Sport Marketing Studies, Volume 7, Issue 2, 2026

Sport Marketing Studies

Online ISSN: xxxx-xxxx

Print ISSN: 2783-0535

Journal Homepage: https://gsmsmr.uok.ac.ir/

The Impact of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Marketing on Brand Equity in Sports Businesses

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received 01 September 2024
Received in revised form 31 May 2025
Accepted 14 July 2025
Available online 22 June 2026

Keywords:
Electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing,
Brand Equity,
Sports Businesses,
Perceived Quality,
Brand Loyalty,
Brand Image

ABSTRACT

Objective: Today, sports have gained importance as a profitable industry, with the increasing consumption of sports goods and services. In this context, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing plays a significant role in enhancing the brand equity of sports businesses and influencing consumer purchasing decisions. The aim of this study was to determine the impact of using electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing on brand equity in sports businesses.

Method: In this regard, an applied study was conducted using a quasi-experimental method, with the statistical population consisting of customers of sports brands. The sample was conveniently selected from the customers of the Ghafari sports brand in West Azerbaijan province, including 40 individuals divided into two groups: control and experimental (20 individuals in each group). The measurement tool was a brand equity questionnaire based on the model by Kim et al. (2003) and the modifications by Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000), with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86. After implementing the electronic word-of-mouth marketing technique for the experimental group, the data were analyzed using covariance analysis and SPSS software version 17.

Results: The findings of the study indicate that the use of electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant impact on brand equity, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand image in sports businesses. The covariance analysis revealed that the impact of this marketing on brand equity (38%), perceived quality (21%), brand loyalty (52%), and brand image (41%) is significant. These results demonstrate the high effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth marketing in improving these indicators.

Conclusions: This implies that sports brands capable of creating opportunities for dialogue, fostering positive customer experiences, and encouraging active customer participation are more likely to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage.

Cite this article: Hesari, S., Jalili Niko, R., & Fattahi, S. (2026). The Impact of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Marketing on Brand Equity in Sports Businesses. *Sport Marketing Studies*, 7(2), 69-84. https://doi.org/ 10.22034/sms.2025.142053.1404

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Publisher: University of Kurdistan.

DOI: https://doi.org/ 10.22034/sms.2025.142053.1404

Introduction

The sports business, as one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors of the global industry, is significantly influenced by the rapid evolution of consumer demand, technological advancements, and cultural transformations. This industry encompasses the production and distribution of sporting goods, the provision of sports-related services, and the management of sporting events. With growing public awareness of the importance of sports and health, the global sports market has experienced remarkable growth over recent decades (Lyeonov et al., 2021). Furthermore, technological advancement and digitalization particularly in the areas of sports data analytics and customer experience enhancement have become key drivers of success in the sports business (Karg, 2022). In addition, branding and marketing play a pivotal role in determining the success of sports businesses. To attract and retain customers, sports companies must adopt creative and innovative marketing strategies. Research has demonstrated that strengthening brand equity and leveraging social media can significantly enhance customer acquisition and retention (Jahan et al., 2024).

In the digital era, social media has emerged as a powerful platform for engaging with customers and promoting brands (Ahmad, 2016). In Iran, the widespread penetration of the Internet and the growing number of social media users have created unprecedented opportunities for companies to strengthen customer relationships and enhance their brand development through electronic word-of-mouth marketing (Burnasheva et al., 2021; Dhewi & Kurnianto, 2023). Owing to its ability to facilitate the rapid and direct sharing of consumer experiences, electronic word-of-mouth has become one of the most credible and influential forms of marketing, exerting a substantial impact on consumers' purchasing behavior (Sun et al., 2021).

On the other hand, brand equity is a fundamental concept that reflects the strength and influence of a brand in the marketplace and plays a pivotal role in creating a sustainable competitive advantage for businesses (Hussain et al., 2020). Representing the added value that a brand brings to products and services, brand equity is generally conceptualized through key dimensions such as brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Parris & Guzmán, 2023). Brand equity directly influences consumers' purchasing behavior as well as firms' financial performance.

