

Developing a Model of the Impact of Service Quality, Brand's Social Identity and Attachment to the Team on the Loyalty of Football Fans

Ali Benesbordi*

Assistant Professor of Sport Management, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran

Mohsen Esmaeili

M.Sc. Student of Sport Management, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to develop a model of the impact of service quality, brand's social identity and the attachment to the team on the loyalty of Iranian Premier League football team's fans. **Method:** This is an applied study of descriptive-correlation type. The statistical population of this study consisted of the fans of the selected Iranian Premiere Football League. A probability clustering method was used for sampling. Azadi football stadium of Tehran, Imam Reza football stadium of Mashhad, Yadegar Imam Football stadium of Tabriz and Naghsh Jahan football stadium of Isfahan were selected and the questionnaires were distributed in the 12th week of the tournament (2018-2019 season) between fans in above named stadiums. 400 questionnaires were distributed equally in four stadiums and finally, 387 full questionnaires were received and this number was considered as a statistical sample of the research. A researcher-made service quality questionnaire, brand's social identity questionnaire of Boyle and Magnusson (2007), fans' attachment questionnaire of Yoon, Petrick, & Backman (2017) and fans' loyalty questionnaire of Tachis and Tzetzis (2015) were used for gathering information. Structural equation model and LISREL software were used to review and test the hypotheses. **Results:** The result showed that brand's social identity has a significant positive effect on the attachment and loyalty of fans ($P < 0.05$). The attachment of fans also has a significant positive effect on their loyalty ($P < 0.05$). **Conclusions:** It is concluded that for enhancing fan's loyalty, managers of football teams should notice to service quality as a key factor.

Keywords: Attachment, Brand, Loyalty, Service quality, Social

* **Author's e-mail:** a.benesbordi@hsu.ac.ir (**Corresponding Author**);
72mohsenesmaili72@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in developed countries, the sport has turned into a profitable industry, and sports executives are looking for solutions to take advantage of the potentials surrounding them in the best way possible and achieve their sports-economic goals. In this regard, loyal fans play a positive role in developing the economic and non-economic potential of sports teams. Generally, the economic development of the sports industry depends on the public's more attention to this phenomenon; therefore, paying attention to the relationship between sports customers and consumers should have an essential place in the performance of the teams in the field of sport (Kim & Trail, 2010).

The concept of brand loyalty has been widely analyzed in the literature, especially marketing literature. Customer loyalty is one of the strategic goals of organizations because loyal customers typically tend to make more purchases of their desired brand and eagerly advocate it (Ebrahimi, Khalifeh, & Sami Zadeh 2012). They also offer positive verbal advertisements about their favorite brands and are willing to pay a higher price as well (Rashid Lamir, Montazeri & Feize, 2017). Although many definitions and explanations regarding brand loyalty are provided, the best definition of loyalty is presented by Oliver (1999). According to him, loyalty reflects a deep sustained commitment to re-purchasing and being always a customer of a preferred product or service in the future. Brand loyalty is a relatively biased behavioral reaction in purchasing which a person feels towards a brand over time, and this behavior makes it possible for that person to feel a particular tendency towards that brand in the processes of decision making and evaluating the collection of names in his/her mind. This reaction is a function of individual psychological and mental processes (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

In the past, brand loyalty has often been measured simply by repurchasing behaviors, while customer loyalty can be more widely considered, instead of being expressed simply by buying behaviors. Brand loyalty consists of two components: behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Shahrokh Dehdashti, Jafarzadeh Kenari, & Bakhshi Zadeh, 2012).

According to Lager (2010), loyalty to sports teams is similar to customer loyalty to non-sports brands. Researchers believe that loyal

fans are committed to their favorite team, both in terms of attitudes and supportive behaviors (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). In the context of sport, loyal fans have an importance beyond their commitment to repurchasing goods, membership in the team, or watching the matches of their teams (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008). In any organization, asset protection is a sign of proper management. In sports service organizations, fans are considered as the asset because they generate profits and are the source of profit (Hosseini, 2017). Sports organizations can use their loyal fans as a lever to ensure media broadcasting; this, in turn, increases the exposure of the sports team to the public and also enhances the ability of the organization to receive more income and money from the financial sponsor (Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2008).

