Brand Management Model in Sport Industry of Iran: Professional Football League Case

Vajihe Javani\textsuperscript{a}, Mohammad Ehsani\textsuperscript{b}, Mojtaba Amiry\textsuperscript{c} Hashem Kozechian\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a}Ph.D Candidate of Sport Management, Department of Physical Education, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran
\textsuperscript{b}Ph.D in Sport Management, Department of Physical Education, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran
\textsuperscript{c}Ph.D in Management, Faculty of Management, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran
\textsuperscript{d}Ph.D in Sport Management, Department of Physical Education, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

The study aims to examine brand management model in Iran’s professional Football League (2011-2012) with emphasis on brand image. The study was descriptive-survey one. A sample of Iranian professional football league fans (N=911) responded 4 items questionnaire. A structural equation model (SEM) test with maximum likelihood estimation was performed to test the relationships among the research variables. The analyses of data showed three dimensions of brand image influenced on fan’s brand loyalty of which the attitude was the most important. Benefits and attributes were placed in the second and third rank respectively. According to Results, brand image play a pivotal role between Iranian fans brand loyalty. Create an attractive and desirable brand image in the fans mind increases brand loyalty. And due to, revenue and profits increase through ticket sales and products of club and also attract more sponsors.

Keywords: Brand management, Sport Industry, Brand image, fans;

© 2013 Published by SSBFNET

1. Introduction

Nowadays, Sport managers use marketing strategies and quality management especially through emphasize on new concept of “voice customer” (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001). Following such strategies, managers consider brand of teams as the basis of marketing strategies for attracting customer loyalty and fans loyalty in particularly (Gladden and Funk, 2002). According to these strategies, many professional sport clubs are trying to strengthen their teams’ brand and promote them even in the other countries. For example, Manchester United football club set off outlets for selling its’ memorabilia and goods in some countries in Asia on the basis of strong brand. Brand is a name, term, expression, sign, mark, symbol, design or combination of them which is used to introduce the products and services to sellers or a group of vendors and distinct them from other competitors. Brand is sellers’ commitment to present specific services and advantages to the customers (Cotler, 2006, P 482).

According to Aaker’s, a superior brand means better quality of the products for the customers. When a customer buys a product with a superior brand, she/he believes that she/he gains something valuable in return of payment (Heidarzadeh and et al, 2007). Keller (1993) suggested: “the successful and powerful brand has two human characteristics; heart and mind. There for, powerful and successful brands can affect the people’s heart and mind”. Construction of a powerful brand is; awareness of brand, brand loyalty and perceived quality lead to creation certain value for a brand which is very important for the companies (Dunne and Moulden, 2009: p 8). In addition, having a powerful brand and establishing it in customers’ mind is a big reason to select a product or service by customers. Brands create a particular personality for costumers through including them in a certain group. For example, wearing a
shirt of certain team is a sign that shows a person belongs to the group of respective team’s fans. Consumers do not pay attention to whole characteristics of a brand immediately. But, they just regard a part of them before they decide to buy special options (brands) (Suterland, 2004: P 30). Under such circumstances, customers may have concerns regarding the acquiring company’s ability to maintain the quality or image of the superior brand.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Image

Definition of brand image refers to the set of associations linked to what brand hold in consumers memory (Keller, 1993). These associations refer to any aspect of brand within the consumer’s memory (Aaker, 1996). This definition of brand image is used to show consumers’ brand cognition. Brand image could be observed in the variations shapes and characters of a product and service or other aspects of them in the consumers’ mind. Basically, brand image describes the consumer’s thoughts and feelings towards the brand (Roy and Banerjee, 2007). Brand image includes a consumer’s knowledge and beliefs about the brands. And products and services are easy to recognize by the brand image. Brand image represents the personal symbolism that consumers associate with the brand, which comprises of all then descriptive and evaluative brand-related information (Iversen and Hem, 2008). When consumers have a favorable brand image, the brand’s messages have a stronger influence in comparison to competitor brand messages (Hsieh and Li, 2008). Therefore, brand image make unique opportunities to represent one of the few constants in fans’ perceptions. So, brand image is used to present a consistent and stable club appearance to fans and the public by sport marketers.

