

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Identifying the Internal Factors and Challenges in Branding of Iran Basketball League

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ABSTRACT

Background. The clubs of the premier league and the basketball federation need to attract and retain fans and sponsors in order to earn financial revenues, through the proper model of branding, to be of interest to the media and customers. **Objectives.** Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify the internal factors and challenges in the branding of the Iranian basketball league. **Methods.** This research based on purpose is practical and based on field research is a qualitative research type. The statistical population of this study consisted of knowledgeable experts in the field of brand and basketball sport. Based on snowball sampling method, to the extent of reaching the theoretical saturation, 19 individuals were selected as a statistical sample. In this study, the data collection tool was a qualitative interview. Grounded theory was used to collect and analyze data. **Results.** Totally 89 tokens were identified in the open source coding process, that in the first stage, coding was classified into 11 classes in terms of subject and concept closeness. Also, results showed that the factors and challenges of the branding in Iranian Basketball League were three main factors, such as the philosophy and nature of basketball and the nature of sport. **Conclusion.** Based on our results, identification of the internal branding factors and challenges of the Iranian Basketball League was recognized and the proposed model was presented based on identified cases at three levels of operational, intermediate and strategic.

KEY WORDS: *Branding, Basketball, Grounded Theory.*

INTRODUCTION

Considering competitive conditions and constant environmental changes, sports industry and related organizations have realized that every customer requires specific conditions. Therefore, like the past, they are not facing a growing economic system and markets, and, in this condition, they should manage the situation to gain a higher market share. Nowadays, marketing is the discovery of a need and efforts to meet that need (1, 2). Focusing on branding is a strategic imperative given changing circumstances and competitive markets. The

sport organizations and clubs should also use this strategy to attract more fans (2). Meanwhile, branding is an internal emotional feeling of a person about a product, service, or organization, and is the largest intangible asset of the companies and the basis of competitive advantage (3). Branding is important because of consumer protection, stimulation of performance, creation of a competitive economy, and expansion of geographical boundaries (4).

In today businesses, branding and identification of factors and challenges in its

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path are important indicators leading to improved marketing and economics (5). Branding is one of the most important intangible assets of any organization which has attracted their attention over the last few decades. Design and manufacture of powerful brands are among the top priorities of successful organizations, as, according to the public belief, successful brands have the potential to create advantage attracting the attention of all participants especially sports organizations (6). Sports clubs and leagues, federations, as well as national and international Olympic and Paralympic Committees are the organizations that operate in a complex and competitive environment. They need to create a strong image in the minds of their customers to recruit volunteers, attract sponsors and gifts, and develop loyalty among their fans. Their brand value depends on creating a strong, desirable, and unique image (5).

Nowadays, successful presence of brands inspires a sense of purposefulness and commitment in the society, in addition to dominating markets, strengthening a sense of trust and loyalty in customers and creating value for the shareholders. By innovation, the brands improve the name of a country and its popularity in the business world (7, 8). Basketball has been struggling with many problems despite the long history of its formation (since 1931) and a history of several Asian Games and Olympic Games. Absence of outstanding teams due to financial difficulties in the Basketball League confirms that the Iranian Basketball League has not used all its potentials over the past few years. Identification of factors and challenges faced by the Basketball League is a very significant topic which has been dealt with in this study. Identifying internal and external factors, and finally, branding, can properly address financial problems such as attracting financial support, privatization, return on investment, and value creation. The reasons for conducting this study include the changing situation of the basketball federation, changes in strategic basketball league programs, lack of stability in the management departments of the organization, lack of a clear pattern for the organization performance, lack of financial benefits, and lack of attraction for sponsors (9).

Considering the importance of internal factors and the possibility of reducing inhibitors and strengthening facilitators in the

organization's internal environment, as well as, lack of comprehensive research in this field in the sports industry, especially, in the field of basketball, this study aimed at identifying the internal factors and challenges ahead of branding of Iranian Basketball League. The results can be used by individuals and institutions including the Basketball League, clubs in the League, Basketball Federation, League sponsors, investors, etc.

