



Brand Positioning of Football Clubs in Iranian Premier League: The Partial Role of Brand Association and Fan-Team Identification

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Publisher: [University of Kurdistan, Sanandaj, Iran](https://www.kurdistan.ac.ir)

DOI: [10.22034/sms.2025.141762.1388](https://doi.org/10.22034/sms.2025.141762.1388)

Received: 19.07.2024

Revised: 10.02.2025

Accepted: 14.03.2025

Available online: 22.06.2025

Keywords:

Branding, Sports Brands, Football Teams, Sports Fans

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess the effect of brand association on the brand positioning of football clubs in the Iranian premier league with the mediating role of fan-team identification. The present study is a descriptive and correlational study that has been conducted in the field. The research population of the study included football fans of popular football clubs in the Iranian premier league. Based on the formula for the SEM approach, 208 fans were selected through purposive sampling. Brand association, brand positioning, as well as fan-team identification Questionnaire, were used to collect data. The validity of the tool was calculated and confirmed based on content and structural validity, and the reliability was assessed according to Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Structural equation modeling via PLS was used to test the research hypotheses. The results showed that brand association had a significant effect on both brand positioning ($\beta= 0.23$) and fan-team identification ($\beta= 0.31$). The results also confirmed the positive and significant effect of fan-team identification on the brand positioning of football clubs in the Iranian premier league ($\beta= 0.29$). Moreover, based on the Sobel test, brand association through fan-team identification was effective on the brand positioning. The value of the GOF also indicated the proper fitness of the research model. This study is one of the few types of research that combines and examines brand associations, fan-team identification, and brand positioning through a comprehensive model in the field of Iranian sports.

How to Cite This Article:

Jaber, A., Fekrat, A. (2025). Brand Positioning of Football Clubs in Iranian Premier League: The Partial Role of Brand Association and Fan-Team Identification. *Journal of Sport Marketing Studies*, 6 (2): 30-43. [10.22034/sms.2025.141762.1388](https://doi.org/10.22034/sms.2025.141762.1388)

1. INTRODUCTION

Powerful brands in sports cannot be developed without considering effective strategies aimed at strengthening the connection between fans and sports teams. Therefore, sports organizations and teams must seek strategies to establish a strong brand position in the hearts and minds of fans to achieve their marketing goals (Miri et al., 2022). Understanding the positioning of sports brands is crucial for developing effective marketing tactics and gaining a competitive advantage (Raissa & Adhilla, 2024). Brand positioning can be defined as the ultimate goal of marketing activities, serving as a powerful tool within the marketing scenario (Chandra et al., 2019; Diwan & Jain, 2009). In the process of brand positioning, organizations and companies aim to differentiate their brand from competitors and bridge the gap between consumer needs and the products and services offered by rivals, thereby creating a unique place for the company, product, or service (Miller & Muir, 2005; Iyer et al., 2019). Marketing approaches in sports teams are most effective when teams and sports organizations can capture the hearts and minds of fans and succeed in establishing a distinctive place for themselves among supporters. Brand positioning involves finding a pathway for the brand to enter and embed itself in the consumer's mind through conscious efforts to select a special position for the brand in customers' perceptions (Foster, 2018). It is an organized effort to identify a window into the customer's mind, creating value and a unique position that stands out in their perception. Consumers respond only to advertisements and information they understand through prior knowledge or experience. Therefore, consumers categorize products to facilitate decision-making and assign specific positions to goods, services, and companies in their minds.

Brand positioning is a complex set of perceptions, influences, and feelings that customers associate with a brand (Darling, 2001). Previous research has defined brand reputation,

performance, and service as components of brand positioning (Knox, 2004). The emotional and functional characteristics of an organization's products also impact brand positioning (Hartmann et al., 2005). Sagar and colleagues (Sagar et al., 2006) identified brand awareness, brand identity, and brand personality as influential factors in brand positioning. Romaniuk (2001) also highlighted service quality, security, and accessibility as key elements affecting brand positioning. According to Omidikia (2012), brand identity, strengthened through visual capabilities, helps reinforce and stabilize the brand's position.

