



The Impact of Sports Sponsorship on Brand Equity: A Study of Rightel, Irancell and Hamrahe Aval Mobile Network Operators

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Iran's mobile network operators have opted for sport sponsorship as a key communicative strategy to boost their brand status and foster customer loyalty. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of sports sponsorship on the brand equity of Iranian mobile network operators using a correlation method.

Method: The statistical population for this research comprised fans of the clubs sponsored by Iran's mobile network operators (Rightel, Irancell and Hamrahe Aval). A convenience sampling method was employed for the research sample, and due to the extensive statistical population, 384 fans were selected. To collect the relevant data, two questionnaires were utilized: "Sports Sponsorship of Mobile Network Operators in Iranian Football" and "Brand Equity Based on Aker's Model".

Results: Regression and ANOVA tests were conducted upon completion of the data collection process. The results indicated that the two variables of Monopoly (0.001) and Success (0.007) have a positive and significant impact on brand equity. In contrast, the awareness, social, and financial dimensions did not exhibit statistically significant effects on brand equity, as evidenced by their respective t-values and significance levels ($p > .05$). Therefore, these dimensions were not found to be significant predictors of brand equity within the context of the present study.

Conclusions: These findings provide valuable insights for commercial companies in designing targeted sponsorship strategies and demonstrate how focusing on the monopoly and success of the sponsored teams can lead to increased brand equity, enhanced customer loyalty, and improved return on investment in sports marketing. This study represents a step toward a better understanding of the role of sports sponsorship in strengthening brand equity within Iran's telecommunications industry. The findings may serve as a practical guideline for marketing managers seeking to develop more effective sponsorship strategies.

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Introduction

With the expansion of products, globalization, and intensified competition, markets have been compelled to differentiate their products from those of competitors and create value for customers. Merely innovating products and services is no longer sufficient to establish a sustainable long-term competitive advantage, as such operational advantages are often rapidly imitated and replicated by competitors. Consequently, these advantages tend to be temporary and scarce (Rafie et al., 2012). Therefore, in today's competitive marketplace, companies continuously seek new marketing approaches to distinguish themselves from rivals and increase both market share and sales (Amis et al., 1997).

Marketing activities have evolved across various domains and have extended beyond commerce into fields such as culture, art, politics, and sports. In highly popular sports such as football, competition is no longer confined to the playing field between two teams; rather, companies also engage in intense competition beyond the boundaries of the game itself (Mohammadian & Pourhosseini, 2017). Given the growing rivalry among organizations striving to achieve their objectives, the sports industry, through the organization of sporting events, provides unique opportunities for advertising and media exposure that sponsors can utilize to promote their products. The widespread appeal of sports and sporting events among people across the world has made them attractive promotional platforms for corporate sponsors seeking to increase awareness of their unique products and strengthen their brand identity (Azadan et al., 2011). Furthermore, sports have become a highly influential advertising platform for many companies because of their flexibility and their ability to provide organizations with broader levels of audience reach and accessibility (Honari, 2021).

Sports sponsorship represents a global communication strategy that involves investing in sporting activities, athletes, teams, and events in order to capitalize on the commercial opportunities associated with sports, influence spectators both inside stadiums and through broadcast media, and establish a connection between the sponsored entity (event, team, or athlete) and the sponsoring organization (Tribou, 2010). Sponsorship has emerged not only in sports but also across numerous sectors as one of the fastest-growing areas of modern marketing (Delia & Armstrong, 2015). Statistics indicate that more than \$53.5 billion was spent on sponsorship worldwide in 2013 (Slåtten et al., 2017). Other reports show that sponsorship expenditures increased from approximately \$500 million in 1982 to \$19 billion in 2016, with more than 70% of these investments allocated to sports and sporting events (Bahari et al., 2020). Moreover, forecasts suggest a substantial increase in global sports sponsorship spending, which is expected to reach approximately \$90 billion by 2027 (Batt et al., 2021).

