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Structural Model of the Role of Brand Trust on Brand Identity through the Mediating Role of Brand Love among Fans of Futsal Premier League Clubs in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Background. Sports brand love refers to the degree of passionate emotional attachment consumers feel towards a sports team. Brand able to be more competitive by establishing the strong brand love of the customers as well as brand identity and brand trust. **Objectives.** The purpose of this research is to present a model of the role of brand trust on brand identity through the mediating role of brand love among fans of Futsal premier league clubs. **Methods.** The present study is a descriptive-correlative research in compliance with existing standard case studies. The population of this research comprised of all fans of the Farsh Ara Mashhad club, among which 295 were selected according to the temporal and spatial domains of the study as the sample, utilizing simple random sampling method. In order to achieve the research goals, the moderated Brand Identity Questionnaire made by Meal and Ashforth (1992), Albert's Brand Love Questionnaire, 2010, and Ballester Brand Trust Questionnaire (2004) were used. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (structural equation modeling and path analysis) were used for data analysis at a significant level recorded as 0.05. **Result.** According to the value of the coefficient path between brand trust and brand identity recorded as 0.47, which is positive and the value of the t-statistics correspondence obtained as 2.09, with 95% confidence, the coefficient path at the error level recorded as 0.05 is significant. Furthermore, a significant relationship between brand trust and brand identity was confirmed and also according to the main hypothesis of the research, the path coefficient of the indirect relationship of brand trust, through the mediating variable of brand love on brand identity with the value 0.53 was also calculated and the main hypothesis of the research was confirmed. **Conclusion.** In general, investing on brand trust on behalf of the Futsal premier league clubs (especially Farsh Ara club) and in the following plan to increase the admiration of fans in creating and developing a brand identity is one of the significant results mentioned in this research.

KEY WORDS: *Brand Trust, Brand Identity, Brand Love, Fans, Futsal.*

INTRODUCTION

For a potential customer, a brand is a significant guide. The brand, like money, facilitates the transaction. Customers are

confused when confronted with collections of products that do not have an identification certificate or products that are difficult to evaluate

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in a glance (1). For centuries, branding has become a tool for distinguishing between products of a manufacturer from other manufacturers. Based on Dictionary definition published by Interbrand Institute, a brand is a combination of obvious, immaterial, and symbolic trademarks of which, if properly managed, will bring great value and credit (2). The brand's goal can make decision making easier, ensure product quality, and provide the appropriate, different and valid option among contradictory options (in competition). A brand is an abstract of the identity, originality, attribute, and difference. A brand raises the information, which is focused on a word or a sign. That is why brands are vital to business exchanges. Few companies, organizations and even clubs know what their brand names are and where their uniqueness, quality and identity is located (1).

Moreover, identity is the essence and originality of the brand. If a company wants to create a lasting image of its own, then it must first create its brand identity and then inspire its message and image based on that identity. Brand Identity is the brand meaning that is brought about by the company. Brand identity shows how an organization wants to be perceived in the marketplace. Thus, each organization transfers its identity through branding and marketing strategies to the consumer. It should be said that an organization can be unique through its identity. Brand identity includes brand perspective, brand culture, brand position, personality, relationships, and their presentation. Generally, brand identity is all that organizations want their brand to look like (1). Given these features, sports in the world today is considered by large countries and companies, and prominent teams and clubs are looking to bring a lot of spectators to the stadium through marketing methods and in competition with the domestic teams and foreign leagues to receive more media outlets and thus increase club revenue. Of course, because the nature of sport is unstable, the problem of attracting loyal customers i.e. sports fans is raised and sports marketers have to take steps that contain unique associations for the fans so that they can establish a link between the team and the fan not only at the time of winning, but also at the time of failure. One of these measures is the brand identity design (3).