In recent years, brand equity has become one of the central constructs in the marketing literature because of its substantial influence on consumers' brand perceptions, customer loyalty, and market differentiation. A study by Aminian et al. (2023), conducted in the context of social media marketing, demonstrated that customer brand engagement and brand attitude—driven by social commerce constructs exert a significant positive impact on customer-business relationships and brand health, highlighting the strategic importance of brand-building mechanisms in digital environments. Similarly, Farzin et al. (2020) emphasized that various dimensions of brand equity, particularly customer satisfaction, with the exception of certain factors such as employee behavior and self-concept, have a significant positive effect on customer loyalty, a finding that has been consistently supported by numerous empirical studies.

From another perspective, the digital landscape has given rise to novel forms of marketing communications that have challenged the role of traditional advertising. Among these phenomena, electronic word-of-mouth is of particular significance. Research by Sefidgar et al. (2023), focusing on sports services, demonstrated that word-of-mouth plays a fundamental role in the creation of brand equity. Similarly, Siahsarani Kojuri et al. (2023) contend that the survival of businesses depends on paying strategic attention to this form of advertising in the digital sphere. In a study on the tourism industry, Abdul Maliki et al. (2021), in the context of electronic sports (eSports), reported a significant relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and business performance through users' purchasing behavior. Likewise, Alefpour

Tarakameh et al. (2021) demonstrated that eWOM exerts a significant positive influence on all dimensions of brand equity, suggesting that brands should leverage this marketing tool to foster consumer trust and strengthen social interaction.

Within the same context, several studies have highlighted the psychological and social foundations of eWOM. Ismailpour and Kabirifard (2019) found that factors such as similarity, strong interpersonal ties, and normative influence play a pivotal role in facilitating information dissemination and even triggering impulse purchasing. International research has reached similar conclusions. For instance, Sijoria et al. (2019), in the hospitality industry, identified information quality and trust as key determinants of eWOM effectiveness. Similarly, Lovett et al. (2020) demonstrated that brand advertising positively influences eWOM, which subsequently affects consumers' purchasing behavior.

Nonetheless, what distinguishes contemporary research is the integration of emergent technologies with marketing instruments. For instance, Faridniya et al. (2024), in developing a model for brand equity enhancement through gamification in sports businesses, demonstrated that causal factors (such as differentiation and positioning), development factors (such as trust in rewards), intervening factors (such as low internet speed), and contextual factors (such as propensity toward new technologies) collectively influence the creation of brand equity. The findings of this model indicate that leveraging gamification can lead to heightened brand salience and improved advertising efficacy. However, the same research team, in a separate (2023) study, revealed that for emerging brands, the utilization of gamification can be counterproductive, primarily due to low public trust regarding the authenticity of rewards.

In addition, several studies have examined other factors influencing brand equity. For instance, Rahimi et al. (2020) demonstrated that entrepreneurial marketing exerts a direct influence on both brand equity and customer loyalty. Similarly, Shad et al (2024) and Kim et al (2021) identified key dimensions of social media marketing namely entertainment, interaction, and customization as critical drivers of brand value. On a global scale, studies such as Gallart-Camahort et al. (2023) have confirmed the efficacy of the internet in enhancing perceived quality and brand loyalty within the retail sector. Furthermore, Langga et al. (2021) revealed that while sales promotions amplify eWOM, their direct impact on brand equity is not inherently guaranteed. In a similar vein, studies like Buil et al. (2013) offer a more critical perspective, contrasting the effectiveness of advertising against promotions in strengthening brand association. Collectively, these findings indicate that brand equity is not a static construct; rather, it is shaped by a dynamic interplay among technology, consumer behavior, social trust, and marketing strategies particularly within the sports domain, where competition and innovation concurrently unfold.

Within the sports industry, where the core business is built upon social interactions and customer experiences, electronic word-of-mouth plays a pivotal role in either strengthening or undermining brand equity. Consequently, acquiring a precise understanding of how eWOM influences brand equity is of paramount importance for sports organizations seeking to optimize their marketing strategies (Khan et al., 2024). However, comprehensive reviews indicate that there remains a dearth of research examining the specific mechanisms and extent to which eWOM impacts the dimensions of brand equity, particularly within the context of sports enterprises. Addressing this research gap is crucial; a deeper comprehension of this relationship would not only enable sports businesses to leverage this powerful marketing tool effectively but also significantly enhance their brand equity by fostering stronger customer relationships. Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by empirically investigating this relationship within the sports industry.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this research gap by comprehensively examining the impact of electronic word-of-mouth on the various dimensions of brand equity in sports businesses. Accordingly, the primary research question guiding this study is: How does electronic word-of-mouth influence the different dimensions of brand equity in sports businesses?

