

Designing a Brand Orientation Model from the Customer Perspective (Sports Goods Brand)

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Abstract

Purpose: In the dynamic and emotional sporting goods industry, branding is not just a choice, it's a necessity. A strong brand is not just your name or logo; it's an intangible asset that creates trust, loyalty, and value, ultimately ensuring the long-term success of your business. The present study was conducted with the aim of developing a brand orientation model of customers for professional volleyball products.

Method: The present research method was qualitative and used an interpretative phenomenological approach. The statistical population included customers of sports products of domestic brands Merozh and Yousef Jameh from the cities of Tehran and Urmia. They were selected based on a purposive sample of 20 citizens who had purchased from two renowned domestic brands in the past until information saturation was reached. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews.

Results: To check the reliability and objectivity of the information, the opinions of researchers outside the research community were also consulted, and the acceptability of the data was checked through peer review and corroboration. Smith & Shinebourne's phenomenological method of analysis was used to analyze the data.

Conclusion: A total of 56 subthemes, 13 sub-themes and 6 major themes were extracted and categorized. The main themes included brand desirability, brand power, personal and social factors, economic factors, cultural factors and other related factors such as technology and advertising. The results of this study show how sports brands can use these factors to build lasting relationships with their customers.

Keywords: Brand orientation, consumer preferences, sporting goods

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Introduction

The sporting goods industry is directly tied to concepts such as motivation, success, health, lifestyle, and community. Strong branding can leverage these concepts and create a deep emotional connection with customers. Brand orientation has a positive effect on emotional value and perceived quality, which in turn increases the intention to purchase sportswear (Hasanzadeh et al., 2022). Brand loyalty factors such as brand name, product quality and advertising have a significant impact on consumer preferences for sportswear (Hasanzadeh et al., 2022). These findings underline the importance of aligning brand strategies with consumer expectations to encourage loyalty and repeat purchases. Customers increasingly prefer brands that align with their values (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Brand orientation promotes a culture that favors employee action and the delivery of quality services (Garas et al., 2018). Undoubtedly, a need is considered key to gaining a competitive advantage, and the organization's ability or the actions of its employees to satisfy customer needs are also effective in gaining market share. Therefore, customer-centric behaviour is a desirable outcome for organizations. Customer-centric behavior requires employees to help customers meet their needs through activities such as identification, understanding, analysis, and response (Mohammad, 2017). Employees' behavior should actively reflect the brand values and act as brand advocates, leading to a manifestation of brand-oriented behavior (Kim et al., 2019). On the other hand, brand orientation is closely linked to market performance as it increases brand equity and competitive advantage. A study on small sports clubs in Isfahan province showed that brand orientation along with market orientation positively predicts club performance (Mondali Zadeh, 2019). Companies that focus on building and developing their brands tend to perform better than their competitors, as consumers are more likely to engage with well-

known brands. In addition, brand orientation in retail helps sporting goods companies to provide a seamless shopping experience, which increases customer satisfaction and purchase intent (Jayasingh et al., 2022). With regard to the importance and necessity of the topic of brand orientation, Identifying and prioritizing factors affecting the brand preference of sporting goods, such as design, price, quality of content and advertising, helps clubs and manufacturers have more effective marketing strategies and that brand diversity significantly impacts the quality of content and emotional value, which in turn drives purchase intent. Finally, the results of this study help to better understand the behavior of customers and fans and underlies the improvement of their interactions and loyalty. It seems necessary to mention a few points. Brands such as Nike and Adidas continue to dominate the market, but emerging trends in sports such as smart technologies and eco-friendly products are changing the competitive landscape. On the consumer side, especially in the sporting goods sector, brand orientation significantly influences consumer behavior. Considering the above material and the need to pay serious attention to the issue of brand orientation, and considering the fact that no domestic or foreign research has yet addressed such an important issue, the gap in current research is strongly felt, so in this context, we decided to develop a model of sporting goods brand orientation from the perspective of customers. This article therefore examines the key factors that affect consumer preferences for sporting goods brands, supported by customer insights.

Theoretical foundations and background

In this study, the term “brand” refers to the branding of companies that manufacture sports products (volleyball). Corporate branding differs from product branding in the importance it attaches to brand values, i.e. the values inherent in or associated with the company (and its products and services) (de Chernatony, 1999). A strong corporate brand is often seen as