In the sponsorship planning process, understanding and fulfilling sponsors' needs is of critical importance because brand managers typically seek sponsorship opportunities that align with their brand values, principles, and identity (Honari, 2021). This perspective highlights that sponsorship is viewed not merely as a promotional activity but also as a strategic instrument for strengthening brand positioning. In this regard, one of the most fundamental and widely discussed concepts in marketing literature in recent years has been brand equity. Owing to its significant role in managerial decision-making and its direct contribution to creating sustainable competitive advantages and enhancing customers' perceived value, brand equity has gained a prominent position in branding research (Badrinarayanan et al., 2015).

Brand equity is defined as consumers' preference for a particular brand name and trademark relative to competing brands within the same product category (Chieng et al., 2011). As an intangible asset, brand equity generates both financial and psychological value for an organization. It represents the added value that a brand contributes to products and services, reflected in customers' perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and respect toward the brand, as well

as in the brand's pricing power, market share, and profitability for the organization (Karaosmanoglu et al., 2011). Positive brand equity, in turn, can lead to higher revenues, lower costs, and greater profitability, while directly influencing an organization's ability to make effective decisions regarding service pricing, marketing communications, and business expansion initiatives (Keller, 2003). Strong brand equity provides numerous advantages for organizations and producers. For instance, when a brand possesses high equity, target consumers tend to develop favorable attitudes toward it, making them more willing to pay premium prices, engage in repeat purchases, and participate in positive word-of-mouth promotion (Ta-Wei et al., 2016; Hesari et al., 2025). Collectively, these consumer responses and behaviors enhance an organization's competitive position and financial performance. By fostering consumer loyalty, brand equity increases the likelihood that consumers will choose a particular brand, thereby enabling organizations to leverage this advantage when expanding their product portfolios (Biscaia et al., 2016).

According to Aaker (1991), customer-based brand equity is a multidimensional construct consisting of five dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and other proprietary brand assets related to the company. Aaker argued that brand equity can be developed and strengthened through the enhancement of these dimensions (Aaker, 1991). Consequently, in today's business environment, branding has become a critical factor in improving marketing effectiveness (Gordon & James, 2017; Zamani Dadaneh et al., 2022). The contemporary marketplace is characterized by the success of brands that not only dominate their respective markets but also cultivate trust and loyalty among customers, create value for shareholders, inspire a sense of purpose and commitment within society, and elevate the reputation of their countries through innovation and leadership in global commerce (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010).

Sports sponsorship is widely recognized as one of the most effective marketing tools for enhancing brand differentiation and increasing brand awareness among target audiences (Moharamzadeh & Noori, 2021). This form of sponsorship can foster emotional engagement between consumers and sponsoring brands. Previous studies have demonstrated that participation in sports sponsorship activities contributes to improved brand equity through enhancing brand image, increasing brand awareness, and strengthening customer loyalty (Phiri & Chakauya, 2023). Furthermore, congruence between the values of the sponsoring brand and those of the sponsored team or event plays a critical role in sponsorship effectiveness. When consumers perceive a strong fit between a brand's identity and the characteristics of a sports team, positive attitudes toward the brand are formed, ultimately leading to higher consumer-based brand equity (Biscaia et al., 2020). Therefore, the success of sports sponsorship depends largely on selecting appropriate sports partners and establishing meaningful emotional connections with audiences. In sports characterized by high levels of fan involvement, where supporters invest substantial emotional energy, sponsorship activities are particularly likely to generate brand equity benefits. This occurs because the emotional attachment that fans have toward a sport is often transferred to the sponsoring brand, strengthening brand associations and brand loyalty (Mazodier & Quester, 2020).

Despite the widespread acceptance of sports sponsorship as a marketing strategy, there remains a need for additional comparative research examining how different sponsorship arrangements influence brand equity across diverse market contexts (Carrillat et al., 2021). Accordingly, numerous studies have sought to clarify the impact of sports sponsorship on various dimensions of brand equity. For example, Cornwell and Kwon (2019) argued that sports sponsorship can substantially enhance brand equity by increasing brand awareness and positively influencing consumer perceptions. Their findings suggest that when a brand is consistently associated with

a successful sports entity, the positive attributes of the team or athlete may transfer to the brand, thereby increasing its perceived value among consumers (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020).

