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INVESTIGATING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FUNCTIONS OF BRAND ASSOCIATION AMONG CONSUMERS OF SPORT BICYCLES ACCORDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES

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ABSTRACT

Brand association is a possession as the same as the brand itself which is considered a reason for distinction of the company. In other words, brand association can influence on emotions towards a product and it is a factor for development of the brand. Therefore, some brand associations affect consumers' decision making by granting validity and confidence to a brand. The purpose of current study is to examine the difference between functions of brand association among the consumers of sport bicycles in Tehran according to demographic features. This study was conducted as a descriptive research through surveys. Randomly, 386 bicyclists were selected from different areas of Tehran. The standard tool used in this research was standard questionnaire of Rio *et al.*, (2001) whose Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.63 and its validity value was calculated as 0.81. The results of the exam were categorized into two distinct groups and one way analysis of variance showed that there are meaningful differences between functions of brand associations according to studied demographic features (gender, age, education background, job and location). But this difference was not meaningful regarding gender and education background. According to the results, it is necessary for marketers, producers and companies to pay attention to the relation of these two factors with the differences between brand associations among consumers in order to adopt successful strategies.

Keywords: Brand; Brand Association; Consumer; Bicycle

INTRODUCTION

In today competitive marketing, appropriate thought and creation of strong strategies play important roles on success of an organization; because the influences of a brand on consumers' minds can be very important and vital to the organization. These deep insights and thoughts of consumer about brands are actually called "brand association". Brand associations must possess enough strength, utility and distinction so that consumer can have a proper mental image of that brand in his memory, consumer's knowledge level can get higher and decision to repeat the purchase can be made to make a close relationship between consumer and brand (Armstrong, 1999).

Consumer's behavior does not include manner of purchasing products, but it can also encompass using services, activities and beliefs. Activities such as traveling, going to sport gyms, registering for training classes and etc. are some cases which are included in consumer's behavior. Although manner of purchasing is important for marketers, but consumer's behavior does not only include purchase. Consumer's behavior contains three actions: Acquisition, Consumption and Disposal.

The profits which are gained by the consumer are consumption and loyalty to the product (Ranjbarian and Ghaffari, 2013).

Thereupon, consumer's behavior does not necessarily reflect the behavior of a certain person. Decision making about purchasing a car, going to a special restaurant, renting a house are some behaviors which can include a group of friends, some of colleagues or all of family members. Accurate understanding about consumers and process of purchase comprises several advantages. These advantages include assistance for managers in decision making, preparation of a cognitive base through analyzing consumers and finally, assistance for consumers in better decision making (Kashkar *et al.*, 2011).

Research Article

One of the factors influencing on consumers' behaviors is brand. In consumers' view, brand is an important component of a product and creation of a brand can increase profitably and value of the product. For instance, consumers consider a bottle of perfume with a famous brand as a luxurious and high-quality product; but, if the same bottle of perfume does not have a brand-even if it has a similar scent- it will be known as a product with low quality (Blaine, 2001). A good brand benefits from scores received from consumer. Consumer's score means that the customers show loyalty to the brand. A significant number of customers will demand this product, even if alternative products with lower prices are available in the market; these customers do not accept the alternative product. In other words, companies which have valid brand are guaranteed against advertisement strategies of competitors. Understanding the content and structure of brand knowledge is important, because they can influence on what comes to consumer's mind when s/he thinks about a brand. The image of a brand in consumer's mind and the impression derived from that are important for marketers. One the most important responsibilities in managing a brand is creation of a desirable image of it. This requires consumers' understanding of brand association (Abbasiyan and Amirshahi, 2007). According to the idea of Aker, one of the impressions which can be used by marketers in order to make their products distinguishable is Consumer Benefit. Marketers can use positive associations in order to increase market share, prepare attractive advertisement and market future products.

These associations help consumer to judge about the value of a brand (Dien, 2004). The more a brand possess strong, positive, dominant and consistent association, the more its ability would be to create efficiency for the products. Consumers use these brand associations to process, organize and recover the information in memory; they can make better decisions (Aaker, 1991).

Generally, we can say that brand associations are a set of impressions about a brand which are organized meaningfully inside the mind of a consumer. It can be defined as anything connecting consumer to the brand. Functions of brand association are categorized in to four groups: Guarantee, Individual identity, Social identity, status (Rio, 2001).