a guarantee of quality or as a kind of insurance against poor performance or financial risk (Balmer & Gray, 2003). In the non-profit sector, a strong brand image can enhance the organization's ability to communicate its values to stakeholders (Tapp, 1996). A strong brand image can change public opinion (Lindsay & Murphy, 1996) and create loyalty (Ritchie et al., 1999). Brand image is about how consumers respond to the benefits of the various attributes that the brand offers to the consumer. Brand image is different from customer perception (Abbas et al., 2021). Despite these obvious benefits, brands are still rarely used as a strategic asset in the nonprofit sector. As Stride & Lee (2007) found in a qualitative study of nonprofit managers, "While respondents spoke enthusiastically about branding, it was rarely discussed as an important strategic tool in its own right." Branding forms the basis of an organization's interactions with customers and should therefore build on market orientation (Urde, 1999). On the other hand, Reid et al. (2005) argued that a higher degree of market orientation is associated with a higher degree of brand orientation. Brand oriented is defined as "an approach in which an organization's processes revolve around the creation, development and protection of a brand identity in ongoing interactions with customers, with the aim of achieving sustainable competitive advantage in the form of brands" (Urde, 1999). This loyalty leads to increased purchase intention and usage of that brand's products (Valipour & Sayari, 2019). A positive brand attitude increases purchase intention and encourages consumers to use that brand's products instead of other brands (Inanlo et al., 2022). The fit between brand personality and consumer attitude affects the components of perceived value. This fit helps to increase positive attitudes towards the brand (Asadi et al., 2017). Popular brands have a strong presence in the market and their reputation plays an important role in the minds of

customers (Rather et al., 2024). Product and brand advertising can improve brand image in the eyes of customers (Gilaninia & Mousavian, 2012). Brand image influences thoughts, feelings and beliefs and can be decisive in the choice of competitors (Tahir et al., 2024). The benefits of brand image are related to five aspects: Experience, symbolism, performance, social and visual changes (Wang et al., 2024). Companies devote resources, including effort, time and money, to building their brand image. Brands influence how customers feel when they interact with the brand, resulting in a defined brand identity. This identity gives the brand meaning that consumers connect with and learn about (Guo & Wang, 2024). In recent years, brands have become more aligned with market trends. Brand image has a significant impact on customer perception (Lyu & Huang, 2024). In a highly competitive environment, companies provide high-quality services with an exceptional brand image to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty (Dam & Dam, 2021). A company's success in the market is based on its ability to attract, satisfy and retain customers by understanding their expectations. Satisfaction occurs when customer feedback meets customer expectations (Mohajerani & Miremadi, 2012). This satisfaction has a greater chance of converting into loyalty. In other words: If the contract meets the customer's requirements, the customer is satisfied (Irawati, 2021). In addition to satisfaction, customer experience, trust and emotional connection can also be another important factor in the development of brand orientation. Customer experience encompasses all interactions a customer has with a brand, including product quality, service delivery and emotional connection (Kumar & Reinartz, 2019). Trust is also a fundamental element of brand orientation. Customers are more willing to engage with brands that they perceive as trustworthy. Trust is built through transparency, reliability and ethical behavior (Fombrun & van Riel, 2021). Brand image also refers to the

perception that customers have of a brand. A positive brand image can increase brand orientation by making the brand more attractive and desirable (Kapferer, 2012). Emotional attachment is a strong driver of brand orientation. Brands that evoke positive emotions and create a meaningful connection with customers tend to have higher loyalty and customer retention (Batra et al., 2012). Another important discussion about brands is brand equity. Brand equity refers to the value that a company derives from its brand.

Lay-Yee et al. (2013) found that a product attribute represents the degree to which consumers' needs and wants are satisfied by owning and using the product. Alamro et al. (2011) found that product attributes have significant effects on brand choice behavior. Product attributes are an important component of brand knowledge that has a lasting impact on brand choice (Park & Srinivasan, 1994). Brand equity and brand preference are influenced by tangible and intangible product attributes (Myers, 2003), which in turn increases the consumer's positive perception of brand equity and leads to an increase in sales and profitability. The next variable is social factors. Social factors include an individual's social status, such as occupation and income, family and friends. A person's occupation can shape their perception of brands based on their professional experiences. Positive interactions with a brand, whether at work or in personal use, can lead to a positive attitude towards the brand (Isotalo & Watanen, 2015). Consumers use brands as a means of communicating their social identity within groups. Luxury brands often act as status symbols that reinforce social self-concept by demonstrating wealth or membership of a coveted social class (Xi et al., 2022). Social factors, economic circumstances and wealth also influence brand orientation. (Audty & Meyer, 2024). A strong brand image, coupled with effective digital engagement, can increase customer loyalty through personalized experiences and real-time interactions.

