

Modeling the role of brand community on brand characteristics by mediation of brand attachment (Case study: Domestic and foreign sport wear customers)

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Abstract:

This research aims at investigating and modeling the role of brand community on brand characteristics by mediation of brand attachment in domestic and foreign sport wear. This is an applied research which is non-experimental in terms of the possibility for controlling variables and is a descriptive-correlational research. The studied statistical community in this research includes Iranian and foreign customers of sport brands (two Iranian brands of Daei and Majid and two international brands of Adidas and Lening) in the sport shops of Shiraz city and the statistical sample was randomly selected. Measurement tool was a 29-question questionnaire of 6-point Likert Scale which was used after confirmation of its formal and content validity by faculties and its internal reliability by Cronbach's alpha test. Factor analysis and test equation modeling were used in statistical methods. The findings showed appropriate fitting indexes which confirm the model. Therefore, it can be said that brand community is directly and prominently affecting the increase of identification and determination of brand identity and brand attachment, and affects the increase of community brand commitment community by mediation of brand attachment. But with regard to the effect of brand commitment community on the variable of brand attachment and indirectly their high influence on increasing brand commitment and also the effect of identification and determination of brand identity and identity of brand community on brand commitment community, it can be inferred that brand identity has direct influence on brand commitment community and on brand commitment via brand attachment.

Key Words: brand community, brand identity, brand attachment, brand commitment, customers

Introduction

In marketing, brands are the starting point of the distinction between products and services, and the products and services competing in market; such that this issue has a vital role in the success of organizations. Brand is considered as one important communicating tool in the managing complex of relationship with customer that can act as a defensive tool for preserving current customers and also an invasive tool of marketing for achieving new customers. The importance of defensive marketing has been specified by knowing that the cost of absorbing a new customer is much more than holding a prior customer (Dehdashti, S., et al, 2010). Brand is valuable for customers due to two reasons: first, it reduces perceived consumption risk and second, there would be saving in decision-making costs. Brand is an inseparable part of corporation value and is a strategic asset that can be considered as a motive for planning procedure of corporation's marketing. It means that brand can be considered as a competitive benefit for a corporation. Essentially, consumers incur a level of doubt about the promises a company has given and the tendency and ability for performing them and the benefit of holding a long-term relation with service supplier for consumer. Hence, the company is motivated for compensating the appeared doubt by showing tendency for realizing the promises given to customer (Sweeney and Swait, 2008). While there has been 30 years of continuous work in Europe and USA to make rich the knowledge of brand, this concept is not considerably attended in Iran. Lack of brand knowledge and lack of proper management of brand in Iran resulted in increasing selling of foreign brands and lowering domestic products (Shams, 2008). Brand is among the invisible assets of every company which is the source of highest values. Based on the definition of US marketing community, a brand is: a name, phrase, mark, sign, design or a combination of all which is used by the aim of identifying and distinguishing goods or services of a seller or a group of sellers and causes differentiating these goods and services from the others presented by competitors (SoltanHoseini et al, 2011). With regard to the benefits that brand and branding creates for organizations and consumers, this subject is highly considered by marketers (Maehle and Shneur, 2010). Brand is a highly applicable strategy to be preferable in servicing and producing industries; and nowadays, companies and organizations not only seek for competition for obtaining

