



The Role of the Authenticity of Iranian Brands on the Emotional Attachment of Sports Goods Consumers, with Customer Bias as a Mediator

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Domestic sports brands seek to establish consumer relations with the brand to survive and earn continuous profits among foreign competitors. Therefore, this manuscript investigates the effect of domestic brands' authenticity on consumers' emotional dependence on domestic sports goods, including the Daei, Majid, and Momentum brands, with customer bias as a mediator.

Methodology: This study was based on a practical purpose and a descriptive correlation data collection method conducted in the field. The statistical population was all consumers of domestic sports goods (Daei, Majid, and Momentum brands), and 191 people were selected as a statistical sample based on the law of structural equations (five times the number of observable variables). The research tools included three [Kadirov's \(2010\)](#) brand authenticity questionnaires, [Lee et al.'s \(2013\)](#) customer bias, and [Thomson et al.'s \(2005\)](#) emotional attachment. Experts confirmed the formal and content validity and the reliability of the questionnaires, estimated to be 0.7, 0.92, and 0.95, respectively. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS/25 and Smart-PLS.3.2.8 software.

Findings: The research results indicated a positive and significant relationship between brand authenticity, emotional attachment, and customer bias. However, there was no significant relationship between customer bias and emotional attachment.

Originality: So far, no research has investigated the mediation of customer bias in the relationship between brand authenticity and consumer emotional attachment; therefore, this research is original.

Keywords

Brand Authenticity
Bias
Consumers
Customer
Iranian Brand

Article type

Research Paper

Received: 2023/07/01

Accepted: 2024/02/18

How to cite this article:

Sarlab, R., Darooghe Arefi, N., Seidler, M., & Zare, F. (2024). The Role of the Authenticity of Iranian Brands on the Emotional Attachment of Sports Goods Consumers, with Customer Bias as a Mediator. *Sports Business Journal*, 4(1), 49-62. <https://doi.org/10.22051/sbj.2024.44246.1107>.



1. Introduction

The significant growth of globalization has led to the development of the business world and increased competition among businesses (Fakaubun, 2019). Therefore, in today's competitive world, creating a positive and compelling brand is crucial for companies to profit and gain market share (Ardiana & Wardhani, 2022). Kadembo (2016) shows that a brand is an important marketing tool that helps companies to offer unique products (Nyagadza et al., 2020). The brand is the most asset of any company (Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015). Brand authenticity is one of the essential elements for companies in product marketing (Saputra, 2018) and one of the critical factors for brand success (Portal et al., 2019). Morhart et al. (2015) define brand authenticity as 'the degree to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true to itself and its consumers. According to consumers' understanding, they express the brand's meaning as real, honest, genuine, and accurate (Portal et al., 2019). The brand name is widely used as a basis for consumers and a tool to assess product differences and uniqueness, enhancing customer confidence and trust in their decision-making process (Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015). When buying, the brand's authenticity attracts consumers' attention, and this genuine value is often used to distinguish original or imitation products (Saputra, 2018). Authentic brands are committed to fulfilling their promises (Bruhn et al., 2012; Eggers et al., 2013; Morhart et al., 2015; Portal et al., 2019), and consumers trust brands that fulfil their promises (Napoli et al., 2014; Portal et al., 2019).

A solid emotional bond with customers is crucial for businesses to establish lasting relationships and foster customer loyalty (Do et al., 2015). There is a belief that the emotional aspects of products are distinctive in the final product choice and the price consumers are willing to pay in a competitive market where goods and services are insufficient for attracting and retaining new customers (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2002). Brand attachment is a concept developed in psychology called attachment theory, created by (Bowlby, 1969). It states that attachment is a deep and strong emotional bond that connects a person with others in space and time (Saputra, 2018). Therefore, it can be said that the concept of dependence comes from a deep and stable emotional understanding, a bond in interpersonal relationships that gradually enters other forms of relationships (Shabani Nashtae et al., 2017). Our daily lives are entirely of brands constantly competing for consumers' attention. Therefore, creating an emotional attachment to the brand is critical in brand management (Bairrada et al., 2019). Most customers have unique relationships with different brands.

