

Investigating the Role of Fan- Team Identification in the Sponsorship Consequences in the Professional Football League of Iran

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the current study was to provide a model including the effect of fan-team identification on the sponsorship consequences in the professional football league of Iran.

Method: The research was a descriptive–survey and a field study. The research tool was a combination of researcher developed questionnaire (Sponsorship consequences questionnaire with 12 items) as well as Mael and Ashforth's (1992) Fan-team identification questionnaire with three items. The research population was football fans in Professional Football League in Iran. 241 football fans were randomly investigated at the selected stadiums. The reliability of the sponsorship consequences questionnaire and Fan-team identification questionnaire was found to be 0.83 and 0.88 respectively based on Cronbach's alpha. Moreover, the validity of the tool was verified by conducting face, content, and structural validity. SPSS18 and Smart PLS as well as the Structural Equations Modeling (SEM) approach were used for data analysis.

Results: Findings demonstrated that "fan-team identification" had a positive and significant effect on "Sponsor recognition" ($\beta= 0.544, t= 7.447$), "Positive attitude toward sponsors" ($\beta= 0.495, t= 6.962$), "Financial support of sponsors" ($\beta= 0.461, t= 5.939$), and "Satisfaction with sponsors" ($\beta= 0.361, t= 3.05$), among football fans. In other words, strengthening the fan-team identification level can improve the sponsorship consequences in Professional Football League in Iran.

Conclusion: According to the importance of fan-team identification in sponsorship consequences, sports marketers as well as corporates that are active in sports events, will be able to be more efficient in the sport context by concentrating on the identification concept.

Keywords: Fans, Identification, Iranian league, Professional football, Outcomes, Sponsorship.

Introduction

One of the fundamental strategies to strengthen sports and sports organizations is to encourage sponsors to engage in sports events (Cook et al., 2021). The awareness of sports organizations and commercial companies of valuable advantages and disadvantages that will benefit both teams and companies will be critical in this relationship. Furthermore, it can offer more opportunities for these fields to work together and have more extensive relationships (Fechner et al., 2021). The owners of commercial companies and different industries have realized that sponsorship is a powerful advertising tool for them. Sports sponsorship is an advertising approach that links sporting events with reputed companies (Takamatsu, 2022). Studies in the field of sports have shown that sports sponsorship has a positive effect on improving the brand equity of companies (Henseler et al., 2007). Improving brand equity can be achieved through the financial support of a team and sporting events and it can have significant outcomes such as differentiation and fan loyalty for companies, too (Jaberi et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, the development of sponsorship in sport setting can -directly and indirectly, influence the development and improvement of the financial condition of sports teams (Koronios et al., 2021). If commercial companies have a positive experience by participating in sports, they will intend to expand their support for sports in the future, and in this cycle, both sides will gain more advantages (Daigo & Filo, 2021). Nevertheless, there is one necessity for it that you must pay attention to the different dimensions of relations between fans, sports teams, and sponsorship in sports for the development of more effective presences of companies in sports. Linking sports with sponsors can help sports marketers and business managers gain a better understanding of the potential of these two domains (Rezaei & Sharifian, 2021). Iranian sport is in the direction of becoming professional, but it is

not yet able to take advantage of this potential. Furthermore, great companies are not willing to participate in sports as sponsors because they are not aware of the critical advantages of sports for more income generation (Alipour et al., 2021). Therefore, investigating the different concepts of sponsorship in sporting events, and the relationship of sports fans with sports sponsors can be considered a critical approach to developing the cooperation between sports and sponsoring companies in Iranian sports.

