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Services Provided by the Fans to the Club and the Achievements of Professional Soccer Clubs: Examination and Analysis - Case Study of Sepahan and Tractor Clubs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to examine the effect of the services provided by the fans to the club on the participation and success of Sepahan and Tractor professional clubs. The present research is an applied study that employs causal-comparative for its purposes. The required information was collected using field methods and questionnaires. The statistical population of this study includes all fans of Sepahan and Tractor clubs, the total number of which is deemed unlimited. According to the characteristics of the statistical population, the requirements of the volume-based stratified sampling, and the recommendations of the Morgan Table, a total of 384 fans from Sepahan and Tractor clubs were selected as the research sample (i.e., 247 questionnaires from Sepahan fans and 137 questionnaires from Tractor fans). Furthermore, a researcher-made questionnaire based on a literature review was used to measure the research variables. The Cronbach's alpha of above 0.7 indicated the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The distribution of variables was evaluated using Kolmogorov and Smirnov tests, all of which were abnormal. The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using one-sample sign and Mann-Whitney U tests, the findings from which indicated that the fans of Sepahan and Tractor clubs provided a higher-than-expected level of services to their respective teams. Moreover, the results revealed a significant difference between the level of services provided by the fans of Sepahan and Tractor Clubs. The final position of the clubs in the four seasons of 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014, and 2014/2015, in which both clubs enjoyed high-position finishes, indicates that the involvement and participation of passionate and loyal fans have improved the team (win in most games, exhibiting free-flowing game).

Keywords: Services provided by fans, fan participation, Sepahan Club, Tractor Club

INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is a leading concept for active marketers and marketing researchers alike. Many perceive it as the very essence of prosperity in a highly competitive world. Therefore, the significance of customer satisfaction and retention for the current customer-oriented and market-oriented sporting clubs in strategy development cannot be overstated. The success of clubs and customer satisfaction are two interrelated notions. That is, one of the prerequisites to being a successful club is to have an established fan base. Changing expectations, needs and demands all point out the necessity of assessing customer satisfaction on a consistent basis. In a competitive service industry, providing superior services is of paramount importance for survival and success (Koozechian et al., 2009).

Sports clubs have found that the key to retaining sports customers and making a profit lies in continuous effort in successful partnerships. Comprehending the expectations of the customers and the commitments they feel the need to fulfill enables the club to gain a competitive advantage. The key to plotting and adjusting the fans expect to have a carefully-designed customer satisfaction indicator since being able to evaluate customer satisfaction is of paramount importance to market performance and management-level decision-making processes, thus

acting as a tool by which marketers can evaluate the integrity of their relationship with their customers, and only then can an organization realize how satisfied, or unsatisfied, are their customers with the current state of the organization's services and products (Koozechian et al., 2009).

Only loyal fans with a high team identity can support the teams in times of triumph and loss. Team identity refers to a person's involvement or participation as a sports fan in a team or a club and establishing a perceived relationship with that it, representing the need for personal commitment and emotional participation of individuals in matters related to that team or club. The relationship is thought to make their mental and behavioral aspects cohesive and unique. Team identity is one of the main factors influencing and justifying the attendance of fans in stadiums to support the team and will make them compare their sphere of support with that of other clubs. Fans are able to enhance the quality of production and service, support their team while at the exhibition, especially in home games, exert a positive influence on their team's revenue sources, encourage potential and existing sponsors, and earn a lot of revenue through audio and video media for the team. Team identity can even offset the impact of winning or losing by increasing or decreasing team support. For example, various world-famous clubs have not lost their fan bases despite enduring consecutive defeats (Shojaei, 2011).

Recent studies in this field have contributed significant findings to the literature, but most studies have only examined the limited number of factors affecting sports fans. Studies have mainly explored management factors in the five dimensions of organization, aesthetics, kinship, media and tradition (Chen 2007). Locke (2009) employed social identity theory to develop a model for fans of new football teams in which the three aspects of football itself, its origins and its opportunities were identified as the main factors involved in creating team identity. Cole (2004) found that people are attracted to teams and clubs whose names have a long history in sports or other areas such as industry. Funk (1998) considers the importance, knowledge and information about the team or club, the level of trust in friends and those perceived to be involved in the team and club, personal experience and the intensity of support as effective factors in attracting fans to teams and clubs.

These findings have significant implications for the executives of the teams and the authorities of the Iranian Football Premier League organization, who can help the sports teams by devising a proper strategy to increase the attendance of spectators and the ensuing revenue. As such, the relevant officials of the teams and the organization of the Iranian Football Premier League are advised to direct more effort and resources to enhance the positive experience of the sporting exhibition, in turn resulting in heightened fan satisfaction. Managers must relentlessly seek ways to understand, evaluate, and improve the team identity of their fans. Retaining the club's fan base is of paramount importance to the sustainable growth of sporting events, as their support can enhance their loyalty to their team.

