The Effect of Brand Identity on the Brand Prestige of Football Clubs in Iranian Premier League with the Mediating Role of Fan-Team Identification

Articles in Press

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Abstract

Purpose: Given the significance of perceived prestige in sport industry, the aim of the current research was to study the effect of team brand identity on developing the brand prestige of football clubs in Iranian premier league with the mediating role of fan-team identification.

Method: The current research was a descriptive-correlational and applied study conducted in the field. The research population included the fans of the popular football clubs in Iranian premier league. 374 football fans were purposefully investigated as the research sample. The research tool was a combination of valid and reliable standard questionnaires. The reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha and the validity was confirmed using content, face, and construct validity. In order to measure the validity and fitness of the model and to test the hypotheses, structural equation modeling was used via AMOS version 22.

Results: The findings revealed that "brand identity" has a positive and significant effect on "fan-team identification" and "brand prestige". "fan-team identification" was also a significant predictor for "brand prestige". The results also demonstrated that "brand identity" indirectly and through "fan-team identification" is effective on the brand prestige of football clubs in Iranian premier league.

Conclusion: According to the research findings, by providing attractive identity for football clubs and developing the identification of fans with their popular teams, the football clubs can be perceived as more prestigious brands by the fans. More prestigious football clubs have this opportunity to get more chance for attracting loyal fans and generating more income in marketing process.

Keywords: Branding, Brand identity, Brand prestige, Football league.

Introduction

Within the extended academic literature on strategic marketing, brand management has been a critical agenda of scholars in the past decades (Kim et al., 2024), and sport brand management has become an increasingly strategic process (Doyle et al., 2024). Developing and strengthening sports brands and attracting fans as the main customers in the sports industry can be one of the core strategies in the heart of sports team management, because developing and strengthening the brand of sports teams, in addition to earning money, can provide national and transnational successes (Jaberi et al., 2013). Therefore, paying attention to the dimensions of branding and specifically focusing on the brand as one of the most important intangible assets of sports teams can provide the necessary grounds for creating a strong image of the brand of sports teams and establishing reputable brands.

The brand prestige that consumers perceive is created by various experiences that customers get from a brand (Kim et al., 2019). The concept of prestige is the overall credibility of an organization and the level of credit that people outside the organization give to it (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). In other words, prestige is the amount of respect, admiration and fame that others have for an organization in their minds. Many researches agree on the view that the prestige of an organization strengthens the desire of people to feel identified with that organization (Ahearne et al., 2005). Many people consider a brand as an identity and like to be associated with authentic and positive brands. Ashforth and Mael (1989) believe that people often cognitively identify with successful groups and individuals, which leads to the satisfaction of their self-esteem. In addition, the study of Arnett et al. (2003) showed that perceived organizational prestige is positively related to organizational identification. Therefore, identification with high-prestige organizations can be considered

as a key factor for consumers in order to continue developing their self-esteem (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The perceived prestige of an organization positively affects the attractiveness of that organization's identity (Pratt, 1998). Bhattacharya et al. (1995) consider the prestige as an important predictive factor in the success of the organizations (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Organizations with high prestige are assumed to be successful organizations, and therefore customers feel proud to be associated with them. The perceived image of the brand by customers, when they identify with a prestigious brand, can develop their pride (Dutton et al., 1994). The findings of Nobre et al. (2023) showed that brand prestige forces consumers to formulate their relationships with those brands and achieve brand happiness. According to the findings of Mansoor and Paul (2022), brand prestige can be related to the desire of consumers to achieve internal satisfaction to show themselves as part of such prestigious brands. Therefore, the feeling of connection with prestigious brands encourages customers to convince their contacts to buy and use such brands.

Considering the multidimensionality of the brand concept, studying the psychological and sociological components in the field of sports can be considered an important step in the management and development of the brand of football club (Jaberi & Sanchez, 2023). Since brand power is rooted in the minds of customers (Keller, 1993), evaluating the psychological and emotional tendencies of fans and the effects of these factors in strengthening sports brands can provide the necessary grounds for strengthening and developing sports brands. Studying the behavior and attitude of fans and explaining them from different psychological and sociological aspects can provide more effective knowledge and information to sports managers in order to manage the behavior of fans in different dimensions (Jaberi & Sanchez, 2023). Team

brand identity, fan-team identification, and brand prestige are among the indicators that can provide sports managers and marketers with comprehensive information about fans' expectations by evaluating the characteristics and tendencies of fans.