Undoubtedly, penetrating the hearts and minds of football fans and establishing a strong sports brand position requires a proper understanding of engaging experiences related to sports and sporting events. Therefore, one of the key strategies to influence fans' perceptions and emotions—as primary consumers in the sports industry—is managing the identity and associations linked to teams, which fans experience when interacting with their favorite teams. Memorable experiences with the services provided to fans can lay the groundwork for creating a solid and powerful brand position in the minds of supporters and sports spectators (Miri et al., 2022).

One of the main strategies for sports marketers—both in brand management and consumer engagement—is to create strong, positive, and unique beliefs about sports brands in consumers. In other words, creating favorable associations in consumers' minds ultimately leads to customer loyalty (Bauer et al., 2008). Aaker (1991) defines a brand as a set of associations that differentiate products and services in the marketplace. In sports, these associations can be any distinctive organizational features that persuade fans to choose their favorite team over competitors. Brand associations are perceptions about the brand that are meaningfully organized in the consumer's mind and influence their judgments

regarding the value of a product (Dean, 2004). These associations reflect deep-seated consumer attitudes toward the brand. Effective brand associations must possess sufficient strength, desirability, and differentiation to aid in brand positioning (Javani et al., 2016).

Ross (2006) demonstrated that brand associations can assist sports teams in the branding process by influencing consumer behavior, brand differentiation, and fostering positive attitudes toward a brand. Gladden et al. (1998) argued that brand associations play a vital role in creating brand equity, and sports brands capable of attracting high levels of consumer identification provide significant opportunities for sports organizations to develop their brand value. Similarly, Burmann et al. (2009) found that brand associations directly impact perceived brand value. Steenkamp et al. (2003) concluded that brand characteristics enhance brand equity, and Burmann et al. (2009) viewed brand associations as internal factors that increase brand value.

Research by Jaberi et al. (2016) revealed that dimensions of team brand identity rooted in brand associations positively and significantly influence football fans' loyalty. Enhancing the attractiveness of a football team's brand identity fosters unity and integration among supporters, which can lead to substantial growth in fan base and revenue for teams and sports organizations (Jaberi et al., 2019). Gladden et al. (1998) also emphasized the importance of brand associations in creating brand equity. Furthermore, Jaberi et al. (2014) found that associations such as star players, coaches, managers, technical features, team history, social commitments, social responsibility, social interactions, and close relationships between fans and teams significantly influence fans' identification with football teams.

Wann et al. (1996) demonstrated that brand associations serve as a foundation for the phenomenon of fan identification. Moshabbaki Esfahani et al. (2016) showed that brand association assets in the Iranian football league significantly influence fans' attachment to their

favorite teams. Jones (1997) identified geographical location as a key element of brand association influencing fan loyalty. End et al. (2002) also found that other brand associations—such as team success and fan-team identification—are important. Based on previous studies, brand associations can aid sports teams in the branding process (Ross, 2006) and impact consumer behavior, brand differentiation, and positive attitudes toward the brand (Aaker, 1991).

Jaberi & Zagalaz-Sánchez (2023) showed that making football club identities more attractive and distinctive can foster supporter identification with clubs and facilitate branding through increased brand value. Shankar et al. (2024) found that alignment between brand and customer identity, along with brand credibility and authenticity, leads to a reinforced brand identity. Farzin et al. (2022) demonstrated that brand identity has a direct effect on customers' willingness to pay more. Mazloomi (2022) indicated that brand associations influence brand equity and fan-team identification. Jaberi (2023) emphasized that differentiation and attractiveness of team identity significantly impact brand value. According to Raissa & Adhilla (2024), understanding the positioning of sports brands in response to fans' needs is of great importance.

In addition to the importance of brand positioning and association in sports, fan identification with teams is another key concept in sports marketing. It reflects the close relationship fans have with their favorite teams and can have significant economic and financial consequences for teams and sports clubs. Fan identification can be examined across various fields such as sociology, psychology, and sports marketing. Given the importance of psychological factors in managing fan behavior (Mohammadi & Abdallah, 2024), studying fan identification from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives can help expand the scope of sports marketing and fan behavior management in sports markets.

