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The Role of Service Quality Dimensions in the Brand Equity of the Iranian Football Clubs Based on the SERVQUAL Model

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Article Info	Abstract
Article type: Research Article	Given the importance of service quality in the development of sports brands, the overall purpose of this study was to study the role of service quality dimensions in the brand equity of the Iranian football clubs based on the SERVQUAL model. The study was a descriptive-survey research and a practical one. The research population consisted of all football fans in Iranian Premier League who had experience of attending in their favorite team stadium. Due to the lack of accurate and reliable statistics of the number of fans, the statistical sample was calculated using Cochran's formula. Using available purposive sampling, 210 fans were surveyed as the research sample. Data were collected using Brand Equity Questionnaire developed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) and SERVQUAL questionnaire developed by Jaberi et al. (2013). Eight experts in the field of sports management and marketing confirmed the face and content validity of the research tools. The reliability of the research tools were verified based on Cronbach's alpha. Structural equation modeling was used to test the research hypotheses. According to the research findings, service quality had a positive and significant effect on brand equity of Iranian Premier League clubs. The results showed that service quality components (Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy) had a significant and positive effect on brand equity of football clubs in Iranian Premier League. According to research findings, promoting and improving the service of Iranian football clubs can play a key role in developing their brand equity.
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Introduction

Undoubtedly, the marketing of products and services is a factor in the sustainability and growth of marketing institutions and companies, so this matter is of particular importance and is also considered a key point in the life cycle of organizations (Honari et al., 2014). The football industry is one of the industries that has a significant share of the world's trade (Szymanski, 2001). Today, sports have been able to play an important role in the macroeconomics of countries (Asadollahi et al., 2020; Tarighi et al., 2021; Reihani & Khatibzadeh, 2021). Football, with its ever-increasing developments and attractiveness among different groups, has been able to establish a special place among different sports (Miri et al., 2022; Soltan Hosseini et al., 2014). The brand equity is one of the key concepts that plays an important role in developing the brand of football and sports clubs (Jaberi et al., 2014). The brand equity deals with the creation of added value that a product creates by using its brand name (Aaker, 1991). Today, companies feel a double need to create attractiveness in the symbolic values of their brand and try to offer a strong and meaningful brand to consumers so that consumers can better identify the company's brand and recognize the company's brand. A brand increases strategic and economic value for their owners (Gil et al., 2007). Gil et al. (2007) believe that one of the important benefits of brand equity is its ability to reduce company costs and increase profits. High brand equity helps the company to increase the price and may also be effective on marketing communication and possibly have a positive effect on brand development and reduce advertising costs (Rezaei & Sharifian, 2021). A company with a popular and famous brand, compared to another company that has a less popular and famous brand, in the process of producing and selling a similar product, earns more profit.

Service quality is one of the basic concepts in branding, which can play an important role in promoting and strengthening the brand value of service companies (He & Li, 2010). Improving the quality of services to attract and maintain spectators is one of the most important parts of the sports industry. The results of the research show that providing good services to the spectators is the most important factor for increasing the number of spectators and as a result earning income of most leagues and sports clubs around the world (Jaberi et al., 2013). Today, service quality has become one of the most important topics in the field of service management and marketing (Ghasemi et al., 2021). Since the role of service in everyday life was revealed, the category of "service quality" was also considered as the main characteristic of the competition between organizations, so that paying attention to the quality of service made the organization different from its competitors and led to gaining an advantage (Ghasemi et al., 2021). Organizations that achieve higher levels of service quality attract higher levels of customer satisfaction as a prelude to achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Guo et al., 2008). According to the SERVQUAL framework, five dimensions and the main drivers for service quality have been identified, which are: 1-Tangibles: It includes physical equipment, the appearance of personnel, and the physical environment of the organization, and it means having modern and high-quality equipment and facilities. 2- Reliability: the ability to perform the promised service accurately and reliably is another meaning of the ability to trust the fulfillment of obligations. 3- Responsiveness: readiness and desire to help customers and quickly provide optimal services for customers. Responsiveness means willingness to cooperate and help the customer. This dimension of service quality emphasizes showing sensitivity and vigilance towards customer requests, questions and complaints. 4- Assurance: knowledge and skills of employees, politeness and kindness and their ability to win customers' trust and low risk and ambiguity. It is the competence and ability of the organization's employees to instill a sense of trust and confidence in the customer. 5- Empathy: It refers to the ability of establishing a relationship with the customer and pay special attention to each one of them in order to fulfill their wishes; it means that according to the spirit of the people, each of them is treated in a special way (Parasuraman et al., 1991). The closer the audience or participant's perception is to the level of excellence, the better their assessment of service quality will be (Lovelock, 2001). Today, service quality has become one of the most important topics in the field of service management and marketing (Khazaei Pool et al., 2016). Organizations that achieve higher levels of service quality attract higher levels of customer satisfaction as a prelude to achieving sustainable competitive advantage (Guo et al., 2008).