Accordingly, the significance of the term trust becomes apparent. Trust is a facilitator of human interaction, trusting people can result in execution of business transactions and assist in smoother increase in the economy. In addition, distrust is a useful mental state that enables us to get rid of systems or individuals and organizations that are unreliable and unhealthy (4). Another definition of trust in this way is the psychological state consisting of the acceptance of the vulnerability based on the behavior of the positive expectations of the other (5). Brand trust is the degree of brand ability and capacity to meet promises made. Customers are willing to understand the identity of brands that are more capable of fulfilling promises and creating confidence. A strong brand is a safe place for customers because it reduces the uncertainty and risk of buying and consuming a product. Fame and reputation of the brand also greatly contribute to its identity. Brand research has shown that a strong brand identity brings customers' trust (6). Investing on a brand as an investment in advertising or sponsorship of sports teams, is the basis for brand trust, through encouraging companies to be honest in their claims about the product (7). Experts in this regard believe that a brand based on social media enhances brand loyalty by building trust in the brand. Through value creation methods, brand creates close relationships, and gains values through long-term interactions that help them to love the brand and establish emotional relationships (8, 9).

A new concept in marketing is raised which takes into account the greater connectivity of the consumer with the brand, which is referred to as brand love or emotional attachment to the brand (10). Specifically, love for the brand is very similar to interpersonal love. Therefore, the application of the concept of love in the study of consumer relations with the brand paves way to achieving a deeper perspective on consumer and customer sentiment towards brands as well as creation of a better understanding of consumer behavior and its favorable prediction (8). This concept became more evident in the field of sports and especially sports brands. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) referring to the concept of love for the brand and its definition in the form of a degree of emotional attachment between the individual and the brand of a particular commodity, believe that brand love can affect customer loyalty to the brand. Moreover, their

results show that higher customer love towards a brand can have a more positive effect on positive statements made by customers to the brand (8).

By examining the research literature, the significance of the subject matter becomes obvious. Moshabbeki Esfahani *et al.* (2013) designed the brand identity model in the Iranian Football Premier League. Dimensions of brand identity in this study were success, color, name, delivery, clothing, fan and competitor, geographic continuity and history, star player and stadium (11). The results of Alavai, and Najafi Siahroodi (2014) indicate the mediating role of loyalty in the relationship between brand love and the advocacy of sports brands. One of the significant results of this research was that as much as a sports brand fan feels more love for the brand, he tries to re-buy that brand or to think about it (more loyalty), have a sense of ownership on it and support it (more support), and in the group of acquaintances, friends and in general the community states the specific and distinctive features of the brand (12).

Bengtsson and Servais (2005) stated that, in general, organizations that provide certain, specific, and relevant brand identity can pave way for their market excellence and create value for their own customers (13). Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) concluded that creating brand identity, and promoting trust facilitates differentiation, and aids identification of consumers through brand (14). Recently, Tavormina (2013) studied the empirical test of brand love in professional sports teams. One of the significant results of this research can be the high and direct significance between brand enthusiasm and a positive feeling towards brand. Also, the results showed that love for the brand in the sports teams varies according to the marketing strategies, conditions and culture that governs the society (15).

Given the above-mentioned effects, it should be recalled that the present research in the domestic environment, especially in the field of futsal sports is significant in a number of aspects. Considering that futsal sports is one of the most popular sports in the country, loyalty and support of its customers can have significant effects on the growth of this industry. For this purpose, in this research, we tried to select one of the most passionate fans of sports teams in the country and