Besides the significance of sponsorship in a sport setting, the identification of fans with teams is one of the key concepts in sports marketing which arises from the close relationship that fans have with their favorite teams and can have significant economic and financial consequences for both the teams and their sponsors (Tsordia et al., 2021). According to the importance of financial sponsors in sports to strengthen the financial aspect of sports teams and organizations, working on the benefits of supporting sports teams for commercial companies can encourage them to be more active in participating in sports (Tsordia et al., 2021). Fisher and Wakefield (1998) contend that one of the key aspects of identification is that people find more motivation through identification to make and preserve the solidarity of their teams. Identification with a sports team is an example of organizational identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), and many sports marketing researchers and sports fans have focused on it (Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Wann and Branscombe (1993) theorized that Fan-team identification refers to the intense solidarity and feelings that fans have for their favorite teams. Ashforth and Mael (1989) have also defined "identification" as a sense of belonging or a perception of unity. In general, the more identification fans have with their favorite teams, the more loyalty and attitude they will have toward those teams (Jaberi et al., 2014). In previous research, the level of

identification with sports teams has been identified as one of the important predictors of fans' emotional responses, behavioral responses, and cognitive responses (Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Adequate and convenient recognition of financial sponsors is a critical condition for achieving the goals of the sponsorship of companies (Stipp & Schiavone, 1996). When companies sponsor sports, they may be considered part of the team and club complex. It seems that fans who show a high degree of identification with a sports team will have a greater tendency to identify and recognize the sponsors of their favorite team than those who show a reduced level of identification. Based on the theory of social identity, this phenomenon can be explained. Individuals have a greater sense of unity and identity than other members of their group, according to social identity theory. Additionally, they have certain behavioral and emotional tendencies toward them (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). This subject could confirm the effect of fans' identification on sponsor recognition.

Positive attitudes toward sponsors will positively affect a willingness to attend sporting events and the popularity of products related to sponsors (Speed & Thompson, 2000). By identifying and perceiving how fans feel toward a sports sponsor, we can gain a deeper understanding of their shopping behavior. People with a high level of identification display a more positive attitude towards the team members (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). For example, College basketball fans who experience a high level of identification introduce sponsors as unique individuals and they tend to associate more with them (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). It seems that the fans will have more positive attitudes toward the teams' sponsors if they consider them as a part of their team. In a study, Hoek et al. (1993) found that sponsorship executives felt financial support improved consumer attitudes toward the

sponsor or its products. It appears that a sponsor in sports, supporting a well-known team, can be perceived by the fans as a companion and ally. McDonald (1991) believed that people who are interested in a sporting event or a team may have a better perception of the sponsors.

Purchasing the products of sponsors of teams and sporting events can be considered one of the most common ways fans financially support sponsors. Many researchers have identified an increase in sales as one of the most prominent outcomes of companies participating in sports teams as sponsors (Turco, 1994). When sponsorship companies are considered members of the club, fans will help the sponsors by purchasing more of the sponsor's products. Sports sponsors can attract enthusiasts and fans of a particular sport or a club, through this, cause more sales and find more stable customers (Hamidi, 2018). After all, a positive image of sponsors in the public's opinion could lead to an increase in sales and returns for these companies in the sports field (Giakoni-Ramírez et al., 2021).

Satisfaction is one of the important concepts in sports marketing. Satisfaction refers to consumers' evaluation of whether a product or service is desirable or undesirable after consumption (Oliver, 1997). Ashforth and Mael (1989) believe that identification motivates people to participate and be more satisfied in activities near their identity. By creating the fans' sense of identification with the sponsors as a member of the club, it can lead to greater satisfaction from fans for the sponsors. Moreover, a strong identification with a sports team and the acceptance of sponsors as club members can even cause members to ignore some of the weaknesses and potential problems of sponsoring companies. By ignoring the weaknesses of the sport's sponsors, fans may experience higher satisfaction in communication with them (Oliver, 1997).

The phenomenon of sports sponsorship, which

has flourished in recent decades in Iran, can be defined as an emerging area that needs more studies and research (Miri et al., 2022). Sponsorship in sports is one of the main sources of income for both sports teams and commercial companies that have not been taken into complete account by sports managers and commercial company managers in Iranian sports, especially in the field of football (Ehsaniet al., 2016); therefore, conducting scientific studies to understand the various dimensions of this domain is necessary. According to the importance of revenue generation in professional football and the multiple financial difficulties faced by Iranian football teams, it seems necessary to increase attention to various studies in the field of sponsorship and the development of theoretical foundations. The heavy reliance of Iranian football teams on government resources has led to their inability to compete at international levels, and this will gradually weaken them in international competitions. Therefore, addressing the concepts that lead to the financial strengthening and revenue generation of football teams can be of great importance. While numerous studies have been conducted in the field of sponsorship of sports events in Iran, the concept of fan identification and its impact on the outcomes of sports sponsorship for sponsors has not yet been examined. As far as we know, this is the first study that has been done on fan-team identification, along with the outcomes of sponsorship for sponsors in this field of sports in this country.

