Pattern of Identification with Athlete Brand Image among Female and Male University Students

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ABSTRACT

Athlete Brand Image (ABI) consists of three main dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. The aim of this study was to consider the relationship between athlete brand image and assimilation with the athlete. 530 students (241 females and 289 males) completed the Scale of Athlete Brand Image and a corrected version of Cohen and Perse’s Identification Scale. Structural equation modeling (SEM) showed that from athlete brand image dimensions, athletic performance and marketable lifestyle had significant path coefficient affecting identification with athletes. These dimensions reflect athletic abilities in sport fields and treatment of athletic expertise as well as athlete’s personality and social perception toward athletes. Thus, to improve the level of fan identification with athlete, besides strengthening skills and performance-related abilities in sport competitions, athletic celebrities and their managers are recommended to focus a large part of their activities on creating athlete’s marketable lifestyle. This is attainable through moral behavior both in and out of competition field, sensitivity in sociocultural topics, good leadership and good example for being a fan, social responsibility, and showing respect for fans and spectators.

INTRODUCTION

Identification is one of key topics in educational psychology, social psychology, and sports psychology [76]. Since it deals with favoritism in sports and its consequents in sports marketing, this concept is considered an inter-discipline concept of the humanities. In terms of sports marketing, fans can be considered as a type of sports consumers [4,41,40] but what distinguishes fans from other sports consumers is their regular consumption [70,39]. In the literature of sports marketing, loyalty and identification are considered as fans’ main behaviors [23]. In fact, a sports fan is a zealous sports consumer that utilizes regularly sports goods and services [4]. Extreme and mild favoritism denote fans’ identification levels. Team identification is defined as the amount of mental dependency observed in fans with respect to a team or team performance [70]. In addition, fans might identify with an athlete [76]. This is a rather broad concept that a sports fan consider a specific team or athlete as introducer of themselves, thus getting inspired by him/her and praising him/her. As this increases, it is due to the deep mental bonding that the individual establishes with her favorite sport or team, thus seeing herself as loyal to it. This loyalty manifests itself in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of the individual, and the individual finds herself a loyal fan [44].

Literature Review:

Many researchers have proven the role of favoritism in the amount of sport consumption. These studies showed that the more favoritism in a person, the more hours of sport consumption such as using video games, watching TV, reading magazines, etc [18,76,21,27,22] will be. By the way, every fan always wishes to see her favorite team’s victory and always wants that her favorite team/athlete win against competitors, especially the main competitor. Therefore, it is not a very complicated and mysterious concept that high-level teams often receive greater ticket sale, more financial support, advertising, and share compared with lower-level teams.
Spectators watch a sports match to see their team’s victory, believing that the victory of their favorite team is the same as their own victory [14,17]. Studies for sports marketing and sports consumption psychology suggest that by determining favoritism level of athlete and sports teams as predictor variables, an individual’s consumption in sports and related products can be predicted. For example, Solberg and Hammervold [64] stated in a research that a sport with the highest number of fans has the highest number of spectators [64]. In fact, hours of watching football-related programs, given its high number of fans, are more than those for other programs. Clingan [18] found that a positive relationship exists between favoritism and hours of online sport websites [18]. In their study, Aelbaun et al [3] concluded that there is a positive relationship between favoritism and other social activities (e.g. watching TV, participation in sport activities, and sport video games). Given the fact that loyal consumers, often recognized as zealot fans in sports, are very important for the success of sport clubs and teams, attempts of sport marketing researchers have been mostly focused on identifying the factors affecting fan loyalty [29,25,9,33,38]. The aim of the present study is to measure the probable effect of athlete brand image on the extent of identification with the athlete. The reason for the importance of this topic is that researchers believe that identification is a key event in fan loyalty [63,72,76]. Also, identification is a powerful incentive for presence of spectators and fans in sport events and intention for buying sport-related goods [33,51] and non-sports products [12]. On the other hand, identification with athlete has a significant relationship with team identification [76]. Also, it has a significant effect on sponsorship activity [37]. However, most investigations concerning identification in sports have been conducted on identification with sport teams, and little attention has been paid identification at the fan-athlete level [76]. This is despite the fact that sport celebrities rather than sport clubs and teams play a significant role in formation of community’s connection with sports in different economic, cultural, and social dimensions. For instance, most considerations show individual role of famous athletes and branding on one of the main income resources of sports and athletes i.e. products endorsement. Or famous athletes act as leaders and pioneers of charitable activities. Athlete brand is one of the concepts that has recently entered sport marketing literature. In study entitled Branding Athletes: Exploration and conceptualization of athletes brand image, Arai, Jae Ko and Ross [6] offered a conceptual model of the dimensions of athlete brand image. In another investigation entitled Athlete brand image: Scale development and model test, Arai, Jae Ko & Kaplanidou [6] considered dimensions of the athlete brand image. Based on the structured equation modeling, researchers obtained a reasonable balance between data from the conceptual model and scale description of athlete brand image dimensions. The mentioned study has been conducted according to economic value model based on Keller [46]’s brand equity model. According to Keller’s model [46], with respect to their connection with the product, brand characteristics are divided into two sets of product-related characteristics and non-product-related characteristics. Product-related properties include attributes that affect product performance or service in customer’s view. These attributes affect significantly the choice of products and services, facilitating purchase decision making [46]. Non-product-related properties are properties that have no direct effect on product performance, but are important in terms of purchase decision making [46]. Athlete brand here is defined as description of customers’ awareness about athlete brand and evoking its properties. The conceptual model suggested by Arai, Jae Ko and Ross [46] and also the tested athlete brand model by Arai, Jae Ko & Kaplanidou [46] have three initial dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. As a sports and distinguished figure, athletes must appear with excellence in their respective sport field. Therefore, primary characteristic of athlete brand must be athlete performance. Athlete performance involves attributes and characteristics related to his/her performance and includes the following four subscales: rivalry, sport expertise, competition style, and chivalry. Athletic performance is considered as a product-related characteristic, which is athletes’ primary role with the aim of enhancing athletic performance and developing their brand situation according to continuity of their success. On the other hand, other characteristics that do not deal with the athlete’s athletic performance have been considered as non-product-related characteristics that include the two dimensions of attractive appearance, and lifestyle. Attractive appearance, as a “commercial sign” of product brand, is the main challenge of most branding activities [5], consisting of the three sub-dimensions of physical attractiveness, symbol, and body fitness. Physical attractiveness is considered as the primary element of athlete brand image and in the Ohanian’s source credibility model, it is propounded alongside and even prior to trustworthiness and expertise, as the primary dimension of endorsement source credibility, suggesting that attractive athletes can fulfill customer expectations [55]. Till and Bustler [69] believe that irrespective of product type, attractive endorsers have a significant effect on brand treatment and intention to purchase endorsed products. According to Keller [46], marketable lifestyle is one of non-product-related attributes that addresses the athlete’s non-athletic aspects. This human brand includes his/her personality attributes in general and consists of three sub-dimensions: life story, role model, and relationship effort. In fact, figures not only attain their success in the area of athletic performance, but also they are noticed by their distinguished lifestyle too [16]. In modern media culture, non-athletic area of an athlete’s life can also play a special role in understanding the athlete’s personality. Furthermore, attributes not related to sport discipline have a strong effect on athlete brand image in customers’ minds and brand value generation [6].
The main idea in these studies was that researches for documenting the role of favoritism, team identification, and loyalty in consumers’ behavior are needed, and on the other hand, due to scarcity and sparseness of these considerations, the need for proper and scientific studies is felt to consider the relationship of favoritism and identification in the area of sports marketing. Hence, the main goal for this study is to analyze the plausible effect of the triple dimensions of athlete brand that according to the model of Arai, Jae Ko & Kaplanidou [6] consists of athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle on identification with athlete in the framework of the structural equation model.

Theoretical Framework:
Statistical population and sample:
Statistical population for the present study consists of the students of Razi University and Islamic Azad University of Kermanshah that were taking courses in Physical Training 1 or 2 in first semester of the 2013-2014 academic year. Since structural equation modeling experts suggest that population size in these studies be at least 200, assuming missing data and use of maximum likelihood (ML), 600 people were selected in current study through multi-stage sampling as the study sample. They completed the questionnaire, with 530 questionnaires filled completely, which were used in the study, and 70 removed due to being incomplete and having missing data.