product market, but also perform a great attempt for directing the mind of customers towards themselves (product, brand, company) (Usakli and Baloglu, 2011). During the past decades, the worth of a company was measured in terms of properties, then sensible assets, factories and equipment. Yet, experts of economy science have now concluded that the real value of a company is somewhere outside it, i.e. in the mind of potential buyers (Moody et al, 2015). Price of a product, measures its monetary value, but brand introduces that product and reveals its distinct aspects (Moodi et al, 2015). Well-known brand makes its customers loyal to it. Nowadays, brand is considered as an inseparable and important part in marketing strategy and brand marketing locates inside the heart of commerce. Best famous companies of the world such as Proctor and Gamble and Mars are structured around their brand community (Heidarzadeh et al, 2010). Sport brands are also in the center of popular brands of consumer and are the main factor of modern sport commerce and an existing factor of contemporary global culture. It means that they show a real global language by their words, codes, values, resources and agents. Similar to some brands of home appliance (e.g. Philips), food products (e.g. Danone), or multimedia products (e.g. Samsung), sport brands are also integrated to people life. Nike has got a mythical position; one of a few brands globally famous which has highest rate of popularity among youths. Finally, Nike is considered both as a brand related to working and technical performance of its own product and also as a brand having symbolic value which promotes its achievements and superiority. Nike is appreciated all around the world. Like Adidas all around the world or Lacoste in Europe and many others, sport brands have shown being higher than economic and industrial purposes and they are the subject of real consumption. Many people show great appreciation to some sport brands either a corporation or a club. Sport brands are a routine social and life excellent sign for some consumers; they often has a social expressing power and have the same meaning with freedom, life and power (Bacht et al, 2014). During the past decade, companies have observed increasing interest of communities. Brand community is an implication related to the relation of consumer and brand (like attitude towards brand, brand personality, brand subjective image) (Zhou et al, 2012). The phrase of brand community (BC) was firstly proposed by Albert Muniz and Thomas O'GUINN in 2001. A brand community can be defined as a group of consumers with common emotions for brand and identity of good community, developed in a way that its members are involved in its activities for performing collective goals or express mutual feelings and obligations (Stokburger and Ratneshwar 2012). A powerful brand community can result in established social loyalty and brand commitment and even extra loyalty to brand. Therefore, brand community is an expertise because there is a good or service with a brand in its center and like other communities has three characteristics of common knowledge, customs and traditions, and moral responsibility feeling. Indeed, the participants are making a bigger community by brand and play a vital role in final heritage of brand (Dubois and Westerhausen, 2011). Brand communities are now very important with regard to the importance of marketing planning process and attention to brand's specific value and in the recent years are turned into one of most encouraging evolutions in relationship marketing (Hur et al, 2011). Brand community is a powerful phenomenon that is appeared around the world and has provided many benefits for companies. By managing, holding and protecting brand communities, companies can establish loyalty in customer and increase their brand and marketing efficiency (Terechshenko and Radionova, 2011). Brand commitment community is also a combination of emotional and reasonable dimensions that performs a mediation effect among relationship elements and loyalty formation (Tsai, 2011). Commitment of customer to brand is a new concept and it is inferred that is influenced in the result of the expected consequences of customer from company's supplies to market like the consequences of buying a product, identity feeling by brand etc. Mormon et al (1992) said that customer's commitment is a kind of stable attitude or tendency to a specific company or brand; the level in which customers as the members of an organization are mentally attached to an organization brand or its products and their relation to organization gets stronger via a continuous tendency to preserve membership. Commitment is an attitude and a mental state that shows tendency, requirement and need for continuing activity in an organization. Meanwhile tendency means a person's interest and demand for continuing activity in an organization and demand means that the person is inevitable to continue service in that organization because of his investments. Consumers establish a relationship with some brands similar to the one they establish in their personal life with others (Each et al, 2006). This relationship can have cognitional benefits of trust and consent to brand and different attachment feeling to a commercial brand and can cause the formation of a strong bonding between consumer and brand (Fournier and Yao, 1997). The concept of attachment to a commercial brand is resulted from the psychological studies in the area of a person's attachment to his or her material assets (Belaid and Behi, 2011). Researchers have defined attachment to a brand as a specific state of the relationship between person and a material possession which requires a mental possession far above the physical ownership (Klein, 2004). There are three dimensions considered for each brand based on the essential needs of customer: the concepts of functional, symbolic and practical. Functional concept of brand encloses the main and superficial goal of creating product and is for removing the need to a problem. Symbolic concept of brand is related to the brands that satisfy the inner needs of people including self-actualization and self-realization and membership in a specific group. Finally, practical concept of brand implies on satisfying the needs of emotional delight, diversity or cognitive stimulation. Based on research, Nike brand has all the three mentioned dimensions among the consumers (Jouzaryan et al, 2015). Branding in sport doesn't mean success and absorbing income and capital, but creating successful methods in attracting consumers and creating strong brand identity causes the success and progress of brand goals. One