This study advises professional sports managers to devise long-term strategies tailored to the specific needs of the fans (in terms of identity and team attachment), with the ultimate aim of enhancing satisfaction and positive behavioral intentions (Beaton et al., 2009). Since the literature on the effect of managerial factors on creating and maintaining fan identity is few and far between in the country, this study aimed to examine the effect of services provided by fans to the club on the participation and success of Sepahan and Tractor professional clubs.



Theoretical foundations of research

Sports marketing

The term sports marketing was first used in 1987 by American scholars. Researchers have formulated various definitions for sports marketing, some of which are mentioned (Mohammad Kazemi, 2007). Louise and Openerler (1985) argue that sports marketing is the application to great effect of mixed marketing elements to align the interests of consumers of sports products and those of sports organizations. Jose (2001) defines sports marketing as predicting, managing and meeting the needs and demands of customers through the application and implementation of marketing principles (Fallahi, 2009).

The notion of promotion as it applies to sports marketing is defined as the process of shaping and influencing the relationship established between people and products of sports companies, the level of intervention and the image of companies when it comes to sporting matters. According to this definition, there are various departments and individuals that sporting organizations should pay close attention to (Pitts et al., 2002).

A sports organization promotes its products and services to end consumers, business customers, the whole community, the business communities and the media. In sports marketing, a large part of communication and promotion, especially in relation to new customers and audiences, is of a learned nature. It may be necessary for companies or sports organizations to teach audiences what sport benefits them, where and when they can be obtained, and how to participate in service processes. As mentioned earlier, communications can be provided through individuals such as salespeople, educators, or media such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, brochures, and the Internet (Mohammad Kazemi, 2007).

Quality of service in sports

Sports organizations are facing a new era of global competition. Within this highly competitive market, the organization's success depends on the extent to which the organization can satisfy its customers through the quality of its service. The more management is dedicated to its customers and their level of satisfaction and loyalty, the more the significance of quality services to sports organizations. To satisfy customers and retain loyal members, sports marketers need to understand the needs and demands of customers and perform periodic evaluations for such (Zhao, 2008).

The number of health and fitness clubs is increasing due to the corresponding global trend. As such, managers and owners of clubs are responsible for complying with standards covering a plethora of issues such as having a healthy and clean environment, employing qualified and approved staff for offering novel training routines and adhering to regulations, good equipment in terms of performance quality, correct and honest performance evaluation and customer orientation, flexible working hours, appropriate facilities and equipment for men and women, fair subscription fees, providing information about the dangers of activities, adapting to social change, making programs accessible to all members of society, and ensuring the welfare of the client (Ramezani, 2004).

Fan and Membership Card

Over the past decade, sports management experts have promoted the concept of identity relationships between fans and sports teams. Hogg and Abrams (1988) argue that "supporting a team is more than a mere physical act as it is a part in the whole of expressing one's identity to the team through which it is presented" and therefore creates cohesion and unity among the fans



of any given team. When watching a sporting event, those who support a particular sports team involved in that event feel more excited than those who do not have an identity. In addition, affiliating oneself with a particular sports team is associated with fans' feelings of self-worth, ambition, and aggression (Van and Branscomb 1993 and Vaslan 1989).

An individual's identity toward a team or sports club can vary depending on the individual's motivation. People with a low team identity tend to have rather passive communication with that team, and hence their attendance in competitions is more motivated by mere entertainment, taking advantage of social opportunities or reducing stress. In contrast, fans with a high level of identity generally feel a strong sense of loyalty to that team, to the extent that their individual identity is tied to the team identity. Fans who have such a sense of team identity are likely to develop completely negative relationships with those of the opposing team (Branscombe and Van, 1994). Such fans are susceptible to severe changes in the emotions associated with the success or failure of their team. That is because the emotions of these individuals are closely linked to the performance of their favorite team; they repeatedly attribute their team's failures and successes to themselves (Hirt et al., 1992).

Identity can be used to assess the degree of consumerism among fans (Gladen and Funk, 2001; Trail et al., 2003 and 2005), as a tool to assess the psychological well-being of fans (Van, 2006) and to identify the emotional and aggressive behavior of fans (Van and et al., 2002). Team-fan identity is recognized as an indicator of attendance at sporting events and the sale of tickets and commercial goods (Van et al., 2004; Lowry & Arenette, 2000). Also, the positive relationship between financial support and playground advertising is the result of the influence of fan-team identity (Gwyner and Swanson 2003).