The results of Jaberi et al.'s research (2012) demonstrated that if the services provided are adapted to the needs and expectations of the spectators, this factor can significantly lead to the attraction and retention of spectators in the stadiums. Hatami and Akbari (2017) found that there is a significant relationship between

service quality and its components with the brand's social identity. In the study of Nadaf et al. (2018), the mediating role of relationship quality dimensions in the effect of personalization and appreciation on the special value of the brand (indirect effect) was confirmed. The findings of Miri et al. (2022) also showed that there is a significant relationship between the quality of services and its dimensions of brand positioning of Iranian premier league clubs. Ladda (2007) showed that service quality is effective in creating brand value through customer decision making. Lee et al. (2011) concluded in their research that the factors of tangibility and empathy were effective in the level of customer satisfaction. The findings of Jamal and Anastasiadou (2009) also showed that reliability and empathy have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Ashraf et al. (2018) showed that service quality, corporate image, and perceived value are the main factors in increasing brand loyalty. Ghezelsefloo and Kalateh Seifari (2017) stated in their research that there is a significant relationship between service quality and satisfaction with the desire to return again. Khazaei Pool et al. (2016) found that the quality of electronic service has a significant effect on fan satisfaction and fan loyalty to the website of football teams. Moreover, findings of Mazloumi et al. (2013) demonstrated that dimensions of service quality have influenced word of mouth advertising. Jaber et al. (2022) found that perceived quality was effective on brand image and brand loyalty of football fans in Iranian premier league. Today, the existing companies and institutions live in fierce competition conditions, and maintaining the existing market is a very difficult and necessary thing for these companies. In such a situation, for the sports service industry, service quality can be a good solution to retain or attract customers. Clubs that realize this and provide good quality and customer-friendly services are valued in the eyes of customers. The perceived value of the services also affects the brand equity and the brand preference of the clubs and leads to the formation of the customer's purchase intention. Therefore, considering the importance and the role that the service quality plays in sports, it is necessary for managers and sports officials to deal better with the needs and demands of customers and monitor the way of providing existing services in order to increase loyalty and develop the continuity of future presence of customers.

Fans are considered the reason for the existence of business systems in sports, and therefore the evaluation of fans' tastes in sports marketing studies is of key importance. Undoubtedly, in the field of football, fans are considered one of the vital opportunities in improving the economic conditions of the clubs. Paying special attention to the field of fandom in football setting and especially in Iranian football, which is at the beginning of the professionalization, can be of double importance. Studying the important and effective factors on attracting loyal fans and providing models for developing the brand of football clubs can be an effective step in the all-round growth of football clubs in the Premier League. The importance of developing the fan base in football clubs for the purpose of economic development and the necessity of formulating effective strategies to strengthen the brand of Iranian football clubs has made the study of variables related to the relationships between clubs inevitable.

Considering the importance of the role of income generation in professional football and the problems of many teams in providing financial resources, it seems necessary to pay more and more attention to various studies in the field of branding. In this research, based on the review of the research literature related to the topic of the research, the impact of service quality components on the brand equity of football clubs in Iranian premier league is investigated based on the following conceptual model (Figure 1).