Fan identification with sports teams is a concept that can lead to emotional, behavioral, and

cognitive responses toward fans' favorite teams (Jaberi et al., 2019). In the research literature, the process of identification with sports teams is considered a significant predictor of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions of fans (Wann et al., 2004). Fan identification with a team is an example of organizational identification and has attracted considerable attention from sports marketing researchers (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Wann and Branscombe (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) believed that team-fan identification refers to a strong, emotional sense of belonging and unity fans feel toward their favorite teams. Ashforth and Mael (1989) defined "identification" as a feeling of belonging or perceived oneness with the team. Generally, the higher the level of fan identification with their teams, the greater their loyalty and positive attitudes toward those teams (Jaberi et al., 2014).

Previous research indicates that the level of fan identification with sports teams is a crucial predictor of fans' emotional responses, behavioral reactions, and cognitive responses, with highly identified fans exhibiting more positive attitudes toward team members (Wann et al., 2004). Ashforth and Mael (1989) argued that identification motivates individuals to participate more actively and feel greater satisfaction with activities close to their identity. Creating a sense of identification among fans toward a club can lead to increased satisfaction and loyalty, causing members to overlook potential weaknesses or issues within the team.

Since fan identification influences behaviors and feelings toward the club, it is expected that the level of identification can impact fans' attitudes and behaviors toward teams and clubs (Jaberi & Barkhordar, 2022). Asadollahi et al. (2020) found a significant relationship between brand identity transfer, sports commitment, and their dimensions. In the study by Kim and Manoli (2022), identification with the team was introduced as a key factor influencing behavioral intentions and word-of-mouth tendencies. The impact of fan-team

identification on consumers' purchase intentions in sports marketing has also been confirmed by Lee (2021). Mazloomi (2022) demonstrated that brand association affects brand equity and fan-team identification, with findings supporting the influence of fan-team identification on the brand equity of Persepolis Football Club. According to Jaberi (2023), the effect of fan-team identification on brand equity highlights the importance of psychological and sociological elements in football club branding processes, emphasizing the need to develop such approaches in research and practice.

Fan identification levels, as an important predictor of fans' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses, have been established in prior studies (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Kim and Manoli (2022) identified fan-team identification as a primary determinant of behavioral intentions and word-of-mouth advocacy. Past research has shown that fan-team identification predicts attendance at university sports events and merchandise sales (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002). Gladden et al. (1998) and Ross (2006) also found significant relationships between fan-team identification and brand equity. Carlson et al. (2002) argued that brand equity is related to the level of fan-team identification. Therefore, this section's findings align with those of Gladden et al. and others. Moreover, Jaberi et al. (2014) demonstrated that fan-team identification positively and significantly influences football fan loyalty. Chen and Wang (2021) showed that brand positioning significantly affects brand loyalty and behavioral loyalty through brand identification and brand personality. Hence, sports teams should invest in long-term branding efforts rather than short-term events to establish a strong position in fans' minds.

Raissa and Adhilla (2024) found that understanding the positioning of sports brands to meet fans' needs is highly important. Although brand associations and fan-team identification have been studied within sports and sports marketing, these concepts have not yet been sufficiently explored in the context of brand positioning. A

review of the literature on sports research, both domestically and internationally, reveals that there has been little focus on the roles of brand associations and fan-team identification in the brand positioning of sports clubs.

One challenge in sports marketing is that managers, marketers, and sports organizations often evaluate brand positioning from their own perspectives, while customers and consumers are the ones shaping the image and perception of the sport and team brands. When the brand positioning aligns with fans' perceptions, it can be said that sports teams have successfully chosen and communicated their position in fans' minds. Therefore, clubs and sports teams must analyze and understand key components of brand positioning from the fans' viewpoint and align their strategies accordingly to achieve success (Miri et al., 2022). Studying brand associations, fan-team identification, and their roles in the brand positioning of Iranian Premier League football clubs can provide valuable insights for establishing a sustainable position among fans.