effective factor on the customers of sport brands is social identity of brands. Because of having symbolic implications, brands can assist consumers towards their identity goals (Stokburger et al, 2012). For this reason, it can be stated that by understanding the implications related to identity-taking from brand, the existing knowledge on the context of brand management can be made richer and have more comprehensive conclusion (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). If a company wants to create its unforgettable picture, it should firstly create its identity. Then based on this identity, it creates its intellectual message and image. There has been much research around brand communities and its characteristics with selecting different brands. Communities tend to be identified based on identification and recognition of their members. Algesheimer et al (2005) considers the power of consumer interactions with community as the main variable of its core and specifies that the members can be different. But only this dimension is a collective or common identity unlike other identities which in them a person may be individual and can solely act. Brand communities can turn into an important marketing. The communities having bright relations to that brand are involved. In the other hand, one of the relations of community members is precision to that brand (Thomson et al, 2005). Maehle and Shneor (2010) defined the identification and determination of community identity as its understanding from individual's real or symbolic dependence to a group, while Laroche et al (2012) divided this variable into three parts: cognitive element (awareness of membership), evaluation (positive or negative reasons for membership in group) and emotional component (commitment to group). In this area, Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) pointed identification and determination of brand identity to powerful mental contact or oneness to a brand. People are identified by the brands that promote and increase their identity (Zaglia, 2013). Algesheimer et al (2005) showed identification and determination of brand identity results in identification and determination of brand identity and showed the inverse relation of these two items. Also, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) showed identification and determination of brand community identity has direct and positive influence on identification and determination of brand. The findings of these two researchers showed that there is a bilateral relation between identification and determination of brand community and identification and determination of brand identity (Zhou et al, 2012). In this regard, companies perform some actions for managing the relations with their customers. One operational goal of each sport organization or company is to implement some policies for attracting and holding customers and knows this issue as one facing challenge towards obtaining and increasing long term profits (Dehdashti et al, 2010). But despite brand importance in sport service sector, little research has been conducted in the area of brand community in Iran and abroad. Hence, it is necessary to perform some research around creating brand communities, its management and investigating community role and customer's loyalty and its effect in identifying needs and producing new sport products and services. Creating customers basement for the consumers that are highly committed to brand is an important and main duty and is yet the challenging duty of marketers and managers that have confronted with them (Carlson, 2005). With regard to the process of marketing planning and in terms of specific value of brand, brand community is a very important factor and in the recent years, it turns into one of the most encouraging evolutions in relationship marketing. In the recent years, there has been great effort towards drifting researchers to perform research in this regard, but there isn't much research on sport brands. With regard to the mentioned descriptions and considering the issue that the variable investigated in this research is not simultaneously studied in any other and the necessity of its investigation in a new statistical community such as Shiraz metropolis, as new aspects of research, it has been like a motive towards selecting this subject for research. Therefore, since brand and its related components and variables are among the cases that are recently entered to research area and since the effects of brand communities on marketing performance are investigated in the recent years, but about the influences of a brand community on brand characteristics, there is less practical research. Therefore, considering many benefits that companies can have by creating a strong brand community and the effects of brand characteristics on company performance, research problem is that how brand community by mediation of brand attachment affects characteristics of sport brands?

Material & methods

The research method was functional and regarding control of variables it was a kind of non-experimental, descriptive-correlational research. The statistical sample of this research were customers of Iranian and foreign sport brands(among the Iranian sport brands, two active brands of Daei and Majid and two foreign brands of Addidas and Lening through sport centers of Shiraz city were chosen). To estimate the size of the sample due to the uncertainty of consumers, 384 persons were estimated by Morgan table that due to the attrition of sample, 400 questionnaires were distributed among the consumers of the respective brands and finally 388 acceptable questionnaires were retained. Therefore, the number of sample in this research is 388 persons that are obtained by accidentally categorical sampling. The instrument was a questionnaire having 29 questions which was in six-point Likert scale. In order to identify and determine the identity of brand community six questions (Algesheimer et al., 2005), to estimate the commitment to brand community five questions(Methvic et al.,2005), ten questions related to mediator variable i.e. the factor of attachment to the brand(Thomson et al.,2005), five questions related to variable of identifying and specifying brand identity(Zhou et al.,2012) and at last three questions related to variable of commitment to the brand(Rajo et al.,2009) were used. To assess face and content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by several professors of sport management and then was distributed

between the samples. The results of this study were analyzed by structural equation modeling using PLS method. Structural reliability and validity using PLS algorithm is presented in Table 1.