Similarly, Nufer (2021) examined the effectiveness of sports sponsorship in enhancing brand value and found that although sponsorship generally contributes positively to brand equity, the magnitude of its impact varies according to factors such as consumer involvement, the relevance of the sponsorship to the brand's target audience, and the overall success of the sponsored entity. Likewise, Biscaia et al. (2012) demonstrated that consumers' perceptions of sponsorship credibility and relevance play a crucial role in determining how sponsorship influences brand equity. Specifically, sponsorships perceived as authentic and closely aligned with a brand's core values are more likely to strengthen brand equity because they foster stronger emotional bonds between consumers and the brand (Biscaia et al., 2020).

Within the Iranian context, previous studies have also reported positive effects of sponsorship on developing fan commitment toward sponsoring brands through improvements in corporate image, purchase intentions, organizational attractiveness, and fan loyalty toward sponsors (Mohammadi et al., 2012; Bahari et al., 2020; Khabiri et al., 2022). Nevertheless, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the impact of sports sponsorship in Iranian football on sponsors' brand equity. Most existing studies have focused on other sports or different contexts, thereby limiting the generalizability of their findings. Moreover, the dominant presence of mobile network operators as sponsors of Iranian football clubs represents a particularly visible and noteworthy phenomenon.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap by investigating the impact of sports sponsorship on brand equity among Iran's major mobile network operators (Rightel, Irancell, and Hamrah-e Aval). By providing a context-specific analysis of the Iranian market and examining brand equity as a multidimensional construct, this research aims to contribute to the domestic body of knowledge in this field. Given the substantial financial commitments associated with sponsorship investments, the study is highly relevant for marketers, brand managers, and corporate decision-makers who require evidence-based insights to guide their sponsorship strategies. The findings are expected not only to enrich the academic literature but also to offer practical implications for optimizing sports sponsorship strategies aimed at building and sustaining brand equity in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Therefore, the central research question of the present study is: What impact does sports sponsorship of Iranian football clubs have on the brand equity of mobile network operators?

Method

The present study employed a correlational research design and was conducted using a survey method. The study population consisted of supporters of football clubs sponsored by Iran's three major mobile network operators: Hamrah-e Aval, Rightel, and Irancell. These operators were selected because of their established history of sports sponsorship within Iranian professional football, making their subscribers and affiliated supporters an appropriate target population for the purposes of this study. Furthermore, given the exclusive sponsorship arrangements between these operators and three major football clubs—Esteghlal, Persepolis, and Tractor—in recent years, as well as the predominance of support for these clubs among Iranian football fans, supporters of these teams were selected to enhance the precision and relevance of the research. Considering the unlimited size of the target population and based on the Morgan sample size table, a sample of 384 respondents was determined to be sufficient for the study. Data were collected using two questionnaires: the "Sports Sponsorship of Mobile Network Operators in Iranian Football" questionnaire and the "Brand Equity Questionnaire Based on Aaker's Model." The standardized Brand Equity Questionnaire, developed based on Aaker's model, consisted of 32 items measuring five dimensions: brand loyalty, perceived

quality, brand associations, brand awareness, and willingness to accept brand extensions (Aaker & Keller, 1991).

To assess respondents' perceptions of the effects of mobile operators' sponsorship activities, a researcher-developed questionnaire titled "Sports Sponsorship of Mobile Network Operators in Iranian Football" was designed. This instrument consisted of 18 items and five principal dimensions: awareness, social, monopoly, financial, and success. The questionnaire items were developed based on the relevant theoretical foundations and a review of the sports marketing literature. The awareness dimension measured the perceived impact of sponsorship on fans' recognition and awareness of the sponsoring brand. The social dimension assessed the perceived social influence of sponsorship activities and sponsoring organizations. The monopoly dimension examined the extent to which operators achieved dominance and exclusive access to supported football clubs through exclusive sponsorship arrangements. The financial dimension evaluated respondents' perceptions of the financial aspects of sponsorship. Finally, the success dimension measured perceptions regarding the sporting success of sponsored teams and its influence on subscribers' emotional connections with sponsors through team performance outcomes.