Strengthening the brand positioning of sports teams in fans' minds and securing this position in their hearts—who are the primary consumers of sport—can generate important opportunities in sports and create conditions for increasing fan engagement in improving clubs' economic stature. By enhancing the brand positioning of football teams, companies and industries are more motivated to support financially and otherwise, which in turn increases media coverage of surrounding events and encourages fans to exhibit more behavioral and emotional reactions in support of their favorite teams. Under these circumstances, Iranian Premier League football clubs, which rely heavily on government resources and have not yet effectively diversified their revenue streams, can

position themselves as commercial brands and pursue income-generating activities related to sports. Brand positioning for sports teams can be regarded as a pivotal moment in the branding and revenue development process for football clubs—an area that has yet to receive sufficient attention in research.

This study is distinct from other sports marketing research because it examines the variable of brand positioning alongside brand associations and fan-team identification. A review of the existing literature indicates that the concept of brand positioning, particularly in the context of sports clubs, has not been thoroughly studied in conjunction with these factors. Given the gap in the literature regarding the role of brand positioning in sports branding within the country and the importance of understanding this concept, the main research question is: What roles do brand associations and fan-team identification play in the brand positioning of Iranian Premier League football clubs? To answer this question, this study is structured around the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

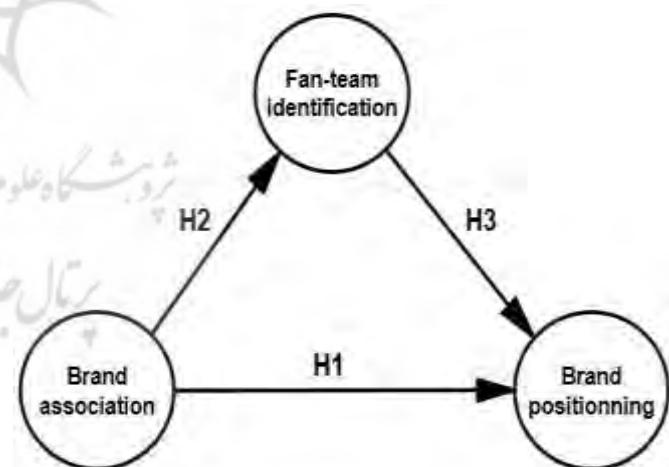


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the research

2. Methodology

This research is applied in terms of its purpose and descriptive-survey in terms of its nature, conducted through fieldwork. The study is of an applied type regarding its objectives, and data

collection was carried out using a descriptive-survey method. In terms of relationship between variables, it is correlational, and from a temporal perspective, it is cross-sectional. Data collection

for this study was performed in two parts: library research and fieldwork.

In the library research phase, sources such as websites, online information portals, books, and Persian and English articles were used to review theoretical literature and previous research backgrounds. In the fieldwork phase, a standard questionnaire was employed, which is a combination of validated questionnaires used in previous studies. The research instruments included the Omidi-Kia Brand Positioning Questionnaire (Omidikia, 2012) with six items, the Fan-Team Identity Questionnaire by Mael & Ashforth (1992) and Wann & Berenskamp (1993) with five items, and the Washburn & Plank Brand Association Questionnaire (2002) with three items. These tools collectively comprised 14 items used for data collection.

The questionnaires were designed on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree), with scores ranging from 1 to 5. The statistical population consisted of all supporters of popular teams in the Iranian Premier League (Persepolis Tehran, Esteghlal Tehran, Foolad Mobarakeh Sepahan, Tractor Tabriz, and Malavan Bandar Anzali) during the 23rd season of the Iranian Premier League (2022-2023). Due to the lack of precise organization and reliable statistics on the number of supporters, the minimum sample size for this study was determined based on the sample size formula for structural equation modeling. According to the formula n between $5q$ and $15q$ (where q is the number of items), the required sample size ranged from 70 to 210 participants (Hooman, 2023).

Considering the research objectives and questionnaire items, purposive sampling was used. Criteria for selecting participants included a minimum of five years of fandom for the team, at least five attendances at matches of the favorite team, and sufficient knowledge to understand the questionnaire items. To ensure supporters' experience, questionnaire distributors asked about this criterion beforehand (self-reporting).

Additionally, one demographic question regarding the number of years' supporters had been following the team was included, which was considered during the validation of the questionnaires for data analysis.