Guarantee

Actually, guarantee is a contract or agreement through which a producer undertakes a commitment to repair the product freely during the period mentioned in guarantee paper, if the product have defect or malfunction (without receiving any payment for repairing or changing the pieces); if the defect is fundamental, the product must be altered (Rokhshad, 2009). In other words, guarantee is an agreement between two people according to which the contract is operationalized, if a certain condition occurs. Guarantee is an assurance which is given to the consumer so that she/he can make sure that the purchased product is the one advertised and if the consumer is not satisfied, she/he can change or return it (<http://www.rokhshad.com/guarantee-warranty>).

Individual Identity

Creation and maintenance of a sustainable and constant concept about individual identity requires presence of other security elements which means acceptance of other things and other people. But it is not derived from them, directly. Feeling of individual identity is simultaneously hard/strong and delicate/fragile. It is fragile because the certain expression which is maintained in the mind of an individual reflexively is just one of the many potential histories which is defined about growth and development of "ego". Individual identity is hard and strong because this feeling is so safe and secure so that and individual can tolerate tensions and current changes of surrounding environment, successfully (Giddens, 1991).

Unlike "ego", "individual identity" requires reflexive knowledge as a general phenomenon. "Identity" is something about which the person is aware. In other words, individual identity is not delivered to a person due to continuity of his/her social performances, but it is something which must be created by a person daily and consistently; it must be protected and supported through a person's reflexive activities (Giddens, 1991).

Individual identity includes experiences, thoughts, dreams and wishes which are interpreted and understood compared to other experiences and thoughts of an individual. Therefore, individual identity

Research Article

can be defined as a unique system of relations between experiences, thoughts, dreams, hopes and wishes (Hosseini, 2004).

Social Identity

No one can be an “ego” outside of social world. Society influences on everybody and its influence on us never disappears. If we imagine that society is not able to play such a role or we are separate from society and we can do our actions alone, we are completely wrong. All of us are somehow affected by family, friends, education, ethnicity, work place, school, and gender, political and historical issues. Generally, we live relying on our social environment and we have share in creation of it (Mead, 1967).

Although we cannot be separated from society and its impacts, society alone is not forming and determining our identity (i.e. thoughts, behaviors and emotions). We have an “inner self” and unique exclusivity which determines our performance kind and way. It is believed that these two ideas that say we are inside of society and at the same time we are separated from society are antithetical; but reality is somehow else. Not only these two ideas are compatible and consistent with each other, but also they are used simultaneously in social life (Parsons, 1951).

Limitations of social environment restrict our “Bubble” or personal space. Therefore, we are located inside of society, while the society itself is placed in soul, mind, memories and experiences of us. So, there is always a part of society outside of us. Our relationships with friends, family, colleagues, and administrative, governmental and non-private agencies would lead us beyond the range of our own. Similarly, social institutes and organizations are working of certain social activities more broadly which possess independence identity form individuality of each person in the society. These institutes and organizations work like us (when we protect our private region against interference of society and its influences) (Leader, 2009).

Derakhshide (2013) investigated in his study the attitudes and behaviors of purchase in youth and adolescents about different brands in Isfahan. Through questionnaires, researcher concluded that the youth desire more to buy products with high quality and after sale services.

Soha *et al.*, (2012) investigated in their study the influence of brand on consumer’s behavior; this study was conducted in the southern part of Kolkata. Questionnaires were given to a sample population of 200. The results showed that persistence in an environment make a brand influence on consumer’s behavior. Also, it was shown than women are more influence by a brand than men.

Sultan Hosseini *et al.*, (2013) investigated in his study the differences between loyalties to a brand among the fans of Premier League football teams of Iran according to their demographic features in Iran. This study is conducted as a descriptive research through surveys by which 797 fans of five Premier League teams were investigated. The results showed that there are meaningful differences between levels of loyalty to team brands regarding demographic features (Marital status, levels of education and background of presence in stadium). But the differences were not meaningful in terms of age and monthly revenue of the fans.

Therefore, according to the mentioned issues and importance of brand associations among consumers, it is necessary for producers and marketers to pay more attention to this significant and fundamental subject and to perform long-term planning to identify the associations and their functions. In this case, managers can recognize the factors causing election of a brand by the consumer. They can design and supply their products according to impressions of consumers. Therefore, the researchers of this study try to investigate the differences between functions of brand associations among consumers of sport products.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the differences between brand associations among consumers of sport bicycles according to demographic features. So, this study is functional in terms of purpose and it is descriptive in terms of nature which is conducted through surveys.

The sampling frame of this study includes all the youth between 15 and 30 living in Tehran who possess one of the brands of sport bicycles. A primary study was performed to determine the volume of sample. According to the results and using statistical equations, sample volume of 386 persons was determined.