Method

The present study is applied in terms of its objective and quasi-experimental in terms of method, employing a pretest–posttest control group design. The statistical population comprised customers of active sports brands in West Azerbaijan Province, and the sports brand “Ghaffari” was selected as the context for implementing the intervention. With more than 10 years of experience in the production and import of sports equipment, active presence on social media platforms (Instagram and Telegram), and an online sales website, this brand provided suitable conditions for the implementation of digital marketing interventions.

The selection of the “Ghaffari” brand was based on a preliminary field study and conducted using a purposive sampling approach. By reviewing online resources, social media platforms, and interviewing local experts, the researcher identified brands that met the criteria for intervention implementation and valid data collection. This selection was aligned with the recommendation of Patton (2002) regarding purposive sampling in applied research. Following the selection of the brand, statistical samples were selected from the brand’s customers through convenience sampling. Subsequently, the participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (n = 20) or the control group (n = 20). The inclusion criteria were as follows: participants had to be at least 18 years of age, have had at least one interaction with the brand during the previous six months, maintain active access to social media platforms, and be willing to participate throughout all stages of the study. Individuals who withdrew their participation during the study or failed to meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the final sample. It should be noted that the use of convenience sampling, particularly with a relatively small sample size, may limit the generalizability of the findings. This limitation was taken into consideration during the interpretation of the results and is acknowledged as one of the study's limitations. According to the sampling framework proposed for marketing research by Malhotra and Birks (2007), suitable brands for empirical studies are those in which a real marketing intervention can be designed and implemented, while reliable data on customer behavior can be obtained. In this regard, the Ghaffari brand was selected as the study setting because it maintains official customer communication channels and cooperated with the research team, thereby facilitating the implementation of the intervention and the collection of reliable customer data.

The measurement instrument used in this study was the Brand Equity Questionnaire, originally developed by Kim et al. (2003) and subsequently revised and culturally adapted by Yoganakan et al. (2015). The questionnaire consisted of 25 items, of which five collected participants' demographic information and the remaining 20 assessed the dimensions of brand equity. According to Kim et al.'s model, these dimensions comprised brand loyalty (5 items), perceived quality (8 items), and brand image (7 items). The research hypotheses were formulated based on these three dimensions.

In the present study, the face and content validity of the questionnaire were assessed based on the evaluations of five experts in marketing and sport management. The experts reviewed the questionnaire in terms of the clarity of the items, the relevance of the items to the research objectives, and the adequacy of the coverage of the conceptual dimensions of brand equity, and they provided recommendations for refinement. To examine construct validity, specifically convergent validity, a preliminary exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. The results indicated that the three principal dimensions—brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand image—were clearly distinguishable from one another. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The overall scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability.

Intervention Procedure (Electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing Training): The intervention was implemented exclusively for the experimental group and consisted of four training sessions on electronic word-of-mouth marketing techniques. The sessions were conducted face-to-face in a digitally oriented learning environment. During these sessions, participants were instructed on how to communicate about the brand through online platforms, share promotional content, and participate in referral-based marketing campaigns.

Table 1. Intervention training session schedule

Session	Training Content	Duration	Tools / Methods
Session 1	Introduction to the concepts of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing	30 minutes	PowerPoint presentation and group discussion
Session 2	Enhancing motivation to share brand experiences	30 minutes	Viewing sample brand videos and group analysis
Session 3	Creating user-generated content (UGC)	30 minutes	Training on caption writing and hashtag usage
Session 4	Participation in the brand's social media platforms	30 minutes	Hands-on content posting practice and feedback review

Following the completion of the training program, participants in the experimental group were encouraged to continue engaging in eWOM-related activities on their personal social media accounts for a period of 10 days. During this period, the control group did not receive any intervention.

After the baseline data had been collected from both the experimental and control groups, the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing intervention was implemented. The intervention was administered exclusively to the experimental group, whereas the control group received no intervention. This design enabled the effectiveness of the eWOM intervention to be evaluated through a comparison of the outcomes between the two groups.