To reach the desired data volume, questionnaires were distributed both in person and online via digital platforms. To ensure an adequate and representative sample, and considering potential non-responses or invalid questionnaires, a total of 250 questionnaires were purposefully distributed among supporters. Of these, 228 were returned, and after initial review, 208 questionnaires met the criteria for inclusion in the analysis. Based on the sample size formula, this number is deemed appropriate for the study and falls within an acceptable range.

In this study, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the instrument. For the preliminary (pilot) study, 30 questionnaires were distributed among football supporters, and after collection, the reliability was evaluated. The

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Brand positioning	0.88	6
Fan-team identification	0.86	5
Brand associations	0.85	3
Total	0.87	14

Cronbach's alpha values for each variable are presented separately in Table 1, indicating the internal consistency of the measurement tools.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficients

After accessing the original versions of the questionnaires and translating them, the researcher revised, amended, and edited them based on the opinions of 10 experts in the fields of marketing and sports. This process ensured the face and content validity of the questionnaires. Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis was used to verify and assess the construct validity of the instruments. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the construct validity of the tools was supported, as the factor loadings of

the items were all above 0.50. For descriptive and inferential analysis, SPSS version 20 and PLS version 3 were employed. To evaluate the validity

of the research model, structural equation modeling was used to examine the relationships between the variables in this study.

3. Findings of the Research

In this study, 208 fans completed the questionnaires accurately and thoroughly. The demographic profile of the participants is as follows. The participants consisted of 119 males, accounting for 57.00% of the total, and 89 females, making up 43.00%. In terms of employment status, 153 participants (74.00%) were employed, while 55 (26.00%) were unemployed. Regarding fandom experience, 52 participants (25.00%) had less than five years of experience, 101 (49.00%) had between five and ten years, and 55 (26.00%) had more than ten years. Educational background showed that 4 participants (2.00%) held diplomas or lower, 168 (81.00%) possessed a bachelor's degree, 32 (15.00%) had master's degrees, and 4 (2.00%) held PhDs. The age distribution included 113 participants (54.00%) aged between 20 to 25 years, 70 (34.00%) between 25 to 30 years, and 25 (12.00%) over 30 years.

The validity of the questionnaires was examined using two criteria specific to structural equation modeling: convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity refers to the extent to which the indicators of a particular construct effectively measure that construct, while discriminant validity indicates that the constructs within the model should be more strongly correlated with their own items than with items measuring other constructs. Convergent validity assesses how well each construct correlates with its own questions (indicators).

To evaluate the convergent validity of the measurement instrument, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was used. According to Magner et al. (1996), an AVE value of 0.40 or higher is considered acceptable. The results of the convergent validity are presented in Table 2. The values indicate that the questionnaire used for variables such as brand positioning, fan-team

identification, and brand association possesses appropriate convergent validity.

Table 2. Convergent validity results of the tools

Variable	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand positioning	0.641
Fan-team identification	0.578
Brand association	0.685
Accepted value	>0.4

In divergent validity analysis, the degree of difference between the construct's indicators and those of other constructs in the model is compared. To do this, the Fornell and Larcker (1981) method should be used. As shown in Table 3, since the squared root values are greater than the correlations with the other constructs, it can be said that the latent variables are more strongly related to their own items than to items of other constructs; in other words, this table demonstrates the divergent validity of the model. The values in Table 3 indicate that the divergent validity of the constructs—brand positioning, fan-team identification, and brand association—is acceptable.

Table 3. Divergent validity results of the tools

Brand association	Fan-team identification	Brand positioning	Variable
		0.735	Brand positioning
	0.781	0.542	Fan-team identification
0.712	0.593	0.621	Brand association

After analyzing the data using PLS software, the output is presented in Figures 2 and 3. To assess the significance of causal relationships

between variables, two indicators—t-value and P-value—were used. At a significance level of 0.05, the t-value should be greater than 1.96. Values below this threshold indicate that the corresponding parameter in the model is not statistically significant. Additionally, P-values less than 0.05 suggest a significant difference between the calculated regression weights and zero at a 95% confidence level.