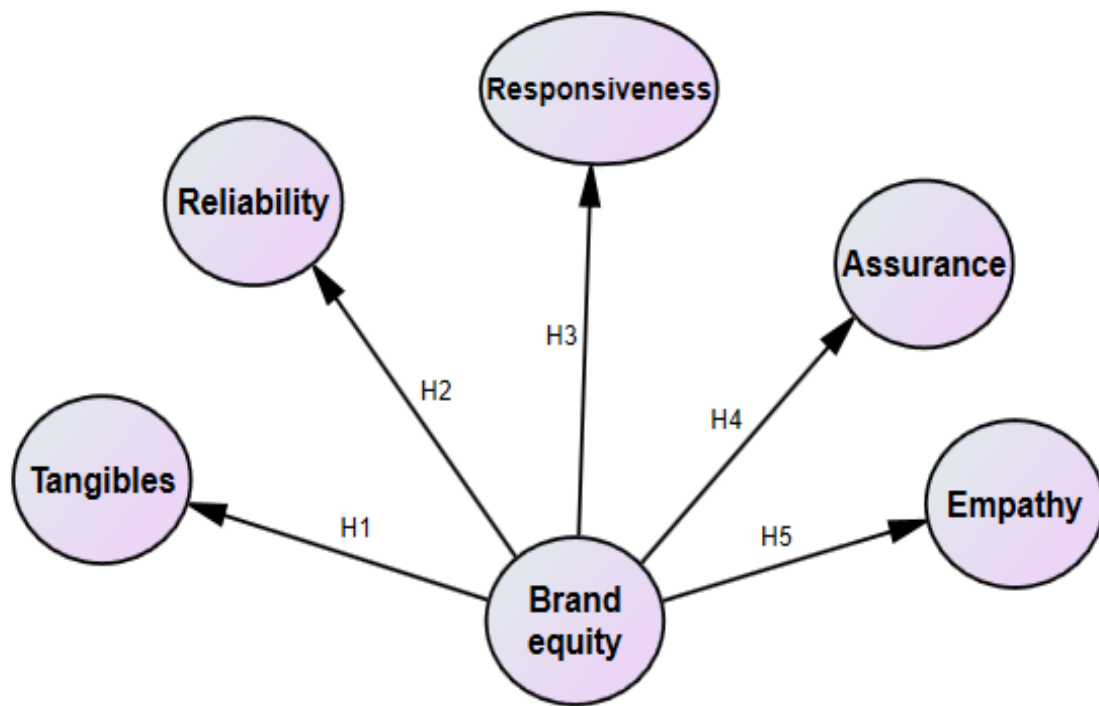


Figure 1. The research conceptual model

Research Methods

The current study was a descriptive-survey research, which was applied study according to the research purpose. In terms of time, this research is considered a cross-sectional research that was conducted in the field. The statistical population of the research included all the fans of the Iranian Premier League football teams with the experience of attending the stadium of their favorite club. According to Cochran's sample size formula in a preliminary study, the required sample for conducting the research was estimated to be 210 people. Due to the possibility of not returning some questionnaires, 230 questionnaires were distributed among the research sample. The available targeted sampling method was used to collect data. For this purpose, the fans who had the experience of participating in the matches of their favorite clubs were selected purposefully and the questionnaires were provided to them in person, by e-mail and in virtual space. Of the total distributed questionnaires (230), 215 questionnaires were returned, and after the initial evaluation, 210 questionnaires were found to be valid for data analysis. In the review section, books, theses, articles and websites were used to collect literature and theoretical foundations. In the field section, Jaber et al.'s service quality questionnaire (2013) with 26 items as well as Yoo and Donthu's brand equity questionnaire (2000) with 4 items were used. In order to evaluate the validity of the research tool, face and content validity were used using the opinions of 7 sports marketing experts. Cronbach's alpha method was used to evaluate the reliability of the research tools. The reliability of the tools based on Cronbach's alpha for Service quality, Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, and Brand equity was estimated to be 0.87, 0.78, 0.85, 0.89, 0.86, 0.93 and 0.96 respectively. SPSS 18 and Amos 18 software were used for data analysis. In this research, structural equation modeling has been used to analyze the relationships and examine the overall fit of the research model. In structural equation modeling, on the one hand, the degree of consistency of the research data with the conceptual model was examined to see if it has a proper fit, and on the other hand, the significance of the relationships in the model was tested. The fitness indices of the research model included CMIN/Df, RMSEA, GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI and IFI. A model has a good fit if CMIN is less than 3, RMSEA is less than 10%, GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI and IFI are more than 90%.

Findings

In order to determine to what extent the indices are acceptable for the research model of the research, the final measurement model was analyzed. Based on the adoption of such a method, the measurement model related to all the variables were tested.

Table 1- Fit indices of measurement models

Structure name	CMIN/Df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Tangibles	2.29	0.92	0.92	0.91	0.93	0.066
Reliability	2.34	0.91	0.91	0.92	0.92	0.074
Responsiveness	2.42	0.92	0.93	0.92	0.91	0.052
Assurance	2.28	0.93	0.91	0.93	0.93	0.041
Empathy	2.51	0.91	0.92	0.93	0.91	0.048
Brand equity	2.59	0.92	0.92	0.91	0.93	0.061
Acceptable	3>	0.90<	0.90<	0.90<	0.90<	0.10<

As demonstrated in Table 1, the general indices revealed the good fitness of the model by the data, or in other words, it can be stated that the collected data supports the model well. The model of the structural equation model of the research along with the regression coefficients is presented in Figure 2.