The implementation of the eWOM strategy was carefully designed and executed in a phased manner, comprising the following stages:

1. **Platform Selection:** Three major social media platforms—Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp—were selected because of their ease of sharing multimedia content.
2. **Participant Recruitment:** Satisfied customers of the brand were identified and invited to participate through direct messages and email. To encourage participation, incentives such as discount codes and entry into a prize draw were offered.
3. **Content Creation and Dissemination:** Participants were encouraged to generate and share three types of content: (a) text-based descriptions of their experiences with the brand, (b) photographs of product use, and (c) short videos.
4. **Content Promotion and User Engagement:** The user-generated content was reposted through the brand's official social media accounts and relevant online communities to increase user engagement, including likes, comments, and reposts.

5. **Evaluation and Optimization:** User interactions were monitored and evaluated using social media analytics tools, and participant feedback was collected to optimize the implementation of the eWOM strategy.

Following data collection, the data were analyzed at both the descriptive and inferential levels using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23. Descriptive statistics included means and standard deviations. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to examine the effect of the intervention on the dimensions of brand equity. Prior to the main analysis, the assumptions underlying MANCOVA were assessed. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used to examine the normality of the data, Levene's test was employed to assess the homogeneity of variances, and the homogeneity of regression slopes assumption was also tested. All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. The results were interpreted based on p-values, F-statistics, and effect sizes (partial eta squared).

Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2. The gender distribution showed that 40% of the participants were female and 60% were male. Regarding educational attainment, the majority of the participants (42.5%) held a bachelor's degree or a higher academic qualification. In terms of work experience, 60% of the participants had less than 10 years of work experience, whereas 17.5% had more than 20 years of work experience.

Table 2. Demographic information of the participants

Demographic characteristics		Abundance	Abundance percentage
Number of interviewees		40	%100
gender	man	24	%60
	woman	16	%40
work history	Less than 10 years	24	%60
	10 to 20 years	11	%27/5
	More than 20 years	7	%17/5
age	Under 25 years	13	%32/5
	26 to35	15	%37/5
	36 to 44	6	%15
	Over 45 years old	6	%15
education	Undergraduate	23	%57/5
	Bachelor and above	17	%42/5

The means and standard deviations of the pretest and posttest scores for brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand image, and overall brand equity in the experimental and control groups are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre-test and Post-test for Research Variables

Variable	group	pre-test		Post-test	
		M	SD	M	SD
Brand loyalty	control	2.066	0.352	2.556	0.381
	test	2.416	0.339	3.725	0.224
Perceived quality	control	3.183	0.464	3.200	0.395
	test	3.216	0.378	3.166	0.489
Brand image	control	3.187	0.254	3.087	0.317
	test	3.312	0.370	3.186	0.332
Brand equity	control	2.950	0.359	2.925	0.466
	test	3.125	0.319	3.950	0.340

Before conducting the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), the underlying assumptions of the analysis were examined. These included sample size adequacy, univariate normality, multivariate normality, linearity, homogeneity of regression slopes, the absence of multicollinearity and singularity, and the homogeneity of variance–covariance matrices (Pallant, 2020).

1. Sample Size Adequacy: The number of cases in each cell should exceed the number of dependent variables. Although larger sample sizes are preferable, this represents the minimum acceptable requirement. A larger sample also helps reduce the impact of potential violations of other assumptions, such as normality, on the validity of the results. The minimum required number of cases per cell is three, corresponding to the number of dependent variables. In the present study, there were a total of six cells, resulting from two levels of the independent variable (experimental and control groups) and three dependent variables (Pallant, 2020).

2.Normality: Although the significance tests associated with multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) assume multivariate normality, the procedure is generally robust to minor violations of this assumption, except when such violations are caused by outliers. According to Tabachnick et al. (2013), a minimum sample size of 20 cases per cell is generally sufficient to ensure this robustness. Nevertheless, univariate normality should be assessed using normality tests such as the Shapiro–Wilk or Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (Pallant, 2020). In the present study, the Shapiro–Wilk test was employed because it is considered more appropriate than the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for relatively small sample sizes.