Technology enables brands to collect data and tailor their offerings to better meet customer needs (Yueqiang, 2022) Technology facilitates the creation of shared value by enabling brands to collaborate with consumers to develop new products and services. This collaboration strengthens brand loyalty as consumers feel more connected to the brand (Sallam Samir et al., 2023). The next influential variable in this context could be culture. Cultural values shape consumers' attitudes, beliefs and behaviors and influence their product preferences and brand loyalty. For example, in cultures that emphasize frugality, consumers prefer affordable brands over luxury brands (Rachwal-Mueller & Fedotova, 2024). Culture influences how consumers perceive brand image and quality, which in turn affects their brand attitude. Brands that are in line with cultural values are likely to be perceived positively (Xue, 2024). Tahir et al (2024) in a study titled "The Impact of Brand Image on Customer Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty: A Systematic Literature Review", their findings emphasize the significant impact of brand image on customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in the outbound tourism sector. In addition, factors such as product quality, pricing and promotion were identified as key determinants that significantly influence the proposed relationship. Tarighi et al (2023) in an article titled The Impact of Brand Orientation on Customer Orientation and Employee Behavior (Case Study: Sportswear Stores) confirmed that brand orientation has a significant impact on customer orientation and brand-oriented behavior of employees. The customer orientation of employees has a significant influence on the customer-oriented behavior of employees. Finally, the customer-oriented behavior of employees has a significant influence on the brand-oriented behavior of employees. Sepulcri et al (2023) in an article titled Brand Orientation: A Systematic Literature Review, the research findings focused on five areas: Development of the concept of brand orientation and proposed

extensions, combination strategies; relationships between brand orientation, internal branding and brand management; relationship between brand orientation and financial performance; and perceived brand orientation. This study provides an overview of brand orientation and highlights connections to topics of interest. Mabkhot & Salleh (2017) concluded in their article titled “The Effect of Brand Image and Brand Personality on Brand Loyalty, Mediated by Brand Trust: An Empirical Study” that there is a significant relationship between brand image and brand loyalty. However, no significant relationship between brand personality and brand loyalty was found in this study. Furthermore, brand trust mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand loyalty, and brand trust does not mediate the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty. In their study entitled “The Effect of Customer Retention Orientation and Brand Orientation on Customer Loyalty and Financial Performance in Small and Medium Enterprises”, Ciunova-Shuleska et al. (2017) found that the results only confirm the positive relationship between brand orientation and financial performance, which is partly mediated by customer loyalty. The type of business activity and company size as control variables have no influence on this.

Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted using a qualitative approach and utilizing Smith & Shinebourne's (1403) method of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology is literally the study of phenomena of any kind and their description, looking at the way they manifest themselves before any evaluation, interpretation or value judgment. In other words, phenomenology is a method that focuses on the experiences of individuals and was developed to understand phenomena through human experiences (Mahmudpour et al., 2023).

Interpretive phenomenological analysis seeks to focus on the experiences of individuals and their understanding of a particular phenomenon and has two main goals: to examine the details of how others perceive a lived experience and to provide accurate interpretations for understanding that experience (Cheraghi et al., 2008). In the present study, the research population included customers of Merozh and Yousef sports brands from the cities of Tehran and Urmia. The reason for focus on volleyball apparel industry was from two brands, namely, Merozh (majid) and Yousef Jameh. these two brands were the only domestic brands that produced specialized clothing for volleyball and were able to compete with foreign brands the reason for choosing the society from urmia cities was because of passionate lovers of volleyball and geographical region. The research was done to facilitate the research and limitation of time and cost... Sampling was purposive by visiting sales centers and interviewing brands and customers and included 20 sporting goods customers, using the snowballing method in some cases (sampling continued until theoretical data saturation). The inclusion criterion was that customers had purchased sporting goods from a brand more than three times a year and continuously for at least two years. In this phase, an attempt was made to create the broadest possible sample from different subgroups of the population in terms of age, gender, education and previous sporting activities, the demographic characteristics of which are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants

	variable	Frequency
Gender	Female	8
	Male	12
Age	Between 17 and 20 years old	4
	Between 20 and 30 years old	12
	Over 30 years old	4
	Diploma and less	2
Education	Associate degree	6
	Bachelor degree	8
	Master's degree and above	4
	Between 2 and 3 years	2
Sports background	Between 3 and 5 years	6
	More than 5 years	12
	Total	20

After obtaining permission from the interested parties for the interview and coordinating with them, the researcher set the time and place of the interview. It is worth noting that the data collection was conducted using open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. Initially, agreement was reached with the participants that they would take part in the interview, the research method and its objectives were explained, and informed consent was obtained to take part in the interview and to record the interview, with assurances that their personal information would be kept completely confidential. It was also announced that the transcripts of the interviews would be sent back to the interviewees so that they could express their opinion to confirm or reject the questions expressed and taken from the content of the interview. Their dignity, honor and freedom of action were respected during the interview. In the interviews, the researchers first asked some general, open-ended questions to obtain information that would delve into the depths of the participants' minds:

1) In your opinion, what factors lead customers to gravitate towards a particular brand of sports products?

2) What dimensions, features and functions

do you think volleyball sports brands should have?