According to the Keller’s customer-based brand equity model consists of two components: brand awareness and brand image. Brand image is the cumulative product of brand associations in the consumer’s mind. Attributes, benefits and attitudes have been considered as the dimensions of brand associations (Keller, 1993). Since brand image contains brand associations (Bauer and et al, 2008), in this article, we only measure brand image which consist of three dimensions; Attributes, benefits and attitudes.

Attributes relate to the intrinsic properties of the brand that characterize a product or service. Attributes show the customers’ mind about the product or service. And they are reasons for purchase and consumption of product or service (Keller, 1993). The subscales of attributes that create connection among fans and a particular team are successes, star players, head coach, management, logo design, stadium, regional importance and tradition (Gladden and Funk, 2001; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, and et al, 2004; Capella, 2001).

Benefits are personal values that connect customers to brand attributes and provide the main needs and wants of customers (Keller, 1993). Gladden and Funk (2001) suggested benefits as customer’s mind concepts and values in relation to products or services (Gladden and Funk, 2001). Moreover, benefits serve as motivation for fan behavior (Hsiang, 2011). In sport industry, the subscales of benefits that relate fans to particular team include; escape, fan identification, peer group acceptance and nostalgia (End and et al, 2003; Funk, and et al, 2004; Gladden and Funk, 2001; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Wann and et al, 2004).

Attitudes are consistent and positive or negative feelings of consumers about a product or service. Also, attitudes conduct consumer behaviors (Funk, 2001). Attitudes are stable desired or undesired reactions of customers to a brand that are constructed by brand image in customers’ mind. Attitudes can also be defending as solely affective constructs that reflect predispositions toward an object, which might lead to overt behavior (Holden and Lutz, 1992). Gladden and Funk (2002) mentioned that attitudes consist of; importance, knowledge and affective reactions. Funk (2001) believed importance, awareness, information, and effective interactions to a team are powerful predictive factors of fans’ commitment to the professional baseball teams.

Brand image’ dimensions are the good descriptive variables of brand loyalty concept (Bauer and et al, 2004; Bauer and et al, 2005). Moreover, brand image create value for companies and customers (Chen, 2001). Also, in sport industry, it is very important factor for perceiving customers’ brand image and attracts customers’ loyalty (Bauer and et al, 2004).

2.2. Fans Brand loyalty

Loyalty is the result of interactions between outside negative changes in the environment and inside commitment of consumers (Heere and Dickson, 2008). Oliver (1999) defined brand loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand set
purchasing, despite the situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior”. So, the prominent character of a brand is illustrated by the amount of its customers’ loyalty.

In sport industry, a sport team can be regarded as a brand and the fans are considered as the customers. So, fans’ brand loyalty to sport teams is similar to customers’ brand loyalty in the other industries (Lager, 2010). Although most of the other industries in which customers have little loyalty to low quality brand, the fans of professional sport teams are very loyal to their team even if their favorite team doesn’t play well (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001).

Fans’ brand loyalty is the fans’ positive attitudes to a brand, fans’ brand attachment, and his/her purchasing intention in the future. So, if the fans become loyal to a brand, they will pay attention for it and the marketing program will be successful. In addition, fans brand loyalty brings constant competitive advantage (Dunne and Moulden, 2009). According to Pareto’s principle, the”20-80” rule, 20 percent of loyal fans provide 80 percent of revenues resources (Mullin and et al, 1993). Moreover, loyal fans aren’t just costumers and supporters, because they are a part of unique product of the club, as if, they are overwhelmed by their teams play. Fans’ brand loyalty that forms based on team identification (Richardson, 2004) explain special behaviors of fans’. Not only, they wear the color of the team, but also sometimes dye their bodies the same color (Vaezmosavi, 2007, P 301).