Table 4. Shapiro–Wilk Test Results

Variable	group	pre-test		Post-test	
		Test Statistic	p-value	Test Statistic	p-value
Brand loyalty	control	0.964	0.308	0.971	0.362
	test	0.951	0.207	0.942	0.131
Perceived quality	control	0.968	0.391	0.973	0.412
	test	0.956	0.243	0.948	0.167
Brand image	control	0.961	0.286	0.965	0.303
	test	0.944	0.144	0.932	0.111

Brand equity	control	0.958	0.255	0.961	0.278
	test	0.936	0.119	0.925	0.097

3. Assessment of Multivariate Normality: MANCOVA is particularly sensitive to outliers; therefore, both univariate and multivariate outliers should be examined (Tabachnick et al., 2013). In the assessment of univariate outliers, no extreme observations were identified, as the calculated *p*-values were greater than 0.001 in all cases. Accordingly, no observations were considered outliers.

4. Linearity: This assumption refers to the existence of a linear relationship between each pair of dependent variables. It can be evaluated using several methods, the most common of which is the inspection of scatterplots for each pair of dependent variables separately within each group (Pallant, 2020). Examination of the scatterplot matrix revealed no evidence of substantial nonlinearity. Therefore, the assumption of linearity was considered to be satisfied.

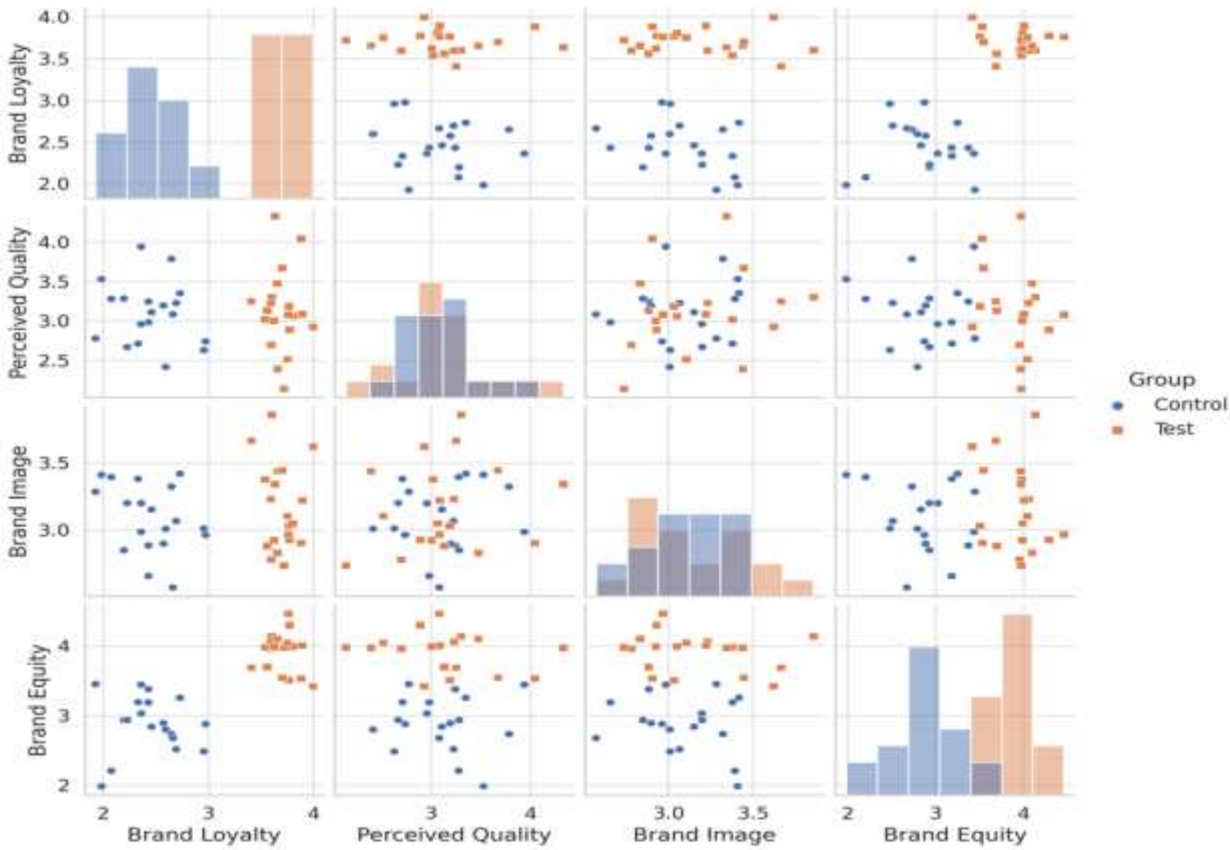

Figure 1. Scatterplot Matrix Results

5. Homogeneity of Regression Slopes: This assumption is relevant only when a stepdown analysis is performed. A stepdown analysis is appropriate when there is a theoretical or conceptual rationale for ordering the dependent variables (Tabachnick et al., 2013).