Consequently, estimating the factors related to prolonging and enhancing the consumer's relationship with the brand is essential. In general, the greater the relationship between them, the more this relationship positively affects the company's results (Do et al., 2015). As Priester et al. (2006) stated, the stronger the consumer's relationship with a brand, the more products can be sold at a higher price, which benefits the company (Saputra, 2018). Creating a stable relationship with the brand (Barreda et al., 2020) has been realized by many researchers as consumers develop their relationships with brands to show their relationships with people (Liu & Chang, 2017). Consequently, companies are increasingly looking for strategies to create a strong emotional bond with consumers

(Bairrada et al., 2019). This is the competitive advantage of companies to attract consumers successfully (Ardiana & Wardhani, 2022).

Iglesias et al. (2011) emphasized that unique and memorable experiences trigger strong emotional reactions. Saputra (2018) researched the effect of brand authenticity on brand loyalty and showed that brand authenticity has a significantly positive impact on brand loyalty. In another study, Keshtidar et al. (2020) examined the communication model of the identity, authenticity, love, and social power of the 'Sports Olympiads' brand among students. Their findings demonstrated that the identity and authenticity of the Sports Olympiads brand have a noteworthy measurable impact on how much students love the brand. In other words, students' sense of identity with the brand and its authenticity positively influences their affection and attachment to the Sports Olympiads brand. Auni Asbforoshani (2014) investigated the effect of national identity on perceived product value through perceived product evaluation and customer bias and showed that national identity has a positive and significant impact on customer bias. Barreda et al. (2020) investigated the effect of social media activity on brand image and emotional attachment and showed that brand commitment and brand image positively affect emotional attachment. Aron et al. (1995) studied the relationship between the brand's social mentality and brand love. According to their findings, brand love was reflective of a higher identity.

Customer bias can explain why some customers have a negative attitude towards foreign products (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and refer to the customer's evaluation of domestic and foreign products. In the current research, customer bias represents the extent to which the customer prefers the products of their own country and evaluates them favourably. Customer bias provides a sense of national identity and belonging that serves as a guide to purchase attitudes and behaviors. Customer bias makes the customer evaluate the products related to his own country higher, which leads to acceptance of the desirability of a product (Nguyen et al., 2008). Customer bias can explain why some customers have a negative attitude towards foreign products (Shimp & Sharma, 1987) and actually refers to the customer's evaluation of domestic and foreign products. On the other hand, due to the economic and trade sanctions against Iran, the production of more and better Iranian brands and the awareness and encouragement of people to buy them have been reflected in clothing. The Leader of Iran argued that one of the characteristics of consumption in the financial system means that the customer is biased towards the product produced by Muslims and their fellow citizens (Samadi Qurbani & Khalipour, 2018). The conditions of the embargo in the country have caused us to have poor economic conditions. Thus, in alignment with economic development policies, supporting domestic production and domestic goods are at the top of the agenda. As an emerging sector, the sports industry can contribute to the country's economy by promoting domestic production. Based on previous research, there is a pressing need for further investigation. This research addresses the following questions: Does brand authenticity influence emotional attachment to the brand? Does brand authenticity influence consumer buying behaviour? Does brand authenticity affect customer bias? It is hoped that the results of the present research can take an essential step towards improving the conditions of sports brands.

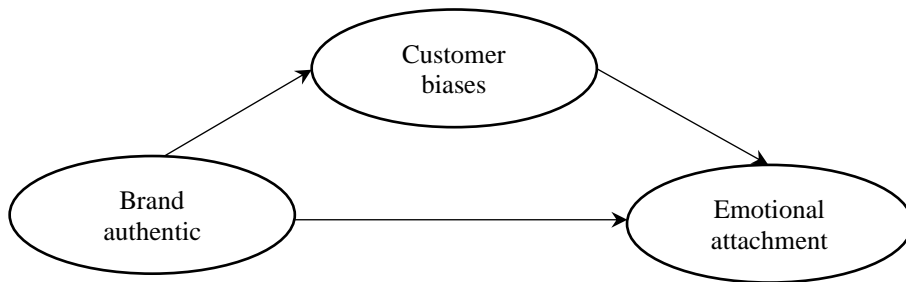


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Research.