It should be noted that the brand awareness dimension in Aaker's Brand Equity Questionnaire assessed respondents' level of familiarity with a brand, whereas the awareness dimension in the "Sports Sponsorship of Mobile Network Operators in Iranian Football" questionnaire specifically measured the perceived effect of sponsorship activities on supporters' awareness of the sponsoring brand. To establish face and content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by seven experts in sport management and sport marketing. Following their feedback and recommendations, the final set of items was developed. Subsequently, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of 16 individuals drawn from the target population to evaluate question clarity and obtain an initial assessment of the instrument's feasibility. Necessary revisions were then implemented.

Construct validity was assessed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using LISREL software. The results indicated an acceptable fit for the measurement model consisting of five dimensions and 18 items. The factor loadings of the items included in the researcher-developed "Sports Sponsorship of Mobile Network Operators in Iranian Football" questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Standardized Factor Loadings of the Researcher-made Questionnaire Items

Item	Variable	Std. Factor Loading	Result
Question 1	Awareness	0.78	Acceptable
Question 2	Awareness	0.81	Acceptable
Question 3	Awareness	0.75	Acceptable
Question 4	Social	0.72	Acceptable
Question 5	Social	0.77	Acceptable
Question 6	Social	0.74	Acceptable
Question 7	Social	0.70	Acceptable
Question 8	Monopoly	0.68	Acceptable
Question 9	Monopoly	0.73	Acceptable
Question 10	Monopoly	0.69	Acceptable
Question 11	Financial	0.81	Acceptable
Question 12	Financial	0.76	Acceptable
Question 13	Financial	0.71	Acceptable
Question 14	Success	0.82	Acceptable
Question 15	Success	0.79	Acceptable
Question 16	Success	0.83	Acceptable
Question 17	Success	0.77	Acceptable
Question 18	Success	0.84	Acceptable

The results of the standardized factor loadings indicated that all questionnaire items exhibited factor loadings greater than 0.50 on their respective dimensions, demonstrating an adequate relationship between the observed items and the underlying conceptual constructs. Furthermore, as presented in Table 2, the model fit indices indicated a satisfactory fit between the empirical data and the theoretical framework underlying the researcher-developed “Sports Sponsorship of Mobile Network Operators in Iranian Football” questionnaire. In addition, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for all dimensions exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming the internal consistency and reliability of the constructs. The combination of acceptable model fit indices, adequate standardized factor loadings, and satisfactory reliability coefficients provided evidence of the questionnaire’s construct validity and demonstrated that the measurement model appropriately confirmed the instrument’s underlying factor structure. Therefore, the researcher-developed questionnaire was deemed suitable for use in the present study.

Table 2. Fit Index Results

Fit Index	Value	Validation Criteria	Result
CFI	0.91	Higher than 0.90	Acceptable
RMSEA	0.05	Less than 0.08	Acceptable
GFI	0.92	Higher than 0.90	Acceptable
χ^2/df	2.34	Less than 3	Acceptable

To assess the reliability of the research instruments, the internal consistency method was employed. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the researcher-developed “Sports Sponsorship of Mobile Network Operators in Iranian Football” questionnaire was calculated as 0.817, indicating an acceptable level of internal reliability. Similarly, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the Brand Equity Questionnaire was found to be 0.822, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency and confirming its suitability for use in the present study. Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire and a convenience sampling approach. Specifically, links to the questionnaires were distributed among football supporters through various social media platforms. Participants subsequently shared the questionnaire links through their own electronic communication channels, thereby facilitating wider dissemination among potential respondents. Individuals from the target population were selected based on accessibility, with ease of access serving as the primary sampling criterion. The electronic questionnaires remained accessible for a period of two months through online and social media platforms, including Telegram, Rubika, and Eitaa. At the conclusion of the data collection period, a total of 384 respondents had completed the questionnaires. For data analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were employed. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the data. Prior to hypothesis testing, the normality of the data was assessed. Subsequently, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and regression analyses were conducted to examine the research hypotheses. ANOVA was utilized to compare mean differences among the customer groups of the three mobile network operators (Rightel, Irancell, and Hamrah-e Aval) with respect to the impact of sports sponsorship on brand equity, in order to determine whether statistically significant differences existed among these groups. In addition, regression analysis was employed to investigate the relationships between sports sponsorship and the various dimensions of brand equity, including brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, and related constructs. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 28, and the data were analyzed at a significance level of $p \leq .05$.

