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INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BRAND IMAGE ANDSPORT SPONSORSHIP INFANS OF IRAN'S FOOTBALL PREMIER LEAGUE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between brand image and sport sponsorship in Iran Football Premier League (2013-2014), respectively. This study, in terms of purpose is practical, and its nature was of descriptive-survey type. Statistical population of this research consisted of the fans of Iran's Football Premier League clubs. The sample size was estimated 1058 people, using a statistical formula. Measuring tool was Structured Researcher Questionnaire and its reliability and validity was tested for this research (Cronbach's alpha Coefficient 0.91). In order to analyze the result data, SPSS version 20 was used. The results showed three dimensions: the product-related brand attributes, non-product related brand attributes, benefits and attitudes are correlated with the amount of sport sponsorship (P= 0.01). Also, there is a significant positive relationship between brand image and sport sponsorship.

Keywords: *Brand Image, Sport Sponsorship, Fan, Attributes, Benefits, Attitudes*

INTRODUCTION

Today, the strategic role of brand image has widely been proven in researches and articles. Empirical researches have supported its importance in purchase decision making, and as a result, the brand image is considered a distinct component in the mix marketing design to create sustainable competitive advantage (Malik *et al.,* 2012).

According to Aaker (1991), brand image is considered as a collection of associations, which are usually organized with a meaningful behavior. Keller (1993), defines brand image as perception of the brand by customer, which is reflected through invocations in consumer's memory. "A high-quality brand image, enables consumers to identify the needs that are satisfied by the brand. In addition, the company distinguishes its products through its brand from the competitors and therefore increases the likelihood of buying its products by consumers" (Hsieh *et al.,* 2004).

On the other hand, various businesses and industries have realized that sponsoring sports events can act as a powerful promotional tool for them (Mohtashami, 2008). Increased enthusiasm for sport sponsorship from industry and career owners is to the extent that businesses today compete to sponsoring sports events such as the Olympics, World Championships, the prestigious leagues and sports clubs, especially football.

One of the most important factors in attracting sponsorship is strong club brand that should possess high equity and an appropriate image, and be able to revoke a positive image in the minds of fans. According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), the sponsorship is a powerful branding tool which internalizes the following: (1) the exposure of the brand, (2) the development of brand association, (3) internal and external mobility, (4) provides experience, (5) and acts as a performance tool for new products. As a result, according to the theory (Henseler *et al.,* 2011), there is a significant correlation which notifies the sport sponsorship as an effective tool to enhance brand image and brand awareness. Cornwell *et al.,* (2001), emphasize that the ability for sport sponsorship has an important role in creating brand equity.

Now, many organizations and companies that sponsoring sport events are particularly keen to enhance or maintain the image of their products through association with a sport attribute (league, club- team, and athlete), which reflects an image. Also, companies to attract consumers (fans), have used information

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exchange and transferring the brand image, informing consumers about the company and its supplies, and establishing long-term relationships with consumers (Tanvir and Shahid, 2012).

Therefore, with regard to the above matters, and that many businesses while maintaining existing customers and attracting new customers, are looking for ways to increase their knowledge of business, sales and ultimately their financial revenues. Hence, this study tries to answer the question: is there a relationship between the brand image of Premier League football clubs, and sport sponsorship of organizations and businesses?

Related Studies

Tanvir and Shahid (2012), conducted their research entitled: the effects of sport sponsorship on brand image and purchase intention. The researchers investigated and analyzed the impact of the sport sponsorship on brand image and purchase intention. This study examines consumer attitudes toward brands, and manipulating it to purchase intention considering sport sponsorship. A survey approach is followed of which the data were collected through questionnaire. The results showed that there is a strong correlation between sport sponsorship and brand image. Also, the results showed a moderate relationship between sport sponsorship and intention to purchase, and sport sponsorship has a great impact on consumers purchase intention.

Musante (2006), in his study entitled: sport sponsorship as an opportunity to create and develop new brands image, states many companies believe that sports association can be an effective way to enhance the brand image. In this his study, the researcher reviewed the role of the sport sponsorships in establishing an identity for a brand which is newly entered the market, especially the impacts of the transferred image from sport to brand. The results showed that the announced sport sponsorship has ability to influence the perception of the primary image for a new brand. This research suggests that sport sponsorship is a continuous and sustainable solution to create a basic understanding for a new brand.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Since the researcher sought to examine the relationship between brand image and sport sponsorship among clubs in the13th season of football Premier League; this study, in terms of purpose is practical, and its nature was of descriptive-survey type. Data collection for the study was conducted using a questionnaire and field method.