2. Methodology

The present study is descriptive-correlational, designed for practical purposes, and employs a specific data collection methodology. The research population includes all consumers of domestic sports goods brands such as Dai, Majid, and Momentum. Given the unknown population size and the reliance on structural equation modelling for analyzing the conceptual model, a sample size ranging from 5 to 20 times the number of observed variables was considered. This study used a questionnaire containing 38 questions as the measurement tool. Thus, the minimum sample size required for the study was five times the number of observable variables, totalling 191 responses. More questionnaires were distributed to account for the non-return of questionnaires, resulting in the collection of 191 usable questionnaires during the research period.

The data collection instrument was a questionnaire consisting of four sections. The first part collected demographic information, including gender, age, history of sports activity, and education level. The second part comprised [Kadirov's](#) standardized brand authenticity questionnaire (2010), consisting of 14 closed-ended items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 for 'strongly disagree' to 5 for 'strongly agree'). It encompassed seven subscales: real-fake, extreme performance, commerciality, uniqueness, individuality, rich history, community, and empowerment. The questionnaire's validity was confirmed through construct validity, and its reliability, assessed using Cronbach's alpha, exceeded 0.86.

The third part contained the customer bias questionnaire, adapted from [Lei et al.'s](#) study (2013), consisting of four questions employing a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 for 'completely disagree' to 5 for 'completely agree'). The reliability of this questionnaire was estimated to be 0.7 in a previous study by [Auni Asbforoshani](#) (2014). Finally, the fourth part was derived from [Mugge et al. \(2010\)](#)'s emotional brand attachment questionnaire (2005), consisting of ten items categorized into three subscales: kindness, communication, and intense emotions. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 for 'very low' to 5 for 'very high'). The questionnaire's reliability, as established in the study by [Kheiri et al. \(2012\)](#), exceeded 0.7.

Four sports management professors confirmed the face validity of the questionnaires used in this study. The reliability of the mentioned questionnaires in this study was estimated to be 0.7, 0.92, and 0.95, respectively, for the questionnaires of brand authenticity, customer bias, and emotional brand attachment. After collecting questionnaire responses, structural

equation modelling was employed for data analysis. SPSS version 25 and Smart-PLS 3.2.8 software were used for data analysis.

3. Results

According to the research findings, out of 191 research samples, 102 (53.4%) were women, and 57 (29.8%) were in the age range of 26 to 30 years. Those older than 36 years had the highest frequency, while the lowest frequency was related to those with bachelor's degrees (77, 40.3%). Those with a master's degree or higher (67 people) were in the next rank.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the research sample.

Variable	Dimensions	Frequency	Frequency percentage
Gender	Man	102	53.4
	Woman	89	46.6
Age	25 years and less	44	23.0
	26-30 years old	57	29.8
	31-35 years old	48	25.1
	36 years and older	42	22.1

Using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach does not require assumptions such as the normal distribution of data, their measurement scale, or having a high sample volume before implementing structural equation modelling with the partial least squares approach, the assumption of non-collinearity of the independent variables should be checked first. The most common method is to check the correlation of independent research variables; correlations higher than 0.80 are the presence of multiple collinearities (Ghasemi, 2012). According to Table 2, the correlation between the independent variables was calculated, which was significant at the 0.01 level, but these values indicate non-collinearity between the independent variables. To assess the fit of the measurement model, convergent validity, divergent validity, and reliability of the instrument were used, which included three criteria: factor loading coefficients, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and composite reliability.

Table 2. Correlation matrix of research variables.

Variables	Brands authenticity	Customer biases	Emotional attachment
Brands authenticity	1		
Customer biases	**0.599	1	
Emotional attachment	**0.633	**0.424	1

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha criteria, composite reliability, and convergent validity of research variables.

Latent variable	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Mean-variance extracted
Brands authenticity	0.709	0.808	0.516
Customer biases	0.925	0.947	0.817
Emotional attachment	0.957	0.926	0.921

As shown in Table 3, all three research variables have Cronbach's alpha value and combined reliability above 0.7, and the suitability of the reliability situation can be considered acceptable. A convergence validity above 0.5 for the variables indicates the confirmation of the convergent validity of the research variables.

Table 4. Correlation between latent variables and AVE values.