the province, namely, Farsh Ara Mashhad. Being one of the best clubs during the years of the futsal league, they have experienced packed full stadiums in the league, and the history preceding their name, especially those who are currently playing at the first level in the world, has distinguished them among other sports clubs of the country. Another limitation of this research is the lack of similar domestic research on the effect of the love for sports brands and its relation to brand identity, where this study attempted to fill this gap. Considering that in the Futsal premier league clubs in Iran there is no long-term planning brand in the field of brand development, such studies can be effective on creating higher tendencies for the Futsal premier league clubs in Iran, and as the competition among the clubs of the premier league in Iran's futsal is followed closely, it is also revealed that lack of sponsors in this field has prevented teams and clubs from achieving a degree of growth that deserves this massive amount of talent and spectators. Such research would be able to introduce this massive potential to financial supporters and indirectly contribute to the development of the brand of the Futsal premier league clubs, and provide the growth and development of these clubs with practical and specialized solutions. In general, the purpose of this research is to investigate the role of brand trust on brand identity through the mediating role of brand love in the Futsal premier league clubs in Iran (Farsh Ara), the results of which can have favorable effects on solving issues related to the brand of sports clubs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Method. This research is a descriptive-correlative research, in compliance with the case studies that were conducted as a field study in terms of data collection.

Participants. The population investigated in this study, according to spatial and time domain comprised all fans of the Farsh Ara Mashhad Sports-Cultural Futsal Club. The final sample was calculated among the 9000 people (with the right to 90% use of the Farsh Ara Mashhad fans as a host in the Shahid Beheshti Stadium in Mashhad with 10000 capacity), who participated in the futsal play of Farsh Ara and Shahid Mansouri on January 18, 2014 in the Mashhad Shahid Beheshti indoor court. Finally, based on the sample size

estimation formula (Cochran) and simple random sampling, and considering the return of healthy

questionnaires with the ability to analyze, 295 subjects formed the final samples of this study.

Table 1. Descriptive Table of cognitive demographic variables

Variable	Percent	
Age	13 to 20	47.5
	21 to 63	52.5
Marital status	Single	75.3
	Married	24.7
Annual watching of the matches	More than 10 games	32.2
	8 to 10	8.9
	5 to 7	20
	1 to 4	38
Education level	Diploma	17.6
	Associate Degree	34.9
	Bachelors	18
	M.A.	24.7
	PH.D	4.8
Occupation	Self-employed	31.5
	Employee	8.8
	Military	7.1
	pupil	18
	Student	40
Membership in the fan club	Membership	30
	No membership	70
Monthly income (Tomans)	Below 200,000	53.6
	201000 to 400,000	15.3
	401000 to 600,000	9.2
	601000 to 800,000	11.5
	Above 800,000 thousand	10.5

Research Tools. In order to achieve the research goals, the moderated brand Identity Questionnaire made by Mealm & Ashforth (1992) and the Albert's Brand Love Questionnaire (2010) were used. On the scale of brand love, its relevant factors are evident in two subscales of kindness to the club (5 items) and intense emotions (5 items). In order to assess the brand trust scale, the Ballester brand trust questionnaire (2004) evaluating the factors affecting brand trust in two subscales of trustworthiness (4 items) and brand intention (2 options) were used. The face and content validity of the tools was done by a team of sports management experts and the reliability of the questionnaires was ascertained in a preliminary study conducted on 30 fans where the brand Identity Questionnaire, Brand Love Questionnaire and Brand Trust Questionnaire were calculated with Cronbach's Alpha, 0.88 and 0.75, 0 and 0.82.

Statistical Analysis. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, etc.) and inferential statistics (structural equation modeling and path analysis) were used at a significant level 0.05 to analyze the data. In addition, Q-Q plot was used to determine the distribution status of variables. It should be noted that all statistical calculations were performed using software SPSS 20 and Lisrel 8.50. SPSS software was used to analyze the descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation and to determine the state of normality. Lisrel software was used for modeling structural equations and path analysis.

RESULTS

Diagrams 1 and 2, respectively, show the path coefficients and t-values related to the structural equation model to investigate the research hypotheses.