During the interview, further questions were formulated that related to the research objectives and were asked as needed during the rest of the interview, e.g. "Can you elaborate on that?" Further questions were then asked based on the interview guide and the participants' responses. A participant survey was conducted to ensure the validity and acceptability of the data (Cheraghi et al., 2009). At the end of each interview, the text was presented to the interviewees for confirmation and comments were deleted or added where necessary. Subsequently, the interviews were coded and similar codes were conceptually linked and categorized into the appropriate group, and this work continued until all extracted codes were replaced. The workflow was as follows: 1- Reviewing the data 2- Developing a coding guide 3- Organizing the data 4- Categorizing the data 5- Open coding 6- Axial coding 7- Preparing the final report of the qualitative data analysis (Taibi Abolhasani, 2019). In order to obtain the validity of the qualitative data, the method of using different experts to collect, analyze and interpret the data was used (Yaghmaei, 2009). To check the reliability and objectivity of the information, the opinions of

researchers outside the research were also used, and the credibility of the data was assessed using the member feedback method; thus, the research results were provided to the participants, and they confirmed the accuracy of the results and interpretations. To assess verifiability, the results were confirmed with a full report of the research process. With regard to transferability, an attempt was made to collect interview data with as much diversity as possible in the samples in order to ensure the validity of the results in similar situations. In this way, the information obtained was first provided to researchers outside the research (university teachers who did not participate in the interviews), and in this context, the relevant content was confirmed in their opinion, irrelevant content was deleted, and then the necessary content was added and the ambiguous content was edited, and in this way the text of the interviews was extracted. Reliability or consistency of results (reliability) In order to check the reliability of the results, data collection and analysis were carried out under the supervision of several experts familiar with the field of sports activities. The duration of the interviews was 50-60 minutes on average for each interviewee. The interviews were conducted at a location agreed with the participants. All interviews were conducted in person or by telephone by the researcher and in some cases additional sessions were required

for the interview due to participants' lack of time. Recording of the samples continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Thus, if the researcher concluded that the interviewees' responses were similar and did not provide new data, the researcher deemed the number of interviews sufficient and terminated the interview. In the present study, theoretical saturation was established at interview 18, but the researcher continued to conduct up to 21 interviews to ensure the adequacy of the data. The interviews were transcribed on the same day. The data from this qualitative study was analyzed using Smith and Shinborn's interpretative phenomenological method of analysis (Smith and Shinborn, 2012).

Results

Based on the fans' understanding and experience of the concept of brand orientation and brand characteristics, and in accordance with the qualitative data collected based on the data analysis, a total of 47 subthemes, 13 sub-themes and 6 major themes were extracted and categorized. The sub-themes of the research included brand characteristics, acceptance and acceptability, advantage, brand awareness, brand image, social status, family and friends, media, wealth and income, economic conditions, factors related to culture, technology and advertising.

Table 2. Determining the main, secondary, and subthemes of the phenomenological model of sports brand characteristics of volleyball teams

Main theme	Sub-theme	themes	
Brand Desirability	Brand Feature	Brand equity, brand name preference, product quality, values	Participant No. 2, 5, 8, 10, 13, 18
	Acceptance and Acceptability	Brand attitude, brand use impact, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for brand use, attitudes and beliefs, perception, performance expectations, price value, satisfaction level, degree of satisfaction	Participant No. 1, 8, 11, 17, 19, 20
	Advantage	Advantage in performance, advantage in relation to society, influence in hearts and minds	Participant No. 2, 8, 10, 13, 17
Brand Power	Brand Awareness	Perceptual quality, perceptual value, specific communicative value	Participant No. 2, 4, 11, 13, 21

	Brand Image	Clarity, brand association strength, fit between brand image and product association, belief in brand importance, fit with demands and decision-making criteria	Participant No. 1, 4, 10, 15, 19
Personal and social factors	A person's social position	Occupation, income, education, social class, societal expectations, attention to choice	Participant No. 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 14
	Family and friends	Family members, friends and colleagues, reference groups	Participant No. 1, 6, 9, 16
	The media	Television, radio, newspapers and social media	Participant No. 3, 5, 12, 19
Economic Factors	Assets and Income	Personal income, family income, personal assets, family assets, consumer credit	Participant No. 2, 6, 9, 17, 18
	Economic Conditions	Inflation, interest rates, economic stability and recession	Participant No. 1, 8, 10, 13, 20
Cultural Factors	Factors related to culture	The main culture of society, which has a profound impact on consumer choice, subcultures (the influence of shared beliefs and values), and the life cycle	Participant number 2, 8, 10, 12, and 21
Other Factors	Technology	Technology growth rate, technology up-to-dateness, technology reputation	Participant No. 2, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13
	Advertising	Increasing brand awareness, creating an emotional connection of advertising by creating a sense of interest in the customer	Participant No. 4, 6, 10, 12, 13, 16

Six main themes emerged from the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews with the participants in relation to the pattern of customer brand orientation:

1- Brand desirability:

One of the main topics frequently mentioned in the interviews was the desirability of the brand. The most important sub-themes of this topic include brand identity, acceptance and acceptability, and advantage. The lived experience of the participants shows that a brand is desirable when it is seen as particularly desirable and attractive by a certain group of customers. If a brand succeeds in demonstrating its promises at the brand touchpoints as well as possible, it will retain customers in the long term and turn them into fans.