Variables	Brands authenticity	Customer biases	Emotional attachment
Brands authenticity	0.704		
Customer biases	0.670	0.904	
Emotional attachment	0.592	0.427	0.959

The results show that the average variance extracted from all variables is more than 0.5, indicating the appropriateness of the convergent validity criterion. The Fronel-Larker matrix was used to check the external validity of the measurement model. Based on the results obtained from the correlations and the square root (AVE) placed on the diameter of Table 4, it is possible to conclude the model's differential validity at the structure level in terms of the Fresnel-Larker matrix. After measuring the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the structural model was examined through the relationships between the underlying variables. The current research used the most widely used criteria to fit the structural model. These criteria include the significant coefficient, the determination coefficient R2, and the prediction power coefficient Q2.

The first and most essential criterion of structural model fit is its path coefficient and significance. Significant coefficients must equal or exceed the significance index of 1.96. If the value of these numbers exceeds 1.96, it indicates the correctness of the relationship between the constructs and, as a result, the verification of the research hypotheses (Mohsenin & Esfidani, 2013). The path coefficients of the implemented model are shown in Figure 2, and their significance is shown in Figure 3.

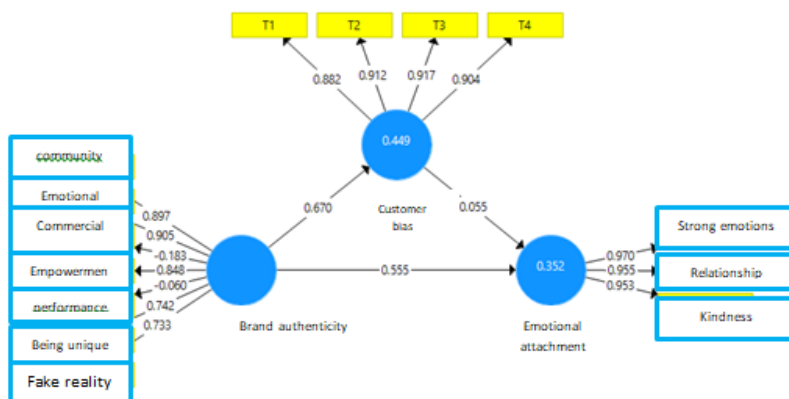


Figure 2. Path coefficient and structural model fit using R2.

As can be seen in the drawn model (Figure 2), the exogenous variables of the model have a significant effect on the endogenous variables of the research.

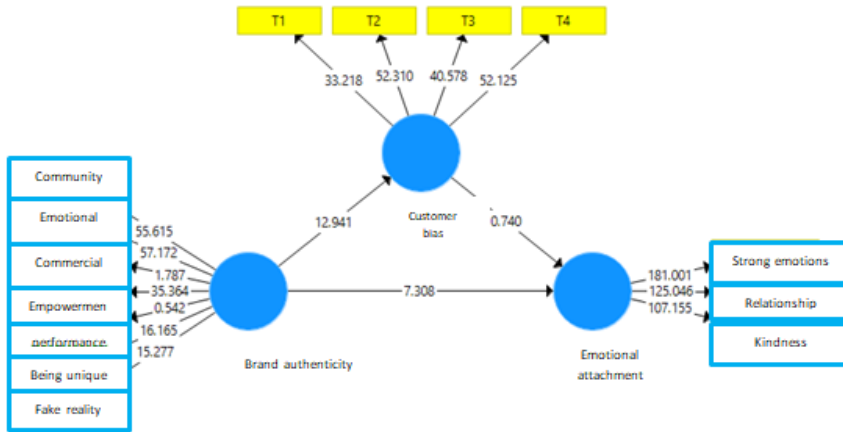


Figure 3. Fitting the structural model using the significance coefficients of T.

According to the significant coefficients in Figure 3, all relationships except the relationship of customer bias to emotional dependence between the variables of the research model are meaningful at the confidence level of 0.99. In other words, all the relationships between the model variables have been confirmed.