Identity of sports fans

Research has revealed that the more the level of identity within a group, the more people tend to declare their membership in that group (Coleman, 1961) and hence exhibit higher levels of individual identity and emotional participation in that group (Underwood et al. 2001). Moreover, fans with a higher perceived identity tend to display more supportive behaviors toward that group (Fisher & Wickfield, 1998). Several researchers have documented team identity as a personal commitment and emotional participation in a sports organization that comprises psychological and behavioral aspects (Branscombe & Van, 1991; Satin et al., 1997; and Fisher, 1998).

Like any other important social identity, fanhood implies a dependence on a sporting concept in which the value and importance stems from collective identity (Hirt et al., 1992). As such, sports fans do not see themselves only as mere spectators in matches, but as participants whose engagement is undisputable to the integrity of their team (Novak, 1976).

Research method

The present research is an applied study that employs causal-comparative for its purposes. The required information was collected using field methods and questionnaires. The statistical population of this study includes all fans of Sepahan and Tractor clubs, the total number of which is deemed unlimited. According to the characteristics of the statistical population, the requirements of the volume-based stratified sampling, and the recommendations of the Morgan Table, a total of 384 fans from Sepahan and Tractor clubs were selected as the research sample (i.e., 247 questionnaires from Sepahan fans and 137 questionnaires from Tractor fans).



Furthermore, a researcher-made questionnaire based on a literature review was used to measure the research variables. The Cronbach's alpha of above 0.7 indicated the internal consistency of the questionnaire.

Table 1: Cronbach's alpha coefficients for research variables

	Subscale	Alpha coefficient	
		Sepahan	Tractor
1	Services of the club to the fans	0.9226	0.9319
2	Services of the fans to the club	0.8998	0.7054
3	Total	0.9451	0.8914

Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used in this study to analyze the data. The descriptive section employed indicators such as frequency and percentages, means and standard deviation, while in the statistics, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to determine the normality of variables and comparative one-sample t-test and Mann-Whitney non-parametric tests were used to examine research hypotheses. SPSS/pc ++ was also used for calculations.

Findings

The results showed that 64.3% of respondents were fans of Sepahan Club, and 35.7% were Tractor fans. Among the fans of Sepahan, 10.9% were under 20 years old, 46.2% were between 20 to 30 years old, 23.9% were between 30 to 40 years old, 9.3% were between 40 to 50 years old, 5.7% were over 50 years old, and 4% did not disclose their age. Among the fans of Tractor, 0.7% were under 20 years, 29.2% were between 20 to 30 years, 43.1% were between 30 to 40 years old, and 11.7% were aged between 40 to 50 years, while 15.3% were over 50 years old. 20.6% of Sepahan fans had a below-diploma education level, 40.1% had a diploma, 8.9% had an associate degree, 15.8% had a bachelor's degree, 9.3% had a master's degree or higher educational level, while 5.3% did not disclose their educational level. Among the fans of the Tractor club, 15.3% had a below-diploma education level, 44.5% had a diploma, 21.2% had an associate degree, 10.9% had a bachelor's degree, and 8% had a master's degree or higher educational levels.

Finally, 46.2% of Sepahan Fans were single, 38.9% were married, while 15% did not disclose their marital status. Among Tractor fans, 35.8% were single, and 64.2% were married.

Two-way analysis of variance and a significance level of $p < 0.05$ is considered for statistical comparisons of the research.

Hypothesis 1: The services provided by the fans to the club are not adequate.

Since the variable of services provided by the fans to the club for the case study clubs does not have a normal distribution, the non-parametric one-sample sign test is used to test and examine. As such, the variable M is defined as the actual median of the variable of services provided by the fans to the club in the study community.

Considering that the variable of services provided by the fans to the club can attribute a value between 1 and 5, values less than or equal to 3 are deemed as low levels of services, while values of more than three are considered as appropriate and higher-than-expected levels, that is:

$$\begin{cases} H_0: M \leq 3 \\ H_1: M > 3 \end{cases}$$



Table 2: Signs test results, level of services provided by fans to the club

Club	Mean	SD	Median	Number of responses lower than the median	Number of responses equal to the median	Number of responses higher than the median	Significance level
Sepahan	3.81	0.54	3.837	6	8	233	0.0001
Tractor	3.88	0.31	3.837	0	0	137	0.0001
Total	3.83	0.47	3.837	6	8	370	0.0001

According to the results of Table 2 for the fans of the Sepahan Club, the mean of the variable of the level of services provided by fans to the club is 3.81, with a standard deviation of 0.54 and a median of 3.837. Also, the significance level of the sign test was calculated to be 0.0001; that is, the level of services provided by the fans to the club is higher than expected. Moreover, the mean of the variable of the level of the services provided by the Sepahan fans to their club was calculated to be 3.88 with a standard deviation of 0.31 and a median of 3.837. ultimately, the significance level of the sign test was determined to be 0.0001; that is, the level of services provided by the fans to the club is higher than expected.