Results

Evaluation of outer model :

For measuring outer model, we investigate combining reliability, Cronbach's alpha and convergent validity (extracted mean variance). Combining reliability is the measurement of outer correlation for observable variables of each hidden variable. Cronbach's alpha represents the level of questions ability in appropriate explanation of its related dimintions; in the other words, measurement of inner similarity of observable variable (Fornell and Larker, 1981). Also, convergent validity points the level of ability in the indexes of one dimension in its explanation. The results are in table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation of external model

Latent variable	AVE	CR	α	communality
Identifying and determining the identity of brand community	0.47	0.84	0.77	0.47
Commitment to brand community	0.43	0.79	0.67	0.43
Attachment to the brand	0.43	0.88	0.85	0.43
Identification and identity of the brand	0.43	0.78	0.66	0.43
Commitment to the brand	0.63	0.83	0.70	0.63

As you see in table 1, all of the variables have high reliability in the model. Combined reliability and Corn Bach’s alpha of higher than 0.7 represents acceptable reliability of each structure of the research. Moreover the acceptable criterion for acceptable level of convergence was 0.4(Magenz et al., 1996). As it is shown in the above table the extents of AVE for each structure was more than 0.4 and this confirms that the convergent validity of this questionnaire is acceptable.

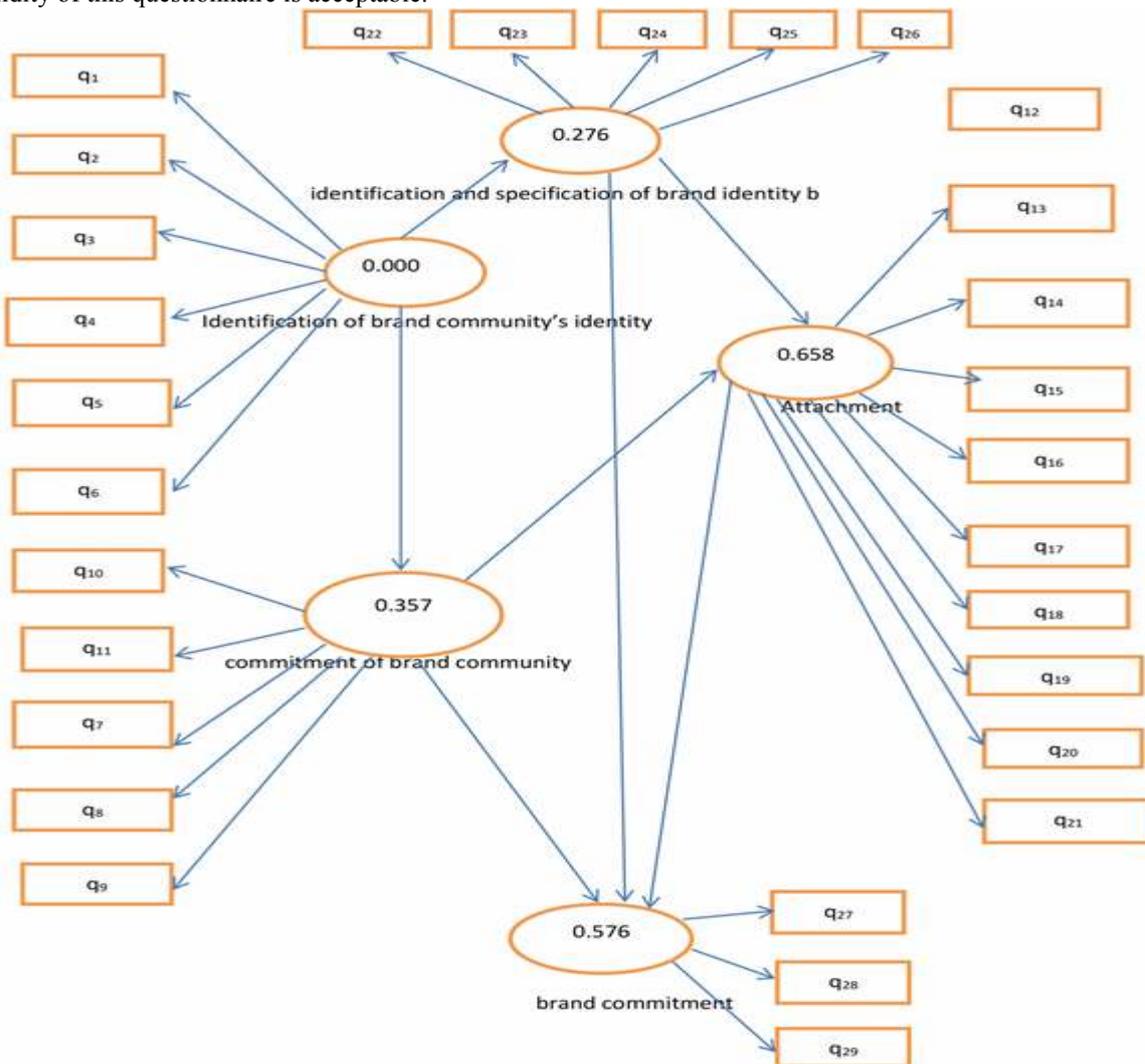


Fig.1. output of pls software in standard state

Based on figure1, the extent of R2 for each of structures of endogenous attachment, commitment to the brand, brand identification, endogenous commitment to brand community were calculated as 0.658,0.576,0.276,0.357respectively that according to three criterion values, it confirms the suitability of structural model of measurement. In the following the calculation of intensity of impact of Cohen f2 is measured by the following equation:

$$F2 = (R2Included - R2 Excluded)/(1- R2Included)$$