The data analysis algorithm in PLS demonstrates that, after evaluating the fit of the measurement models, the structural model, and the overall model, we can proceed to test the research hypotheses and interpret the findings. In this section, the significance of the t-values and the standardized path coefficients related to the hypotheses are examined. The significance levels and standardized coefficients of the paths associated with the hypotheses are shown in Figure 2. The t-value model of the research is provided in Figure 3.

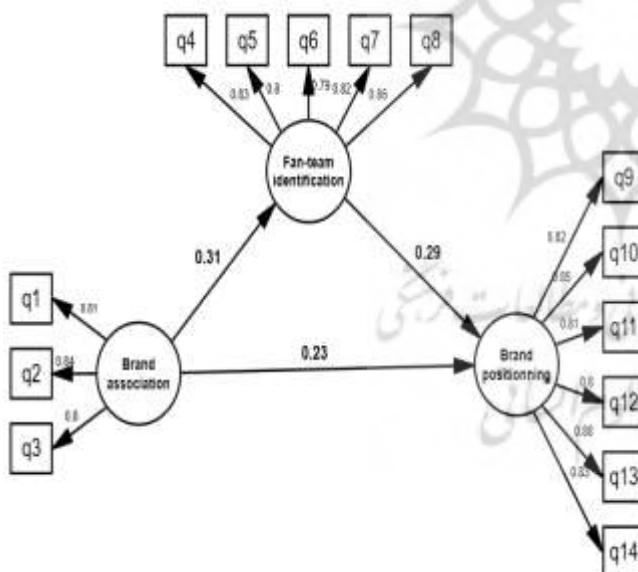


Figure 2. Structural equation model of the research

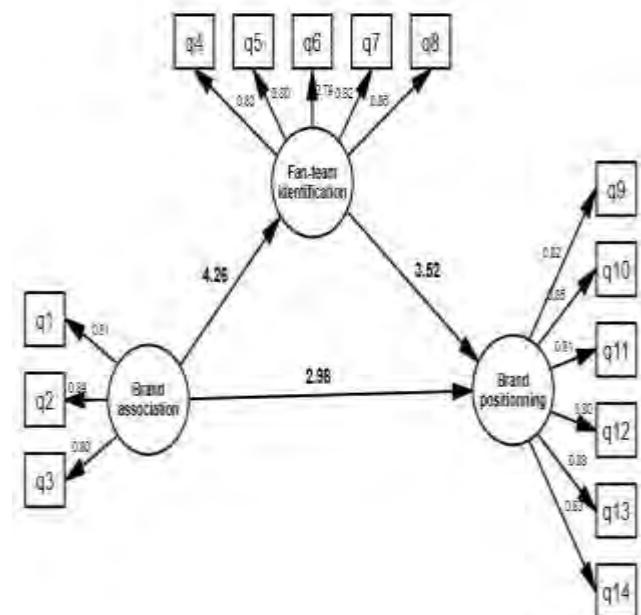


Figure 3. Model of t-statistics values

The regression coefficients and their corresponding t-values for each relationship depicted in the research model are presented in Figures 1 and 2. The causal paths, along with their regression weights and the partial indicator values related to the research model, are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of Partial Least Squares Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	T-value	Path coefficient	Sig	Result
Brand associations to Fan-team identification	4.26	0.31	0.001	✓
Brand associations to Brand positioning	2.98	0.23	0.001	✓
Fan-team identification to Brand positioning	3.52	0.29	0.001	✓

In the table, the results of the partial least square analysis and hypothesis testing show that when the path coefficient (t) exceeds 1.96, the related parameter is considered significant, thereby confirming the research hypotheses. Based on the significance level (p-value) obtained for the paths between variables, all four hypotheses of the model

are supported. According to the statistics presented in Table 3 (critical value greater than 1.96, and p-value less than 0.05), all hypotheses outlined in the research model are confirmed.

Regarding the findings, brand association not only has a direct effect but also an indirect effect through the fan-team identity variable, with an impact coefficient of 0.09 on brand positioning (total effect = 0.31). In other words, the fan-team identity can facilitate the influence of brand association on brand positioning, with the total effect in this model approximately equal to 0.24 (0.09 + 0.23).