Finally, the mean corresponding to the variable of the level of the services provided by the fans to the club is 3.83 with a standard deviation of 0.47 and a median of 3.837, while the significance level of the sign test was determined to be 0.0001, that is, the level of services provided by the fans to the club is higher than expected.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference between the services provided by the fans to the club in Sepahan and Tractor clubs.

Because the variables of the level of services provided by the fans to Sepahan and Tractor clubs have non-normal distribution, the Mann-Whitney non-parametric test was used to analyze variables.

Table 3: Mann-Whitney results on comparing the level of services provided by fans to Sepahan and Tractor clubs

Club	Descriptive statistics			U statistics	Z statistics	Sig. level
	Mean	SD	Average rank			
Sepahan	3.81	0.54	182.97	14566.5	-2.264	0.024
Tractor	3.88	0.31	209.68			

The findings from Table 3 show that the Mann-Whitney U statistic is 14566.5 and the Z statistic 2.264, and the significance level of the test is 0.024. That is, there is a significant difference between the level of services provided by fans to Sepahan and Tractor. As such, the fans of the Tractor club offer more services to the club compared to their rival.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant relationship between the club's success, providing services to the fans, and receiving the fans' support.

According to the results obtained and considering the final standings of the Persian Gulf Pro League for seasons 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014, and 2014/2015, in which both clubs enjoyed high-position finishes, both clubs were successful in providing services to fans and receiving support from their fans. That is, the null hypothesis is rejected, and hence there is a direct and significant relationship between the success of the club and providing services to the fans and receiving the support of the fans.

2013/2014 Persian Gulf Pro League table

R.Rs. ↕	Team	P.l.d. ↕	W. ↕	D. ↕	L. ↕	GF. ↕	GA. ↕	GD. ↕	Pts. ↕
1	Foolad (C)	30	16	9	5	36	24	+12	57
2	Persepolis	30	16	8	6	34	15	+19	55 ^[a]
3	Naft Tehran	30	15	9	6	39	23	+16	54
4	Sepahan	30	14	12	4	36	20	+16	54
5	Esteghlal	30	15	9	6	34	25	+9	53 ^[a]
6	Tractor Sazi	30	11	13	6	39	33	+6	45 ^[a]
7	Malavan	30	13	6	11	40	33	+7	44 ^[a]
8	Saipa	30	7	14	9	26	31	-5	35
9	Saba Qom	30	8	9	13	32	38	-6	33
10	Gostaresh	30	7	11	12	31	34	-3	32
11	Rah Ahan	30	7	10	13	25	34	-9	31
12	Est. Khuzestan	30	6	11	13	26	37	-11	29
13	Zob Ahan	30	6	11	13	24	36	-12	29
14	Fajr Sepasi (R)	30	6	11	13	20	34	-14	29
15	Damash (R)	30	5	12	13	30	40	-10	26 ^[a]
16	Mes Kerman (R)	30	1	19	10	21	36	-15	22

2012/2013 Persian Gulf Pro League table



Pos	Team	Pld	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
1	Esteghlal (C)	34	19	10	5	42	18	+24	67
2	Tractor Sazi	34	18	11	5	55	32	+23	65
3	Sepahan	34	19	7	8	60	33	+27	64
4	Foolad	34	14	14	6	52	35	+17	56
5	Naft Tehran	34	14	13	7	42	29	+13	55
6	Mes Kerman	34	13	14	7	33	22	+11	53
7	Persepolis	34	12	14	8	41	31	+10	50
8	Rah Ahan	34	12	10	12	32	35	-3	46
9	Saba Qom	34	10	15	9	37	33	+4	45
10	Saipa	34	11	12	11	37	33	+4	45
11	Damash	34	11	10	13	36	43	-7	43
12	Fajr Sepasi	34	10	12	12	42	38	+4	42
13	Malavan	34	9	13	12	34	39	-5	40
14	Zob Ahan (O)	34	9	11	14	36	40	-4	38
15	Aluminium Hormozgan (R)	34	7	14	13	26	40	-14	35
16	Sanat Naft (R)	34	4	13	17	31	60	-29	25
17	Paykan (R)	34	6	7	21	26	66	-40	25
18	Gahar Zagros (R)	34	3	10	21	24	59	-35	19