Conceptualization and subsequent measurements of loyalty in sport have recently attracted a lot of attention in scientific texts (Kaynak et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2001). Individuals prove their loyalty by traveling outside their local area to support their team and players or buying tickets for the season (Yoon et al., 2017).

Loyal fans play a positive role in developing the economic and non-economic potential of sports teams and teams. Therefore, paying attention to this strategic indicator can be very helpful to strengthen the financial capability of the teams. The economic growth of the sports industry depends on the public's more attention to this phenomenon (Kim & Trail, 2010). Therefore, it is essential to recognize the factors affecting the loyalty of the teams' fans. Accordingly, this study seeks to develop a model of factors affecting the loyalty of fans of football teams in Iran. In this regard, we focused on the variables of service quality, brand's social identity and fans' attachment by studying the literature review and investigating the research gap.

Service quality is one of the variables emphasized by many researchers regarding the factors affecting customer loyalty. Quality is one of the most essential criteria for service evaluation; a broad concept that different parts of the organization are committed to, and aims to increase the overall efficiency of the organization with minimal cost to enhance its competitiveness, so that this whole set is adjusted to the desired features of the customer (Choi, 2001). Service quality can be defined as "the overall attitude or judgment of customers regarding the

services received.” The quality of services or goods plays a fundamental role in the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the clients. Thus, progressive and transcendental organizations always seek to ensure the satisfaction of their clients (Hatami & Akbari Yazdi, 2017).

Service quality is a function of the relationship between the customer's basic expectations and his/her experience and understanding of the services before and after receiving them. Unlike the quality of goods, the quality of services is assessed based on the service delivery process, as well as the outcome of the services delivered. Every customer call is a moment for building trust and an opportunity to make the customer satisfied or dissatisfied. Customer satisfaction with a service can be defined by comparing the customer's expectations of the services with his/her perception of the services delivered. When a customer's expectations of the services match his/her perception of the services delivered, service quality has been realized (Malekzadeh, Asghari, & Sharbaf Aydahi, 2015).

Findings have shown that in the last two decades, interest in the service quality had reached the sports industry as well, so today, service quality is one of the most important headlines in the field of service management and sports marketing. As the service sector enters the sports industry as a highly competitive service industry, excellent service is a prerequisite for the survival and success of any sports team. Thus, understanding and meeting expectations, communicating efficiently with customers, and finally creating and presenting value to them is one of the most important topics of interest among researchers and managers of service centers in the sports industry (Hosseini, 2017).

In the sports industry, the satisfaction of the audience can bring significant benefits to sports teams as sports teams, and particularly football teams like other service providers should consider audience satisfaction as an essential criterion for evaluating their performance. Therefore, it's necessary for their teams and their managers to make their best efforts to improve the quality of services provided to the fans as the core customers and also the most important source of income for the teams and provide conditions for strengthening and developing their fan base by making them feel satisfied (Jaberi, Soltan Hosseini, Naderian Jahromi, & Khazaei Pool, 2014).

In case of a sports team, the appearance of teams and buildings, landscapes, cars, furniture and chairs, sports equipment, the staff of the organization, signs, written material and other visible signs are all tangible evidence, showing the service quality of a sports team (Hassanzadeh, 2005). Literature and the theories in the field of sports marketing state that sporting products have two aspects: 1) the main aspect that includes the features related to team play, such as player performance, game quality, and team features (Yoshida and James, 2011: 2) an environmental or supportive aspects that includes elements related to amenities and facilities, the stadium, environment and support services and the interaction between the audience and the team staff (Theodorakis, Alexandris, Tsigilis, & Karvounis, 2013). Therefore, the quality of the team inside the pitch (sports field), the quality of environment (facilities), and the quality of staff interaction with audiences are the three dimensions of service quality in this research.