Results

Based on the frequency distribution data presented in Table 3, the sample was predominantly male, with men accounting for 90.1% of respondents, while women comprised only 9.9% of

the sample. Regarding the distribution of supporters across the selected football clubs, Persepolis supporters represented the largest proportion of participants (44.03%), followed by Esteghlal supporters (34.9%) and Tractor supporters (20.8%). With respect to age distribution, the largest group of respondents fell within the 26–30-year age category, representing 21.4% of the total sample.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution

(Variable)	(Category)	(Frequency)	(Percentage (%))
(Gender)	Male	346	90.1
	Female	38	9.9
(Age)	15–20	78	20.3
	21–25	129	33.6
	26–30	82	21.4
	31–35	50	13.0
	Above 35	45	11.7
(Favored Club)	Esteghlal	134	34.9
	Persepolis	170	44.3
	Tractor	80	20.8
(Total)		384	100.0

As presented in Table 4, the coefficient of determination (R^2) indicates that sports sponsorship explains 25.9% of the variance in brand equity. This finding suggests that sports sponsorship has a meaningful influence on brand equity among the mobile network operators examined in this study. The calculated Durbin–Watson statistic was 2.104, a value that is very close to the benchmark value of 2.00, indicating the absence of significant autocorrelation among the model residuals. In other words, the residuals appear to be randomly distributed without any systematic pattern, and there is no evidence of either positive or negative serial correlation.

This result supports the assumption of error independence in the regression model and enhances confidence in the validity of the estimated coefficients and statistical inferences. Therefore, from a statistical standpoint, the model demonstrates satisfactory behavior with respect to its residuals, and the assumptions required for regression analysis have been adequately satisfied.

Table 4. Determination coefficient

Model Summary ^b					
Model	R	Determination coefficient	Adjusted coefficient of determination	Standard error of estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.509 ^a	.259	.249	3.83171	2.104

The results of the ANOVA test are presented in Table 5. The analysis revealed that the p-value associated with the F-statistic was less than .001, indicating that the regression model was statistically significant. This finding suggests a significant relationship between the independent variable (sports sponsorship) and the dependent variable (brand equity). The significance of the F-statistic demonstrates that the model possesses meaningful explanatory power and that the observed relationship between sports sponsorship and brand equity is unlikely to be attributable to random chance. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the regression model explains a significant proportion of the variance in the dependent variable and that at least one of the independent variables makes a statistically significant contribution to predicting brand equity. Furthermore, the regression sum of squares ($SS = 1942.061$) was substantial relative to the residual sum of squares ($SS = 5549.785$), indicating that a considerable portion of the variation in brand equity was explained by the model. Based on the significance level

obtained and the calculated F-statistic, it can be concluded that the regression model provides an adequate fit to the data and is appropriate for examining the relationship between sports sponsorship and brand equity.

Table 5. ANOVA test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance coefficient
Regression	1942.061	5	388.412	26.455	.000 ^b
Residual	5549.785	378	14.682		
Total	7491.846	383			

Based on the results presented in the previous table, Table 6 reports the regression coefficients. The independent variables were entered into the model simultaneously using the Enter method, which was selected in accordance with the study objective of examining the relative effects of the sports sponsorship dimensions on brand equity. The intercept (Constant) coefficient was 13.258, indicating the expected value of brand equity when all sports sponsorship dimensions (awareness, social, monopoly, financial, and success) are held at zero. The regression coefficients for the independent variables represent the expected change in brand equity associated with a one-unit increase in each predictor while holding all other variables constant. The resulting regression equation was as follows:

$$**\text{Brand Equity} = 13.258 + 1.393 (\text{Monopoly}) + 0.807 (\text{Success})**$$

This equation indicates that, *ceteris paribus*, a one-unit increase in the monopoly dimension is associated with an average increase of 1.393 units in brand equity. Likewise, a one-unit increase in the success dimension corresponds to an average increase of 0.807 units in brand equity. These findings suggest that the monopoly and success dimensions of sports sponsorship play a significant role in enhancing brand equity. Examination of the individual regression coefficients revealed that the monopoly and success dimensions were statistically significant predictors of brand equity, with p-values of 0.001 and 0.007, respectively, both of which were below the significance threshold of 0.05. Furthermore, the corresponding standardized beta coefficients and t-statistics indicated that both variables exerted positive and significant effects on brand equity and contributed substantially to the prediction of the dependent variable. In contrast, the awareness, social, and financial dimensions did not exhibit statistically significant effects on brand equity, as evidenced by their respective t-values and significance levels ($p > .05$). Therefore, these dimensions were not found to be significant predictors of brand equity within the context of the present study.