Measurement:
Cohen & Perse’s [19] Identification Scale has been used to determine individuals’ identification with athletes. In the main version, this section consists of 10 questions that are able to measure people’s experiences when facing athletic personalities. For instance, the Identification Scale measures people’s experiences in front of athletes, as though the sport event is happening for the very individuals. In other words, sport spectator/viewer attributes the athlete’s role to himself/herself. Therefore, study participants were asked to recall the process of identification with their favorite athlete. The questions have been rated based on the 5-item Likert Scale, from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). For example, the questionnaire consists of questions such as, “when I see my favorite athlete, I forget myself and get completely attracted to him” or “when watching a match, I feel excitement of my favorite athlete”.

To determine questionnaire validity, the exploratory factor analysis was used by analyzing primary components. Results showed that correlation matrix’s determinant was a non-zero figure equal to 0.023, more than 0.001. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) criterion was equal to 0.755 and more than 0.70. Also, the result of Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant. This means that variables had correlations high enough to offer a logic basis for the analysis. Finally, from a total of 10 questions, 6 had significant factor loadings, which were used in the analysis and 4 questions with binary loadings less than 0.40 were removed. In terms of reliability of the identification questionnaire in former studies, the Cronbach’s alpha has been variable from 0.83 to 0.86. In the work of Ironheart (2007), Cronbach’s alpha of the identification questionnaire was 0.93. In this study alpha was obtained to be 0.89. The questionnaire used for athlete brand image was obtained by Arai, Jae Ko & Kaplanidou [6], which includes three primary dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. This questionnaire has 30 items, measuring 10 scales including rivalry, athletic expertise, competitive style, chivalry, attractive appearance, symbolic feature, body fitness, life story, role model, and relationship effort in 7-choice spectrum of -1 (strongly disagree) to -7 (strongly agree). The athlete brand image questionnaire was translated separately into Persian by two experienced professors of physical education fluent in two languages, and then the translated scale was translated into English by two other professors. To ensure more about integrity of the translation and conformity of the two English and Persian versions, existing challenges were removed during a common session. Therefore, after a multistage consideration, review, and applying necessary changes and corrections, the reliability of this questionnaire was confirmed by 5 faculty members. Next, the survey was conducted experimentally on a 20-member group of students, who expressed their opinion on their understanding of questions once they completed the questionnaire. After applying necessary changes, the final questionnaire was obtained. It took approximately 10 minutes to fill the questionnaire. Also, Cronbach’s alpha for the athletic performance scale, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle was 0.88, 0.87, and 0.71 respectively. Also, standardized coefficients, non-standardized coefficients and their meaning, and the expressed variance values of measurement model of athlete brand image dimensions were good and acceptable (table 4).

Application method:
Permissions were received from university authorities. Then, by researchers’ attending in general physical education classes, after getting oral permission, and stating that there are no obligations on cooperation and filling of the sheets, participants completed respective questionnaires. It is worth mentioning that the aim and instructions of filling the questionnaire was explained again orally despite the fact that it had been written in questionnaires. Respondents were asked to get researchers’ help in case they had any queries or problems about
questions. In the work of Arai et al [6] respondents focused on athletic figures, whose image was ordered on the questionnaire. But in this survey, respondents were asked to answer the questions according to the athletic figure in their own mind.

Analysis:
Data was analyzed using SPSS® and LISREL 8.5. To describe data, descriptive statistics, mean, and standard deviation were used. To determine validity and reliability of the questionnaires, factor analysis and Cronbach’s alpha were used. Also, Pearson’s correlation coefficient and, in line with supplementary analyses, structural equations were used to model causative relationships, and the desired model was offered. Finally, multivariate variance analysis was used according to the gender factor for comparing study variables.

Findings:
A total of 530 people including 241 female university students with average age of 21.41±2.18 years and 289 male university students with the average age of 22.83±4.25 years formed the statistical population for this study. In tables 1 and 2, descriptive criteria (mean and standard deviation) and correlation matrix of observed variables are presented. Given correlations observed in table 1 and 2, the relationship between variables is significant, and since the principal condition for using the structural equation model in findings analysis is existence of correlation among variables, relationship pattern was analyzed in the model.

