	0.82
Brand Associations	15	15	15	1	(0.45) 0.67	0.81
Perceived quality	14	14	14	13	1	0.90

\*

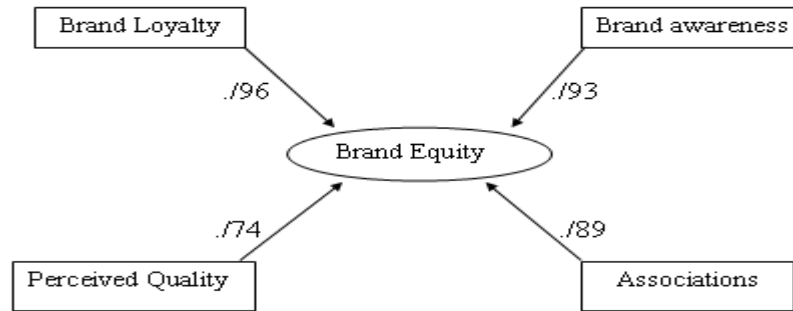
The numbers in the brackets of correlation coefficients (R) and the numbers on the main diagonal matrix are the critical ratio (CR).

As the results of confirmatory factor analysis in Table 7 show, the main issue of equity is measured using four subcategories including brand loyalty (7 items), brand awareness (4 items), brand Associations (4 items), and perceived quality (3 items). The loyalty includes two attitudinal and behavioral dimensions. The factor loadings for each of the indicators are also presented. The results of confirmatory factor analysis in the form of factor loadings and average extracted variance are also shown.

Table 4: factor loadings (FL) Indices, standard error (SE), Critical Ratio (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE)

Main category	Subcategory	F.L		F.L	Items	F.L	S.E	C.R.	AVE
Brand Equity	Brand loyalty	0.96	Attitudinal loyalty	1	AL1	0.9			0.84
					AL2	0.9	0.026	35	
					AL3	0.85	0.028	31	
			Behavioral loyalty	. /56	BL1	0.89			0.85
					BL2	0.9	0.028	37	
					BL3	0.93	0.027	39	
	BL4	0.87			0.029	34			
	Brand awareness	0.93			AW1	0.92	0.035	32	0.82
					AW2	0.86	0.037	28	
					AW3	0.89	0.036	30	
					AW4	0.83			
	Brand associations	0.89			AS1	0.87	0.032	31	0.81
					AS2	0.87	0.031	30	
					AS3	0.87	0.032	32	
					AS4	0.86			
	Perceived quality	0.74			PQ1	0.94	0.021	47	0.90
PQ2					0.90	0.023	42		
PQ3					0.94				

According to Table 5, it can be seen that the critical ratios for all indicators' factor loadings are significant at good level; and for all the relationships in the conceptual model, the relationship between the criteria and categories is significant (P <0.05). In all cases, the calculated factor loadings indicate the variables used in the questionnaire show related components. In addition to confirmatory factor analysis, the content validity was also used to determine the validity of research tool. The proposed equity model of research in the form of a confirmatory factor analysis is presented in the following.



$\chi^2/df = 1/14$ , P-value=0.46, RMSEA=0.07

Figure 1: the confirmed model of team’s brand equity

According to Figure 1, it can be seen that the loyalty with factor loading of 0.96 and perceived quality with 0.74 had the highest and lowest role in team’s brand equity, respectively. Other factors influencing the brand's identity in the order of factor loadings include brand awareness (0.93) and brand Associations (0.89). This analysis is consistent with the equity model of Aaker (1996). So, it can be concluded that brand equity of Iran’s football is a function of team’s brand loyalty, team’s brand awareness, team’s brand Associations, and perceived quality.

In conducting this analysis, a three-level strategy was used. The items of the questionnaire, the criteria of sub categories, and the sub-categories of main category was investigated at first level, second level, and third level, respectively. For brevity, only third-level Indices are considered. According to the outputs of model, however, all indicators suggest the fitness of model. To evaluate the suitability of confirmatory factor analysis for each of the studied categories, the fitness parameters are provided in Table 6.