Nowadays, brand and trademark are one of the most essential marketing topics facing all organizations, including sports teams; its importance is to the extent that brand management has turned into an independent discipline in scientific circles. Economically and strategically, brands are the valuable assets of organizations, and even without exaggeration, one of their most valuable assets. In recent years, researchers have concluded that the real value of products and services for companies is not within these products and services, still value exists in the minds of the actual and potential customers, and it is a brand that brings real value into the minds of customers (Keller, 2012).

One of the methods to strengthen customers' loyalty to the brand is to develop a brand identity. Brands introduce themselves to customers through their identity and differentiate themselves from other competitors. According to Kapferer (2008), having an identity, which is being yourself as the way you are and following your fixed plan, but individual plan The process of creating brand identity includes developing the mindsets that the brand intends to create and ensuring the identification of the brand by the customer and linking it to a specific category of need. Brand Identity is a unique collection of brand associates, which indicates making a promise with the customers (Ghodeswar, 2008). Brand identity needs to be integrated with its customers, distinct from the brand of competitors, and it also should

show its organization as desired so that it can be useful. The effectiveness of brand identity means establishing a stable relationship with the customer, a relationship that distinguishes that brand from other competitors, and determines what the company wants to do in the long run (Shahrokh Dehdashti et al., 2012). A key factor for brand success is to understand how to develop a brand identity - what a brand wants to accomplish and how to adequately express that identity. A brand can be considered as having a distinct identity when it delivers relevant, durable, and believable promises concerning the value of a product, service or organization, and also show the source of these promises (Ebrahimipour, Amirnezhad, Hosseini, & Kalashi, 2016). The proper identity of a sports team leads to the high personal commitment of its fans and their emotional conflict with their favorite team, which mixes both psychological and behavioral aspects (Rashid Lamir, Montazeri & Feize, 2018). Previous researches, such as the study of Boyle and Magnusson (2007), introduced four dimensions for the social identity of a sports team. In this regard, it is argued that the feeling of belonging and bonding among a small group can be extended to a larger group. The link between a team and its fans is defined as group prominence, and the link between a team and a city or a community and the symbolism of a sports team for a community is defined as a group's sociability. Additionally, the history and stadium of a sports team have been introduced as other dimensions of its social identity.

Another concept in the field of sports is the attachment of fans (Yoon et al., 2017). Attachment is defined as an emotional relationship characteristic by durability and resistance to change as its main feature and can affect the perception and behavior of individuals (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Researchers emphasize that attachment can lead to people's resistance to change and enables a brand (sports team) to maintain their fans, even in spite of poor performance (Keller, Apéria, & Georgson, 2008). In the research literature, three dimensions have been introduced for fan attachment: significance (symbolic meaning), knowledge (functional information) and impact (emotional response). Significance refers to the importance of the team for a fan and that others see him as a symbol of interest in that team. Knowledge refers to the level a person pursues a team and its players and his information about his/her favorite

team and the influence on the emotional reactions of that person towards the team (Yoon et al., 2017).