Table 6. Regression coefficients

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	13.258	.930		14.261	.000
Awareness	-.358	.339	-.077	-1.057	.291
Social	-.186	.398	-.043	-.466	.642
Monopoly	1.393	.330	.343	4.217	.001
Financial	.579	.322	.143	1.797	.073

Success	.807	.298	.202	2.707	.007
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Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the impact of sports sponsorship on the brand equity of mobile network operators in Iran. The research employed a descriptive-correlational design, and the study population consisted of supporters of football teams sponsored by Iran's three major mobile network operators: Hamrah-e Aval, Rightel, and Irancell. These operators were selected due to their established history of sports sponsorship within Iranian professional football, which made their related subscribers and supporters an appropriate population for the objectives of the study. The results of multiple regression analysis indicated that the regression model was statistically significant, suggesting that sports sponsorship, as an overall construct, has a significant effect on brand equity. This finding supports the assumption that investment in sports sponsorship can explain a proportion of the variance in brand equity. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.259$) demonstrated that 25.9% of the variance in brand equity was explained by the independent variables, including the dimensions of sports sponsorship (awareness, social, monopoly, financial, and success). Although this value represents a moderate explanatory power of the model, the adjusted coefficient of determination (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.249$) and the Durbin–Watson statistic (2.104) confirmed that the model was statistically acceptable and that the assumption of error independence was satisfied. Based on the regression coefficients, the two dimensions of “monopoly” and “success” had positive and significant effects on brand equity. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Pappu and Cornwell (2014), Cornwell et al. (2001), Gwinner and Eaton (1999), Khabiri et al. (2022), and Bahari et al. (2020), which demonstrated that sports sponsorship positively contributes to sponsor brand equity and its development.

The findings suggest that sports sponsorship is most effective in enhancing brand equity when it is implemented through exclusive sponsorship arrangements (such as sponsoring a specific team or a prominent sporting event) or when it is associated with the sporting success of sponsored teams (such as championships or outstanding performances). If a mobile network operator can demonstrate brand monopoly through sports sponsorship and simultaneously contribute to improving the performance conditions of the sponsored team (for example, by supporting the recruitment of key players that increase the team's chances of success), it may achieve a significant improvement in brand equity. In contrast, the results indicated that the dimensions of “brand awareness,” “social perceptions,” and “financial perceptions” derived from sports sponsorship did not have significant effects on the brand equity of mobile operators. These findings are inconsistent with previous studies such as Azadi et al. (2015) and Iranzadeh et al. (2012), which confirmed the positive role of these dimensions in enhancing brand value. Therefore, contextual factors should be considered when interpreting these differences.

One possible explanation for the insignificant effect of the “awareness” dimension may be related to the high level of advertising saturation in Iran's telecommunications industry. Mobile network operators have extensively utilized various advertising channels, including television, social media, outdoor advertising, and digital marketing platforms. This extensive exposure may have reduced the perceived distinctiveness of sports sponsorship in consumers' minds. In other words, due to repeated exposure to multiple promotional messages, audiences may no longer perceive sports sponsorship as a unique source of brand awareness (Keller, 2008; Cornwell & Kwon, 2019).

Regarding the “social” dimension, the absence of targeted interactive campaigns between brands and sports fans may represent one of the primary reasons for its insignificant effect. Although social dimensions of sponsorship emphasize the creation of emotional and identity-

based connections between brands and consumers (Heere & James, 2007), the lack of initiatives such as participatory events, joint brand-team activities, or interactive digital campaigns may prevent the development of a sense of belonging and social connection between consumers and sponsoring brands (Meenaghan & O'Sullivan, 2013).