The Sobel test was used to assess the significance of the mediating variable's effect in

the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Based on this, the Z-value for the current study's model was calculated to be 1.01. Since this value exceeds the 1.96 threshold, it can be stated with 95% confidence that the mediating effect of the fan-team identity variable in the relationship between brand association and brand positioning is significant.

The overall fit of the model was evaluated using the GOF (Goodness of Fit) index. According to this index, values of 0.10, 0.25, and 0.36 are considered weak, medium, and strong fit levels, respectively. The GOF value for this model was 0.253, indicating a moderate fit of the research model.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Research indicates that elements which evoke fans' associations can motivate greater engagement with sports brands. This, in turn, helps sports managers better meet the expectations and interests of fans, ultimately fostering stronger relationships between teams and their supporters (Mazloomi, 2022). By highlighting the position of branding for clubs in Iran's Premier League, the present study aims to offer a model emphasizing brand association and fan-team identification alongside brand positioning.

Part of the findings revealed that "brand association" has a positive and significant impact on "brand positioning" for clubs in Iran's Premier League. Consistent with this, Burmann et al. (2009) emphasized the direct role of brand associations in shaping perceived brand value. Similarly, Steenkamp et al. (2003) discussed how brand characteristics can enhance brand equity. Moreover, Jaberi et al. (2016) found that dimensions of football team identity rooted in brand associations lead to increased fan loyalty. Corresponding to these findings, Aaker (1991) highlighted that brand associations influence consumer decision-making, help differentiate brands, and create positive feelings among customers. Gladden et al. (1998) also underscored

the crucial role of brand associations in establishing brand equity. Additionally, Jaberi et al. (2014) emphasized the predictive role of associations such as star players, coaches, managers, technical features, team history, social commitments, social interactions, and close fan relationships in fostering fan-team identification.

Therefore, sports managers and marketers aiming to build strong brands within the sports industry and cultivate loyal fans should prioritize understanding fans' perceptions and identifying key team associations as part of their marketing strategies. This approach enables them to leverage fan potential effectively. Given that brand associations play a vital role in establishing brand identity (Gladden, 1998), a comprehensive understanding of these associations and their influence on fans' behavioral and emotional responses can facilitate the solidification of football clubs' brand positioning within the minds and hearts of supporters.

Brand associations significantly influence the brand positioning of football clubs by shaping how fans perceive and identify with their favorite teams. When a club is associated with positive attributes such as success, innovation, or social engagement, its brand position is strengthened, attracting more fans, sponsors, and other

stakeholders. Conversely, negative associations can harm the club's brand, limiting its ability to attract and retain fans, funding, and other resources. Hence, brand association is a critical factor in the success and positioning of a football club, impacting how it is perceived and marketed within the sports ecosystem.

Furthermore, the findings showed that "brand association" affects "fan-team identification" in the Iranian Premier League. In line with this, Wann et al. (1996) highlighted brand association as a key source of fan identification. Moshabbaki Esfahani et al. (2016) pointed to the role of brand association assets of Iranian football leagues in fostering fans' loyalty to their favorite teams. Jones (1997) identified geographical location as one of the primary elements of brand association influencing fans' allegiance. End et al. (2002) also noted that brand associations such as team success are important in fostering fan-team identification.

Building on previous research, brand associations can assist sports teams in their branding processes (Ross, 2006) and influence consumer behavior, brand differentiation, and positive attitudes toward a brand (Aaker, 1991). The combination of attributes associated with football teams in fans' minds creates close bonds between supporters and their favorite teams. In such cases, fans perceive their beloved club as part of their own identity and respond with more supportive behaviors. Fans recall their favorite clubs, teams, players, and sporting events through these associations. When these associations are pleasant and attractive, they are likely to strengthen fans' motivations and tendencies toward their preferred sports entities. Positive and appealing associations cause fans to feel that their favorite club aligns closely with their inner desires and preferences, fostering greater loyalty and empathy. Under these conditions, fans experience a sense that their favorite club's identity is an extension of their own, leading to a deep sense of connection—so much so that they feel they "live" with their team and club.