Based on the fact that identification is defined as a factor influencing the behavior and emotions of fans (Tsordia et al., 2021), it is expected that the level of identification can influence the behaviors and attitudes of fans toward companies that support sports teams and sporting events. Marketing managers in sports teams and marketing managers in commercial companies must recognize the goals and opportunities of sports and make use of them effectively. Commercial companies can participate in the sports arena with various goals and provide the opportunity for achieving their interests. According to a preliminary study and literature review, different consequences of the presence of sponsors in the sports arena have been examined. In this study, sponsor recognition, positive attitude toward sponsors, financial support of sponsors, and satisfaction with sponsors have been examined as four effective and crucial outcomes in the sponsorship of sports teams and events based on the study of Gwinner & Swanson (2003).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of fan-team identification on sponsorship outcomes for sponsors in the Iranian Football Premier League because of the importance of identification and the consequences of sponsorship in this field. In this study, based on a review of the research literature, the effect of fan-team identification on the consequences of sponsorship in the professional football league of Iran has been studied based on the following conceptual model (Figure 1).

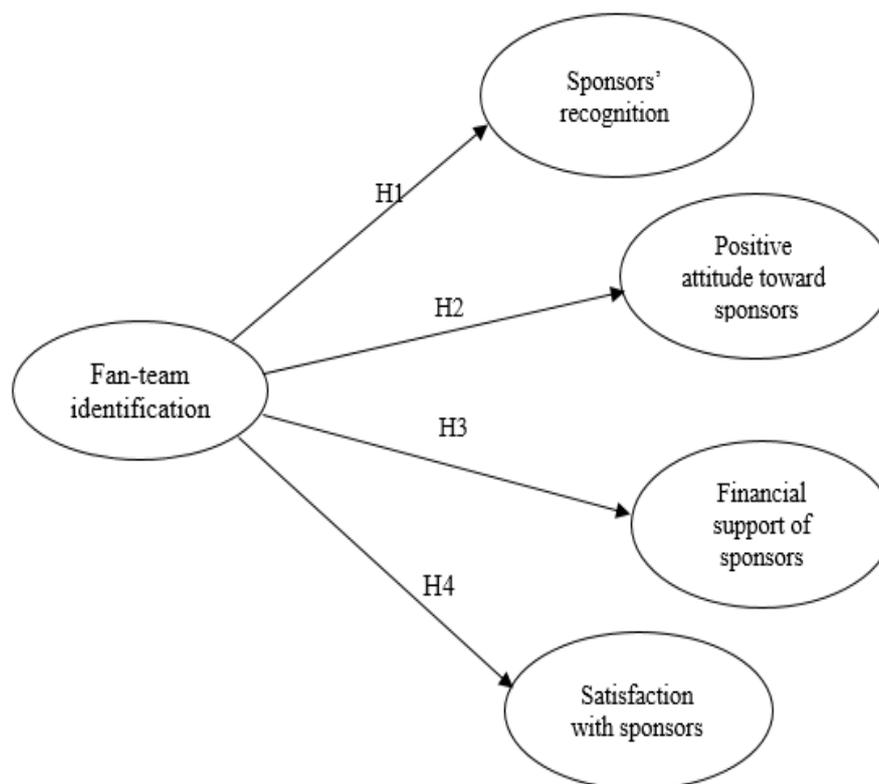


Figure1.Research Conceptual Model

Materials and Methods

A field study along with a quantitative approach was conducted on the fans of the most popular football team in the Iranian professional football league to fulfill this study. The present paper was an applied and descriptive correlation research. The research population included the fans of the most popular football teams Iranian Pro League (Tractor F.C, EsteghlalF.C, Sepahan F.C, Persepolis F.C) in the 18thseason Iran Pro League. According to the purpose of the study, these teams were selected in consultation with experts and specialists in sports marketing. Due to the lack of accurate and documented statistics on the statistical population, the formula used for the structural equation ($5q \leq n \leq 15q$) was used to determine the proper sample size (Kline, 2015). The 15-item-questionnaire proposed in this study required a minimum of 75 and a maximum of 225 samples to be considered proper samples in the research.