Identification of internal branding factors and challenges in the Basketball League will lead to recognition of this league, attraction of higher investment, willingness of better teams to attend the league, presence of more powerful foreign players, greater media coverage, loyal fans, and ultimately, higher income for the league and Basketball Federation. Failure to take advantage of these and especially, in an emerging field, such as basketball, will cause organizations to face several problems, most notably, weakened cultural and political relations, inability to maintain competitive conditions, lack of audience satisfaction, failure in emotional relationships, and lack of full support from the organization, losing loyal supporters, and lack of financial benefits (10).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Methodology. It was an applied survey study. Grounded theory was used due to the unknown nature of the subject, existence of very different processes, existence of unknown variables, and lack of quantitative studies. Interviews, documentation, observations, etc. were used to collect data.

Procedure. The research stages included: 1. Selecting participants, 2. Collecting data, 3. Regularizing data, 4. Analyzing data, and 5. establishing the theory (11, 12, 13).

Participants and instrument: Due to the nature of research and not identifying the number of samples, snowball and purposeful samplings were used to attain theoretical saturation. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data.

Note that due to the analytical nature of the research method and the emergence of new cases during the research process, some experts were interviewed more than once for confirmation or refusal of the details (Table 1).

Finally, the extracted model was investigated by four experts and finalized. Qualitative interviews with university elites and scholars

were used for data extraction. During the interview, various recording methods such as note taking and recording of the interview on the audio or video tape were used and, after completing the interview, detailed notes about the interview process were taken.

Analysis and Processing Steps. In the analysis section, the relevant data were recorded and analyzed based on the following steps:

Step 1: Reviewing the literature, Step 2: Selecting cases or samples, Step 3: Developing a data collection framework (initial formation by the researcher and approval by other members of the research team); Step 4: Entering the research field (conducting interviews with the time and place proposed by the interviewees), Step 5: Setting up the data (setting the interview notes for data coding), Step 6: Analyzing the first case data

(coding, data analysis, and new organization of concepts), Step 7: Repeating theoretical sampling (flexible sampling along the research path), Step 8: Achieving saturation (comprehensive concepts and repetitive interviews), and Step 9: Examining the literature (review of fundamental research on the path to create a model) (10).

Data analysis was performed in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The data analysis process begins with open coding and identification of the concepts. In the axial coding step, the data that are broken into the coding step are merged. Finally, in the selective coding, the body of research is formed. In this study, the theory was developed by analyzing the relationships between concepts as well as comparing with other existing models. The theory was also reviewed by experts and was finally confirmed.

Table 1. Details of research interviews

Number Group	Number of people not interviewed	Number of interviews	Number of people that approved model
Managers and executive specialists and marketing managers of the Premier League Basketball	2	5	1
Economists, especially brand experts	1	1	0
experts and faculty members that specializing in sports marketing and brand management	3	4	2
Individuals with the sports history in Basketball League (Coaches and Basketball Premier League players)	2	5	1
Other people that aware the subject matter of the research according to the nature of qualitative research and position	1	4	0
Total	9	19	4

RESULTS

After creating the open codes, they were reviewed and modified by three experts. Then, the theoretically related concepts were grouped under a code adopting a new name. In the open coding, 89 concepts were identified and at the axial coding stage, 11 sub-categories were obtained. Finally, the axial coding process focusing on the factors and challenges in branding Iran Basketball League was conducted according to Shilhang's (2008) sports brand management model and Strasuss and Corbin (2003, 2008) theories. Here, three main concepts of conditions were obtained: Iranian basketball league (8 sub categories and 75 initial codes), philosophy and nature of basketball (2 sub

categories and 10 initial codes), and nature of sport (1 sub category and 4 initial codes) (13, 11, 12). Their details are presented in the Table 2.

After confirming the factors derived from the interviews and coding them, the internal factors and challenges of the Iranian Basketball League were identified in three general areas: The Iranian basketball league, the philosophy and nature of the Iranian basketball, and the nature of sport. They are represented in the Figure 1.

Eventually, the information was reviewed by the research team. After final confirmation of the extracted factor, the final model was plotted according to the open coding, sub categories, general category, and axial code further was confirmed by the experts (Figure 2).