Also, mean and standard deviation and correlation coefficient of hidden variables of the study are shown in table 3. Results of fit indices of the model are presented in table 4. Indices included normed chi square i.e. chi square with the degree of freedom of 3.27, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.06, goodness of fit index (GFI) of 0.93, adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) of 0.91, normed fit index (NFI) of 0.93, non-normed fit index (NNFI) of 0.92, comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.94, and incremental fit index (IFI) of 0.94. Given acceptable values presented in table 3, appropriate fit of the study model is inferred.

Tables 5 and 6 show standardized and non-standardized coefficients and their significance. All standard coefficients for the micro-scales of athlete brand image and identification have high values. T significance test also showed that all factor loadings or obtained path coefficients were significant (P<0.01). Furthermore, structural coefficients between athletic performance, marketable lifestyle, and identification are positive and statistically significant. Also, the coefficient between attractive appearance and identification is negative and insignificant.

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation and correlations among variables in model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.57*</td>
<td>0.36*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>5/80</td>
<td>Athletic performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>5/26</td>
<td>Attractive appearance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>5/06</td>
<td>Marketable lifestyle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (p<0.01) ** (p<0.001)

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation and correlation among observed variable of identification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>sd</th>
<th>mean</th>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Question1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>3/41</td>
<td>Question3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/08</td>
<td>3/34</td>
<td>Question4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/03</td>
<td>3/67</td>
<td>Question5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/09</td>
<td>3/15</td>
<td>Question6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (p<0.01) ** (p<0.001)

Table 3: Mean, standard deviation and correlation among variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.57*</td>
<td>0.36*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>5/80</td>
<td>Athletic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>5/26</td>
<td>Attractive appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>5/06</td>
<td>Marketable lifestyle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (p<0.01) ** (p<0.001)
Table 4: Tested fit indices of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Chi-square/degree of freedom</th>
<th>Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)</th>
<th>Goodness of fit index (GFI)</th>
<th>Adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI)</th>
<th>Normed fit index (NFI)</th>
<th>Non-normed fit index (NNFI)</th>
<th>Comparative fit index (CFI)</th>
<th>Incremental fit index (IFI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admissible value</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>&lt;0.08</td>
<td>&gt;0.90</td>
<td>&gt;0.85</td>
<td>&gt;0.90</td>
<td>&gt;0.95</td>
<td>&gt;0.90</td>
<td>&gt;0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Expressed variance of athlete image dimensions.

<table>
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<th>Model path coefficients in the case of standard approximation</th>
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<tr>
<td>M±SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: standardized and non standardized and their significance and expressed variance of identification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Marketable lifestyle</th>
<th>Attractive appearance</th>
<th>Athletic performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3/21±0.72</td>
<td>4/98±0.78</td>
<td>5/14±1/04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>3/49±0.79</td>
<td>5/14±0.93</td>
<td>5/14±0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>P=0.000</td>
<td>P=0.033</td>
<td>P=0.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>P=0.033</td>
<td>P=0.128</td>
<td>P=0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>Trace(4,525)=.030, f=5.28, p&lt;0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Results of MANOVA test for comparing research variables among boy and girl students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Marketable lifestyle</th>
<th>Attractive appearance</th>
<th>Athletic performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
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<td>Identification</td>
<td>P=0.000</td>
<td>P=0.033</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>Trace(4,525)=.030, f=5.28, p&lt;0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1: Model path coefficients in the case of standard approximation.