For this purpose, to reach a suitable and sufficient sample size, according to the possibility of non-return of the questionnaires or invalidity of some of them for any reason, 300 questionnaires were randomly distributed about one hour before the team competition in stadiums selected purposefully. Questionnaires were distributed and collected during Perspolis Tehran-Tractorsazi Tabriz and Esteghlal Tehran-Sepahan matches in Tehran in the 18th season of the Iranian Pro League. The questionnaire had an appendix to inform about the purpose of the study and a guide for completing the questionnaire. Each questionnaire was estimated to take approximately 9 minutes to complete. Four research colleagues, who had been justified, participated in the competitions to distribute and collect the questionnaires. Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 241 were deemed eligible for analysis and calculations. Data were collected using a combination of researcher-

developed questionnaires and standardized ones in similar and related research in the literature. In a preliminary qualitative study, the research literature in this field was reviewed to compile a questionnaire about the consequences of sponsorship. Additionally, supplementary data were collected from interviews with ten experts in sports marketing. Finally, four factors were extracted as consequences of sponsoring sporting events by sponsorship companies. The researcher-developed questionnaire included four components: “sponsor recognition” with three items, “positive attitude toward sponsors” with three items, “financial support of sponsors” with three items, and “satisfaction with sponsors” with three items). The components extracted in the qualitative phase of the study included: sports sponsors’ recognition, positive attitude towards sports sponsors, Satisfaction with sports sponsors, and financial support from sports sponsors. The structural validity as well as the reliability of the extracted components were evaluated and confirmed. In addition to the researcher-developed questionnaire (mentioned above), we also applied a standard questionnaire (Mael and Ashforth's, 1992) with three items to measure fan-team identification. A total of fifteen items were used in the general questionnaire to assess the research variables. The questionnaire was designed based on the seven-point Likert scale. To ensure instrument reliability, Cronbach's alpha along with composite reliability was used. A pilot study was conducted on a sample

of 30 football fans in the Iranian Premier League to determine the reliability of the research using Cronbach's alpha. A higher alpha value of 0.7 and a value of composite reliability higher than 0.8 indicate optimal reliability (Chin, 2010), which is presented in Table 2. The Cronbach's alpha value for the sponsorship consequences questionnaire and Fan-team identification questionnaire was found to be 0.83 and 0.88 respectively. Face, content, and structural validity were conducted to assess the questionnaire's validity. The face and content validity of the research tool was confirmed by 9 sports marketing experts. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), convergent validity, and exploratory factor analysis were used to evaluate the structural validity of the tool. In confirmatory factor analysis, factor loads higher than 0.5 indicate confirmation of the structural validity of the research instrument, which confirms the results of factor analysis in the number one instrument validity table. Convergent validity was also determined by calculating the average extracted variance (AVE). The variance of the research tool in Table 2 was higher than the recommended value (0.5), which indicates its convergent validity (Hair et al., 2016).

Results

The demographic features of the research sample have been given in table 1.

Table 1- demographic features of the research sample

Demographic features	Percent %	
Employment status	Employed	40.3%
	Not employed	58.6%
Age	18–29	51%
	30–39	31%
	40–49	13%
	>=50	3%
Education	University degrees	78%
	Diploma & high school degrees	22%
Favorite team	FC Esteghlal	27%
	FC Sepahan	22%
	FC Perspolis	32%
	FC Tractorsazi	17%
	Missed	2%
Marital state	Married	35%
	Not married	65%

Table 2 shows the results of confirmatory factor analysis, Composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and Average variance extracted.