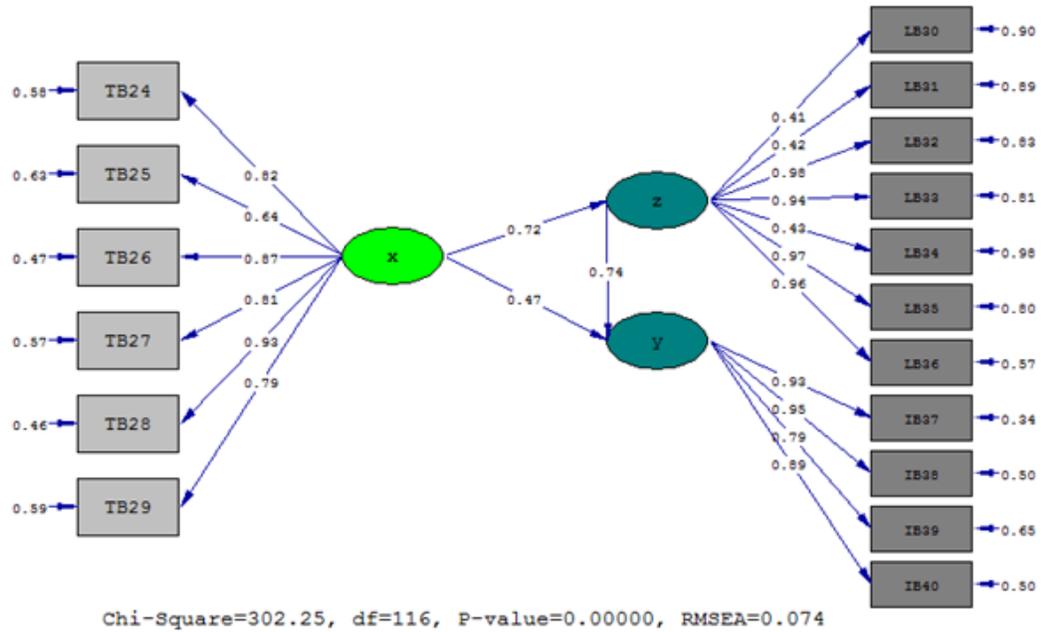


Figure 1. Factor coefficients and path coefficient of the research model. x: represents brand trust (independent variable), y: represents brand identity (dependent variable), z: represents brand love (mediating variable).

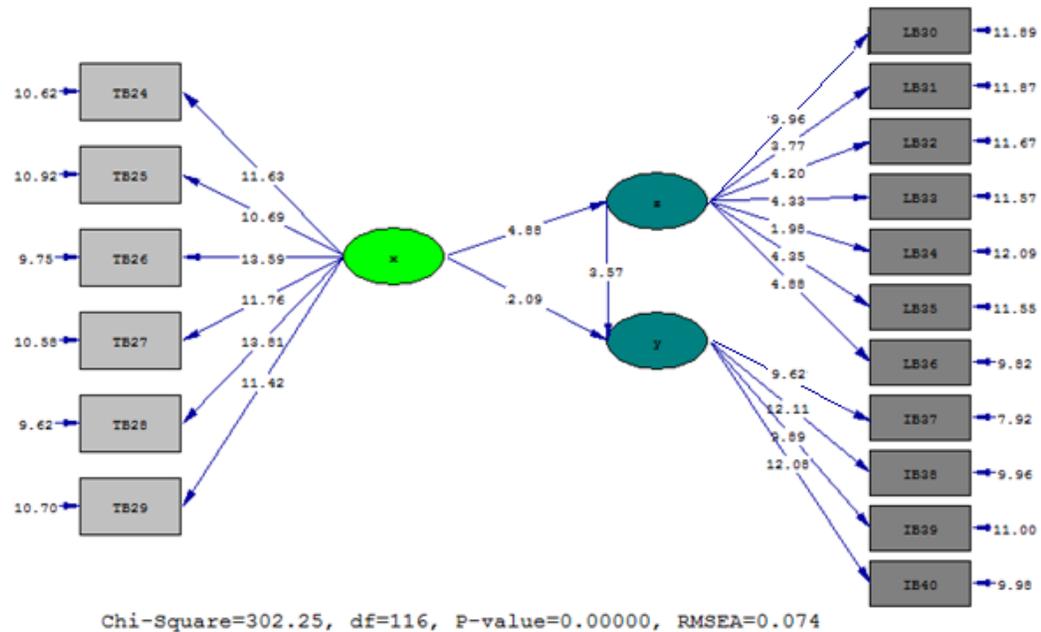


Figure 2. The values of the t-statistic for the research model. x: represents brand trust (independent variable), y: represents brand identity (dependent variable), z: represents brand love (mediating variable).