For this purpose, the researcher used self-made questionnaire which was examined for validity and reliability prior to the main test and by presence in the stadiums of selected teams collected the data and completed the questionnaires.

Population and Sample

The study populations were Fans of existing teams of 13th season of Iran football Premier League (2013-2014). Considering the fact that the exact number of football fans were not at hand and the variance of the study population was not available either, the researcher, to obtain the appropriate sample size, first did a preliminary study, and based on that and using statistical formulas, estimated the appropriate sample size. Therefore, 30 questionnaires were distributed among the population and the variance of mentioned sample was used.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 S^2}{D^2} = \frac{(1/96^2)(0/83^2)}{(0/05^2)} = 1058$$

According to the formula, the sample size was estimated 1058 people, and a questionnaire was distributed among them. From distributed questionnaires, the number of 972 were fully completed and returned, and the same number was analyzed as the final size of the sample.

The sampling method was multistage cluster sampling, i.e. from 18 clubs in the Premier League, eight clubs were selected based on geographical zoning (chosen clubs are as follows: Malavan Anzali, Tractor Sazi Tabriz, Persepolis Tehran, Esteghlal Tehran, Sepahan Isfahan, Saba Qom, Foolad Khuzestan and Fajr Shahid Sepasi). Then, from fans who had come to the stadium on the match day for their favorite team, some of whom were randomly selected, and questionnaires were distributed among them and collected after.

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Measuring Tools
In this study, a questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire used in this his study was the researcher-made one, which is formed based on the questionnaires in this field and existing theoretical foundations (for example, Bauer *et al.,* 2008), and it is examined for reliability and validity. The questionnaire consists of three parts: the first part of the questionnaire contains 10 questions which is dedicated to the demographic characteristics of respondents. In the second part, the questions about brand image variable are presented, which consist of 27 questions, and ultimately the final section of the questionnaire is related to the sport sponsorship variable questions (6 questions).

Also, to examine the reliability of the basic concepts, Cronbach's alpha test was used. To assess reliability, first the validated questionnaire among a sample of 30 people of the desired team fans were distributed and collected, and then the reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire based on data obtained and using SPSS software and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated. Accordingly, the reliability of the brand image 0.89, and sport sponsorship was 0.85. Also, the total reliability of the questionnaire was estimated 0.91, which is desirable.

Statistical Methods
In this study, to analyze the data collected, methods of descriptive and inferential statistics were used. To analyze the data in descriptive statistics part, statistical parameters such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used. In inferential statistics, to determine the relationship between brand image and the sport sponsorship, Pearson correlation coefficient was used. Statistical analysis were made possible using SPSS version 20.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Profile of Respondent
The sample size of the present study was consisted of 972 people of fans from 8 Premier League football clubs, from whom 76.2 percent were single and 23.8 percent were married. The age group 16 to 30 years, accounted for the largest number with 79 percent. The lowest frequency was for respondents over 46 years with 1.3 percent frequency. 21.8 percent of respondents' level of education was under high school diploma, 35.6 percent of respondents with high school diploma, 15.6 percent had an associate degree, and 24 percent had a bachelor's degree. Also, 3 percent had a master's degree or higher (Table 1).

Table 1: The frequency and percentage distribution of respondents by demographic characteristics

characteristics		Frequency	percentage
Marital status	Single	741	76.2
	Married	231	23.8
Age	15 years or younger	49	5
	16-30 years	768	79
	31-45 years	142	14.6
	46 years and more	13	1.3
Education	Under high school diploma	212	21.8
	Diploma	346	35.6
	AS	152	15.6
	BA	233	24
	MS and higher	29	3

As Table 2 shows, on the assets associated with the product, respondents score varied between 16 and 40, the average score was 32.91, standard deviation 4.42 and variance of scores was 19.58. Subjects' score on attributes unrelated to the product was between 7 to 35, the average 26.84, with a standard deviation of 5.69, and variance of 32.42. Another dimension is related to the interests of the brand image of which statistical indicators are as follows: average 24.78, standard deviation 4.64, variance 21.54, the minimum