Table2. The confirmatory factor analysis, Composite reliability, Cronbach’s alpha, and Average variance extracted Results

variable	Item	Factor loading	Composite reliability (above0.70)	Cronbach’s Alpha (Above0.70)	Average Variance extracted (Above 0.50)
Fan-team identification	FTI1	0.84	0.91	0.83	0.75
	FTI2	0.92			
	FTI3	0.85			
Sponsors recognition	SI1	0.80	0.88	0.86	0.69
	SI2	0.79			
	SI3	0.89			
Positive attitude toward sponsors	AS1	0.87	0.85	0.89	0.71
	AS2	0.80			
	AS3	0.84			
Financial support for sponsors	FS1	0.85	0.89	0.85	0.70
	FS2	0.79			
	FS3	0.97			
Satisfaction With sponsors	SS1	0.81	0.90	0.88	0.77
	SS2	0.88			
	SS3	0.80			

Table 2 shows the proper validity and reliability of the research tool. After verifying the validity and reliability of the tool, SPSS18 and Smart PLS software was used to analyze the data and

test the hypotheses.

In the inferential findings section, after analyzing the data with the PLS software, the

test results of the research hypotheses are shown in Table 3 and Figure 2. To measure the significance of causal relationships between variables, t value, and p-value were used. Based on the significance level of 0.05, the value of t should be greater than 1.96 less than this value,

the corresponding parameter in the model is not considered significant, and also values less than 0.05 indicate a significant difference for the P value calculated for the regression weights with zero at 0.95.