6. Multicollinearity and Singularity: MANCOVA performs optimally when the dependent variables are moderately correlated. When the correlations among the dependent variables are weak, separate univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) are generally recommended for each dependent variable (Pallant, 2020). In the present study, examination of the relationships among the dependent variables indicated that they were significantly correlated (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of Box's M Test

Box's M	F Statistic	df1	Df2	p-value
7.912	0.927	10	5732.20	0.684

In addition, Levene's test was performed to examine the homogeneity of variances between the two groups. The results indicated that none of the variables reached statistical significance; therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was satisfied (Table 6).

Table 6. Results of Levene's Test

Variable	F Statistic	df1	Df2	p-value
Brand loyalty	1.014	1	38	0.320
Perceived quality	0.825	1	38	0.368
Brand image	0.675	1	38	0.417
Brand equity	0.594	1	38	0.445

The estimated marginal means (adjusted means), which represent the original means after adjustment for the covariate, are presented in Table 7. Unlike analysis of variance (ANOVA), which compares the original group means, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) compares the estimated marginal (adjusted) means.

Table 7. Results of Adjusted Means and Standard Deviations

Variable	group	M	SD
Brand loyalty	control	2.58	0.37
	test	3.68	0.26
Perceived quality	control	3.21	0.38
	test	3.38	0.41
Brand image	control	3.09	0.35
	test	3.45	0.33
Brand equity	control	2.94	0.43
	test	3.89	0.31

As the assumptions underlying multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) were satisfied, MANCOVA was subsequently performed to examine between-group differences at the posttest stage. As shown in Table 8, the results of the multivariate analysis revealed that the overall F statistic at posttest was statistically significant, with a Wilks' Lambda value of 5.74 ($p < 0.05$). This finding indicates that a significant difference existed between the experimental and control groups following the intervention.

Table 8. Results of Wilks' Lambda Test

Test	Values	F Statistic	p-value	Effect Size
Wilks' Lambda	0.426	5.60	0.000	0.574

Finally, the results of the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) were examined. As shown in Table 9, brand loyalty differed significantly between the experimental and control groups at the posttest stage, indicating a significant effect of the intervention ($F = 41.420$, $p = 0.001$). Likewise, perceived quality was significantly influenced by the intervention ($F = 10.322$, $p = 0.001$). Brand image ($F = 25.782$, $p = 0.001$) and overall brand equity ($F = 23.488$, $p = 0.001$) also showed significant effects at the posttest stage. Therefore, the research hypothesis stating that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing has a significant effect on the dimensions of brand equity in sports businesses was supported, and the null hypothesis was rejected. Based on the effect size estimates, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing had the greatest effect on brand loyalty ($\eta^2 = 0.52$), whereas its smallest effect was observed for perceived quality ($\eta^2 = 0.21$).

Table 9. Results of Between-Subjects Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA)

Variable	Sum of Squares	df	F Statistic	p-value	Eta Squared
Brand loyalty	2.685	1	41.420	0.001	0.528
Perceived quality	1.629	1	10.322	0.001	0.218
Brand image	1.688	1	25.782	0.001	0.411
Brand equity	0.721	1	23.488	0.001	0.388

Conclusions

With the rapid expansion of social media and the continuous growth of the digital environment, sports businesses have gained unprecedented opportunities to establish closer and more effective relationships with their customers through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing. These developments have not only transformed traditional marketing practices but have also created new opportunities for sports brands to substantially enhance their brand equity. The findings of the present study demonstrated that the strategic implementation of electronic word-of-mouth marketing has a significant positive effect on the key dimensions of brand equity, including brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand image, and overall brand equity in sports businesses. In other words, when sports brands successfully encouraged the widespread dissemination of customers' positive experiences through digital platforms, they not only strengthened customer trust and loyalty but also reinforced their competitive position in the marketplace.