According to Gladden and Funk (2001), attachment is a psychological relationship between an individual and a sports team. Funk and James (2006) conceptualized a psychological chain and argued within its context that team engagement is a valuable structure; because it can maintain and strengthen the interconnection between a team and the attitudes and beliefs of its fans. It means that fans have more commitment creating a self-concept through a sport or team and have more links to their favorite team. Given the above explanations, this research seeks to develop a conceptual model of relationships between service quality, brand identity, attachment, and loyalty of fans. In the sports industry, each sports team can be considered as a brand and fans as the customers; thus, brand managers in this industry can use branding strategies; for example, use the leverage of trust in the trademark through social responsibility, customer satisfaction and high-quality services for their customers (Filo, Funk, & Alexandris, 2008); also they can use the factors of trademark reminding and team supporting to make their fans loyal, concerning the temporary factors affecting loyalty, such as the presence of stars and the excitement, as well as the long-term influential factors such as the performance and fulfilling the commitments of the teams (Ebrahimipour et al., 2016). In today's football, fans play the most fundamental role in advancing national and team teams. Without an audience, football has no appeal, and teams with more loyal audiences are generally more successful. If we consider the fans' behavior in sports, we find that they are a group who are involved in the competition. They are wearing the color of their favorite team's uniform, probably painting their bodies with the same color. The presence of this audience at the stadiums to encourage their favorite team not only increases the appeal and excitement of the competition but also psychologically influences the performance of teams and players. Additionally, income in football is most likely depends on the advertising of big companies; for advertising, these companies look for a team that has a lot of fans and many people watch their games so that eventually a lot of people will see the company's ads (Ebrahimipour et al., 2016). In this regard, this study can enhance the understanding of sports team managers about the importance of this topic and how to increase the loyalty of fans.

The research argues that understanding the efforts of team players and officials to satisfy the fans has a positive impact on the team identity, attachment, and, ultimately fans' loyalty. Also, when the interaction between customers and the organization providing services is high, the organization is aware of the problems and needs of its customers and tries to overcome these deficiencies. In general, customer satisfaction with service quality has a substantial impact on repurchasing intention and, generally, building identity and loyalty to the brand (Hatami and Akbari Yazdi, 2017). In this regard, the results of Hatami and Akbari Yazdi's research on fans of Perspolis football team (2017) show that there is a significant relationship between the quality of services and its components with the social identity of the brand. The results of Yousefi Kalati's research (2015) reveal that game quality and service quality have a positive effect on the loyalty of the fans of the Samen al-Hajj handball team in Sabzevar. The results of research conducted by Khazaei Pool Dehghan, Jamkhaneh, Jaberi, and Sharifkhani (2018) show that the quality of electronic services has a positive effect on fans' loyalty. The results of research conducted by Theodorakis et al. (2013) indicate that service quality has a positive effect on the satisfaction and behavioral goals of football fans. The results of researched conducted by He, Li, and Harris (2012) also show that service quality has a positive effect on brand identity and brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is also affected by brand identity. Concerning the brand's social identity, it is argued that building a proper identity has a positive effect on the attachment and loyalty of sports team fans. Burmann, Jost-Benz, and Riley (2009) emphasize that in contrast to concepts such as customer trust, which is an external organizational factor, brand identity is an internal organizational factor that plays an essential role in shaping customer loyalty. Trademarks that determine and distinguish their identity and goals and offer a tangible and friendly face are capable of having a rich, beneficial relationship with their customers; not only they will conquer a part of consumers' hearts and minds, but also a part of everyday life (Ebrahimi et al., 2012). In this regard, the results of researches conducted by Shahrokh Dehdashti et al., (2012) reveal that brand identity has a positive effect on brand loyalty. Nguyen, Leclerc, and LeBlanc (2013) argue that trust in brand identity and its image increases customer loyalty. The results of researches conducted by Bayrami Igdirdir et al. (2016) show that brand identity has a

positive effect on the reputation of the football team. The results of researches conducted by Ebrahimi Pour et al. (2015) on the fans of Esteghlal and Persepolis teams show that brand identity has a positive relationship with the loyalty of the fans.

Regarding fans' attachment, this research also argues that the attachment of fans has a positive effect on their loyalty. In this regard, previous studies emphasize that attachment to a team is one of the determining factors for attitudinal and behavioral loyalty in popular sports (Yoon et al., 2017). Funk & James (2006) argue that the loyalty of sports customers can be strengthened through the emotions, knowledge, and symbolic value of a sports team, and these variables are consistent with the dimensions of attachment.