Another finding of the research indicated that "Fan-Team Identity" has a positive and significant impact on "Brand Positioning" of clubs in the Iranian Premier Football League. In other words, the higher fans' sense of unity and shared identity with their favorite club, the greater the credibility and value of the club's brand in their eyes. One of the key concepts in strengthening team brands is developing the level of fan-team identification, which ultimately encourages fans to actively engage with their teams (Jaberi et al., 2019). The level of identification has been defined in previous studies as a major predictor of fans' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). In the study by Kim and Manoli (2022), fan-team identification was identified as a primary determinant of behavioral intentions and word-of-mouth promotion. Prior research has also shown that fan-team identification significantly predicts fans' participation in university sporting events, ticket sales, and merchandise purchases (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002). Supporting these findings, Gladden et al. (1998) and Ross (2006) confirmed the relationship between fan-team identification and brand equity. Additionally, based on the studies by Carlson et al. (2002), brand equity is correlated with the level of fan-team identification. Therefore, this section of the results aligns with the findings of Gladden and colleagues. Jaberi et al. (2014) also confirmed the relationship between fan-team identification and football fan loyalty. Efforts to make the identity of Iranian football clubs more attractive and distinctive can facilitate the development of fan identification with clubs and help in brand building by increasing the perceived value of the brand (Zagalaz-Sánchez, 2023). Fan-team identification plays a crucial role in fostering loyalty and greater engagement, which in turn influences the brand positioning of football clubs. When fans deeply connect with their club and experience a sense of unity, they are more likely to support their team through purchasing merchandise, tickets, and attending matches. This

emotional connection creates a strong brand position for the club, establishing it as a trusted source of entertainment, pride, and identity for fans. Fans who identify with sports teams tend to have a higher psychological and mental connection with their favorite teams, and this sense of belonging and solidarity can lead to stronger behaviors and emotions toward those clubs. In the sports context, it appears that fans' primary motivation for supporting teams depends on their level of identification. Greater fan identification with football teams can be a key factor in establishing and solidifying their brand position. If sports managers and organizations facilitate the development of interactions and mutual engagement between football teams and fans, this can provide a vital foundation for improving the team's brand position in the minds and hearts of supporters.

The examination of the mediating role of fan-team identification in the relationship between brand association and brand positioning in Iranian Premier Football League teams revealed that fan-team identification significantly influences this relationship as well. Based on this finding, fan-team identification can facilitate and strengthen the effect of brand association on the brand positioning of Premier League football teams. In other words, increasing fans' level of identification with their football clubs can pave the way for more positive behavioral and cognitive outcomes in marketing. Sports managers and marketers should thus pay attention to creating appropriate opportunities for aligning team identities with fans' desires and expectations, as this can enhance fan identification and ultimately improve the brand's position in supporters' minds and hearts.

Given the importance of brand positioning in managing fan behavior, sports clubs must shift their focus from short-term events to long-term strategies for brand positioning (Chen & Wang, 2021). A comprehensive understanding of the brand positioning process for clubs and teams offers marketers and sports managers the opportunity to present their sports products and

services in ways that meet the needs and desires of their target consumers. Recognizing the market position of sports brands is crucial for devising effective marketing tactics and gaining a competitive advantage (Raissa & Adhilla, 2024). Furthermore, the psychological engagement and commitment of fans and sports participants are key factors in sports development (Khorshidi et al., 2022). Addressing the internal needs of fans and striving to meet these through managing a compelling and distinctive identity can lay the groundwork for establishing and reinforcing the brand position of football clubs. This research provides valuable insights for sports marketing professionals, brand managers, and strategic decision-makers regarding the importance of brand positioning in sports and its role in achieving competitive advantages. It also contributes to the existing knowledge base and offers practical concepts for developing effective marketing strategies in the sports industry.

Considering the limited studies conducted in the fields of sociology and psychology related to sports marketing concepts in the country, focusing on the psychological and sociological aspects related to branding in sports can lead to a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the relationship between fans and sports brands. Alongside quantitative studies that explore the relationships between sociological and psychological variables to facilitate brand development, conducting qualitative, exploratory research in this area can provide a different perspective on marketing strategies in sports and strengthen sports brands.

5. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

6. Financing

The article has no financial sponsor or research funding, nor is it derived from a research project.

7. Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to all participants and experts helped in conducting this study.

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