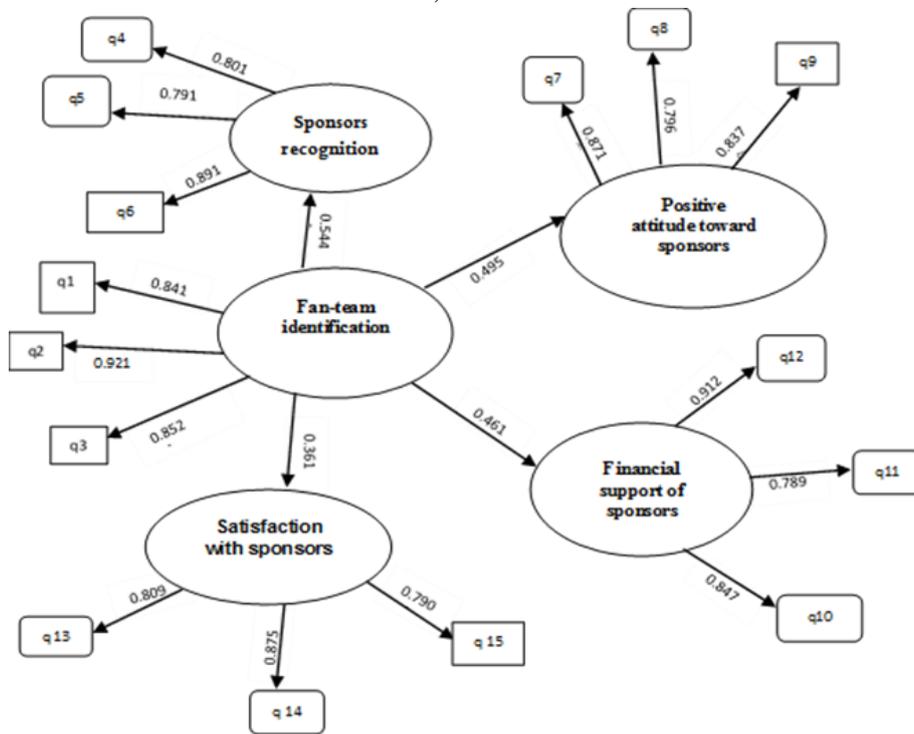


Figure2.Structural equations model

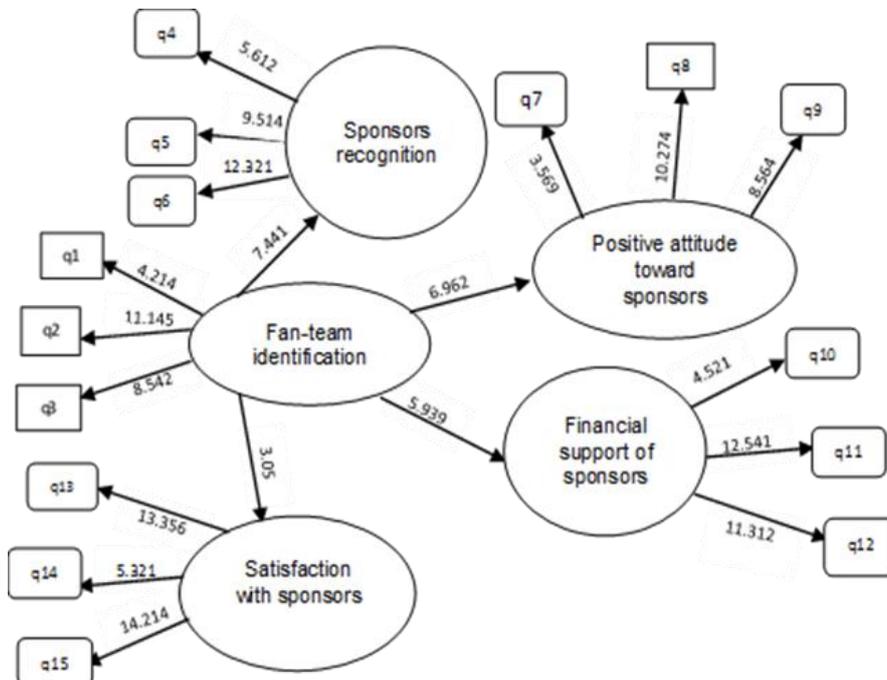


Figure3. T value output

Regression coefficients and t-values related to each of the relationships proposed in the research model are presented in Figures 2 and 3. The Causal paths along with regression

coefficients and values of partial indices related to the research model are presented in Table 3.

Table3.Regression coefficients (test results of relationships between variables)

Number	Exogenous variable	path	Endogenous variable	β	t value	P	Result
1	Fan-team identification	→	Sponsors recognition	0.544	7.447	*	supported
2	Fan-team identification	→	Positive attitude toward sponsors	0.495	6.962	*	supported
3	Fan-team identification	→	Financial support of sponsors	0.461	5.939	*	supported
4	Fan-team identification	→	Satisfaction With sponsors	0.361	3.05	*	supported

*p<0.05

The Causal paths along with regression coefficients and values of partial indices related to the research model are presented in Table 3. Based on the results of Figure 2 and Table 3, the relationships proposed in the research model were confirmed with a level of 0.95 confidence, and the findings indicated that fans' identification with football teams in Iranian Football Premier League can have a positive and significant impact on the consequences of financial support of active companies in sponsorship.

Discussion

Fan identification with sports teams is one of the concepts that can cause fans to have specific emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions toward their favorite teams. In other words, the level of identification and attachment with sports teams in past research has been defined as one of the prominent predictors of fans' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Koronios et al., 2021; Hazari, 2018). One of the possible reactions of fans who identify

with sports teams can be their specific behavioral and cognitive reactions to the sponsor of their favorite team. Because the relationship and success of sports teams and sponsors in sports are mutual; being more attractive to sports teams can be associated with being more attractive to sponsors among fans too. The main purpose of this study was to model the effect of Fan- team identification on the sponsorship consequences in the Professional Football League in Iran. Generally, the results confirm the hypothesis of the effect of fan-team identification on the consequences related to sponsorship in sports. A part of the results indicates that Fan-team identification affects sponsors' recognition by fans. In other words, the higher the level of identification of the fans towards their favorite team, the higher the knowledge and awareness of their team sponsors. In addition, SoltanHoseini et al. (2012) found that sports sponsorships can improve customer awareness and make customer relationships permanent. Supporting this finding, Tsordia et al. (2021) revealed evidence for the effect of team