After examining and confirming the model, two partial indexes of critical value (C.R) and P have been used to test the significance of the hypotheses. The critical value is the value obtained by dividing the "regression weight estimate" by the "standard error". Based on the significance level of 0.05, the critical value should be more than 1.96. Less than this value, the parameter in the model is not considered significant, and values smaller than 0.05 for the P value indicate a significant difference between the value calculated for the regression weights and the zero value at the 0.95 confidence level. Hypotheses along with regression coefficients and partial index values related to each hypothesis are given in Table 2.

Table 2- Regression coefficients and test results of relationships

Number	Exogenous variable	Path	Endogenous variable	Beta coefficient	Critical value	Sig	Result
1	Tangibles	→	Brand equity	0.38	9.96	***	Confirmed
2	Reliability	→	Brand equity	0.35	7.63	***	Confirmed
3	Responsiveness	→	Brand equity	0.41	10.21	***	Confirmed
4	Assurance	→	Brand equity	0.36	8.11	***	Confirmed
5	Empathy	→	Brand equity	0.31	5.89	***	Confirmed

0.001< p***

According to the results and indicators obtained in Table 4, the relationships in the research model have been confirmed.

The structural equation model of the research, along with the regression coefficient, is presented in figure 2.

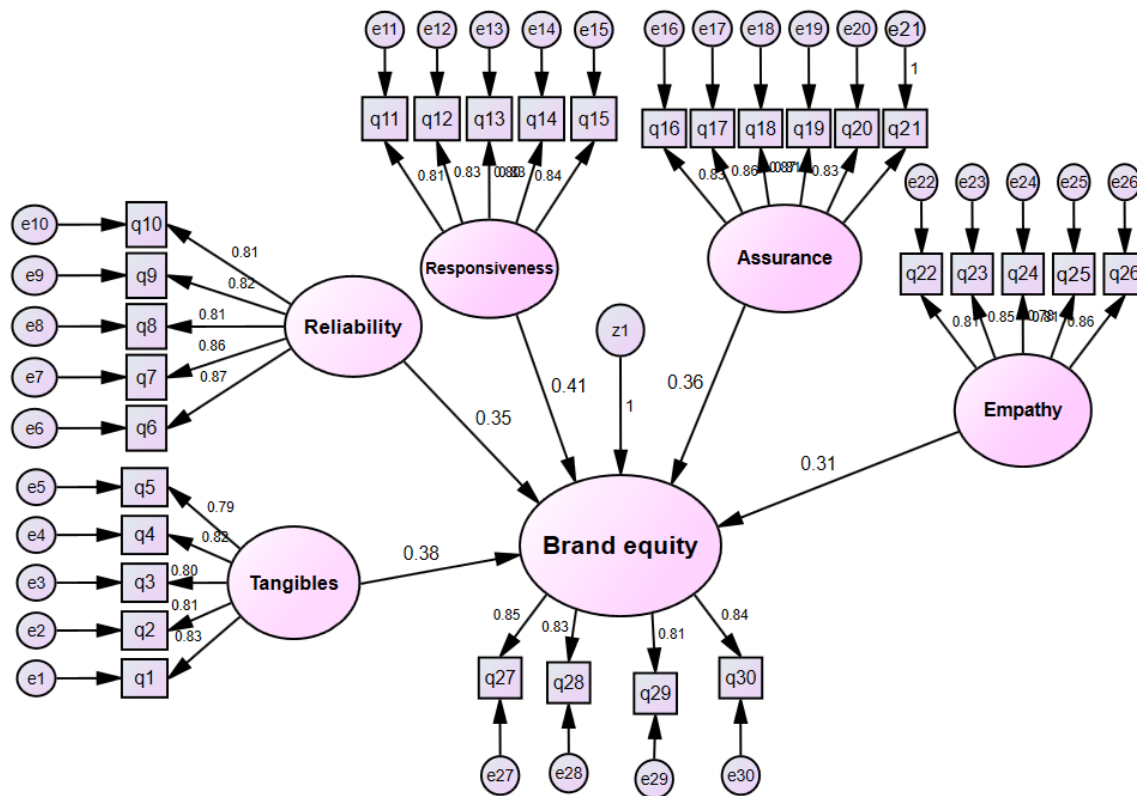


Figure 2. Structural equation of the research model

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to study the effect of service quality dimensions on the brand equity of Iranian football clubs based on the SERVQUAL model. This finding was in line with the results of Khani et al.'s research (2013), because they also stated that service quality directly and indirectly affects brand equity. Moreover, Ladda (2007) stated that service quality is effective in creating brand value through customers' decisions. In addition to the above researches, other significant researches have been conducted on service quality and brand. Hatami and Akbari (2017) found that there is a significant and positive relationship between service quality and brand social identity. In part of his results, Miri et al. (2022) showed that service quality has an effect on the brand positioning of Iranian football clubs. In their studies, Jaberri et al. (2012) found that if the services provided are adapted to the needs and expectations of the spectators, this factor can significantly lead to the attraction and retention of spectators in the stadiums. The findings of Ghezelsefloo and Kalateh Seifari (2017) revealed that there is a significant relationship between service quality and satisfaction with the desire to return again.

The findings revealed that the tangibles as the first dimension of SERVQUAL have a significant effect on the brand equity of the football clubs in Iranian Premier League. The first component of service quality in SERVQUAL model is tangibles, which deals with factors such as the calmness and beauty and appearance of the clubs. The tangible dimension of service refers to tangible and objective things such as the presence of sufficient sports equipment, the beauty and cleanliness of the club environment, and the quality and quantity of sanitary equipment. Therefore, the appearance of physical facilities, health, employees, coaches and other factors related to physical factors play an important role in the brand equity of the team's brand. Sports environments are among the environments in which the up-to-date facilities, environmental hygiene, having modern and high-quality sports equipment, and a suitable atmosphere, etc., are important factors in customers' perception. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the physical environment of sports venues and stadiums (access to facilities and facility space), suitable scoreboard, suitable entrances and exits in the stadium, equipping the stadium with suitable seats, as well as the color and style of team uniforms are an important factors in brand positioning. Miri et al. (2022) showed that by improving the quality of services, the positioning of the brand of the football premier league teams is strengthened. The findings of Memari