R2 is a measure that shows the effect of an exogenous variable on an endogenous variable, and three values of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 are considered criteria values for weak, medium, and strong values of R2 (Mohsenin & Esfidani, 2013). As shown in Figure 2, the value of R2 for customer bias variables was calculated as 0.44 and for the emotional dependence variable as 0.35. According to the three criterion values, R2 for customer bias and emotional dependence variables is evaluated at an average level.

Predictive Power Coefficient (Q2): The Q2 criterion also determines the predictive power of the model, and if this criterion obtains three values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 for an endogenous variable, it indicates the predictive power, respectively. Weak, medium, and firm have corresponding exogenous variables (Mohsenin & Esfidani, 2013). The Q2 criterion for the customer bias variable is 0.34, and the emotional dependency variable is 0.29, so the model's predictive power was evaluated substantially.

Finally, to check the fit of the overall research model, the goodness of fit criterion was used, which is calculated through the following formula. Considering the three values of 0.01, 0.25, and 0.36, which are introduced as weak, medium, and strong values for the goodness of fit (Mohsenin & Esfidani, 2013), obtaining a value of 0.53% for the GOF criterion, the fit It confirms the general research model very well.

$$\text{Equation (1): } GOF = \sqrt{R_{Average}^2 \times AVE_{Average}} \approx 0.53$$

Table 5. Other fit indices of the model.

Chi-Square	NFI	SRMR
400.97	0.9	0.06

In the following, the table of indirect effects and the Sobel test were used to measure the significance of the mediating effect of one variable in the relationship between two other variables.

Table 6. Indirect effects estimation.

Result	t	Path coefficient	dependent variable	Path	Path	independent variable
rejection	0.79	0.04	Emotional attachment	<---	<---	Customer biases Brands authenticity

$$\text{Equation (2): } Z = \frac{a*b}{\sqrt{(b^2*S^2a)+(a^2*S^2b)}} = 0.99$$

According to Equation 2, it can be said that at the 95% confidence level, the effect of the mediating variable of customer bias is not significant in the relationship between brand authenticity and emotional attachment.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In today's market, consumers encounter various brands of products and services, and acquiring more customers is the primary concern and priority for brand managers. A strong brand presence in the market is often the distinguishing characteristic that sets a product or service apart from its competitors. In such a scenario, securing a place in the consumer's mind fosters loyalty to the company (Azadi et al., 2015).

Furthermore, consumers seek authenticity to meet their internal and external needs due to the abundance of brands. Research indicates that customers emphasize brand authenticity in all aspects of brands and branding. The growing connection between brand authenticity, marketing concepts, and consumer behaviour has been highlighted recently, making the quest for brand authenticity a cornerstone of contemporary marketing and a key differentiator for businesses.

This equally applies to sports brands, which must establish a solid foothold to thrive in today's competitive landscape. This article aims to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of brand authenticity on emotional attachment to the brand, with customer bias acting as a mediator. The research findings demonstrate a positive and significant influence of brand authenticity on emotional attachment to the brand. These results align with the findings of Foroz Shahrstan and Erfani (2019), Manthiou et al. (2018), and Ghafourian Shagerdi et al. (2020).

Satisfying customers alone is no longer adequate for success in today's competitive market. To explain and predict the desired changes in subsequent consumer behaviours following satisfaction, a new marketing framework called "brand love" has been introduced. It comprises primary and secondary dimensions like interest and lust, such as intimacy, dreams, relationship duration, uniqueness, memories, idealization, and brand enjoyment (Keshtidar et al., 2020). Brand love signifies an emotional attachment to a brand (Zareyi et al., 2022).

According to psychological research, the relationship between brands and consumers resembles human relationships. An example can illustrate the connection between brands

and consumers (Zareyi et al., 2022). The motivations that prompt customers to act are seldom purely logical, predictable, or consciously driven; instead, most of their reactions stem from feelings and emotions, which have been harnessed across various fields (Mohammadian & Khajeh Dehdashti, 2016). Emotional attachment to a brand is characterized by warm and pleasant feelings, excitement, and a sense of brand superiority in the consumer's mind. Consumers seeking authenticity are naturally drawn to sports brands that demonstrate genuine intent, purpose, or a commitment to providing authentic service and quality (Batra et al., 2012).