Analysis results of the confirmatory factor is presented in the table below. As can be seen from Table 2, t values for all load factors are larger than 1.96, so it can be concluded that the selected

questions provide an appropriate factor structure for measuring the variables and dimensions studied in the research model.

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis results of the model

Dimensions	Variables	Factor load	The statistics t
Brand Trust	TB24	0.82	11.63
	TB25	0.64	10.69
	TB26	0.87	13.59
	TB27	0.81	11.76
	TB28	0.93	13.81
	TB29	0.79	11.42
Brand Love	LB30	0.41	9.96
	LB31	0.42	3.77
	LB32	0.98	4.20
	LB33	0.94	4.33
	LB34	0.43	1.98
	LB35	0.97	4.35
Brand Identity	LB37	0.96	4.88
	IB37	0.93	9.62
	IB38	0.95	12.11
	IB39	0.79	2.89
	IB40	0.89	12.08

Also the values of fitness indices are shown in Table 3. The RMSEA value is 0.074 and, given that it is less than 0.08, it shows that the model is acceptable. Also, the relative chi-square value, i.e., division of Chi-square by degrees of freedom equals $2.61 \frac{302.25}{116}$ and between 1 and 3, and the

level of AGFI, GFI, IFI, CFI and NFI indices are also 0.9 and further. In total the amount of indices corresponds to their interpretative criteria and the confirmatory factor analysis confirms the structure of the dimensions examined in the research model.

Table 3. Fitness indices of the research model

AGFI	GFI	IFI	CFI	NFI	RMSEA	χ^2 / df
0.92	0.91	0.95	0.95	0.92	0.074	2.61

Considering the confirmation of questions regarding the dimensions of the questionnaire, the following sections will test the research hypotheses. Based on the Figures 1 and 2, the

summary of the results obtained from the fitness model is shown in Table 4. As it was said, the paths with s-statistics more than 1.96 or less than 1.96 are significant.

Table 4. Results of the study to test the hypothesis

Hypothesis	Relationship of the test	Path coefficient	The t- statistics	Result
First	Brand Trust → Brand Love	0.72	4.88	Significant
Second	Brand Love → Brand Identity	0.74	3.57	Significant
Third	Brand Trust → Brand Identity	0.47	2.09	Significant
Fourth	Brand Trust → Brand Love ← Brand Identity	$0.74 \times 0.72 = 533$	---	Significant

Based on Table 4, the path coefficient between brand trust and brand love is equal to 0.72, which is a positive value. The value of the t statistics is 4.88, which is larger than 1.96, so with 95% confidence it can be concluded that this path

coefficient is significant at the error level 0.05 and there is a significant and direct relationship (positive) between brand trust and brand love. According to Table 3, the coefficient of the path between brand love and brand identity is 0.74,

which is positive. The value of the t statistics is 3.57, which is larger than 1.96, so with 95% confidence it can be concluded that this path coefficient is significant at the error level 0.05 and there is a significant and direct relationship (positive) between brand love and brand identity. According to the results the path coefficient between brand trust and brand identity is 0.47, which is positive. The value of the t statistic is 2.9, which is more than 1.96, so with 95% confidence it can be concluded that this path coefficient is significant at the error level 0.05 and there is a significant and direct relationship (positive) between brand trust and brand identity.