Table 2. Coding Internal Factors and Challenges of Branding Iran Basketball League

Main Code	General Category	Special Category	Concepts (Basic Codes)
Internal Environment	Conditions of Iranian Basketball League	Basketball League	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. League instability conditions** 2. Unstable events outside the league 3. Weakly conditions of league holding ** 4. Negative effects of short league time (5 months per year) 5. Lack of electronic leagues 6. Instability of league planning 7. Limited and variable teams in the Premier League 8. Qualitative difference of the league inside with outside leagues 9. Not having a competitive balance in the Basketball Premier League 10. Results and quality level of national team and its influence on the league*** 11. Pay attention to the league(as a system) and the sub-systems 12. paying attention to the lower league (except to national team and Premier League) 13. Disadvantages of industrial and technical teams diversity 14. Involved in a small number of provinces (4 provinces) 15. Differences between private and government teams 16. possibility of using basketball enterprises 17. Struggle and distance from basketball 18. The need for proper and long-term goal setting in basketball 19. Escape or extrication (Avoiding the Challenges of Life) 20. Advantage of separation from community frameworks 21. Desirable quality of judgment and execution factors** 22. clashes with margins
		Facilities Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.inadequate Physical environment, facilities, equipment and facilities ***** 2. Poor physical facilities such as training Academy or Sports Medicine Academy * 3. Not having private stadiums in clubs 4. Inappropriate conditions for the national team camp and separate women's camp 5. Facilities and assets of federation and league organization
		Planning Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have an operational plan in line with the strategic plan 2. Take advantage of the strategic promotion of the league and brand** 3. Not having a plan to attract the audience 4. Proper league planning (Federation Committee or Federation Council)** 5. Advantages of using the FIBA Calendar 6. Gap between the decision makers and other people 7. Planning to create event charm 8. Management of shopping pleasure while watching the game
		Financial Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transparent financial management in financial matters 2. Improper management of debt and fines 3. Improper management of income sources such as shirt sales 4. Proper management and clarity of contracts 5. Crude retail of tournaments
		Management of Legal and International Affairs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. need to create a law with an executive guarantee***** Non-use of rules and supervision of international basketball organizations Weak legal system(Not having the inspection board)**** Weaknesses of the statute, regulations and law
		Players	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Super star players or celebrity***** Enter and maintain foreign player and coach** Attempts to enhance the player's reputation and behavior Behavior management and personality of coaches and players Transnational morale of basketball players Paying attention to the views of the players Pay attention to physical factors in foreign players such as height and skin color need to make players that feel secure about the club need to pay attention to external patterns of attracting foreign players Product approved by player level of bias and attachment of the player and coach to the club * Technical, ethical and social performance of players Social activities of the organizations and basketball players

		Coaches	1.coaches and their science level and performance**** The need for the use of star coaches**
		Clubs	1. poor quality of teams and games** Lack of utilization of R & D unit lack of cohesion in club's structure low stability of clubs and organizations Age, history and club achievements Need to know the current image of the club lack of effort to create a strong Club identity impartiality of players Club history (professional presence and strong financial credentials) Uncertainty and Variable club system Inactivity of clubs to attract the fans use of club-related academies Lack of policies to attract the fans and absence of fan sites Lack of exclusive stores in clubs Misconduct of human resources leading to the destruction of club brand Team Owners (Being One Owner and Sponsor in Some Clubs***
	Philosophy and nature of basketball	Basketball history and culture	1. Lack of deep knowledge of basketball organization need for a understanding of basketball culture Rich History Of Basketball
		Specific groups of contacts	1. Not having a public image in basketball Amount of education and culture of basketball high cost of basketball Special contacts in basketball ** The positive mental image of people in comparison with other disciplines Social Placement (Score for specific groups(high level of basketball field (college sports)
	Nature of sport		1. Sports industry Structure and organization of sport Monopoly in sport Live Event

The stars that are shown in the table, it means the importance and frequency of the initial code (initial concept).