Participant #2 (a Merozh brand customer living in Urmia) explained about the factors of brand attributes, including brand awareness and brand reputation:

"Product quality and brand equity significantly influence consumers' decision-making processes. Consequently, product quality and brand equity also affect the brand attribute in people's minds and encompass a range of feelings, opinions, thoughts, experiences, images or attitudes related to the brand. The more favorable this relationship is, the greater

the likelihood of brand enthusiasm among consumers and brand loyalty, and it leads to positive opinions about the brand and brand policies related to brand social responsibility."

Participant No. 13 (a customer of Merozh brand living in Tehran) explained about the factors of brand attributes including brand name preference and brand equity:

"If we want to talk about brand attributes, we need to know the role of brand name preference and whether this preference is regional or national and global. And at what level does the brand itself operate, apart from the question of motivation, can this brand itself operate globally?"

Participant number 17 (Yousef Jameh, brand customer, residing in Tehran) identified factors for acceptance as including attitude towards the brand, impact of brand use, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for using the brand:

"The fact that I can have a positive or negative view of the brand, the importance of my attitude towards the brand and what is my purpose in using the brand? What are my motivations and are these motivations intrinsic or extrinsic? And should I be able to express how using the brand has affected me? And if we can claim that our favorite brand is so popular in the minds of customers that it has

become a factor that motivates customers to consume, we can hope for a lasting association with the brand."

Participant number 20 (Yousef Jameh, brand customer, resident of Tehran) cited perception of quality and hope for performance as factors for acceptance:

"Perception of brand quality is one of the most important factors in the emergence of brand acceptance. Based on their evaluation of brand quality, customers increase their trust and loyalty, and hope for brand performance is associated with an increase in brand equity. Customers who have hope experience higher levels of satisfaction and commitment to better performance. In general, a positive perception of brand performance and the hope for it can lead to increased brand acceptance. This is achieved through increased trust, loyalty and purchase intention. "

Participant No. 8 (Yousef Jameh, a brand customer living in Urmia) stated the following in the factors of acceptance, including attitude towards the brand, impact of brand use, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for brand use: "A positive attitude towards the brand can lead to increased consumer acceptance and loyalty. Brands that have a desirable personality and attributes and are consistent with the consumer's self-concept create a better attitude among consumers. The use of a brand and the experiences made with it can influence consumer attitudes and loyalty. Positive experiences lead to the creation of emotional bonds, and the acceptance of a brand depends on consumers aligning it with their self-concept. The use of a brand can lead to repeat purchases and loyalty, provided the brand personality matches consumer expectations.

Participant No. 10 (a customer of Merozh brand living in Tehran) stated in relation to the benefit factors including benefit in performance, benefit in relation to society and benefit in influencing hearts and minds:

"In my opinion, if my favorite brand performs well and exceeds expectations, it will firstly affect customer loyalty and then credibility and trust in the brand, which in turn will affect the acceptance of the brand. If my favorite brand can influence people's hearts and minds with

the factors of emotional connection, distinctiveness and perceived value, it will be able to increase the degree of desirability in society and among customers, and that factors such as faster acceptance of new products and customer loyalty can be components of brand advantage in relation to society."

2- Brand power:

Another important topic is brand power, which refers to the influence of a brand on the market. Brand power shows how much consumers believe in your brand and are willing to pay a higher price for your products or services than competitors. The following are some of the participants' experiences with brand power:

Participant No. 11 (a Tehran-based customer of Merozh brand) stated in relation to brand awareness, including brand awareness, brand recall, marketing communication, media effects, social effects and demographic factors:

"Brand awareness plays a fundamental role in building a brand in the minds of customers, because I myself make purchase decisions based on knowledge, awareness or experience with a particular brand. This can lead me to make repeat purchases because I am convinced of the quality of the brand. In this regard, I must first recognize my favorite brand, which is strong, and when I learn of its existence, I can recall it when needed. "

Participant No. 13 (a customer of Merozh brand living in Tehran) stated in terms of brand awareness, both perceived quality and perceived value:

"In my opinion, the perceived quality and value of the brand can have an impact on customer satisfaction and ultimately on brand awareness. Customer satisfaction resulting from perceived quality and perceived value of the brand can lead to increased brand awareness and subsequently brand loyalty. The perceived quality and perceived value of the brand can have a direct and indirect impact on brand awareness. These effects occur through increased customer satisfaction and positive brand associations in the minds of customers."