Despite the high potential for revenue-generating, Iranian Premier League football teams are often in financial trouble. In sports marketing literature, one of the most important ways of generating revenue is to use fan capacity. Fan loyalty, meanwhile, is a prerequisite for revenue-generating through fans. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to identify the factors affecting the loyalty of fans in Iranian Premier League teams, specifically to investigate the impact of service quality, brand social identity and team attachment on loyalty of fans. To that end, the model of Figure 1 was proposed to investigate the purpose of the study.

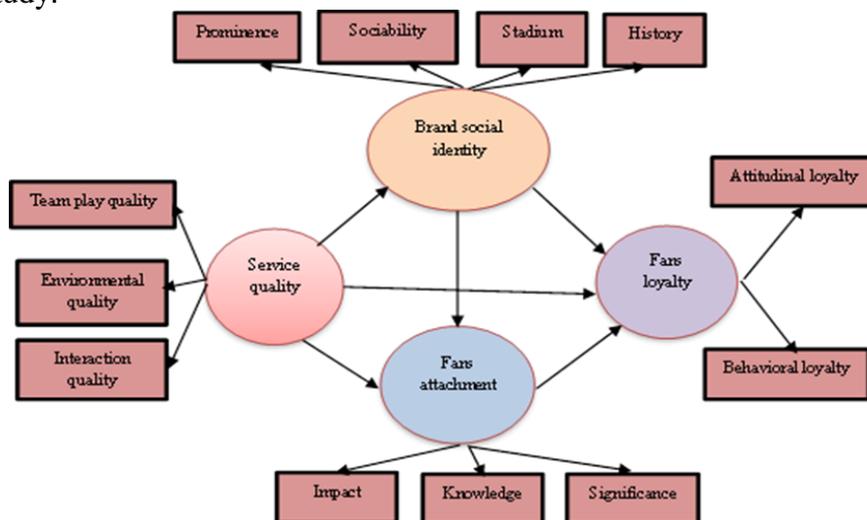


Figure 1: Conceptual model of research

METHOD

The method of research is descriptive and correlation Kind. The statistical population of the study consisted of selected fans of the Iranian Premier Football League. A probability clustering method was used for sampling. Azadi football stadium of Tehran, Imam Reza football stadium of Mashhad, Yadegar Imam Football stadium of Tabriz and Naghsh Jahan football stadium of Isfahan were selected and the questionnaires were distributed in the 12th week of the tournament (2018-2019 season) between fans in these stadiums. According to the Krjsay and Morgan sample size determination table, for a population of more than 10,000 members, 384 members are needed. For this purpose, 400 questionnaires were distributed equally in four stadiums and finally, 387 full questionnaires were received, and this number was considered as a statistical sample of the research. A researcher-made questionnaire was used to measure the service quality because the researcher did not find a suitable questionnaire for research purposes. Quality of the team's play and performance, the quality of the environment, and the stadium which the team practice and play, and the quality of interaction between team officials and fans, was three dimensions of service quality questionnaire. The questionnaire of Boyle and Magnusson (2007) was used to measure the brand's social identity. This questionnaire has consisted of 4 dimensions: Prominence, sociability, Stadium, and History. The questionnaire of Yoon et al. (2017) was used to measure fans' attachment (Impact, Knowledge, and Significance), and the questionnaire of Tachis and Tzetzis (2015) was used to measure fans' loyalty (Altitudinal and behavioral). All questionnaires were based on a Likert seven-point scale. 11 sport management specialists confirmed content and face validity of the questionnaires. The reliability of questionnaires was confirmed by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Table 1). The structural equation approach and confirmatory factor analysis have been used to test the research model. Since the structural equation model is a comprehensive statistical approach to test the hypotheses regarding the relationships between observed variables and latent variables, we can test the acceptability of theoretical models in specific societies through this approach. Also, since most of the variables in managerial researches are either latent or hidden, the need to use these models is increasing day by

day. Therefore, the structural equation model has been used in this study, to explain the desired relationships and test research purposes. For this, Lisrel software was used.