According to Table 4, "brand trust" has a positive and significant effect on "Brand Love" with a path coefficient of 0.72, also the "Brand Love" on "Brand Identity" with a coefficient of 0.74, has a positive and significant effect; therefore, the first and second conditions are established, and the path coefficient of the indirect relationship of brand trust, through the brand mediation variable, is calculated based on brand identity as follows $0.74 \times 0.72 = 0.533$.

Therefore, it can be said that brand trust through brand love has a positive and significant effect on brand identity.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of brand trust on brand identity, through the mediating role of brand love among the fans of the Futsal premier league clubs, Iran. Since brand identity is the brand's essence, the brand's most significant and unique features are reflected in its identity (11) and, on the other hand, considering that one of the factors contributing to customer loyalty is the brand trust and love, (16) the study of these three significant components in futsal clubs of the country that are yet to be addressed scientifically is considered necessary. In this section, the conclusions of this research are presented.

According to demographic findings, more than 47.5% of respondents had higher education. Accordingly, it should be acknowledged that fans with higher education have higher expectations of their favorite club and are not satisfied easily. Also the attention of the fans doubles the duties of the Iranian Futsal premier league clubs to meet their expectations. Moreover, given that almost

40% of the fans of the Farsh Ara Mashhad Futsal Club is made up of students, it can be admitted that in the path of building their brand identity, the closer the club is to the set of factors constituting student identity, such as passion, heat, questioning etc., and in spite of success in attracting trust and developing loyalty in them, as well as increasing the number of supporters, brands can be more successful in building a steady and attractive brand identity.

Descriptively, roughly 61% of the fans of the Futsal Farsh Ara club annually watch more than 5 games of their favorite team. It is clear that as clubs become more successful in attracting fans to the stadiums to watch matches, they can increase the components of trust and love for fans, along with social and economic achievements and as a result, the club turns into a strong and desirable symbol.

The demographic variables survey shown that more than 70% of Farsh Ara Mashhad audiences are not members of their supporters' club. The results of extensive research in this field showed that the fan club of the sports teams and clubs provide a very suitable place for dynamic and mutual communication between the club and its supporters. Assigning special gifts, buying personal chairs, offering great discounts for purchasing tickets, and communicating with favorite players etc. are among the benefits of joining a fan club (17).

Considering the inferential findings of the research, brand trust has a positive and significant effect on brand love of fans of Futsal premier league clubs. Brand trust, which is one of the main elements of the interface between the organization and the customer, will result in the development of long-term relationship between the organization and the customer. Due to the fact that brand trust is rooted in the past experiences and effects of the brand on customers, according to researchers, promotion of satisfaction, especial brand value will ultimately lead to customer loyalty (18). Given this finding, it can be said that if the clubs of the Premier League of the Iranian Futsal (especially Farsh Ara Mashhad) in cases of building trust; such as, meeting their expectations, satisfying and providing supporters' requests, and demonstrating honesty in reflecting information towards their supporters, then they can increase the interest, happiness, goodness and pleasure of

the brand in their supporters, which also Improves brand love.

Based on the results of the inferential findings; brand love of futsal league fans (Farsh Ara Mashhad), has a positive and significant effect on the brand identity of fans. Brand love, which comes from three basic elements such as enthusiasm, intimacy, and commitment, plays an undeniable role in the presence of a loyal customer in the long run. This finding is also consistent with the results of Alnawas and Altarifi (2016) (19). Love creates motivation in people that causes them to give maximum efforts towards brand success. Hence, stirring up the emotions and feelings of supporters has become one of the ways to promote brand in today's marketing industry (20). Based on this finding, it can be stated that the development of love in the fans can have such an effect on them that the defeat of the team, will be considered a personal defeat and its success will be regarded as a success of the fan. At this level of support, the individual does not reject any irrational criticism, so it can be said that the fan has reached a high degree of brand identity.