Brand identity refers to a set of brand associations through which people achieve functional, emotional and self-expression benefits. A brand should display an identity that engages customers and enables them to distinguish the desired brand from its competitors (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Creating and promoting brand identity is the starting point in sports branding, and the managers of sports organizations should be in search of key activities so that they can create and strengthen the value of sports brands by presenting an appropriate identity of their teams (Kwon et al., 2005). The brand identity perceived by fans in the field of sports can have different behavioral and emotional consequences for teams and sports clubs. Associations related to the brand are very important because of its different functions. These functions are the processes of influencing customers' decisions, differentiating the brand and creating positive emotions in customers towards the brand (Aaker, 1996). Therefore, in the field of sports, which is considered a competitive context for sports teams, creating distinct identities of teams and clubs that lead to attracting and strengthening the fan base of sports teams can help to develop and strengthen the teams' brands.

In the past decade, the scientific community of sports management has placed a lot of emphasis on the identity congruity of fans and sports teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Trying to make the identity of football clubs attractive and different can provide the necessary ground for the unity of the fans with the clubs and facilitate the branding by improving brand equity (Jaberi, 2023). The development of identification and the connection among

potential fans will have a significant benefit for sport managers (Shtudiner et al., 2022). Fan-team identification is an important predictor of fan attendance at college sports events (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Ashforth and Mael (1989) have defined identification as a feeling of belonging or a perception of oneness. Gladden et al. (1998) and Ross (2006) have revealed the relationship between fan-team identification and brand value in their model. Fan-team identification has been suggested as an important predictor of fan attendance at college sports events (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). The more the fans have a sense of identification with their favorite team, the more attitudinal and behavioral loyalty they will have towards their favorite teams (Jaberi et al., 2014). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) found that people seek to develop a sense of identification with attractive organizations that fulfill their inner needs. Providing a basis for the creation of team-fan identification will be one of the key prerequisites in developing the team brand and strengthening the teams' fan base. Gladden et al. (1998) and Ross (2006) have confirmed the relationship between fan-team identification and brand equity in their model. Wallace et al. (2014) have also revealed that brands that express the personal and social identity of customers can enjoy more support from customers and customers will love such brands more and promote these brands more by word of mouth. Farahani et al. (2015) found that brand identity helps in creating brand loyalty and increasing brand equity. Jaberi et al. (2014) argued that to create strong brands of sports teams, sports managers and marketers should determine the identity-building factors for sports teams at the top of their marketing and branding strategies. According to Burmann et al. (2009), brand identity is an internal factor that leads to the enhancement of brand equity. Carlson et al. (2002) also believed that customer-oriented brand equity is positively associated with the level of identification with the sports team.