Table 1: Reliability of the measured components

| № | Variable | Cronbach's alpha | Row | Variable | Cronbach's alpha |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|-----|---------------------|------------------|
| 1 | Team play quality | 0/845 | 7 | Team's history | 0/871 |
| 2 | Environmental quality | 0/842 | 8 | Team's significance | 0/911 |
| 3 | Interaction Quality | 0/831 | 9 | Fans' knowledge | 0/883 |
| 4 | Prominence | 0/843 | 10 | Emotional impact | 0/893 |
| 5 | Sociability | 0/892 | 11 | Behavioral loyalty | 0/865 |
| 6 | Team's stadium | 0/849 | 12 | Attitudinal loyalty | 0/858 |

RESULTS

The sample demographic information is presented in table 2. As can be seen, a higher percentage of football team's fans in this research were 20-30 years old. Fans with a bachelor's degree were more than others. Attendance between 4 to 6 games per season was more than others, and about thirty percent of respondents have been a fan of their team more than ten years.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of respondents

| Variables | Frequency | Frequency percentage | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|------|
| Age | Under 20 years old | 58 | 15 |
| | 20-30 years old | 145 | 37.5 |
| | 31-40 years old | 103 | 26.6 |
| | 41-50 years old | 64 | 16.5 |
| | Older than 50 years | 17 | 4.4 |
| Education | High school diploma | 98 | 25.3 |
| | Associate Degree | 44 | 11.4 |
| | B.Sc. | 181 | 46.8 |
| | M.Sc. | 62 | 16 |
| | Ph.D. | 2 | 0.5 |
| amount of attendance (per season) | 1-3 games | 123 | 31.8 |
| | 4-6 games | 174 | 45 |
| | 7-10 games | 79 | 20.4 |
| | More 10 games | 11 | 2.8 |
| | Less than 1 year | 9 | 2.3 |
| Duration of being football team's fan | 1-3 years | 84 | 21.7 |
| | 4-6 years | 106 | 27.4 |
| | 7-10 years | 73 | 18.9 |
| | More than 10 years | 115 | 29.7 |

After collecting information, to determine which measurement metrics (patent variables) are acceptable to measure latent variables, it is necessary to examine all the observed variables separately that are related to latent variables. The general indexes of fit were evaluated for measurement models (confirmatory factor analysis) Lisrel software. The indexes of fit for confirmatory factor analysis were at the desired level for all the latent variables and all measures had a factor load of more than 0.5 (Results were not submitted for brevity), indicating that the measurement indexes (visible variables) can measure the latent variables accurately.

As stated before, structural equations and Lisrel software have been used to test the research hypotheses. As shown in Fig. 2, the structural model regression coefficients for latent variables and factor loadings of the measurement model for patent variables are investigated. Table 3 shows the fit indexes of the model, which indicates the proper fit of the model.

Table 3: Fit indexes of the model

| Index | Standard value | Obtained value |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| χ^2/df | Less than 3 | 2/85 |
| RMSEA | Less than 0/08 | 0/073 |
| SRMR | Less than 0/09 | 0/040 |
| CFI | More than 0/9 | 0/98 |
| NFI | More than 0/9 | 0/97 |
| NNFI | More than 0/9 | 0/98 |
| IFI | More than 0/9 | 0/98 |
| RFI | More than 0/9 | 0/96 |