identification on sponsor-sponsee perceived congruity. Moreover, in line with the findings, Gwinner and Swanson (2003) found that fan-team identification plays a critical role in improving awareness of fans toward event sponsors. Consistent with this finding, Wann and Branscombe (1993), highly identified fans of college basketball perceive other supporters of the team (such as team sponsors) as very "special". In line with this finding, Koronios et al. (2021) found that sports involvement and beliefs about sponsorship were effective in fans' awareness of sponsoring companies. According to the results, Fan-team identification has played a positive and significant role in sponsors' recognition by Iranian football fans. Brand awareness or recognition is one of the key elements in the brand management of organizations and commercial companies. Increasing awareness and recognition of sponsors and sports teams can provide the conditions for higher profits and be sure about recovering advertising costs in sports. Sports and sporting events are attractive to fans and spectators, therefore, accompanying sponsors along with sports can leave positive associations in their minds, and these associations lead to the creation of lasting images of the brand of sponsors in the minds of fans. People's interest in sports activities and specific sports attractions creates an emotional connection between the brand of sponsors and fans. When Fans gain familiarity with a sponsor's brand are more likely to become loyal customers of the sponsor easily and with more confidence. The institutionalization of this approach in sports event sponsorship could provide substantial benefits for both sports teams and active sponsors.

Some parts of the findings showed that Fan-team identification has a positive and significant effect on the positive attitude of fans toward sponsors in sports. In other words, the higher the level of identification of the fans with their favorite team, the more positive attitudes toward their team sponsors will be.

Consistent with this result, Demirel et al. (2018) revealed that team identification with the sponsored entity has a significant effect on perceived benefits to the sponsoring organization. Hazari (2018) showed that consumers' behavior is significantly affected by their attitudes toward the sponsors in the sport setting. In addition, Koronios et al. (2021) found that sports involvement and beliefs about sponsorship were effective on fans' attitudes towards sponsoring companies. This is consistent with McDonald (1991) that stated those who are interested in a sporting event experience a good feeling toward sponsoring corporates. According to Zepf (2008), the attitude towards financial support activities should be used as a lever in marketing. Supporting this finding, Hoek et al. (1993), found that managers of sponsoring corporates believe that sponsorship improved consumers' attitudes to the company products. Zepf (2008) showed that sports sponsorship not only increases income but also strengthens the corporate identity of companies. Thus, it seems that the prejudice and desire of the fans toward their favorite team will also affect their positive attitude toward the team sponsors. In other words, fans that experience a higher level of identification will have a higher level of solidarity and commitment than their favorite team sponsors. As a result of higher fan identification with the team, more positive psychological and mental associations are formed between the sponsors and the fans. Hence, a positive attitude can result in positive behavioral and cognitive reactions to sponsors.

In addition, the results showed that Fan-team identification affects the financial support of sponsors in sports. In other words, the higher the level of identification of fans with their favorite team, the more willing and committed they will be to support the sponsor of that team financially. One of the most notable and well-known examples of fan financial support of companies that sponsor teams and events is the purchase of goods and the offer to buy the

goods of sponsoring companies for others. When manufacturing companies support a sporting event, they will be revived, activated, and rebranded, allowing them to be more prominent than their competitors, (Hamidi, 2008). Thus, by increasing product purchases, fans and spectators help sponsors to return sponsorships costs. SoltanHoseini et al. (2012) also showed that sports sponsorship could increase sales. Similarly, Pope and Turco (2001) believe that financial support for sports facilitates return on investment. In the study of Kim and Manoli (2022), team identification was found as a significant determinant of both behavioral intention and WOM intention. The effects of team identification on consumer purchase intention in sports marketing were also confirmed by Lee (2021). Consistent with this result, Sutton et al. (1997) argued that identified fans experience higher price tolerance. This finding is also consistent with the findings of Gwinner and Swanson (2003). In the study of Turco (1994), increasing firm sales was found to be a critical outcome of corporate engagement in sponsorship. In addition, Speed and Thompson (2000) found that positive attitudes toward sponsors will positively affect a willingness to attend at sporting events and the popularity of products related to sponsors. Thomas et al. (2022) demonstrated that the perceived sincerity of the sponsoring brand and consumers' sports involvement had a positive influence on motivation for sports consumption.