For football clubs, brand prestige and reputation can have a significant impact on several aspects of their operations and success. A reputable brand can drive higher sponsorship costs, ticket prices and commercial revenues, contributing to the club's overall financial success. Reputable brands can attract star players, who may be willing to accept lower salaries or play for less money to be associated with a reputable brand. On the other hand, a club with an authentic brand can inspire higher fan loyalty, which can lead to increased attendance, merchandise sales and engagement on social media. Therefore, football clubs in Iran that has suffered from financial problems in recent years and in many cases their successes on an international scale have been affected by these problems can focus on strengthening their prestige to achieve a better position among the fans and provide better conditions for earning more money and success. 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 (Jaberi & Barkhordar, 2022). With the increase in the prestige of the clubs, marketers and financial sponsors will be more willing to participate in sports and support Iranian football clubs, and in the long run, this can lead to strengthening the infrastructure and improving the sports and non-sports performance of the clubs. In this study, the researchers are looking for an answer to the question that "can variables such as team brand identity and fan-team identification, along with the brand prestige, explain the model and path for branding and strengthening the brand prestige of football clubs in Iranian premier league?". In this research, the effect of team brand identity (team identity) and fan-team identification on the brand prestige of football clubs in Iranian premier league will be investigated in the form of a conceptual model. This model can answer the question that the use and application of psychological and sociological concepts along with marketing concepts can be the basis for strengthening the brand and improving the prestige of the brand among the fans as the main customers in the football setting. The research hypotheses and components are presented in the following model (Figure 1).
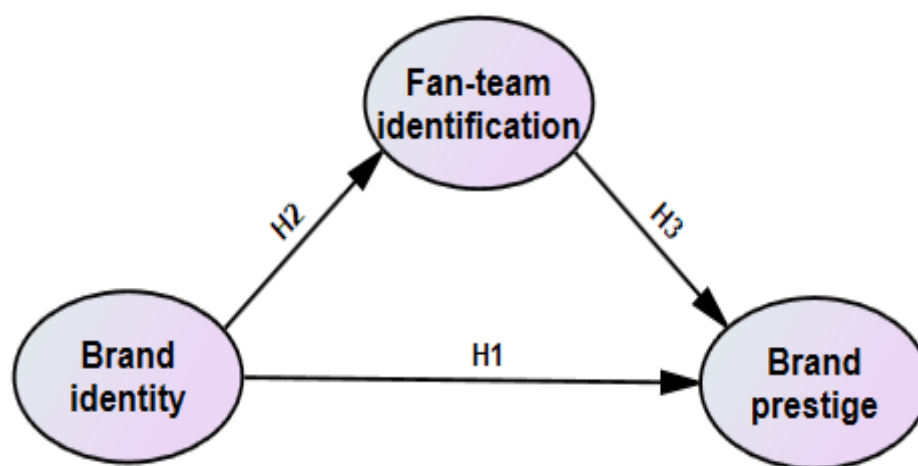
Figure1. The Research Model

Materials and methods

This quantitative research is an applied, descriptive-correlational, and cross-sectional

conducted in the field. In general, the methods of collecting data related to the current research can be divided into two categories: librarian method and field method. In librarian section,

websites, internet information portals, books, Persian and English articles, theoretical literature review and past research background were investigated. In the field section, a standard questionnaire has been used, which is a combination of valid questionnaires used in past researches. From Erdoğmuş and Büdeyri-Turan's (2012) standard brand prestige questionnaires, a combination of Mael and Ashforth's (1992) fan-team identification questionnaires and Wann and Branscombe (1993), and Koo's (2009) team brand identity questionnaire as the research tools. This tool has a total of 22 items for data collection. The research tool was designed with a five-point Likert scale (completely disagree to completely agree), which were assigned 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 points respectively. After obtaining the original text of the questionnaires and after translating them, the researcher removed, modified and re-edited them according to the opinions of 15 researchers in the field of marketing and sports management. In this way, the face and content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed. In addition, the confirmatory factor analysis was used to verify the construct validity of the research instrument. For the purpose of confirmatory factor analysis, the measurement models of each of the research constructs are presented separately, and the results of the confirmatory factor analysis are presented along with the partial P index to test the acceptability of the factor load related to each item. The strength of the relationship between the factor (latent variable) and the observable variable is shown by factor loading. Factor load is a value between 0 and 1. If the factor loading is less than 0.3, the relationship is considered weak. A factor loading between 0.3 and 0.6 is acceptable, and if it is greater than 0.6, it is very desirable (Mansourfar, 2015). Based on the significance level of 0.05, the critical value should be more than 1.96. Less than this value, the corresponding parameter in the model is not considered important. In this research, Cronbach's alpha method was used to determine the reliability of the tools. In order to evaluate the reliability value of the tool, in a preliminary study (pre-test) 30 questionnaires were distributed among football fans. In Table 1, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each of the factors are presented separately.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficients

Constructs	Items	Cronbach's alpha coefficient
Brand identity	13	0.85
Fan-team identification	5	0.81
Brand prestige	4	0.80

The statistical population of this research consisted of all the fans of the popular teams of the Iranian Premier League (Perspolis Tehran, Esteghlal Tehran, Foulad Mobarakeh Sepahan, Tractorsazi Tabriz, and Malvan Bandar Anzali) in the 23rd season of the Iranian football Premier League 2023-2024. Due to the lack of accurate organization of the fans, there was no accurate and reliable statistics of the number of fans of the studied teams. The minimum number of samples required to conduct this research is 384 based on Morgan's table, and in addition, based on the formula for determining the number of samples based on the formula used for structural equation modeling, i.e. $5q \leq n \leq 15q$, where q is the number of items and n is the sample size, the required number of samples were estimated to be between 110 and 330 fans (Kline, 2015). Since the questionnaire used in this research included 22 items, according to the formula for determining the sample size, a sample of 110 to 330 people was calculated as a statistical sample for conducting the research. In this research, the purposive sampling method was used and the research population included fans of Persepolis Tehran,