Research Article

$$n = \frac{Z^2 S^2}{D^2} = \frac{(1/96^2)(X^2)}{(0/05^2)} = 386$$

The tool used in this study was standard questionnaire of Rio *et al.*, (2001). In order to determine the formal validity of the questionnaire, it was confirmed by some of professors in the fields of Sport Management, Business Administration and Physical Education.

Then, its content validity was calculated as 0.63 by some specialists. The questionnaire was distributed among a sample of 30 of professional and semi-professional bicyclists.

Reliability coefficient or inner sustainability of the questionnaire was obtained 0.81 according to Cronbach's alpha coefficient. It should be noted that this questionnaire consists of two parts including demographic brands and scale of association functions and it has 15 propositions, in total.

Moreover, the proposition of association functions includes a 5-option spectrum of “completely agree- agree- no idea- disagree- completely disagree”. These questionnaires were distributed randomly among bicyclists in different areas of Tehran and then, they were collected.

The data collected were then analyzed by SPSS software through descriptive statistics and inferential statistics such as frequency, percentile, average, standard deviation, variance analysis and average comparison.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the findings, there were 308 male respondents (79.8%) and 78 female respondents (20.2%).

Table 1: Frequency and Percentile Distribution of Respondents According to Gender

Gender	F	Percent
Man	308	79.8
Woman	78	20.2
Total	386	100

In terms of age, group of 21 to 30 were the most frequent category with percentile of 85.3% and the least frequency belonged to respondents over 50 years old with frequency percentile of 0.8%. Moreover, 12.4% of the respondents were 20 years old and below, 21.8% of them were 31-40 years old and 7.6% of them were in the category of 41-50.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentile Distribution of Respondents According to Age

Age	F	Percent
20 years and lower	48	12.4
21-30 years	225	58.3
31-40 years	84	21.8
41-50 years	26	6.7
51 years and higher	3	0.8
Total	386	100

In terms of education degree, the most frequency belonged to M.A degree which included 160 people (41.5%) and the least frequency was for Diploma degree which included 18 people (4.7%).

Also, 28.2% of the respondents possessed diploma degree, 18.1% possessed post-diploma degree and 7.5% of them possessed B.A degree or higher.

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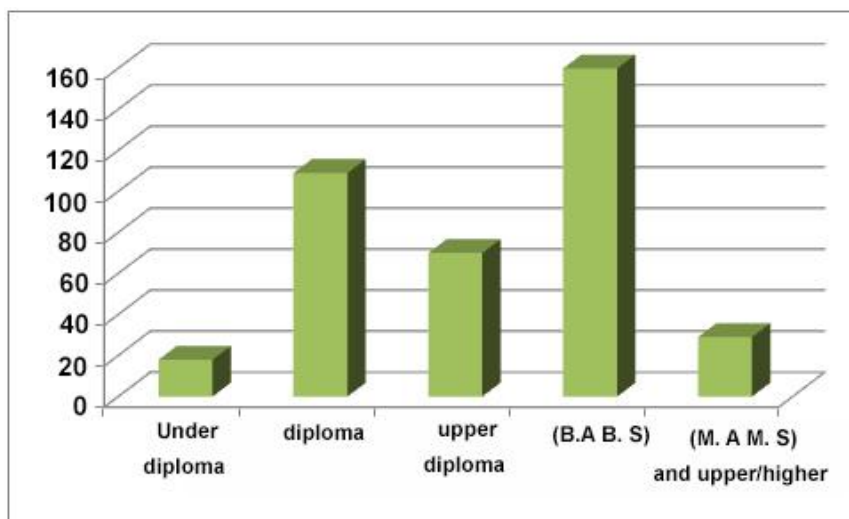


Figure 1: Bar Graph of the Respondents According to Education Degree

The obtained data imply that among 386 respondents of this study, 50.3% are living in northern part of the city (districts 1 to 5), 11.1% are living in the central part of the city (districts 6 to 20) and finally, 38.6% are living in western part of the city (districts 21 and 22).

Table 3: Frequency and Percentile Distributions of Respondents According to Place of Living

Residential Area	F	Percent
the city north	194	50.3
the city center	43	11.1
the city south	149	38.6
Total	386	100

The obtained data imply that among 386 respondents, 174 (45.1%) are working in self-employed jobs, 103 (26.7%) are employees and 101 (26.2) are students and collegians. 8 of them (20.1%) are working in other jobs.

Table 4: Frequency and Percentile Distributions of Respondents According to Job

Type of profession	F	Percent
self-employment	174	45.1
employee	103	26.7
student and scholar	101	26.2
the other(s)	8	2.1
Total	386	100

The obtained data imply that brand of Giant is the most popular one with frequency percentile of 27.2% and it is used more frequent among bicyclists of Tehran. After that, the brands of TREK, Merida, Viva and Scott are the next popular brands with frequencies of 8%, 7.3%, 6.7% and 6.5%, respectively.