Fans brand loyalty facilitates clubs’ marketing process, because it plays an important roles; First, brand loyalty ensures a more stable following even when the core product's performance falters (i.e. the team has a losing season). Second, brand loyalty creates good opportunities to have brand extensions beyond the core product (Gladden and Funk, 2001). And third; Supporting of teams and clubs by more loyal fans is a guarantee for constant incomes by increasing market share and attracting more sponsorship investment. Thereby, Successful companies prefer to advertise their products through teams which have more fans. Also, they must perceive fans’ psychological relationship and involvement with their favorite team (Wann and Schrader, 2000). Managers should pay more attention to loyal fans and brand to acquire long-term sustainable advantages (Dick and Basu, 1994).

In Iranian sport industry, there is a big gap in academic studies about fans’ brand loyalty. Consider to the role of fans’ brand loyalty, the researchers decided to study fans’ brand loyalty in the Iranian professional sports industry. So, researchers surveyed the influence of brand image dimensions on brand loyalty among the fans of Iranian professional football league as the most popular sport league of Iran. Thus, the following hypotheses were drawn; a) Brand image attributes effect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, b) Brand image benefits affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, and C) Brand image attitudes affects fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran. The results of this study provided good guidelines for the executives of the clubs to select appropriate strategies to attract fans brand loyalty in order to help the clubs development.

3. Methodology

This research aims to study brand management based on brand image in professional football league of Iran. This study is a survey- descriptive one. The participants were the fans of professional football league of Iran in the 2011-2012 seasons. The 911 numbers of fans participated at the study by responding the 4 items questionnaire which contains 68 questions by using Likert scale; from completely agree to completely disagree respectively.

In this study, the validity and reliability were examined by the researchers. First, the questionnaire was reviewed by 12 sport marketing experts. And the questions which concerned to subscales of stadium, was omitted. From experts’ point of view, measurement of this item is impossible in Iranian football clubs. Because, Iran football clubs don’t have own dedicated stadiums.

Then, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was estimated in brand attributes (0.75), brand benefits (0.89), brand attitudes (0.82), and brand loyalty (0.94). Using the obtained questionnaire, data was collected in stadiums before the teams began their matches. Data was analyzed using structural equation model (SEM).

The structural equation model is the most appropriate method to examine the multi-relations among the dependent and independent variables (Mcquitty, 2004). And it is a good method to examine the effects between observed variables and latent variables (Ghasemi, 2010). So, to analyze the hypotheses of this study which consist of the cause and effect relationships between brand image’ dimensions and fans’ brand loyalty, structural equation model (SEM) was utilized. Therefore, Amos Graphics software was used to data analysis.
4. Findings

The means and standard deviations of the sample are illustrated in table 1. The standard deviations ranged from 1.34 for attributes to 2.57 for attitudes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Correlations of Estimates matrix are reported in table 2. The inspection of this matrix showed that correlations between the investigated constructions were moderate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Loyalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Correlations among observed and latent variables were illustrated in table 3. According to table 3, the correlations of all constructions were significant (P<0.001). The correlations among attitudes and loyalty 0.47, benefits and loyalty 0.77 benefits and attributes 0.81, attributes and attitudes 0.34, and benefits and attitudes 0.52 were illustrated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Loyalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>12.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>12.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>5.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>6.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The adequacy of structural equation models were investigated by using goodness of statistics (Ghasemi, 2010). Some of most applying good of fit statistics were presented in table 5 that verified the adequacy of the hypothesized model. CMIN (chi-square) 38.23, NFI 0.98, RMSEA 0.1, and CFI 0.99 estimated that all indices verified the hypothesized model. Also p-value .28 indicated that the result of model was significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>CMIN</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>NFI</th>
<th>TLI Delta</th>
<th>TLI rho</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>CFI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Default model</td>
<td>38.230</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>.283</td>
<td>.985</td>
<td>.997</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.998</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturated model</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.283</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.193</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence model</td>
<td>2556.696</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: P<0.01
5. Conclusion