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score of 6 and maximum score of 30. The figures for brand image attitudes were as follows: average 25.90, standard deviation 4.08, variance 16.68, the minimum score of 6 and maximum score of 30. But in general character of brand image, the respondents score varied between 45 and 135, average 110.45, standard deviation 14.87, and variance of scores was 221.31. The other variable in the present study was sports sponsorship of which statistical indicators are as follows: a minimum score of 6, the highest score of 28, standard deviation of 4.03, variance of 16.25, and average of 20.08.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of research variables and their dimensions

Statistic Index	Average	standard deviation	variance	Range	Min.	Max.
Product-related brand attributes	23.91	4.42	19.58	24	16	40
Non-product related brand attributes	26.84	5.69	32.42	28	7	35
Benefits	24.78	4.64	21.54	24	6	30
Attitudes	25.90	4.08	16.68	24	6	30
Brand image	110.45	14.87	221.31	90	45	135
Sport sponsorship	20.08	4.03	16.25	22	6	28

As can be seen in Table 3, findings suggest that there is a correlation between brand image dimensions (product-related attributes, non-product related attributes, benefits and attitudes) and sport sponsorship. Also, the correlation between these two variables is 0.456, the point of the relationship is direct, the intensity of the relationship is strong and significance level is at the desirable value (sig= 0.000).

Table 3: Relationship between brand image and sport sponsorship

Independent variable	coefficients and level of significance	sport sponsorship
Product-related brand attributes dimension	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.258^{**}
	Level of significance	0.000
Non-product related brand attributes dimension	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.408^{**}
	Level of significance	0.000
Benefits	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.404^{**}
	Level of significance	0.000
Attitudes	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.355^{**}
	Level of significance	0.000
Brand Image	Pearson correlation coefficient	0.456^{**}
	Level of significance	0.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Discussion and Conclusion
This study aimed to investigate the relationship between brand image and sport sponsorship of football Premier League fans. The population included all the fans present at the 13th football Premier League (2013-2014), of whom 972 cases using multi-stage cluster sampling were studied as the sample size. The data measuring tool was a researcher-made questionnaire, which was made based on questionnaires in the field, and theoretical bases, and for this study the reliability and validity for them is examined.
The findings of the research, which were conducted using Pearson correlation, suggests that there is a positive and significant relationship between brand image dimensions and sport sponsorship. Among dimensions of brand image, non-product related attributes has the highest level of relationship with sport sponsorship (r=0.408). Also, there is a positive and significant relationship between brand image and sport sponsorship.

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Based on the above findings, it can be concluded that the brand image and its dimensions to attract new sponsors and to continue working with the current sponsors is of a particular importance. Huda (2001), noted that the sponsors want maximum benefit from their investment in the sport sponsorship, and to be ensure that their business interests outweighs their investments, thus, they reach for clubs (event or athlete) with appropriate and strong image.

Smith *et al.,* (2008), emphasizes that the main purpose of commercial marketers is to increase awareness of their brand, which lead to improvement of the brand image. Hence, businesses can through sponsoring of events and sports clubs achieve their goals (Hsiao, 1995; Hung, 2004; Zou, 2005).

So, in successful brand management, as Keller (2003) stated, many companies are looking for ways to increase their brand equity and their budget revenues by building brand image, increasing brand awareness and brand loyalty. As a result, sponsoring various events is growing rapidly, and marketers through various sponsoring activities such as sports and artistic events, try to improve the brand image and increase the loyalty to their brand (Cornwell and Meenaghan, 1998).

Overall, it can be said that in order to establish a win-win deal between the club and the sponsor, we should pay a special attention to the role of brand image and its dimensions (product-related attributes, non-product related attributes, benefits and attitudes), and make efforts to build the brand with respect to the above variables.

Based on the findings of the present study, we can also offer managers and marketers of sports clubs to create innovative marketing plans to strengthen positive associations; and pay special attention to their fans. Furthermore, it is recommended to use flexible and appropriate programs in order to create, maintain and develop their brand image, so that they can take the utmost advantage of the intangible power of this element. Therefore, investment on these variables and endeavor to earn and establishing them can have a significant impact on the success of sport clubs.

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