Participant #15 (Yousef Jameh, a Tehran-based brand customer) mentioned the impact of brand image on brand strength, including internal commitment to the brand, clarity, strength of

brand association, and alignment between brand image and product association:

"By increasing employee commitment to the brand, the company can provide its services and products with better quality and in line with customer expectations, which increases loyalty and thus brand strength. If the brand identity and values are clear, customers can properly understand their expectations of the brand, and this understanding leads to greater loyalty and brand retention. Brand association also has an impact on purchasing decisions. The alignment between brand association and brand image is also critical to creating a strong and distinct brand identity. This alignment helps the brand to be perceived as a desirable option in the minds of customers and ultimately leads to a stronger brand. Consequently, these factors can help to increase brand strength and apparel companies should look to develop these factors in their marketing strategies. "

Participant No. 19 (Yousef Jameh, a Tehran-based brand customer) commented on the impact of brand image on brand strength, including the belief in the importance of the brand and its compliance with the brand's requirements and decision criteria:

"The greater the importance of the brand in the minds of consumers, the more the company can benefit from it. The importance of the brand maintains the value of the team by creating a competitive advantage over the competition and attracting the attention and loyalty of customers. From the point of view of brand consistency with consumer requirements and decision criteria, it helps to create a strong and desirable identity for the brand. This alignment leads consumers to view the brand as a safe and desirable option and prioritize it in the purchase decision process.

Overall, the belief in the importance of the brand and its alignment with the requirements and decision criteria helps to create a strong and sustainable brand, which is one of the most important factors for the success of companies in today's competitive market.

3- Personal and social factors:

In the present study, personal factors refer to the individuals themselves that affect the way they choose a certain product brand and social

factors are assumed to be things that are common in the society and where consumers live. Family members, friends, relatives and colleagues are social factors that affect consumers' purchasing behavior and influence their feelings, attitudes, thoughts and behavior. This is because consumers are influenced by others, especially family members and friends, when purchasing goods. In this article, the individual's social status, family and friends, and social media are categorized as variables of personal and social factors.

Participant No. 4 (a Merozh brand customer who lives in Urmia) mentioned the following in relation to the individual's social status, including occupation, income and education, when choosing a brand:

"In my opinion, profession can influence people's brand awareness and brand perception. For example, people in professions related to marketing or sales may have a greater awareness of different brands and therefore show a greater inclination towards certain brands. In addition, occupation can affect people's lifestyle and consumption preferences. Consequently, income has a direct impact on purchasing power and brand choice. Customers with higher incomes may be more inclined towards luxury or quality brands because they can afford to pay more. Another personal variable is education. Education can influence awareness and perception of brands and product quality. People with higher education may be more inclined towards brands that emphasize quality and innovation."

Participant No. 6 (Yousef Jameh, a brand customer living in Urmia) explained about the influence of social class, including social expectations, and attention in brand selection:

"Usually, people from the same social class tend to have similar attitudes and store in the same stores. On the other hand, social expectations also play an important role in brand selection and influence the perception of the needs and desires of individuals in society and thus consumer behavior. Luxury brands are particularly affected by societal expectations because consumers perceive these brands as part of their identity."

Participant No. 9 (customer of Merozh brand,

residing in Tehran) on the influence of family and friends, including family members, friends and colleagues, on customers' brand orientation:

"In my opinion, family plays an important role in transmission. Family members can influence brand selection with their recommendations and conversations. These cross-generational connections can impact marketing variables such as brand loyalty and brand preferences. From Other friends and colleagues can lead customers to a particular brand by recommending products or services. These social endorsements can increase trust in the brand and encourage customers to buy from that brand.

Participant number 19 (Yousef Jameh, a brand customer living in Tehran) believes that media such as television, radio, newspapers and social media can influence customers' brand orientation:

"As far as television advertising is concerned, brands can gain the trust of the audience, especially if they use famous personalities or important events. On radio, the brand can be introduced to the audience through sound. Social media and networks such as ETA, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube etc. offer the opportunity to interact directly with customers. Brands can target their advertising to specific audiences and interact with them through comments and feedback."

4- Economic factors

Some of the economic factors studied may relate to the person and others to the person's environment. In this study, we examine the impact of economic factors on customers' brand orientation from two aspects: Wealth and income and economic conditions.

Participant No. 2 (a Merozh brand customer living in Urmia) commented on the impact of income, including personal income and family income, on brand choice and orientation:

"In my opinion, personal income and family income directly affect purchasing power and brand choice. Financial stability and personal wealth can influence brand purchasing decisions. People with greater financial stability are more likely to gravitate towards brands that have long-term value. People with higher

incomes may tend toward higher-value consumer behavior, while those with lower incomes may tend toward frugal behavior."