Esteghlal Tehran, Foolad Mobarake Sepahan, Tractorsazi Tabriz and Malavan Bandar Anzali. In order to achieve the required data, questionnaires were purposefully distributed among the fans attended in the stadium on the match days of the teams. In this way, after attending the teams' stadiums, the researchers collected distributed the tools for data collection. The research sample was selected using the purposeful sampling method based on the inclusion criteria as well as the research nature. The criteria for the purposeful selection of the research sample included a history of at least five years of being a fan of the favorite team, the experience of participating in the favorite team's matches at least five times, and sufficient knowledge to understand the items of the questionnaire. It should be mentioned that in order to collect the required number of questionnaires, the stage of distribution and collection was repeated for each team in separate competitions, and finally 374 valid questionnaires were obtained. 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 10 minutes to complete. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 382 were returned, and after an initial review, 374 were found valid for data analysis.

SPSS version 20 and AMOS version 22 software were used for descriptive and inferential data analysis. In order to assess the validity of the research model as well as investigating the research hypotheses, the structural equation modeling method was applied.

Results

In the inferential section, in order to determine how acceptable the indices are for the measurement models, all the measurement models were first analyzed separately. Based on the adoption of such a method, first four measurement models related to variables were tested separately. General fit indices for measurement models are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Fit indices for the measurement models

Structure	Cmin/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Brand identity	2.31	0.918	0.921	0.926	0.925	0.06
Fan-team identification	2.19	0.914	0.919	0.922	0.921	0.07
Brand prestige	2.22	0.911	0.913	0.915	0.919	0.08
Recommended Value	<3	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.10

According to the results of Table 2, it can be concluded that the measurement models have a good fit, in other words, the general indicators confirm that the data well support the patterns. After examining and confirming the

measurement models in the first step, in the second step, structural equations were used to test the hypotheses using the structural equation modeling method. Table 3 shows the general fit indices of the research model.

Table 3. General indices of research model fit

Index name	Cmin/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Research model	2.31	0.92	0.92	0.92	0.91	0.02
Recommended value	<3	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.10