(2017) showed that tangible factors have an effect on the behavioral intentions of customers of bodybuilding complexes. In the research of Lee et al. (2011), sensations are considered important in the level of satisfaction.

Another part of the results showed that the reliability has a significant effect on the brand equity of the football teams of Iran's Premier League. In SERVQUAL model, the second component of service quality was reliability, which referred to things such as trust in the organization of the club, the performance of players and managers, etc. Based on the results, it was found that reliability has a significant effect on the brand equity of the football clubs of Iran's Premier League. Therefore, by increasing the dimension of reliability by fulfilling promises and providing appropriate services, the special value of the brand of Iran's premier football league teams can be increased. Choi (2001) showed that creating trust in customers leads to an increase in brand equity. Considering the importance of creating customer trust in the brand and the service received as well as the fact that trust in the services provided is considered a turning point in establishing a relationship with the customer, this dimension is one of the important dimensions in creating a strong brand value and a favorable image. It is from the brand. Miri et al. (2022) showed that by improving the quality of service from the aspect of trust, the brand positioning of Premier League football teams is strengthened. Al-Alak (2012) believes that trust is one of the significant factors in customer satisfaction. In the research of Jamal and Anastasiadou (2009), trust had a positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction. Nguyen et al. (2013) showed that trust in brand identity and its image increases customer loyalty. Based on this finding, it can be said that the managers, players and coaches of the team can create the trust, loyalty and satisfaction of the fans towards the team by fulfilling the promises made in relation to various axes.

Another part of the research results showed that responsiveness affects the brand equity of football teams of Iran's Premier League. One of the aspects of the service quality refers to the responsiveness of the company and clubs to their performance and the demands of the fans and customers. Miri et al. (2022) showed that by improving the quality of service in terms of responsiveness, the brand positioning of Premier League football teams is strengthened. Al-Alak (2012) considered responsiveness as an important factor in customer satisfaction. Responsiveness implies readiness and desire to help fans and provide appropriate services for customers. Responsiveness means willingness to cooperate and help fans. This component emphasizes on showing attention to fans' questions, requests and complaints. The readiness and desire to help club customers and quickly provide optimal services for customers by sports organizations and stadiums has positive and direct results on the special value of the Premier League teams' brand. According to this research finding, the accountability of team managers and players to the performance of the team as well as spending time to answer and guide the fans can lead to strengthening the perceived value and brand equity in the minds of the fans.