Based on the findings, brand trust has a positive and significant effect on brand identity of Premier League Futsal club fans (Farsh Ara). Today, the saturation of markets, change in the customer tastes and eventually, increasing competition, has resulted in Iranian companies in the service and non-service sectors facing multiple challenges. In these situations, companies that can properly use their tools and facilities, and using effective advertising to build trust in their customers, can overcome these challenges and ensure their survival as a sustainable brand. This significant issue corresponds with the Premier League Futsal club, such that when brand confidence is attained, brand relationships become more valuable to fans and they try to maintain this relationship as long as it becomes a kind of psychological and emotional commitment; therefore, brand identity is a means by which a fan indicates its attachment. Generally speaking, brand identity develops when it promotes positive social identity (21). Considering the fact that with brand trust confidence increases in brand behaviors, this trust leads to the attractiveness of identity and ultimately leads to a stable brand.

Regarding the findings from the fourth hypothesis of the research, there is a positive and significant relationship between brand trust and identity of the brand through the mediating role of brand love among the fans of Farsh Ara Mashhad Club. Considering the coefficient of the effect of trust on brand identity (0.47) and coefficient of trust effect on identity with the mediating role of brand love (0.53), it can be admitted that the indirect effect of brand trust on brand identity is more than the direct effect without the mediating role of brand love. Thus the mediating and undeniable role of love is also proven in the two components of trust and identity. This finding is also consistent with the results of the Dehghani Soltani *et al.* (2014) (7). The positive effects of brand trust on brand identity through the mediating role of brand love leads to the significant point that futsal and soccer clubs where the interest and attention of fans is more than other sports, and the need for considering the concept of brand trust is felt more than before. Clubs in seeking to create and develop their brand identity are unaware that the main root of a strong brand identity originates from brand trust as well. It should be noted that brand trust is developed and presented by the club, and continues its development by fans and that, with the advancement of this trend, all concerns, sensitivities, intentions and thoughts are also branded (brand love) and brand identity development takes place.

CONCLUSION

With regard to the above, it is generally seen that despite the high potential of the Premier League teams such as Farsh Ara, both in terms of player and technical staff and in terms of the enthusiastic spectators of the club and the team, we do not see the presence of sponsors in these teams and the league. In addition, based on the results of the research in this study, which shows a positive and significant relationship between brand trust and brand identity through the mediating role of brand love in the fans of the Farsh Ara Mashhad club, it is strongly recommended that sports investors and capital owners consider this huge number of fans and massive human capital, and in order to introduce their products and services with more investment in teams such as Farsh Ara, it also helps to introduce their brand and promote the

development of these teams and develop the sports. Moreover, it is recommended that the managers of the Futsal Premier League teams, especially the management of the Farsh Ara team create more welfare facilities for fans, especially during domestic matches, and provide a variety of services at times other than the tournament, such as: activating more fan clubs and holding tours within the club and during exercises for fans. They are also recommended to have more activity in virtual spaces such as the creation of active systems equipped with up-to-date response systems and online stores of products designed with the brand and logo of the club for fans. Such activities can attract fans and increase their brand popularity which will enhance their brand identity.

APPLICABLE REMARKS

- The clubs of the Iranian Premier League (Farsh Ara) are advised that with continuous presence in cyberspace, the promotion of websites and the launch of specific social networks, as well as, ongoing communication with universities, institutes, and science centers across the country meet the demands of the fans and create brand love and trust among fans.

- The clubs of the Premier League in Iran's futsal, especially Farsh Ara Mashhad by attracting fans in their fan clubs, and subsequently presenting favorable services, as well as planning to maintain a two-sided relationship between themselves can increase their brand trust on behalf of the fans, and ultimately witness the emergence of fans with a high degree of brand love.
- In general, managers and senior officials of the Futsal Premier League clubs (especially the Farsh Ara) are expected to meet expectations, guarantee the satisfaction and fix the problems of fans that embody brand trust behaviors to build a stable identity among their fans.
- Finally, investing in brand trust on behalf of the Premier League Futsal clubs (in particular, Farsh Ara), and then planning to increase the level of fan admiration in the creation and development of a strong brand identity is suggested.

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