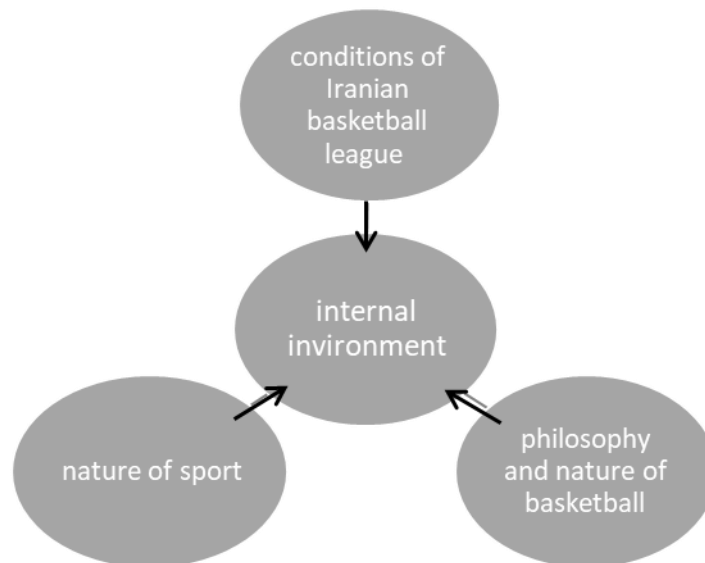


Figure 1. General Factors and Challenges of the Basketball League Branding



Figure 2. *The Final Model of the Internal Factors and Challenges of Branding of the Iranian Basketball League*

Accordingly, the Iranian Basketball League must become aware of its internal status to become a credible brand and use facilitators and control inhibitors. This stage involves understanding conditions of the league, the philosophy and nature of basketball, and the nature of sport. If the knowledge, control, and proper use of branding factors and challenges happen accurately, the Iranian Basketball League can become a credible brand. In an effort to create a satisfactory image and with continuous assessment, the Iranian Basketball League can consolidate its brand and become a mega-brand in the sports industry.

DISCUSSION

Considering the today's changing circumstances and competitive markets, branding is a strategic imperative necessitating sporting organizations and clubs to use this strategy to maintain and attract fans. As long as the internal factors and challenges of an organization are identified and managed, the brand cannot be cared for and upgraded. Considering the above and the importance of branding, this study aimed at identifying the factors and challenges of internal

branding in the Basketball League of Iran. Totally, 89 tokens were identified in the open coding process which were categorized in 11 categories based on the concepts. These categories include the Basketball League, facility management, planning management, financial management, legal and international affairs management, players, coaches, clubs, basketball rich history and culture, basketball specific audience, and the nature of sport. In the axial coding process, the "internal challenges and factors of branding of the Iranian Basketball League" was considered as the axial phenomenon, the categories emerged in the final model, and general categories were described. Furthermore, the results revealed that three factors affected the branding pattern of the Iranian Basketball League: the Iranian basketball league conditions, the philosophy and nature of basketball, and the nature of sports. In the following, we tried to compare the findings of this study with the existing scientific and proven models and the results of other experiments. At the end, practical and conclusive suggestions are provided.

The conditions of the Iranian basketball league: In the development of sport, especially

professional sport, some issues affect the situation in the basketball league. This can also affect other areas of sport. A study noted that facilities in any field of sport can be affected by financial issues. Al-Salih and Hartman (2013) suggested that the availability of appropriate facilities in sport leads to proper conditions and infrastructure for brand use (11).

Further, Tilman and Lijmbach (2012) argued that the nature of sport and various issues including related events are issues representing the need for development and attention to brand management (15). Cheng (2014) stated that use of players and coaches in sport makes it possible to perfectly chart the brand improvement. They pointed that players and coaches can make a difference in their brand value to complete brand management and achieve high goals. Creating business activities in the sport and using players and coaches' capabilities will increase attraction of customers in these business activities and improve brand management. Meanwhile, players and coaches can lead to the development of customer-related issues and strategies (17). Players and coaches, as the main pillars of Iran basketball league, can promote the brand growth and improvement in the Iran's Basketball League using the potential of the media. High popularity of some players and coaches in this sport has made it possible to attract fans to this sport. Benefitting from this potential of players and coaches can lead to brand promotion in the Iran Basketball League (16, 17).