Based on obtained results, the extent of calculated f2 for the route of brand identification to commitment to the brand is calculated as 0.02;similarly the extent of f2 for the route of brand identification to brand attachment is calculated as 0.38;the extent of it for the route of brand attachment and commitment to the brand was calculated as 0.11;the extent of it for the route of commitment to brand community and brand commitment was calculated as 0.0 and the route of attachment to brand community to brand attachment was calculated as 0.38. Thus according to these results, the size of the effect for the routes of 2, 3, and 5 is big and for the routes 1 and 4 is positive but little. According to the algorithm, structural evaluation of the model of the study, several criteria are utilized that the first and most fundamental criterion is significant coefficient Z with the same amounts of t-values(the meaningfulness). The route of commitment to brand community to brand commitment was lower than 1.96 that represents the rejection of this relationship between these two variables and in other routes there was a significantly positive relationship. To evaluate the overall quality of the model in least minimal squares, we use the GOF index that Totenhous et al. introduced in 2005. The high fitness of the model shows that this model is confirmed by least minimal squares. The suitability of the fitness of the model was between zero and one and Wetzels et al.(2009) introduced three amounts of 0.01,0.25,0.36 as the respective low, medium and high amount for GOF.

The overall quality of the model is calculated by the following equation:

$$GOF = \sqrt{\text{Communality} \times R2}=0/473$$

Since the amount ofQ2for endogenous attachment structure, commitment to the brand, commitment to brand community, and endogenous brand identification was calculated as 0.65, 0.36, 0.15 and 0.11 respectively for each of them; it represents the strong predictability of the model for these structures and again confirms the suitability of the structural model of research. Also with regard to inspecting indices, the convergent validity of hidden variables represented that all of the variables are positive that this points to the quality of the measurement model.

Generally, with regard to the final output of PLS software and its fitting indexes, it was specified that the presented model coincides with the data from research and is appropriate. Therefore, it can be said that the conceptual model of research is confirmed based on the obtained material.