The findings of structural equation model for investigating of three hypotheses; I) Brand image’ attributes affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, II) Brand image’ benefits affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran, and III) Brand image’ attitudes affect fans’ brand loyalty in professional football league of Iran verified the cause and effect relationships between brand image’ dimensions (attitudes, benefits, and attributes) and fans’ brand loyalty. According to table 3, there were good correlations among variables. So, three dimensions of brand image were capable predictive for fans brand loyalty. Moreover, results of table 4, goodness of fit indices confirmed the adequacy of hypothesized model. So, the influence of brand image’ factors on fans’ brand loyalty and also the interactional effects of them illustrated on structural model were verified significantly.

Based on the literature, the attributes’ subscales were included; successes, star players, head coach, management, logo design, regional importance and tradition which were examined in the first hypothesis. Findings showed these subscales were influential in creating attractive image and good image of the club in fans’ mind. Therefore, dimension of attributes affected fans’ brand loyalty indirectly through attitudes dimension.

According to the first hypothesis, attributes help teams to attract and keep their fans’ loyalty. The subscales of famous coaches and managers, design of attractive logo, successes and win championships increase the fans’ brand loyalty. Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2004; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Erdener, Gultekin, Ekrem, 2008, showed the same results about attributes.

Although, attributes dimension was highlighted as the most influential factor on fans’ brand loyalty in majority studies; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Erdener, Gultekin, Ekrem, 2008. In this study it is placed in the third rank after attitudes and benefits. It seems likely that this difference refers to weaknesses of teams In Iranian football clubs.

Based on the literature, in the second hypothesis benefits dimension was examined through four subscales; escape, fan identification, peer group acceptance and nostalgia. Benefits dimension influenced Iranian fans’ brand loyalty. Also, this dimension affected both attributes and attitudes dimensions strongly and directly.

The result of the second hypothesis showed that the benefits’ subscales affected fans’ brand loyalty positively. Also, the other researchers’ findings like Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, 2004; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; Lin, 2007; Erdener, Gultekin, Ekrem, 2008, confirmed this relationship, too. Besides, benefits’ subscales like; nostalgia, escape from daily problems, team identification and acceptance peer groups were elements concerned with fans’ brand loyalty.

Based on the findings, the benefits dimension had the most effects on the fan’s brand loyalty (table 3). Because, the other brand image’ dimension i.e. attributes and attitudes were affected by benefits, too. Consider to benefits subscales, offering attractive matches and entertainment programs and provide intra-group and inter-groups connections among fans could enhance Iranian fans brand loyalty.

In the third hypothesis, the attitudes dimension was divided into subscales of believed importance, awareness, information, and effective interactions to a team. The effects of attitudes dimension on brand loyalty were examined through these subscales. Findings showed it affected fans’ brand loyalty in Iranian football league, too. Findings of this study were adapted to studies of Gladden and Funk, 2002; Bauer, Sauer, and Schmitt, P. 2004; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, and Exler, 2008; in which they reported the significant relationship between attitudes’ subscales and the degree of fans brand loyalty.

Totally, findings of this study verified influencing of brand image’ on fans brand loyalty in Iranian football leagues. It is influential to manage the brand club successfully and appropriate to select the best strategies to earn incomes by acquiring their fans’ brand loyalty.

Therefore, managers and officials are recommended to use this influencing framework to allocate their limited sources and setting optimum strategies of branding in Iranian professional football league. Also, the executives of Iranian clubs should notice these elements, and use them to improve the promotion of their brand for earning advantages like earning more revenue because of attendance of more fans in the stadium, selling more tickets, increasing the purchasers of the club’s brand products, absorbing investment, and increasing the price of club’s shares.
References