Discussion:

According to the theory of social identity, people look for identity of a person who has distinguished individual abilities and traits, and they also try to acquire social identity such as belonging to groups and membership of social organizations and clubs. This theory has formed expression of the concept of sport co-identification and favoritism, which, as one of considerable topics, has been drawing attention of academic researchers in sports marketing as well as executive managers of sport clubs. While people usually seek to fulfill and determine the need for acquiring their social identity and this way, they also fulfill basic needs such as sense of belonging, social integration, and self-esteem [67], in many cases, people seek role models to determine effective and appropriate features in formation of individual identity and desirable self-concept, so that by identification, they can reduce the distance between their perceived self and the ideal desirable self they have in mind [65,47]. Undoubtedly, desirable role models for individuals depend to a great extent on taught values and emphasis on societies’ education system, and of course, the media that have traversed boundaries of countries. Given such traits as success in sport fields, and by creating conditions to make alternative experiences happen in
fans, having hot newsworthy lifestyles, drawing media attention to their behavioral aspects and acquisition of enormous income, they are strong role models for youths and adolescents. It is noteworthy that identification necessarily does not require to establish formal relationships [60]. Thus, in the current consideration, the contribution of athlete brand image on identification with athlete was considered. In current study, data possessed a good fitness with the default model according to fitness indices (table 3). Results of model test showed that from athlete brand criteria, factors of athletic performance and marketable lifestyle have a significant effect on the amount of identification with athlete in investigated samples of this study. Athletic performance refers to athletes’ abilities in the competition field, i.e. such criteria as exhilarating competition style, possession of distinguished skills, expertise in sports, and chivalrous behavior in athletic environments. One of the items that is propounded as cultivating identification with athlete, is creation of opportunities for acquiring alternative experiences [65]. Actually, in such circumstances, by identification and sharing his/her thoughts and feelings with his/her favorite athlete, an individual reduces the distance between the real self and the ideal self, thus boosting his/her self-confidence [76]. Also, according to studies conducted regarding effectiveness of famous people’s endorsement including that of athletes, belief in expertise has been mentioned as one of the sources of trust in message origin (commercial and non-commercial). Nonetheless, path coefficients showed that marketable lifestyle has stronger effect on identification with athlete brand. This criteria specifically refers to famous athletes outside competition fields. Also, this finding underlines the importance of athletes’ success in terms of role-modeling in social activities, acquisition of social prestige, feeling responsible in social relations, having appropriate relationship with fans, and attempt to appreciate and respond to fans. It is worthy of note that based on factor loading (figure 1), among the triple dimensions of marketable lifestyle, the biggest contribution concerns role model and then attempt to establish appropriate and worthy relationship with fans and spectators. In this regard, maybe it could be inferred that criteria of athletic performance and success distinguish a star athlete from other players in the competition field. This topic is an introduction to popularizing athletic figures and distinguishing an athlete’s other life aspects. But in the views of most sport spectators and fans, the distinction of star athletes or their branding relative to other athletes involves their success and acceptability in and out of sport field. On the other hand, attractive appearance had an insignificant path coefficient that inversely related to identification with athletes. In other words, possession of beautiful face, attractive appearance, and traits alike had no significant effect on identification with famous athletes. In line with results of the current survey, in the survey of Arai et al [6], athlete brand image had a significant impact coefficient that affected psychological commitment within the sample group under study (427 college students). Although in that survey, also, marketable lifestyle had the highest impact coefficient and attractive appearance had the least impact on athlete brand image, impact of each of the three dimensions on psychological commitment could not be clearly recognized since in the mentioned survey the athlete has been considered as the third order criterion. To a high extent, in confirmation of the findings of this survey, results of the work of Stevens et al [66] could be addressed. In a qualitative study on Canada’s generation Y (those born between 1977 and 1994, who, besides age domain focused on adolescence and youth, possess the far-reaching power of media tools), the mentioned researchers found that, in the opinions of that survey’s respondents, traits of heroes include 5 features with concepts of personal features, social traits, athletic skills, endorsement situation, and adhesion to other factors. Survey of Braunstein & Zhang [12] also corroborated that determinative criteria in star athletes include trustworthiness, possession of a lovely personality, sport expertise, and their social attractiveness. Therefore, these criteria predict sport consumption such as watching directly a sport event, indirect watching of an event, reading sport journals, and also endorsement effect of products from famous athletes within the age group of 10-24. Also, Bush et al [13] found that famous athletes, as effective models, predict behavioral intention to purchase, which in turn involves oral advertising, and brand loyalty in the adolescence age group. Dixon & Flynn [24], in a content-based survey, evaluated positive and negative attributes of endorsing athletes among 272 British college students, and the results of their study showed six groups of factors as effective variables in sport endorsers. Noticeably, while none of the samples under investigation addressed attractiveness, the first set of extracted concepts were considered as desirable or undesirable traits in endorsing athletes in terms of their role modeling and moral/immoral behavior in and out of the competition field. Also, in addition to physical and mental competence, the quality of interpersonal relationships had been considered as the third group of important contexts.