Lacey et al. (2010) found that sponsorship of major international sporting events increases viewers' awareness of corporate products and piques their interest in purchasing products. On the other hand, customer loyalty to the logo, effectiveness of advertising costs, activation of the production or service units, attraction of specific customers, and return on investment are the benefits of sponsorship of sporting events (Hamidi, 2008). Therefore, events and sports fields can create crucial opportunities for sponsors to use the support of sports fans to

develop their brands and sales.

Another part of the findings showed that fan-team identification has a positive and significant effect on fans' satisfaction with sponsors in sports. In other words, the higher the level of identification of fans towards their favorite team, the higher the satisfaction with their team's sponsors. Ashforth and Mael (1989) assert that people who identify with an organization or a team are more likely to participate in activities converging with their identities. This finding is also consistent with the findings of Gwinner and Swanson (2003). Moreover, this result is in line with the findings of Gwinner and Swanson (2003). In line with this finding, Silva (2022) found that there is a significant relationship between team identification and the effectiveness of professional soccer sponsorship. If a company as a sponsor can introduce itself to fans as part of a team identity or sporting event, the sponsor will also be perceived as an integral part of that team's identity by fans. As a result of this interaction and closeness, more fans are satisfied with the products and services of the sponsors. The more fan identification sports teams have, the more sponsors associated with their team can obtain fan support and satisfaction. This support can ultimately provide opportunities for sponsors to reach more loyal customers. Thus, companies can become part of the fans' identity by sponsoring sports teams and events. These sponsorships have both short- and long-term benefits. Increasing satisfaction can be a prelude to gaining fans' loyalty to brands, by actively participating in sports, commercial companies can seek to strengthen the satisfaction of their customers and develop their loyalty.

It is hoped that the results of this study will provide sponsors, sports teams, and managers with helpful and practical guidelines. Sponsors can use sporting events and competitions as effective tools to attract and retain customers for their goods and service businesses. Through

this potential, they can strengthen their relationship with sporting events, gain more business opportunities, and create a significant target market for themselves.

Conducting studies that lead to a mutual understanding of sports and sponsors about the benefits and advantages of sport sponsorship can help commercial companies to participate in sporting events with greater nobility and awareness. There is no doubt that the conscious participation of commercial companies in sports events in the long and short term will provide significant financial resources for the sports teams and will greatly help them to solve their financial problems.

Conclusions

Sponsoring sports and sports-related events is one of the best ways to communicate effectively with customers and achieve marketing goals. According to the research findings and the importance of fan identification in strengthening the consequences of sponsorship of sporting events, segmenting sports fans in terms of their level of identification with sports teams are significant for achieving more effectiveness in sponsoring. In the study, the findings showed that the greater the sense of identification and unity with sports teams, the more positive the image of sponsors is perceived by fans, and such a positive image could lead to behavioral and emotional reactions to sponsors. Sports managers should be aware that a prominent presence of companies and sponsors in sports and sporting events can create a valuable way for more income for sports teams and clubs. Thus, sports teams and clubs are more likely to experience success at the national and international levels. Those who identify with sports teams experience a higher sense of psychological and mental identification with their favorite team. And this solidarity can lead to more intense behaviors and feelings toward teams and their sponsors. In sports marketing management, identification is one of the key

concepts that can be applied to new areas such as sociology, psychology, and sports marketing. Studying this concept from different quantitative and qualitative aspects of sports marketing can help to expand the field of marketing and management of fan behavior in sports markets. There is a need to examine different aspects of identification in different sports and their relationship with other cognitive, behavioral, and emotional concepts of fans related to their favorite teams. To take advantage of the potential of sports, sponsors are better to turn to sports teams whose fans have a greater level of identification with their teams. Consequently, the marketing managers of the teams and sponsors, should provide the opportunity for the development of more fan identification with the sports teams, and thus, make the most of their behavioral and cognitive consequences towards the team sponsors. Providing an identity document for sports teams and providing ways for fan participation in the club management process are some methods that can strengthen the fans' sense of identification with sports teams. Sports managers and sports marketers should follow the fans' needs and demands to pave the way for more identification of fans with sports teams. Moreover, the sponsor companies should plan their marketing strategies based on the level of fans' identification with the sports teams. Fans' segmentation based on identification level, can help both sports teams and sports sponsors to use the maximum potential of sports settings.

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