The results of the research also showed that the assurance has an effect on the brand equity of the football clubs. Miri et al. (2022) also found that by improving the quality of service from the aspect of assurance, the brand positioning of Premier League football teams is strengthened. Honari et al. (2014) also stated a positive and significant relationship between confidence and customer satisfaction. Saeidi et al. (2015) in their results stated that confidence has an effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Khazaei Pool et al. (2016) stated that the quality of electronic services had a significant impact on fan satisfaction and fan loyalty to the website of football teams. Assurance is related to the politeness, kindness, knowledge and skill of players, coaches and managers and their ability to win the trust of the fans and show the competence of the club staff to instill a sense of confidence in the fans. The knowledge and good manners of employees and their ability to inspire confidence and trust, the level of employees' ability in terms of working knowledge and the level of familiarity with their job responsibilities, having a friendly relationship with fans have a significant effect on the brand equity of Iranian football clubs.

Another part of the research results showed that empathy has an effect on the brand equity of football clubs in Iranian Premier League. In SERVQUAL model, the fifth dimension of service quality is empathy, which refers to showing and applying special and warm attention to customers. Empathy means that according to the spirit of the people, each of them should be dealt with in a special way, so that the customers are convinced that the organization understands them and that they are important to the organization. Lee et al. (2011) state that tangibility and empathy were the main dimensions to determine satisfaction. Miri et al. (2022) showed that by improving the quality of service from the aspect of empathy, the brand positioning of

the teams is strengthened. The research of Jamal and Anastasiadou (2009) showed that empathy had a significant relationship with customer satisfaction. Saeidi et al. (2015) mentioned empathy as an effective factor in explaining the level of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Lee et al. (2011) also considered empathy to be important in the level of clarity. Compassion and empathy with the customer and paying special attention to him and trying to understand and meet the customer's needs on the part of sports managers is a factor in the satisfaction of customers and sports fans. When the fan feels that the staff, players and managers care about his wishes and are willing to help him and answer his questions, he will feel satisfied. Understanding the conditions of the fans, having a friendly relationship with the fans, and the sympathy of the officials with fans for the success of the team will lead to the loyalty and satisfaction of the fans towards the team, as well as a proper formation of the team's brand position in the mind of football fans.

Today, service industries are growing and developing faster than manufacturing industries in the world. Service industries impose less tangible costs on the owners of industries compared to manufacturing industries, and for this reason, they bring higher profit margins and less risk of losing the spent cost. These advantages in service industries have led to more attractiveness of service industries in recent years and the competition in these industries has become more intense than in the past. Today, merely providing services to customers is not enough, and competition to improve the quality of services is a strategic and key issue for organizations that operate in the service sector. Companies survive that provide better quality services to customers and satisfy them in the best possible way. The more the service quality improves, the more realistic and psychological value the service will have in the eyes of the customer, and it will lead to the development of the perceived value and brand equity of the service brand from the customer's point of view. Increasing the service quality provided by organizations and sports clubs will establish the brand of the clubs in the minds of customers and sports fans.

Conclusion

To succeed in the field of competition, sports clubs and organizations need to provide high quality services to their customers. In addition, increasing the service quality will boost the economic cycle of the clubs. Today, the service quality provided by the world's leading football clubs has a significant impact on the income and also the increase in the number of fans of the clubs. Although in Iranian football, the clubs do not provide significant service quality to customers and fans, but the concept of service quality by sports managers should be considered as a basic and important principle. By increasing the quality of services, in addition to generating more income for teams and increasing the number of customers and fans, the reputation and brand position of clubs increases in the minds of customers and sports fans, and the level of loyalty of sports customers to their favorite clubs increases. The proper quality of service provided by sports clubs increases the credibility of the clubs' brand both domestically and internationally. In this case, service consumers consider clubs more valuable, and preference and superiority are formed in their minds. Finally, the created brand preference also stimulates the purchase intention and the buying behavior process in the customer. One of the service industries that has grown a lot in recent years is the service sector of the sports industry, which unfortunately has not grown as much as it should in Iran.

Considering the positive and significant impact of service quality and all its components on the brand value of Iran's Premier League football teams, it is suggested that team officials pay due attention to the importance of service quality for their success. Factors such as beautifying the environment of the stadium, modernizing the equipment of the stadiums, paying attention to the appropriate and attractive design of the team's uniforms, reporting the performance by the club, using information channels, keeping the popular people of the club, paying more attention to the fans' wishes, can be effective in improving the brand equity of the football clubs.

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Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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