Research Article

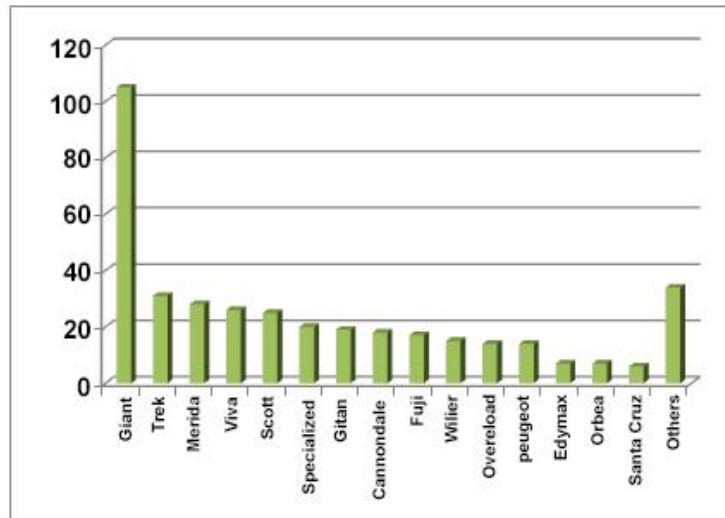


Figure 2: Bar Graph of the Respondents According to brands sport bicycles

As we can see in Table 5, 29.3% of the respondents use bicycle 1 day in each week; 30.6% of them use bicycle 2 days in each week; 21.2% of them use bicycle 3 days in each week and 10.9% of them use bicycle 4-5 days in each week. It is stated by 8% of the respondents that they use bicycle more than 5 days in each week.

Table 5: Frequency and Percentile Distributions of Respondents According to Days of Using Bicycles

Usage/Utilization Rate	F	Percent
One day in week	113	29.3
Two days in week	118	30.6
three days in week	82	21.2
Four to five days in week	42	10.9
more than five days in week	31	8
Total	386	100

Table 6: Relationship between Gender Variable and Functions of Brand Association

Variable	Categories	Number	Mean	Standard deviation	TSignificant level
Guarantee	Man	308	16.832	7.9	1/6270/104
	Woman	78	16.252	9.0	
Identity	Man	308	8.10	1.58	0/343 0/732
	Woman	78	8.03	1.56	
Social-identity	Man	308	12.03	2.24	-0/769 0/442
	Woman	78	12.25	2.16	
Social Status	Man	308	7.04	1.66	0/219 0/827
	Woman	78	7.00	1.52	

Research Article

Table 7: Relationships between Degree of Education Variable and Functions of Brand Association

Variable	Total of Squares	Df	F	Significant level
Guarantee	3069.78	385	1.929	0.105
Identity	958.64	385	0.859	0.489
Social- identity	1913.34	385	1.341	0.254
Social Status	1031.49	385	0.595	0.666

Table 8: Relationships between Age Variable and Functions of Brand Association

Variable	Total of Squares	Df	F	Significant level
Guarantee	3069.78	385	1.782	0.132
Identity	958.64	385	0.815	0.516
Social- identity	1913.34	385	0.384	0.820
Social Status	1031.49	385	2.416	0.048

Table 9: The Results of Exam about Investigating Differences between Average of Respondents in terms of status According to Age

Age	Social Status
20year and lower	7.39
21-30 years	7.01
31-40 years	7.13
41-50 years	6.42
51 years and more/higher	5.33

Table 10: Relationships between Job Variable and Functions of Brand Association

Variable	Total of squares	Df	F	Significant level
Guarantee	3069.78	385	1.941	0.122
Identity	958.64	385	9.546	0.000
Social- identity	1913.34	385	5.033	0.002
Social Status	1031.49	385	2.965	0.032

Table 11: The Results of Exam about Investigating Differences between Average of Respondents in terms of Brand Association Functions According to Job

Rate of education	Guarantee	Identity	Social- identity	Social Status
Self-employment	16.69	8.21	12.12	6.97
Employee	16.26	7.43	11.46	6.75
Student and scholar	17.19	8.49	12.65	7.40
Other	17.12	8.75	11.87	7.37

Table 12: Relationships between Place of Living Variable and Functions of Brand Association

Variable	Total of squares	Df	F	Significant level
Guarantee	3069.78	385	6.209	0.002
Identity	958.64	385	3.196	0.042
Social- identity	1913.34	385	5.557	0.004
Social Status	1031.49	385	4.357	0.013