Participant No. 17 (a Tehran-based customer of the Yousef Jameh brand) commented on the impact of wealth and income, both personal and family wealth, on brand choice:

"In my opinion, the amount of wealth of individuals can have a great impact on the choice of brand type. As a rule, children from wealthy families try to choose the most durable and stylish brand for each product, while this is quite different for other, normal social classes. Consequently, family wealth also has a great influence on the fetus. For example, if we want to buy from a reputable brand, we no longer worry about lack of money, lack of savings and the future of our children, which are sometimes the main factors for customers' lack of brand orientation. "

Participant No. 1 (a Merozh brand customer living in Urmia) commented on the impact of inflation, interest rates and economic stability on customers' brand orientation:

"Under conditions of inflation and economic instability, factors such as inflation, interest rates and economic stability have a profound impact on customers' orientation towards brands. These factors lead to changes in consumer behavior, purchasing priorities and levels of brand loyalty. Lower purchasing power and greater price sensitivity are prompting customers to look for more added value. Under these conditions, brands that can offer products with acceptable quality and reasonable prices are more popular with customers. On the other hand, rising interest rates, which limit the financial capacity to buy on credit, are pushing customers towards lower-priced brands. Another factor is economic instability, where trust in the brand becomes a key factor. In such situations, customers remain loyal to reputable and well-known brands."

5-Culture and subculture

In this study, culture is understood as a key factor that shapes consumer behavior. This influence can be seen in all stages of the buying process, from needs assessment to post-purchase evaluation, and subcultures are subsets of culture that influence consumer

behavior.

Participant #2 (a Merozh brand customer living in Urmia) commented on the influence of culture and subculture on brand orientation:

"Culture can influence consumers' values and beliefs and also has an impact on the types of products and services demanded. If there are concerns about health and fitness in a society, this affects various industries, including sports equipment and light foods. On the other hand, subcultures can influence individuals' lifestyles, clothing and purchasing decisions. Subcultures create specific consumption patterns that influence people's purchasing decisions. For example, a subculture in a particular region may influence the purchase of certain products that are less popular in other regions. Subcultures influence consumers' decision-making styles. These styles can influence hedonistic or utilitarian purchases."

6- Other factors

The last main theme extracted is other factors related to the extent to which a brand is influenced by technology and advertising.

Participant No. 3 (a Merozh brand customer living in Urmia) commented on the impact of technological growth and technological reputation on brand orientation:

"Technological growth and technological reputation play an important role in brand orientation. For example, new technologies, especially social media, allow brands to interact directly with their customers and engage in targeted advertising. This helps to increase brand reach and advertising. Or virtual and augmented reality technologies can help create personalized experiences for customers and

Discussion

To improve their brand position, volleyball sporting goods manufacturers can create a clear image of the club's performance in the minds of fans and audiences by emphasizing the brand of their products and conveying feelings to customers by creating intimacy, warmth and social acceptance. The present study was conducted with the aim of developing a brand orientation model for volleyball sports products for customers. The results indicate the existence

provide a better picture of products before purchase. These technologies help brands to create a need for their products among customers.

Participant #8 (a customer of the Yousef Jameh brand living in Urmia) commented on the impact of technology timeliness on brand orientation:

"It is safe to say that as customers keep up with technology, they will try to use brands that are aligned with new technologies, and the companies that produce these brands also try to communicate this to customers in various ways. Participant No. 10 (a customer of Merozh brand living in Tehran) commented on the effects of advertising, including increasing brand awareness, creating an emotional connection with advertising and generating a sense of interest among customers:

"Advertising is a powerful tool for increasing brand awareness. With the help of advertising, manufacturers of sports equipment and apparel can provide customers with information about the brand name, features and price of their products. This awareness leads to potential customers becoming loyal buyers. By appealing to the emotions of the audience, advertisers can create an emotional connection between the brand and the customer. An emotional connection leads to customers not only needing a product, but also identifying with its values and aspirations.

Advertising encourages customers to buy by creating a sense of need and interest. These advertisements use attractive and creative messages to direct the customer's mind towards a particular choice."

of six main themes, including: Brand desirability, brand strength, personal and social factors, economic factors, cultural factors and other influencing factors. The first topic comprised the following three sub-topics: Brand Characteristics, Acceptability and Benefits. In this respect, the results of the studies by Inanlo et al. (2022) and Valipour & Sayari (2019) were consistent with the first sub-theme. For example, Inanlo et al, 2022, found in their study that a positive attitude towards the brand increases purchase