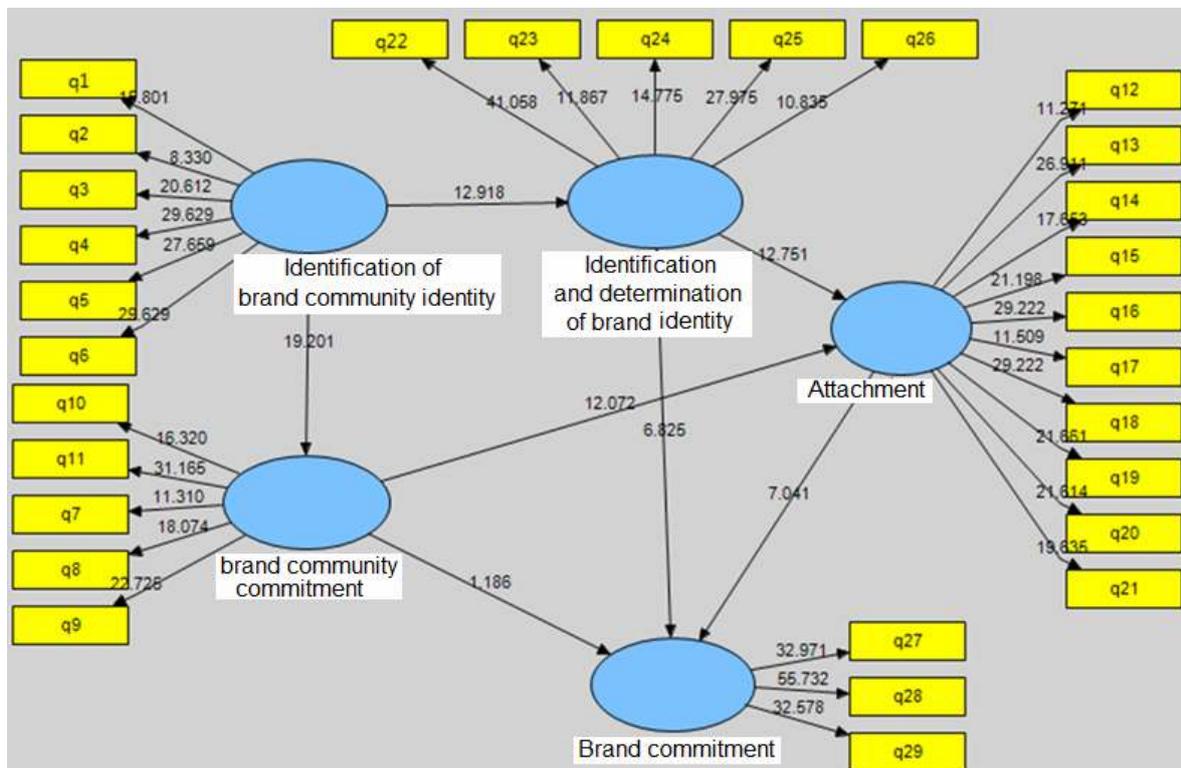


Fig.2. output of PLS software in Significant state

Table 2. Direct and indirect effects of the final model of research

Relations	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Path of identification and identity of brand community to identification and determination of brand identity	0.52		0.52
Path of identification and identity of brand community to brand community commitment	0.35		0.35
Path of identification and determination of brand identity to brand commitment	0.36	0.20	0.54
Path of brand community commitment attachment	0.42		0.42
Path of brand attachment commitment to brand commitment	0.054	0.189	0.24
Path of brand community commitment to brand attachment	0.44		0.44
Path of identification and determination of brand identity to brand attachment	0.46		0.46

With regard to the results of table 2, the effect of identification and determination of brand identity on brand commitment directly and via mediation variable of attachment to brand commitment is equal to 0/20% and the indirect effect which path of brand commitment community has on brand commitment is calculated equal to 0/189. In the other words, attachment variable mediates the variable of identification and determination of brand identity and brand commitment community to brand commitment positively.