On the other hand, Fink et al [30] showed that players’ non-customary and improper behavior outside of match fields have negative effects on team fans and identification with athlete as well as on his team. Also, in conducted surveys, improper behaviors of athletes have been stressed as a threat to investments of companies and institutes for using athletes in endorsement [73,36]. For instance, after Tiger Woods’ moral/family issues were revealed and popularized, five companies who supported him lost about 2-3 percent of their market value [49]. Since the topic of athlete brand is one of the emerging concepts in sports social psychology literature as well as sports marketing that can, like many other concepts, be considered as antecedent, consequence, or mediator of other variables, this study can theoretically be considered a step toward development and deepening
of this concept in sports marketing. Regarding practical results of the present study, it could be stated that, since identification has been emphasized by researchers as a key antecedent, and if according to the various surveys mentioned earlier, we accept that identification with teams and athletes and subsequently the quality of sport favoritism affect sports consumption and consumption of relevant products, then in terms of strategic programming in marketing, it is extremely important to note which behavioral criteria and attributes of famous athletes affect athlete identification and favoritism. As said earlier, identification is in fact a scope, where sport fans consider a specific team or athlete as descriptor of themselves, thus getting inspirations from him and praising him. As this increases, due to deep mental connection that an individual establishes with the favorite athlete/team, he/she sees himself/herself loyal to the athlete/team thereby he/she gets affected. Therefore, it is recommended for team managers, sport clubs and famous athletes that if an athlete wants to have appropriate effects on others and especially sport fans, he will be able to convert spectators to fans once, besides intra-field successes, he establishes good relationship with people, acts as a suitable role model for his fans and tries to accept social responsibilities. Also, since athletes are under the magnifying lens of media, a branded athlete must, besides utilizing media opportunities for boosting his brand – attempt to avoid margins that scratch his/her credibility. Since star athletes are noticed by media and media culture of today has reduced the pace of news propagation considerably, this topic and possession of the state of a role model and high public relations are important for famous athletes.

Conclusion:
Results concerning gender factor showed that male students identify with their favorite athletes more significantly than female students. Also, the mean of the factor of marketable lifestyle was higher in boys compared with girls (table 8). This result can be analyzed in two angles. First, the concept of gender and roles expected and perceived of gender among women and men is formed in a set of values, cultural-social variables, and direct/indirect educations. In a patriarchal society sport is often considered a masculine subject. Second, typically in Muslim communities like Iran, due to religious, cultural, and social reasons, female athletes do not usually find media personalities and hence, a female athlete’s brand image has little exposure to introduction. Nonetheless, like men, today’s women are active in many sport fields and as a considerable part of the community, they affect the country’s sport, and their sport interests cannot be ignored. Means of descriptive findings regarding aspects of athlete brand and identification with athlete shows domains higher than mean spectrum of measurement in women (table 8). This finding can mean that despite the role of gender in identification with athlete, women also identify with branded and favorite athletes at a considerable level.

Results interpretation and analysis for each study depends on perception of its limitations. The deterministic nature of present study justifies usage of the term effect merely based on path coefficients and statistical analyses, considering calculation of error probabilities. Thus, a closer interpretation of findings depends on supplementary and similar studies with a bigger statistical population. The sample studied in this survey consisted merely of college students, who are among major customers and target markets in sport as well as main sport marketing audiences [61,54]. Nonetheless, the results require subsequent society-oriented considerations with more coverage in order to be generalized.

As the final conclusion, results of the present study stress that in order to deepen and extend the identification relationship of fans and supporters with them in society, in addition to expanding sport abilities, famous celebrities must have more focus on a marketable lifestyle, which is based on generating appropriate social image through establishing good relationships with spectators and fans, performing leadership roles for sport fans, pioneering in social charitable activities, and responsibility.

REFERENCES