intention and encourages consumers to buy their product brands. Desirability analysis allows companies to analyze desirability at different levels. This means that brands can gain an effective understanding of desirability through individual posts, marketing campaigns or specific ads. By identifying specific content that resonates positively or negatively with their audience, sporting goods companies can make informed decisions to improve the desirability of their brand. The results of the present study show that the second theme comprises two sub-themes: Brand Awareness and Brand Image. In this regard, the studies of Hasanzadeh et al. (2022) and Asadi et al. (2017) were consistent with the sub-themes. For example, Asadi et al. concluded in their study that the alignment of brand personality with consumer attitudes leads to perceived value. This congruence helps to increase positive attitudes towards the brand. Brand awareness is the degree to which consumers are familiar with and recognize a brand. Brand awareness can lead to a positive attitude towards the brand, as consumers tend to favor brands they know, which reduces perceived risk. Brand awareness has a positive influence on consumer attitudes. If consumers are familiar with a brand, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards it, which can encourage purchasing decisions. Therefore, brand strength can be measured by whether consumers always have a certain brand association in mind. The third theme includes the following three sub-themes: social status of the individual, family and friends, and media. The defined social factors are those factors that influence consumers' feelings, attitudes, thoughts and behavior. In this respect, the research findings are consistent with the studies by Isotalo & Watanen (2015) and Xi et al. (2022) with sub-themes/open codes of the third theme. In their study, Isotalo & Watanen found that profession can shape the perception of brands. Positive interactions with a brand, whether through work or social status, can lead

to a positive attitude towards the brand. The fourth topic comprises two sub-topics: Wealth and Income and Economic Conditions and Recession. In this regard, the findings of Audty & Meyer's (2024) research were consistent with the sub-themes/open codes of the fourth theme. Audty & Meyer stated in their article that inflation increases consumers' price sensitivity and causes them to focus on essential goods. During an economic recession or crisis, consumers often change their purchasing behavior. Falling disposable incomes lead them to prioritize essential goods over luxury items. Stable employment and rising wages increase purchasing power and enable consumers to invest in well-known brands. Conversely, when wages stagnate or unemployment falls, demand for premium products decreases. The fifth theme covers factors related to culture. Culture-related factors include core consumer culture and subcultures. Culture refers to the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group of people from another. It encompasses the values, norms and practices that determine behavior in a society. Cultural factors have a profound influence on consumer behavior as they dictate what is considered desirable or acceptable in a society. In this regard, the findings of Xue's (2024) study were consistent with the sub-themes/open codes of the fifth theme. Garabino and Xue found that cultural values influence consumer beliefs and purchasing behavior. Cultural contexts shape consumers' preferences so that they often view products as an extension of their cultural identity. Cultural rituals influence purchasing behavior at certain times, such as festivals or holidays. Sportswear brands in the volleyball sector often use these moments to align their products with cultural traditions. In the case of subcultures, serious leisure activities in subcultures often lead to activity-based consumption patterns in which brands become an integral part of the group's identity. Modern consumers expect brands to take a stand on social issues such as sustainability or equality.

Brands that create positive change and break norms are seen as culturally relevant. The sixth theme is other influential factors such as technology and advertising. The proliferation of digital platforms has lowered barriers to entry and made the brand landscape very competitive. In this regard, the findings of Yueqiang (2022) and Samir Sallam et al. (2023) are consistent with the sub-themes/open codes of the fifth theme that technology strengthens brands and increases brand loyalty as consumers feel more connected to the brand. It can be said that technology enables brands to provide personalized experiences through data-driven feedback. This personalization increases customer satisfaction and loyalty by tailoring products and services to individual preferences. Technology, particularly social media, has changed the way brands interact with their customers. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram serve as both marketing tools and channels for customer feedback, allowing brands to build closer relationships with their audiences. Social media enables real-time interactions, which is crucial for maintaining brand relevance and fostering loyalty. Advertising also has a significant impact on brand awareness, which in turn influences brand loyalty. Advertising can influence how consumers perceive the quality and trustworthiness of a brand. When advertising emphasizes the quality of a brand, it can lead to greater loyalty because consumers associate the brand with reliability and superiority. Advertising not only influences loyalty, but also consumer buying behavior. By creating awareness and positive perceptions, advertising can boost sales and strengthen brand loyalty. Finally, the combination of technology and advertising enables targeted digital advertising, which can significantly increase brand orientation by reaching specific target groups with personalized messages.

Conclusion

In general, to explain the above results, it can be said that in the present study, the first two

themes were related to factors that are inherent in the brand itself and have a direct influence. The next four themes related to environmental factors in connection with the brand. Therefore, the aim was to consider both brand-related and brand-environment-related attributes and to suggest more specific dimensions for non-product-related attributes. Items were used to measure strength, desirability and uniqueness, performance, and internal and external factors. Considering this result, it can be said that the participants of this study believe that the implementation of the presented strategies and their operationalization can be an effective model for customer brand orientation. This study had several limitations that require future research. The initial application of this attribute scale relates to other brands of sports products. Therefore, further studies on the validity of the scale should be confirmed by evaluating other types of brands as well as by comparing with foreign sports brands so that researchers and marketers can evaluate customers' brand orientation toward sports products in different environments.

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