Dicussion

Brand communities are the tools that help amplify brand and consumer relationship. A brand community can be proposed as a group of consumers with common enthusiasm for brand and good community identity developed to involve its members jointly in its activities for performing collective goals or mutual commitment and emotional tools. The aim of this research is to model the role of brand community on brand characteristics by mediation of brand attachment in domestic and foreign sport wear industry. With regard to R2 value for attachment endogenous structure 0/658, brand commitment structure 0.576, endogenous structure of identification and determination of brand identity 0/276 and endogenous structure of brand commitment community 0/357, appropriateness for fitting of structural model is confirmed according the three criteria. The results from f2 value for the paths represent the level of positive influence of the intended paths. General quality index (GOF) was calculated equal to 0.473 which confirmed appropriate fitting of structural model in the first stage of re-analysis. Also, the value of Q2 was 0/65 for attachment endogenous structure, 0/36 for brand commitment, 0/15 for brand commitment community and 0/11 for endogenous structure of identification and determination of brand identity which represents strong prediction power of model about these structures and confirms appropriate fitting of research structural model again. The finding of this research is consistent with the results of other studies; such that DehdashtiShahrokh et al (2014), Eghbali et al (2014), Zhou et al (2012), Zaglia, 2013, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2010) and Algesheimer et al (2005) confirmed the correctness of these results. Therefore, existence of a positive relation between identification and determination of brand community identity and identification and determination of brand identity represents that brand identity increases by increasing identification and determination of brand community identity. Therefore, customer selects sport brands for his/her identity formation and is always willing to support his/her brand; in the other words, there is higher brand commitment community by increasing identification and determination of brand community identity. This result is consistent with the results of Tsai et al (2012), Kuenzel and Halliday (2008), Maehle and Shneur (2010) and Mat Wick et al (2008). Therefore, the consumers that are committed to brand community go mentally or emotionally attached to brand which shows a level in which they know the brand as the only acceptable choice in a specific class of product. Generally, a customer is attached to a brand due to strong brand community and also brand identity and this level of attachment forms brand commitment in customer. About the indirect effects, attachment variable to brand mediates the relationship between brand commitment community and variable of brand commitment positively (0.127). Also, the variable of brand attachment mediates the relationship between identification and determination of brand identity and brand commitment positively (0.123). Therefore, it can be said that commitment to sport brand customers club affects via brand attachment on brand commitment. It means that brand attachment causes customer to select brand consumption in long term relationship with customers club, in interaction with other members and using services and activities in brand community, and the close relationship with other members in customer community results in his/her brand attachment. The consumers committed to brand community take a deep positive feeling to brand community and strong attachment is formed in brand community. Accordingly, it can be said that brand attachment has a significant relationship with brand commitment; it means that attachment helps a brand to have the committed customer to be also committed and loyal to brand community and there will be positive oral advertisement by customer. He/she also has a tendency on frequent selection of brand and selects his/her favorite brand among the others. Therefore, it can be concluded that commitment to sport brands community affects sport brand commitment via attachment to sport brands. Then, it can be said that after identification and formalization of brand by customers, real attachment and dependency is created which causes emotional bonding between brand

and image of consumer itself. Therefore, when the customers show brand attachment, during brand attachment, customers get loyal and committed to his/her brand. Brand attachment results in the relationship between identification and determination of brand identity and brand commitment. So it can be concluded that identification and determination of brand identity affect brand commitment via brand attachment. The results of Eghbali et al (2014), Kheiri et al (2013), Davidson et al (2010), Park et al (2010) and Luis and Lampart (2010) are consistent with the above results. Therefore, the set of these results show the importance of brand community in business space and especially communities of sport brands. Therefore, it can be inferred that brand is an important and inseparable part in strategy of sport marketing and brand marketing is in the heart of commerce. Brand management is identified via management of brand community relations. Many marketers in current environment of marketing believe that brand communities are cost effective and powerful. According the results of this research and with regard to the increasing competence among sport brands and the challenge of attracting new customers and preserving current customers, sport brands must follow creating and promoting their brand characteristics in customer perceptions and provide the context for implementing required strategies in this area. Brand community is a powerful phenomenon that is appeared around the world and has brought many benefits for companies.

Conclusions

Creating baseament for the customers that are highly committed to brand is the main and important duty and challenging in front of marketers and managers of today's competing world. By management, preservation and protection of brand communities, companies can form attachment and loyalty in customer and also increase marketing and brand efficiency. Brand community is also appeared via customer experience during many years. Therefore, it is generally specified that brand community considerably and directly affects the increase of identification and determination of brand identity and brand attachment, and affects the increase of brand community commitment by mediation of brand attachment. But with regard to the effect of brand community commitment on brand attachment variable and their high indirect effect on increase of brand commitment and also the influence of identification and determination of brand identity and brand community identity on brand community commitment, it can be inferred that brand identity had direct influence on brand community commitment and via brand attachment on brand commitment. These evidences represent that successful sport brand community causes attachment and is more influential if is accepted in the conception of customers. Creating positive mentality in customer conception is also appeared when brand community in customers is based on buying and consent and having only a brand community identity and brand community commitment is not effective for creating a positive influential change.

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