The findings of the present study are consistent with those of previous research, including the studies conducted by Faridniya et al. (2024), Alefpour Tarakameh et al. (2021), Langga et al. (2021), and others, all of which highlight the importance and significant impact of electronic word-of-mouth marketing on the brand equity of sports brands. As reported by Faridniya et al. (2024), a combination of factors influencing the development of sports brand equity through gamification including positioning, trust and fairness, as well as environmental conditions can lead to substantial improvements in brand equity. Likewise, Alefpour Tarakameh et al. (2021) clearly demonstrated the pivotal role of electronic word-of-mouth marketing in strengthening all dimensions of brand equity. Furthermore, studies by Langga et al. (2021) and Faridniya et al. (2023) indicated that focused and innovative marketing strategies, including guerrilla marketing, can significantly enhance purchase intention and strengthen brand equity by increasing customer engagement and facilitating more effective information dissemination. The studies conducted by Chen & Qasim (2021) and Abedini and Kim et al. (2021) likewise emphasized the positive influence of social media and its various dimensions on customer behavior and brand equity. These findings suggest that the digital environment and emerging technologies provide unprecedented opportunities for sports brands to establish stronger and more meaningful relationships with their audiences. Furthermore, the findings of Ezzati and Mazhari (2021) demonstrated that brand equity and brand loyalty have a direct positive effect on customers repurchase intention, underscoring the importance of continuously maintaining and enhancing brand equity.

Nevertheless, the present study makes two distinctive contributions. First, it focuses on sports brands within the Iranian context by examining the impact of electronic word-of-mouth among customers of the Ghaffari sports brand in West Azerbaijan Province. Second, it adopts a quasi-experimental design and employs analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), providing greater explanatory power than studies based solely on descriptive research designs. In other words, the present study offers stronger empirical evidence supporting the positive effect of electronic word-of-mouth on brand equity. The results of the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) indicated that electronic word-of-mouth marketing had a statistically significant effect on all dimensions of brand equity in sports businesses. As presented in Table 9, significant differences were observed in the adjusted means of the experimental and control groups with respect to brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand image, and overall brand equity. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the eWOM intervention in enhancing customers' perceptions of sports brands.

Specifically, the largest effect among the dimensions examined was observed for brand loyalty (effect size = 0.52). This finding indicates that electronic word-of-mouth marketing is particularly effective in fostering and strengthening customer loyalty toward sports brands. The present finding is consistent with those reported by Rahimi et al. (2020), Huang (2017), Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan (2021) and Faridniya et al. (2023). Rahimi et al. (2020) reported a significant positive relationship between entrepreneurial marketing, brand equity, and customer loyalty in sports organizations. Huang (2017) further demonstrated that a favorable brand image enhances customer loyalty by fostering brand love and trust. Likewise, Srivastava and Sivaramakrishnan (2021) found that electronic word-of-mouth significantly enhances consumer brand engagement, which subsequently strengthens customer loyalty, highlighting the indirect role of eWOM in fostering loyal customer relationships. Furthermore, Faridniya et al. (2023) emphasized that perceived brand values, particularly brand loyalty, are strongly influenced by effective communication strategies, including electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Overall, the findings of the present study indicate that electronic word-of-mouth marketing not only plays a vital role in enhancing customer loyalty but also serves as a strategic mechanism for strengthening the relationship between brands and their customers. Sports brands that effectively leverage this communication tool are more likely to foster higher levels of customer loyalty, thereby establishing a foundation for long-term success.

On the other hand, the smallest effect observed in the present study was related to perceived quality (effect size = 0.21), although this effect remained positive and statistically significant. This finding is consistent with the results reported by Bańbuła (2024), Gallart-Camahort et al. (2023), and Faridniya et al. (2023). Supporting the findings of the present study, previous research has consistently identified perceived quality as one of the key determinants of brand equity, although its relative contribution may be smaller than that of other dimensions. For example, Bańbuła (2024), in a sport context, showed that perceived quality, alongside brand awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty, contributes to overall brand equity. In another study, Gallart-Camahort et al. (2023) demonstrated that the Internet, as a modern communication platform, can enhance consumers' perceived quality of retail brands, which subsequently contributes to improving brand image and strengthening customer loyalty. Finally, the findings of Faridniya et al. (2023) further suggest that electronic word-of-mouth marketing can contribute to the development of positive perceptions of brand quality by fostering deeper customer engagement and enhancing brand image. Therefore, based on both the empirical evidence reported in previous studies and the findings of the present research, it can be concluded that electronic word-of-mouth marketing remains a significant determinant of perceived quality, even when its effect is smaller than that observed for other dimensions of brand equity. These findings provide valuable managerial implications by suggesting that brand managers can strengthen customers' perceptions of brand quality and reinforce their brand's market position through well-designed eWOM marketing strategies.