Regarding the “financial” dimension, it can be argued that the lack of transparency regarding sponsorship expenditures by mobile operators and insufficient communication about corporate social responsibility initiatives may have contributed to consumer indifference or reduced trust. However, when consumers perceive a brand's financial investment in sports as transparent and supported by tangible evidence (such as investment in grassroots sports, youth development programs, or sustainable sports initiatives), it can generate more positive attitudes toward the brand (Plewa & Quester, 2011; Zdravkovic & Till, 2012). Based on previous research findings, to enhance the effectiveness of these dimensions in future sponsorship strategies, sports sponsors can utilize narrative-based approaches within the “awareness” dimension, particularly during match broadcasts and behind-the-scenes sponsorship activities. Such strategies can move beyond simple logo exposure and connect the brand with consumers' emotional experiences associated with sports (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008).

Within the “social” dimension, designing participatory and interactive campaigns, such as fan surveys, digital challenges, or physical brand presence at sporting events, can strengthen emotional connections between brands and audiences (Delia & James, 2018). Regarding the “financial” dimension, providing transparent reports on sponsorship expenditures, particularly in projects related to sports development, community sports, or supporting talented athletes, can increase public trust and improve consumers' perceptions of the sponsoring brand (Kim, Lee, Magnusen, & Kim, 2015).

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide important practical implications for mobile network operators. According to the results, focusing on “monopoly in sponsorship” and “supporting the success of sponsored teams” can contribute to enhancing brand equity. These achievements, particularly from the consumer perspective, may generate feelings of pride, attachment, and increased interest among supporters, which can ultimately be transferred to the sponsoring brand through the image transfer effect.

Although the success of a sports team is not directly controlled by the sponsoring brand, companies can increase their opportunities to benefit from the positive outcomes of team success by strategically selecting teams with strong performance potential or established reputations. In other words, the strategic selection of popular, successful, or historically prominent teams represents a manageable marketing decision within sponsorship strategy. Furthermore, mobile operators can develop exclusive products and services—such as special supporter packages, dedicated ticketing opportunities, or exclusive digital content related to sponsored teams—to establish stronger and more distinctive relationships with their audiences. These initiatives can not only enhance perceived brand value but also strengthen brand loyalty and positive brand associations among consumers.

For brand managers and marketers, the findings emphasize that improving the effectiveness of sports sponsorship requires a strategic focus on securing exclusive sponsorship agreements with selected and high-performing sports teams. As sports sponsorship continues to grow as a marketing field, gaining a deeper understanding of its dimensions, particularly its influence on brand equity, has become increasingly important. Considering that sponsorship explained approximately one-quarter of the variance in brand equity in this study, organizations should view sponsorship not merely as an advertising expense but as a strategic investment. The

overall conclusion is that brands in Iran should move beyond simple logo exposure and conventional advertising approaches when designing sports sponsorship strategies. Brands that successfully create effective cognitive and emotional connections with audiences through exclusive sponsorship arrangements and associations with team success are more likely to achieve enhanced brand equity.

This study was subject to several limitations. First, the study population was limited to supporters of sports teams sponsored by mobile network operators, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other consumer groups. Second, the model's coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.259$) indicates that other factors influencing brand equity were not examined in this research and may contribute to explaining additional variance. Another limitation of the study was the unbalanced gender composition of the sample, as the number of male respondents was considerably higher than female respondents. This imbalance may limit the generalizability of the results to the broader population of sports fans.

Future studies are recommended to examine other influential variables, such as customer loyalty, brand image, and service quality. In addition, qualitative studies may provide deeper insights into consumers' perceptions and experiences regarding sports sponsorship activities. Future research may also investigate the effects of sponsorship over longer periods and across different markets to enhance the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, examining the mediating or moderating effects of psychological factors, such as fan loyalty, team identification, or brand involvement, may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which sports sponsorship influences brand equity. Given that the awareness, social, and financial dimensions did not demonstrate significant effects in the present study; future research should consider contextual moderators, including the type of sponsored sport.

This study represents a step toward a better understanding of the role of sports sponsorship in strengthening brand equity within Iran's telecommunications industry. The findings may serve as a practical guideline for marketing managers seeking to develop more effective sponsorship strategies.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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.

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