Research Article

Table 13” The Results of Exam about Investigating Differences between Average of Respondents in terms of Brand Association Functions According to Place of Living

Residential Area	Guarantee	Identity	Social- identity	Social Status
The city north	17.16	7.89	12.45	7.24
The city center	16.86	7.86	11.62	7.13
The city south	16.10	8.29	11.73	6.73

Base on the information obtained from the results of statistical tests, average comparisons and variance analysis which are observed in the tables above, the variables of gender and education degree did not have any meaningful difference with four variables of brand association, but variable of age have a meaningful difference with status; individual identity has a meaningful difference with social identity; and place of living has a meaningful difference with all variables of brand association.

We should note in expression of the above data that in variable of status, adolescents (20 and below) have gained higher degree than elderly people (51 and above). Moreover, the scores of student and collegians were higher than employees in terms of status, individual identity and social identity. Also, the scores of the people living in northern part of Tehran were higher than the score of people living in southern part of Tehran in terms of all variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mental imaginations about a brand are very vital so that positive and desirable imaginations cause development of the brand and negative ones cause failure of brand, company and producer. In the market of sport bicycles, consumers are searching for functions that improve their social senses. Sport brands can influence on their consumers' behaviors through creation of positive functions.

The findings showed that 80% of the respondents included men who were between 21 and 30 years old. Education grade of the respondents showed that 41.5% of them possessed M.A degree. Among 386 participants, 45.1% worked in self-employed jobs. Also, brand of Giant was the most popular brand perceived by them. Living places of most of the participants were located in the northern part on Tehran and finally, most of the respondents used bicycle 2 days in each week.

The findings also showed that among personal features of the respondents, age and education degree have no meaningful difference with four variables of brand association. The reason for this is that the associations and imaginations about a brand have no significant relationship with gender and education degree; because these imaginations are derived from ability of the brand and producer company to create power and strength which can engender a positive and strong image of the brand in consumers' minds.

Also, it was shown that variable of age have a meaningful difference with status; individual identity has a meaningful difference with social identity; and place of living has a meaningful difference with all variables of brand association. We should note in expression of the above data that in variable of status, adolescents (20 and below) have gained higher degree than elderly people (51 and above). To justify this we can say that the adolescents desire to be given more attention among friends, peers and the others; they try to attract attentions by purchasing special brands and to elevate their status. Accordingly, producers can design the attractions of their brands based on the needs of this age range.

Moreover, the scores of student and collegians were higher than employees in terms of status, individual identity and social identity. The reasons of these differences are that an employee rides a bicycle for pleasure and doing a temporary exercise, and he tries to get the most use of his/her limited time. But students and collegians have more free time to ride bicycles and they tend to perform more regular, competitive and professional sport exercises. That is why athletes pay more attention to functions of brand associations, and criteria of individual identity and social identity is more prominent for them relative to employees.

In all variables of brand association (guarantee, individual identity, social identity and status), the scores of people who live in the northern part on Tehran was higher than the scores of people who live in the southern part of Tehran. In justifying this issue we can say that one of the major factors that causes more

Research Article

usage of bicycle in these areas is proximity of appropriate placed for riding bicycle. The lower scores of people living in the southern part of Tehran is because of lacking enough understanding of these people about brand and its images in their minds.

It is recommended to producers and marketers to help these people to know the brands by accurate and intelligent marketing.

In this regard, the study of Derakhshide (2013) investigating attitudes and behaviors of the youth and adolescents towards different brand in Isfahan showed that the youth desire to buy products with better quality and after sale services which is consistent with present research.

But the study of Batachariya and Mitra (2012) which investigated the behaviors of consumers among a sample population of 200 in southern part of Kolkata showed that women are more influenced by a brand than men.

These data are not consistent with the results of this research which showed that men and women are equal in terms of being influenced by functions of brand association. One possible reason for this discrepancy is the differences in tested samples and cultural distinctions between Iran and India.

Also, more diversity of brands in India and the types of women exercises in that country might be other reasons of this discrepancy.

Finally, we can conclude that demographic features of consumers are appropriate guidance for selection and application of strategies related to brands.

Accordingly, paying attention to each functions of brand associations and consumers' understandings of these functions are affective in attraction and maintenance of consumers' interests and loyalties to a brand.

Based on the results derived from investigating different dimensions of brand association functions, producers and marketers of sport products must place three variables of guarantee, individual identity and status at the top of their policy making.

They should try to improve and enhance the loyalties of consumers through these factors, recognize target groups and change them into loyal fans of the brand through effective advertisement methods.

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Research Article

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