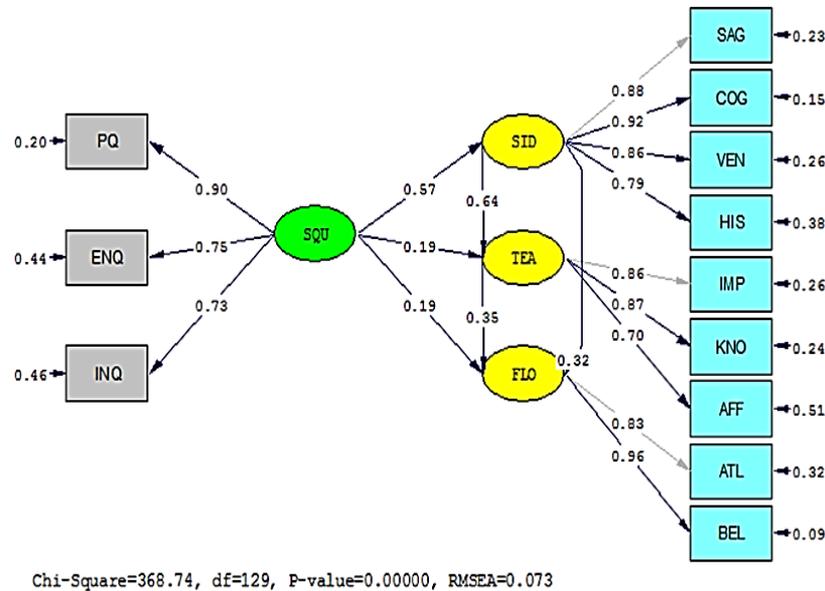


Figure 2: Conceptual model of research in the case of standard coefficients

The first hypothesis predicted that service quality has a significant positive effect on fans' loyalty. Based on the obtained results, service quality affects fans' loyalty at the rate of 0.19. Given that the t statistic for this relation is 2.56 and significant ($P < 0.05$), so the first hypothesis is confirmed at 95% confidence level. The second hypothesis predicted that service quality has a significant positive effect on a brand's social identity. Based on the results, service quality affects a brand's social identity at the rate of 0.57. The statistic for this relation is 7.55 and significant ($P < 0.05$), then the second hypothesis is confirmed at 95% confidence level. The third hypothesis predicted that service quality has a significant positive effect on fans' attachment. Based on the results, service quality affects fans' attachment at the rate of 0.19. The statistic for this relation is 2.53 and significant ($P < 0.05$), then the third hypothesis is confirmed at 95% confidence level. The fourth hypothesis predicted that the brand's social identity has a significant positive effect on fans' attachment. Based on the results, brand's social identity affects fans' attachment at the rate of 0.64. Given that t statistic for this relation is 8.08 and significant ($P < 0.05$), then the fourth hypothesis is confirmed

at 95% confidence level. The fifth hypothesis predicted that a brand's social identity has a significant positive effect on fans' loyalty. Based on the results, brand's social identity affects fans' loyalty at the rate of 0.32. The statistic for this relation is 3.25 and significant ($P < 0.05$), then the fifth hypothesis is confirmed at 95% confidence level. The sixth hypothesis predicted that fans' attachment has a significant positive effect on fans' loyalty. Based on the results, fans' attachment affects their loyalty at the rate of 0.35. The statistic for this relation is 3.45 and significant ($P < 0.05$), then the sixth hypothesis is confirmed at 95% confidence level.

DISCUSSION

In today's marketing activities, communication with customers is central, and attracting customers' attention has become a priority for all companies. One of the main marketing activities is to maintain customers and increase their loyalty to the products and services of the organization. In competitive marketing, the ultimate goal of brands is to achieve customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is a concept that has been studied in many types of research and has recently been considered in the field of sports management. In the field of sport, fans' loyalty is the equivalent of consumer loyalty in the marketplace. Generally, the importance of developing a fan base in football teams to develop the economy and the need to prepare effective strategies for strengthening the team brand and fan loyalty in Iranian football teams has made it inevitable to study the variables related to the relationships between teams and fans in the Premier Football League. The literature on the development of fan loyalty has examined and studied the psychological, sociological and economic variables as prerequisites and factors affecting the development of loyalty and, consequently the development of sports brands. This research attempts to develop a new model of factors affecting the loyalty of football fans by studying literature and examining the existing gaps in this field. Accordingly, we focused on the variables of service quality, brand's social identity, and fans' attachment. All fans of Iranian football teams in the premier league were studied as the statistical population. The research results showed that service quality has a positive effect on fans' loyalty. The results of this research are consistent with the results of researches by Yousefi Kalati (2015), Khazaei Pool et al. (2018), Theodorakis et al. (2013) and He et al. (2012).