As shown in Table 3, all indices were consistent to the acceptable fitness level. Therefore, it can be concluded that the research model is supported with the data and thus has been able to explain the research hypotheses. The structural equations with impact coefficients are presented in Figure 3.
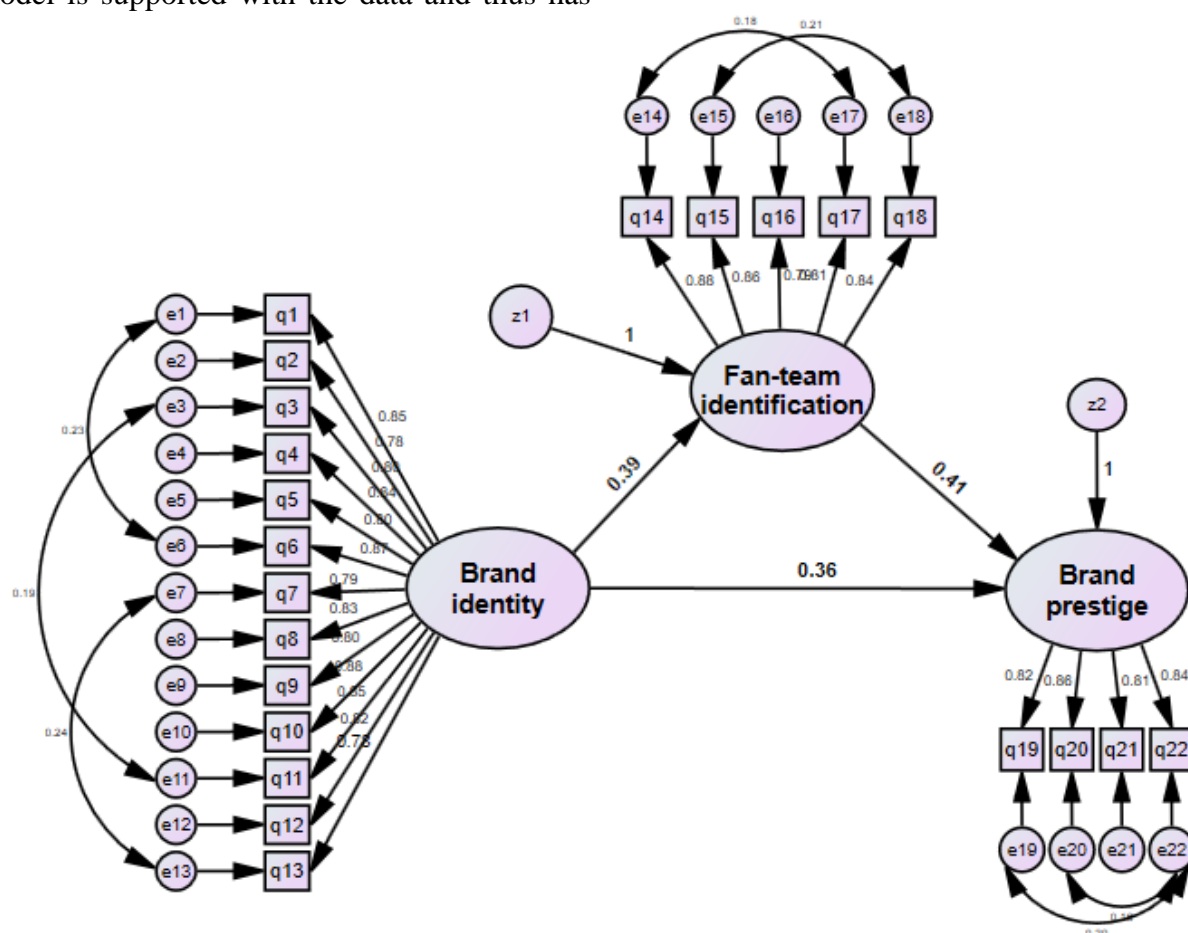
Figure 2. Results of structural equation modeling

After examining and verifying the research model, two partial indexes of critical value and P have been used to test the significance of the hypotheses. The critical value is the value obtained by dividing the "regression weight estimate" by the "standard error". Based on the significance level of 0.05, the critical value should be more than 1.96. Less than this value, the corresponding parameter in the model is not considered important, and values smaller than 0.05 for P value indicate a significant difference between the value calculated for the regression weights with zero value at the 0.95 confidence level. Hypotheses along with regression coefficients and the values of partial indicators related to each hypothesis are given in table 4.

Table 4. Coefficients and results of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path	Regression weights	C.R.	P	Result
H1	Brand identity --------- Brand prestige	0.36	9.98	0.001	supported
H2	Brand identity ---------- Fan-team identification	0.39	10.21	0.001	supported
H3	Fan-team identification --------- Brand prestige	0.41	13.15	0.001	supported

*p<0.01

According to the statistics presented in table 4, (higher critical value of 1.96, and P value less than 0.05), all the hypotheses drawn in the research model have been confirmed. According to the findings, in addition to the direct effect, brand identity has an indirect effect on brand prestige through the fan-team identification with an effect coefficient of 0.16 (0.39 * 0.41). In other words, fan-team identification can facilitate the effect of brand identity on brand prestige, and the total effect in this model is equal to 0.52 (0.36+0.16).

Discussion

In this research, the role of team brand identity and fan-team identification in the brand prestige of football teams in Iranian premier football league has been studied and investigated. The results can be used as effective strategies to help managers, owners and officials of football clubs in order to develop the brand of Premier League football clubs among fans.