Table 5: the fitness indicators of team’s brand equity model

RFI	IFI	CFI	NNFI	NFI	RMSEA (90% CI)	SRMR	AGFI	GFI	P	$\chi^2/df$	$\chi^2$	Category
.99	.99	.99	.99	.99	.07 (.03 ; .12)	<.01	.99	.99	.467	1.14	2.28	Equity

$\chi^2$ , chi-square; df, degrees of freedom;  $\chi^2/df$ , normed chi-square; GFI: Goodness of Fit Index; AGFI: Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual;NFI: Normed Fit Index; RFI: Relative Fit Index; IFI: Incremental Fit Index; NNFI: Non-Normed Fit Index; CFI, comparative

According to the values of provided indices for each of these categories, the degrees of freedom for the chi-square is smaller than 5. It confirmed the fitness of models. The fitness indices of GFI, AGFI, NFI, NNFI, RFI, IFI, and CFI were obtained greater than 0.9. Also, the fitness indices of RMSEA and SRMR were obtained smaller than 0.80 and 0.10. They confirmed the validity of each of the models. As a result, these models obtained a sufficient level of fitness. Based on them, the structure of any of the categories can be confirmed (Tinsley, 2000).



## **Conclusion and Discussion**

As can be seen in chart 1, despite the low quality of games, football fans have high loyalty (0.96) to their favorite teams. Then, brand awareness (0.93), brand Associations (0.89), and perceived quality (0.74) have the lowest role in team's brand equity, respectively. It is obvious that this order is not definite and the brand management team must assess these dimensions at different times. However, any changes in the dimensions indicate the success or failure of club's marketing programs in relation to the brand management. Based on the findings, each of these dimensions will be described:

1 - Perceived quality    The perceived quality in football is in direct contact with the wins of team. The perceived quality is the customer's satisfaction of watching a game. In other words, successive success of team indicates the high-quality of team's products. In this study, Mullen and McDonald (1999) also confirmed that the teams do well just in a season have lower perceived quality compared with the teams that has a lot of success in different seasons. Among the factors affecting the perceived quality are the product of team (games), the reputation of team's brand, existence of star players or factors other than famous players in the team, and team performance. These cases cause the fans consider more the chance of a team to win a competition. If the quality of game will be good- even if the teams do not get the suitable result- fans will leave the stadium satisfied. In this case, Esteghlal and Persepolis are the leading teams in Iran because of using famous players and staggering expenses. Teams like Sepahan Esfahan, Malavan Anzali, Tractorsazi Tabriz, and Foolad Khoozestan are known for using local players, especially young indigenous players and their performance in the field. In the season 2012-2013 of football in Iran, Gahar Dorud Lorestan was an exception. Despite not having a proper stadium and other facilities, the fans of this team had high quality.

2 – Brand Loyalty    When a consumer has a positive attitude towards the brand and repeated its demand for the brand based on previous experience, he has brand loyalty (Aaker 1991, Brown et al, 2004). In football, the behavior of loyal fans is influenced by intangible factors associated with the game and the team. The price and other visual characteristics are less attractive to fans. The spectators watch the game not because of the low price of a ticket.

One reason could be related to emotional loyalty of fans to the team instead of rational behavior of fans (Di, 1969). Brand loyalty makes a connection between fans and teams and reduces the possibility of joining the fans to the competing teams through the media and advertising. In this way, a connection may be made between loyalty and equity. It causes the loyal fans have a favorable desire toward brand and products.

As Aaker (1996) refers to the presence of brand name in memory of consumer which will help the recognizing and recalling the brand in various conditions, if the customers recognize and recall the brand in less time and with less effort, they has higher loyalty to it. Therefore, famous brands have competitive advantage because these characteristics (Ramos, 2007). These features are more obvious in the football. If the fans have more awareness of a team or brand, naturally the team will be a familiar team. Many general information and images broadcast every day from the media on these teams; this helps to create competitive advantage. Therefore, the famous brands that their news broadcast every day from the media have more competitive advantage compared with other brands. It is obvious in the League of Iran. The

news and margins of two famous brands in the football of Iran- Esteghlal and Persepolis- form a major part of the contents every day.

