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ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Designing a Model for Creating Brand Equity for Private Sports Clubs, A Qualitative Approach****Farhad Farzan Moghadam¹ Rasool Norouzi Seyed Hossini^{*2}, Mina Mostahfezian³**

1. Ph.D. Student, Department of Sport Management, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.

2. Associate Professor, Department of Sport Science Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.

3. Associate Professor, Department of Sport Management, Sport medicine research center, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran.

***Correspondence**

Rasool Norouzi Seyed Hossini
Email:
rasool.norouzi@modares.ac.ir

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Extended Abstract**Introduction**

In recent years, brand equity has emerged as a critical strategic asset in the sports industry, shaping customer behavior, financial performance, and long-term competitiveness (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2016). For private sports clubs-operating without government support-developing sustainable brand equity is essential for success and growth in increasingly dynamic and competitive markets (Giroux et al., 2017). These clubs function as service-oriented organizations, offering athletic development and recreational experiences to various stakeholders, including athletes, fans, and sponsors (Robinson, 2010). Despite the extensive study of brand equity, most existing models are either generalized or developed for large-scale corporate and professional sports contexts (Ansary & Hashim, 2018). Brand equity is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct, shaped by factors such as brand awareness, brand personality, brand image, and emotional attachment (Dwivedi et al., 2019; Su & Tong, 2015). However, there remains a lack of frameworks specifically aligned with the structural realities and stakeholder dynamics of private sports clubs. Recent research has also emphasized the importance of emotional branding, perceived value, and digital engagement-particularly through social media-as key drivers of brand strength and customer loyalty (Kammerer et al., 2021; Verma, 2021; Ahiabor et al., 2023). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop a qualitative, context-sensitive model that guides private sports clubs in building and maintaining sustainable brand equity through the creation of customer value.

Methodology

This research is developmental in nature and employs a qualitative approach using grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory was selected for its effectiveness in developing context-specific theoretical

frameworks, especially in areas lacking prior models-such as brand equity creation in private sports clubs. The study population comprised experts in marketing and sports marketing, identified as key informants. Purposeful sampling was used, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, resulting in 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was transcribed immediately after completion. Data coding and analysis began concurrently with data collection, following grounded theory procedures. Participants included doctoral-level specialists in marketing management, sports management, and business administration with both academic and practical experience. To ensure research rigor and validity, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria-credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation and member checking. Transferability was supported by detailed documentation of procedures and participant demographics. Dependability was ensured via intercoder reliability, where a second researcher independently coded two interviews, achieving an 81% agreement rate. Confirmability was reinforced by external review from independent physical education scholars and transparent reporting of research processes. The analysis followed grounded theory's three coding phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, resulting in the identification of core themes and the development of a conceptual model for brand equity creation in private sports clubs.

Findings

During the open coding phase, 84 initial codes were extracted from interview transcripts. These were grouped into 24 secondary concepts and subsequently classified into 11 subcategories, including club brand architecture, emotional branding, customer mindset, expanding market share, enhancing customer brand commitment, environmental and industry contexts, direct and indirect club activities, financial brand value, and brand power enhancement. For example, the subcategory "customer mindset" included concepts such as brand awareness, brand image, brand personality, and customer perceptions-reflecting how customers cognitively and emotionally relate to the club's brand. The subcategory "enhancing customer brand commitment" encompassed elements like brand attachment, satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intentions, including repurchase and recommendation. "Emotional branding" highlighted dimensions such as ethical responsibility, educational initiatives, and philanthropy, which contribute to emotional value creation. Through axial and selective coding, the researchers identified the core category of the model: *customer mindset*, which emerged as the central driver of brand equity. This mindset influences two major interactive processes: (1) enhancing customer brand commitment and (2) increasing the club's potential market share. These are, in turn, shaped by contextual and intervening variables such as club activities and environmental dynamics. The resulting outcomes include increased financial brand value and brand market power. The model thus outlines a complex system of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interactions that collectively generate brand equity. It offers a comprehensive, integrated framework tailored to the specific characteristics of private sports clubs.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study presents a context-specific model for brand equity creation in private sports clubs, placing customer mindset at its core. This mindset encompasses four essential elements: brand awareness, brand image, brand personality, and brand perception. Unlike general brand equity frameworks, this model is developed based on grounded insights from domain experts and tailored to the unique dynamics of the sports industry. Findings demonstrate that both structural factors (e.g., brand architecture) and emotional strategies (e.g., emotional branding) significantly influence customer mindset. Increased customer commitment-driven by satisfaction, loyalty, and emotional attachment-translates into greater market share and purchase intentions. Environmental variables, such as competitive dynamics and socio-cultural factors, also affect how customers engage with and evaluate the club's brand. Overall, the research underscores that building sustainable brand equity in private sports clubs requires a holistic strategy encompassing cognitive recognition, emotional engagement, and strategic branding actions. The proposed model offers practical guidance for managers and contributes to academic discussions by integrating theoretical and operational dimensions of brand value creation in the sports context.

KEY WORDS

Brand Equity, Sports Clubs, Value Creation, Customer Mentality.