Part of the findings of the research showed that the "brand identity" had a significant effect on the "brand prestige" of football clubs in the Premier League of Iran. In other words, by strengthening the brand identity of the clubs in Iranian Premier League, the amount of prestige and perceived credibility of the clubs in the minds of the football fans will also increase. Consistent to this finding, the results of Chiu et al.'s (2019) studies showed that perceived event credibility partially mediates the relationship between sports participation and intention to attend sports events. This study suggests that sports event organizers should employ different strategies in developing future editions of the event and maintaining fan interest in the sport. In particular, event organizers should enhance the credibility of the sporting event through effective marketing communications to attract first-time spectators to the event (Chiu et al., 2019). The results of Salar et al.'s (2020)

studies have also demonstrated that brand identity management is effective on brand identity prestige. The findings of So et al. (2017) revealed that brand identification is critical in brand attractiveness. Brand identity plays a crucial role in shaping brand prestige. Brand identity involves the set of tangible and intangible assets including attributes, values, and messages that a brand communicates to its stakeholders. A strong brand identity creates a consistent image and message across all touch points, which can enhance brand prestige by making the brand appear more reliable and trustworthy. A football brand with a long and rich history and special features may have a high level of brand prestige due to its heritage and tradition. A unique and distinctive brand identity can help a brand stand out from its competitors, which can enhance its perceived prestige. Football brands can use symbols, colors, logos, and other visual elements to create an iconic and memorable identity, which can contribute to their prestige. The logo and colors of a football club can become powerful symbols that represent the club's identity and history. These features as elements of identity are instantly recognizable to football fans around the world, contributing to the clubs' prestige. Many football clubs have a motto or anthem that captures their essence and history, which can enhance the club's prestige.

Another part of the findings showed that brand identity of football clubs has a positive and significant effect on fan-team identification. In other words, the higher the level of brand identity, the higher identification towards favorite team will be experienced by football fans. Brand identity affects fan-team identification because it shapes the way fans perceive and interact with the football club. Fans are more likely to identify with a football club if they are familiar with the club's brand and can easily recognize it. Fans are more likely to identify with a football club if they

perceive the club's brand as providing value and quality, such as through high-quality merchandise or engaging digital content. A strong brand identity that is perceived as trustworthy and credible can create a positive image in the minds of fans, which can increase their identification with the club. Clubs with a strong brand identity that aligns with fans' values can attract fans that identify with those values. A powerful brand identity that connects with fans on an emotional level, such as through powerful visual symbols or a compelling brand story, can increase fan-team identification.

The next part of the findings demonstrated that fan-team identification has a positive and significant effect on the brand prestige of football clubs. In other words, the higher the level of identification of the fans with their favorite team, the more perceived prestige toward the clubs will be expected. Fan-team identification is a critical factor that makes fans to experience special emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions toward their favorite teams (Jaberi & Barkhordar, 2022). Kim and Manoli (2023), found that team identification was a significant determinant of both behavioral intention and WOM intention. The influence of team identification on buying inclination was also verified by Lee (2021). Align to this finding, Sutton et al. (1997) stated that identified fans experience higher price tolerance. Perceived brand prestige can be one of the cognitive and emotional consequences of fan-team identification in sport setting. Moreover, Wann and Branscombe (1993) revealed that highly identified fans of college basketball perceive other supporters of the team very "special". Fan-team identification refers to the psychological bond that fans develop with their favorite football club. This can have a powerful influence on the club's brand prestige in several ways. Strong fan-team identification can create a loyal fan base that is committed to the club, even in difficult times. This can enhance the club's prestige by demonstrating the club's enduring appeal and popularity. Football clubs can become an important part of fans' social identity, which can contribute to their prestige by creating a sense of belonging and community. Fans who strongly identify with their football club often experience intense emotional attachment to the club, which can enhance the club's prestige by creating an aura of excitement and passion around the club. Moreover, the fans identifying strongly with their football clubs are more likely to recommend the club to others, which can enhance the club's prestige by creating positive word of mouth and social media engagement.

Conclusions

According to the research findings, in addition to the direct effect of brand identity on brand prestige of football clubs, brand identity has an indirect effect on brand prestige through the fan-team identification as a mediating factor. In other words, fan-team identification can facilitate the effect of brand identity on brand prestige. Therefore, in order to create strong brands of football clubs in the field of sports industry, sports managers and marketers should examine the perceptions of fans and determine the identity-building factors for football clubs at the top of their marketing and branding strategies. Establishing an identity document for football clubs and creating a proper atmosphere for fan engagement can strengthen the fans' sense of identification with football clubs. By providing attractive identity for football clubs and developing the identification of fans with their popular teams, the football clubs can be perceived as more prestigious brands by the fans. More prestigious football clubs have this opportunity to get more chance for attracting loyal fans and generating more income in marketing process.

Acknowledgments

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