With regard to brand image, the effect size of 0.41 indicates that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing effectively improved customers' perceptions of the brand. The findings of the present study demonstrate that eWOM marketing significantly enhances brand image, a result that is consistent with previous research. For example, Qaidamini Harouni et al. (2020) reported that brand performance not only strengthens customer trust and brand image but also contributes to enhanced brand equity and positively influences consumers' purchasing behavior. Their findings further indicated that brand image exerts a substantial effect on brand equity, accounting for approximately 76% of its variance. Similarly, Asghari and Sadeghi (2024), in the context of sports stores, found that word-of-mouth advertising has a significant positive effect on brand image and revisit intention, with brand image also mediating this relationship. Moreover, Akoglu & Özbek (2022) argued that brand experience enhances customer loyalty by shaping brand image and strengthening customer trust. Likewise, Murtiasih et al. (2021) demonstrated that marketing communication activities significantly bolster brand equity, with brand image and brand loyalty serving as critical intervening channels that translate communicative stimuli into stronger consumer-brand relationships. Overall, these studies are consistent with the findings of the present research, emphasizing that electronic word-of-mouth marketing not only contributes to improving brand image but also enhances brand equity and positively influences consumers' purchasing behavior through this mechanism. Particularly in the sports industry, eWOM can serve as a strategic marketing tool for promoting business growth, fostering customer loyalty, and strengthening the competitive position of sports brands.

The findings of the present study clearly demonstrate that electronic word-of-mouth marketing is not merely a communication tool for interacting with customers but also serves as a strategic driver for creating and enhancing brand equity in the sports industry. What makes these findings particularly noteworthy is the multidimensional role of eWOM in shaping customers' perceptions, strengthening brand image, and ultimately fostering greater customer loyalty.

In other words, electronic word-of-mouth has become a powerful bridge between customers' individual experiences and the collective perceptions of the marketplace—a bridge whose speed, reach, and influence are unprecedented in today's digital environment. The present study highlights a key insight: the brand equity of sports brands is built not only through formal advertising but also through the collective voice of customers. This implies that sports brands capable of creating opportunities for dialogue, fostering positive customer experiences, and encouraging active customer participation are more likely to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage.

Limitations and suggestions

Although the findings of the present study demonstrate that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing serves not only as a communication tool but also as a strategic mechanism for enhancing the brand equity of sports brands, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the study population was limited to customers of the Ghaffari sports brand in West Azerbaijan Province, Iran. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other geographical regions or sports brands without further empirical evidence. Moreover, the present study did not directly examine the effects of demographic, cultural, and economic factors, despite their potential influence on consumer behavior and brand perceptions. In particular, variables such as brand trust, brand performance, educational level, income, age, and cultural differences may significantly affect the outcomes of eWOM interventions. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to investigate the mediating or moderating roles of these variables in the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth marketing and brand equity.

In this regard, future research is encouraged to employ structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel analytical approaches to examine the mediating and moderating roles of relevant variables. Furthermore, future studies may enhance the generalizability and robustness of the findings by investigating different sports brands across diverse geographical regions or by conducting comparative analyses among various sectors of the sports industry. Examining the roles of digital culture, the intensity of social media uses, and the characteristics of user-generated content may also provide deeper insights into the influence of electronic word-of-mouth on brand equity. Moreover, future research could investigate the effects of different types of eWOM content (i.e., positive, negative, or neutral) and evaluate their relative influence on the various dimensions of brand equity. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how brand equity is developed within the digital environment and contribute to the design of more effective marketing strategies.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Their individual contributions are as follows: Conceptualization, S.H.; Review and Research, S.H.; methodology, R.J.; software, R.J.; resources, S.H.; data curation, S.F.; writing—original draft preparation, S.H.; writing—review and editing, S.H.; supervision, S.H.; funding acquisition, S.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, and any form of misconduct.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the participants for their contributions to this study. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions, which significantly improved the quality of this manuscript.

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