2011/2012 Persian Gulf Pro League table



Pos	Team	Pld	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
1	Sepahan (C)	34	19	10	5	54	27	+27	67
2	Tractor Sazi	34	19	9	6	57	32	+25	66
3	Esteghlal	34	19	9	6	58	34	+24	66
4	Saba Qom	34	12	14	8	40	38	+2	50
5	Naft Tehran	34	13	10	11	36	38	-2	49
6	Zob Ahan	34	9	18	7	29	33	-4	45
7	Damash	34	11	11	12	34	38	-4	44
8	Saipa	34	10	13	11	50	39	+11	43
9	Mes Kerman	34	11	10	13	35	39	-4	43
10	Sanat Naft	34	11	10	13	49	57	-8	43
11	Rah Ahan	34	9	15	10	43	42	+1	42
12	Persepolis	34	10	12	12	50	54	-4	42
13	Fajr Sepasi	34	10	11	13	31	38	-7	41
14	Foolad	34	10	10	14	35	37	-2	40
15	Malavan	34	9	12	13	32	33	-1	39
16	Sh. Tabriz (R)	34	6	16	12	34	44	-10	34
17	Shahin Bushehr (R)	34	6	15	13	30	43	-13	33
18	Mes Sarcheshmeh (R)	34	5	9	20	23	54	-31	24



Conclusion

Clubs with loyal and organized fans hold are perceived to have an important key to generating revenue and attracting sponsors, as their support for the club is an important determinant of other sources of revenue, both directly (through ticket sales) and indirectly (through the sale of club-related goods, sponsors and even the sale of television broadcasting rights in some countries). The support of loyal fans puts sports clubs in a favorable competitive status compared to other commercial companies, and the sustained attendance of fans increases the sales of sports and even non-sports products. In addition, the most influential fans are those who support a particular team because they are the main source of income for the club. To retain and entice the fans, club managers seek various forms of incentives, such as issuing membership cards with premium benefits for the fans

The findings of the first hypothesis indicated that the level of services provided by both fans of Sepahan and Tractor clubs to their respective teams is higher than expected. The effect of the membership card on social status, free parking spots, participating in the club's charity, supporting the group and the club in any situation and doing positive publicity for the club, attending the stadium and encouraging the team are among the most notable services offered by either of the parties according to the respondents. Nevertheless, findings from previous studies have been somewhat inconclusive regarding certain findings. Gwyner and Swanson (2003)

argue that personality and professional characteristics are highly effective in supporting and serving the club. Trail et al. (2003) also declared fanhood as the most important factor in the success of various clubs. Ku et al. (2009) have identified inner emotions and feelings as effective in supporting and promoting team morale. Saatchian (2013) believes that the terms fan, spectator and viewer should be used for different scenarios. Although the terms might be used interchangeably by even the media, a fan is someone who is loyal to the team, no matter the spot conditions of that team. Loyal fans play an undeniable role in developing the economic and non-economic potential of sports teams and clubs. Therefore, paying attention to this strategic indicator can be the key to enhancing clubs' financial strength. The economic growth of the sports industry depends on the growing public interest therein; as Hogg (1995) argues, in the last decade, the academics of sports management have placed great emphasis on the correlation of identity between fans and sports teams. Supporting a sports team in a city is more than just a simple supporting function.

The findings from the second hypothesis indicate that there is a significant difference between the level of services provided by fans to the club in the two clubs, Sepahan and Tractor. The mean values for the Tractor club show that fans are more dedicated to their club. As such, the results of this hypothesis show that the fans of the Tractor Club have been more successful in this regard than those of Sepahan. Previous research has produced no results, either in line or in contrast to this study's results. An important reason for such a difference is the strong ethnicity-orientation of Azeri-speaking people compared to Sepahan supporters. The warm-hearted people of Azerbaijan are very sensitive and love what they have, which has led to such a conclusion in this hypothesis.

Regarding the findings on the third hypothesis, the final standing table for the seasons 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014, and 2014/2015 reveal that the two teams of Tractor and Sepahan club have always been at the top of the league table, which indicates that attendance of loyal fans promotes the quality of the teams (win in most games, exhibiting free-flowing game). Based on the results of the first hypothesis, club-level executives are advised to adopt measures to mitigate the impact of hooligans on the atmosphere and team quality. Also, based on the results of the second hypothesis, fans are advised to support their team's sponsors, that is, buy their products and wear the uniforms, the ultimate purpose of which would be to moralize the team in putting on a better exhibition. Finally, the results of the third hypothesis imply that executives should note that employing top-class players and coaches to offer free-flowing football.

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