A review of the second hypothesis showed that service quality has a positive effect on brand's social identity. The results of this research are consistent with the results of studies by Hatami and Akbari Yazdi (2017) and He et al. (2012). In general, service quality is increasingly important for the team to give identity to its brand. The results also showed that service quality has a positive effect on fans' attachment. Therefore, the quality of team's play and performance, the quality of the environment and the stadium which is the place for the team to practice and play, and the quality of interaction between team officials as three dimensions of service quality can lead to the development of brand's social identity, attachment and loyalty of fans. The quality of game and the performance of the team within the pitch are factors that technical personnel and players are responsible for. Still, the quality of interaction and the quality of environmental services are in direct control of the team and sport officials of football federation of Iran and premier league. Therefore, technical personnel and players can develop brand's social identity of the team, attachment and loyalty of the fans by team excellence, fast and aggressive playing, showing high technical quality on the pitch, exciting and viewer-friendly game, and accountability on the pitch, fighting and playing possessively and ultimately getting good results throughout the season. The team and sports officials of football federation of Iran and premier league also have to pay attention that the high quality of environmental services, including the physical attractiveness of the stadium, comfortable seating for watching the game, the cleanliness of the stadium, the availability of drinking water and an excellent buffet at the stadium, providing proper facilities for parking cars, suitable public transport, the availability of the stadium, the possibility of booking tickets and the convenient entry and exit, and providing security at and around the stadium are among the factors that strengthen the brand's social identity, attachment and loyalty of the fans. Regarding the quality of the interaction, one should also consider such things such as respecting the wishes of fans, the possibility of communicating with the team's officials and giving opinions, officials fulfilling their promises, involving the fans in important decisions of the team such as the selection of managers and players' respect for the fans during the game and outside the stadium.

The results of this study showed that brand's social identity has positive effects on attachment and loyalty of football fans. The results of this study are consistent with the results of Ebrahimipoor et al. (2016), Shahrokh Dehdashti (2012), Rashid Lamir et al. (2017), Yousefi Kalati (2015) and Nguyen et al. (2013). Also, the results indicated that fans' attachment had a positive effect on their loyalty. The results of this research in this field are consistent with the results of Yoon et al. (2017). Accordingly, sports team officials should pay more attention to the concept of brand identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Iranian Premier League football teams can increase the attachment and loyalty of their fans by giving identity to their brand and attracting fans, gaining fans' trust in the team, building a two-way relationship between the team and the fans, fans' proximity to the team and creating a commitment to the team; so that these fans can more attend the stadium and make money for the team. In this regard, managers need to use techniques that will lead to stimulation and alertness of the fans and will positively affect their attitude or feeling about the team's brand. Regarding the brand's social identity of the team, officials should develop the sense of identification or affiliation of fans with their beloved team and also the sense of membership in a social group through different programs and by preventing controversies and tensions on the platforms through fan teams and strengthening the solidarity between these fans. Meanwhile, they should highlight the importance of the presence of a team as a representative of the city in different competitions through various cultural programs and with social responsibility to be recognized as one of the symbols of their city eventually. In this context, highlighting the history of the team and its impressive results in the past, more emphasis on the symbols, traditions, stories and background of teams and the revival of the values and traditions of teams with a long history can help give identity to the team's brand. Undoubtedly, every research has limitations that make conducting that research difficult. These limitations vary according to the subject and community of the study. The study has also faced barriers that are presented to the next researchers for their information and use: all indexes are measured using the respondent's responses, which intrinsically depend on that person's mindset. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to use more impartial data or

multiple sources of information in future researches. The statistical population of the study consisted of all fans of football teams in the premier league. The differences between different environments and regions make it necessary to consider the relevance of obtained results regarding other teams and use them more cautiously. Researchers can test the developed model for other teams and their fans to understand and examine the generalizability of the findings.

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