The Iran Basketball League needs branding because of its potential. The various qualities and conditions existing in this league have made it possible to develop the sport by designing the branding model in the Iranian Basketball League. Further, managerial resources in this field including senior executives as well as old athletes, who play an important role in the development of this sport as pioneers, have created appropriate managerial approaches in this sport and provided proper conditions for brand development in Iran Basketball League. Consequently, the concepts affecting Iranian Basketball League branding including the Basketball League, facility management, planning management, financial management, legal and international management, players, coaches and clubs, have improved the competitive advantage of this league as well as development and necessity of

designing and implementing a brand model in the Iranian Basketball League. Therefore, use of potentials created by the basketball League conditions has led to a greater hope of branding in the league, and which can also address the shortcomings in the league conditions such as the lack of specific spaces and weaknesses in legal actions (10, 15).

Philosophy and Nature of Basketball in Iran: The basketball has a high capacity, long history, and specific audience in Iran and has the potential to expand dimensions of marketing. This concept has been investigated by some researchers. In this regard, although it has not been able to affect all groups and individuals like football, researchers have argued that basketball has become a popular sport worldwide and has managed to progress in the branding field. The proper dynamics of the Iranian Basketball League as well as acquisition of some international successes in basketball in recent years has led it to play a significant role in brand development. In the meantime, a large number of fans in Iran including the young and educated group, have contributed to emergence of the nature of basketball as an effective field of branding.

The large number of fans in this sport has contributed to branding given the very nature of basketball and its events at both national and international levels. Although basketball influence is lower compared to some sports, including football, in national and international arenas, its rich history and culture and its specific audience have provided a basis for its impact on Iran sports industry (20-25).

The nature of sport: the nature of sport and importance of sporting events have augmented the significance of branding in the sports industry which has been ignored in research. Rasooli (2014) maintained that sport has become a popular industry and a favorite destination for many people. This has led sport and its related leagues to become an important element in developing the brand today. Similarly, the nature of sport itself has become an effective ground on the brand development (26). Kirkpatrick et al. (2018) as well as Schneider and Bristow (2007) suggested that sport has become an important and essential industry in the world and it can absorb all people in every situation. This issue can also have an impact on the success of sports concerning brand issues (27, 19). Furthermore,

the growing expansion of sport in the society has contributed to the impact of sport on all aspects of societies. According to De Mel and Boccardo (2014), sport has profound effects on all aspects of the world (14).

The sheer number of sporty attractions as well as the great benefits of sports or playing sports has great impacts on people every day. Further, the great potential of sport has prompted many companies and business organizations to select sport as an important arena in their business activities (14, 30, 31). Consequently, the nature of sport has caused brand issues to develop well in sport (32, 33). Nowadays, all sports fields, including basketball, have been able to use the nature of sport as a strong ground for brand empowerment. Therefore, the nature of sport has been able to be well represented as an effective factor in the branding of the Iranian Basketball League. Thus, important factors such as the sports industry, the structure and organization of sport, exclusiveness of sport, and liveliness of the event can be effective in designing, implementing, and improving the brand of the Iran basketball league.

CONCLUSION

This study indicated that identification of barriers and facilitators of the Basketball League branding depends on identifying and analyzing the internal factors in this league. Paying attention to these factors makes it possible to take meaningful measures in the brand management. Factors such as the management of legal and international affairs, the conditions of players, the particular audience of basketball, and its nature were identified as appropriate strategies for improving branding in the Basketball League. Accordingly, plans to promote brand should be

developed within the framework of these strategies. According to the results, it is expected that identification of internal branding factors and challenges of the Iranian Basketball League will lead to the promotion of clubs, brand, basketball league, events, and federation. Further, in this regard, it is necessary to identify the current status of the brand of Iranian Basketball League and resolve the internal issues using existing capabilities.

APPLICABLE REMARKS

- Nowadays, all sports fields, including basketball, are using the nature of sport as a strong ground for brand improvement. Therefore, the nature of the sport has been well represented as an effective factor in the Iranian Basketball League branding. The main factors such as sports industry, structure and organization of sport, the exclusiveness of sport, and liveliness of the event can be effective in designing, implementing, and improving the Iran Basketball League branding.
- Factors such as the management of legal and international affairs, conditions of players, a particular audience of the sport, and its nature were identified as the strategies for improving basketball league branding. Therefore, brand promotion plans should be developed within the framework of these strategies.

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