It seems the loyalty to teams be conditional. Some fans support a team because of a special player; if for any reason the player be moved to another team, they will support that team. An obvious example is the transfer of Ali Karimi from Persepolis to Tractor Tabriz in 2012-2013 season. It should be noted the majority of Iran's football fans are fanatical fans of their favorite teams. The results showed that the loyalty of football fans in Iran is associated with geographical, cultural, and emotional ties. Rarely, a fan changes his mind about his favorite team. Age and sex is a meaningless topic among the loyal fans of football in Iran; to the extent that an adolescent fan of Esteghlal died because Farhad Majidi said goodbye to football or a one hundred years old woman still speaks about supporting the Perspolis.

3 – Brand Associations In the view of Keller (1993), brand Associations have 3 dimensions: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Brand Associations help in designing brand image, customer decision-making process, resolution, and providing the reason of purchasing to customer (Aaker, 1996). If the different brand Associations be based on past favorable experiences of customers, it will link in consumers' minds with other Associations and a network of feelings and emotions will be created. Therefore, the brand image will be reinforced and brand loyalty will be increased (Yu et al 2000).

In sport and specifically football, the Associations are related to symbolic elements -for example, name and team colors- and emotional experiences while watching a game. It can be said that fans Associations are based on three factors: factors associated with the team, the organization, and the market (Van 2006). The Associations related to the team include internal and external successes of teams and star coaches and players on the team. The Associations associated with the organization include reputation, tradition, collaborating with one particular institution -charity or environmental organization- , and entertainment in the game. Finally, market-related Associations include local, regional, and national media coverage, local region of teams, the fans, and any strong competitors.

The fans of Perspolis speak about past successes, the red color, the type of game, and the great players in the team. The fans of Esteghlal speak about team's class, domestic and Asian championships, the great players in the team, and an interest in blue color. Sepahan fans consider the disciplined style of play and Foolad fans consider the style of play and being youth of teams. It should be noted that other than two popular teams of the Tehran, the major source of Associations in other teams' fans is geographical and cultural ties.

4 - Brand awareness Aaker (1996) considers the brand awareness as the consumer's ability to identify the brand under different conditions. Confirming the opinion of Aaker, Keller (1993) considers the brand awareness as the strong bonds between symptoms in memory of consumer. He states that it includes the recall and recognition. In this study, it was found that many respondents have sufficient familiarity with the league and its teams. Therefore, they had high levels of awareness. Many of them were able to recall the name, logo, and nickname of team and players, uniform numbers, primary colors, second uniform of team, and even the sponsor of team. It is interesting to note that some fans even know the family and behavioral

information of players. It should be noted that television and newspapers play an important role in delivering the information.

#### The limitations and suggestions for future research

In this study, there were several limitations. The limitations of present study include the lack of resources and studies on the subject in new form. In terms of public and organizational problems that usually exist in Iran organizations, it should be said that researcher faced with numerous problems in obtaining the views of experts and fans; but with numerous visits of friends and colleagues, these barriers were removed. Because of the prevailing conditions in the stadium, questionnaires were distributed frequently among the fans. Instead of filling it, many fans used it for other purposes.

According to the results and limitations of the study, it is recommended that clubs and sports teams consider their social responsibility towards the community, the using of cultural traits and values, the required use of customer relationship management system, the using of specialist managers especially in the field of sports marketing and sports economics, the sensitivity of hiring coaches and players who are bound to professionalism, and providing relaxed and cheerful atmosphere in the stadiums. Despite the scientific and practical recommendations, it should be emphasized that these are not practical except with privatization of sports and football. Finally, given that this study only identified the dimensions of customer-based brand equity in football and given the extension of brand in sport, it is recommended that other subjects such as sport needs, brand identity, loyalty, media, and etc be investigate in economic and non-economic dimension from the perspective of fans or sports administrators.

Now by considering these issues, it is expected that the football of Iran move away from partial viewpoints and short-term approaches to brand management issues in football and consider the positive Associations of fans in the design of their programs. Neglecting this issue has led a number of football fans to feel an emotional crisis. So it's natural that not only these teams cannot get a better place, even their former place and fans will be lost and most importantly their existence will be compromised.

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