Sports companies should connect with customers by surpassing their expectations regarding goods and services. Moreover, they should create a pleasant and entertaining yet relaxing environment. The study's findings indicate that the authenticity of national brands, such as Daei, Majid, and Momentum, positively and significantly affects customer bias. Authenticity is fundamentally a perceptual quality, necessitating an appearance of genuineness to the consumer (Baniyadi & Naami, 2021). Brand authenticity is a crucial determinant of the consumer-brand relationship (Tran, 2018). In the consumer's perception, brand authenticity invokes personality, presence, and high product and service performance (Pourasadollahi et al., 2019).

Therefore, domestic sports brands must differentiate their offerings from other brands to emphasize their originality. Customer bias stems from the social dimension (Auni Asbforoshani, 2014), and it manifests as customer behaviour reflecting people's natural inclination toward products from their own country. Customer bias leads customers to evaluate products associated with their group more favourably than those unrelated to their group, resulting in a more favourable reception of corresponding products (Nguyen et al., 2008). Differences between domestic and foreign sports brands regarding their influence on Iranian culture and identity within sports and sports-related activities can play a pivotal role in creating customer bias towards these brands. Domestic brands should emphasize their national identity to boost product sales and encourage consumer preference for domestic products. This enables consumers to evaluate domestic sports products more favourably in terms of price, quality, and services compared to foreign products, fostering a negative attitude toward foreign products. In consuming domestic goods, consumers maintain their social and emotional values (Zareyi et al., 2022). Foreign product purchases negatively impact Iran's domestic economy, causing unemployment, capital flight, and loss of national wealth. Understanding these points can influence consumer purchasing behaviour.

The final research findings indicate that the mediating effect of customer bias in the relationship between brand authenticity and emotional attachment is insignificant. This insignificance may be attributed to limited consumer knowledge about domestic brands such as Daei, Majid, and Momentum and the lack of marketing efforts to reach the audience. Additionally, the absence of domestic brands in international competitions and social and cultural events in Iranian society could be contributing factors. Research has demonstrated that customers identify with brands that possess a favourable identity. The country of origin plays a significant role in determining a product's symbolic and emotional perception, providing benefits like pride and dignity. Products associated with a specific country of origin acquire unique personality traits, including psychological and

social characteristics such as power, social status, and style, adding distinctiveness to the product (Adina et al., 2015).

Consequently, domestic brands are encouraged to strengthen the national sense and gain favourable evaluations from Iranian consumers by linking their products to the national identity. Domestic sports brands must work toward building a lasting relationship with consumers to ensure continued profitability and reinforce their brand's authenticity. This approach can cultivate a bias favouring domestically produced goods among consumers, increasing the likelihood of choosing domestic sports brands. Consumers are more likely to form emotional connections in business relationships, and brand attitude and loyalty remain key cognitive predictors of consumer behaviour. Brand loyalty emerges due to the passionate attachment consumers feel towards a brand.

These research results pertain to consumers of domestic sports brands, and their generalizability to other product brands may vary. It is recommended that similar studies on different product categories be conducted and that the impact of national identity and nationalism on consumer bias in the context of sports brands be investigated. Consumers may be more willing to share personal information for exclusive and personalized services, particularly when establishing an emotional connection with a brand. However, certain variables beyond the scope of this research, such as culture, gender, and education level, can influence the research findings.

Disclosure statement and funding

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest. The present study received no financial support from any organization or institution.

Acknowledgment

We would like to give special thanks to all the participants in this study.

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نشریه کسب و کار در ورزش

آدرس نشریه: <https://sbj.alzahra.ac.ir/>

زمستان ۱۴۰۲، دوره ۴، شماره ۱، ص ۴۹-۶۲

شناسه: 10.22051/SBJ.2024.44246.1107



نقش اصالت برندهای ملی ایرانی بر وابستگی عاطفی مصرف‌کنندگان کالاهای ورزشی با میانجی‌گری تعصب مشتری

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چکیده

هدف: برندهای ورزشی داخلی برای بقا و کسب سود مستمر در میان رقبای خارجی به دنبال برقراری روابط مصرف‌کننده با برند می‌باشند. لذا، پژوهش حاضر به دنبال بررسی تأثیر اصالت برندهای داخلی بر وابستگی عاطفی مصرف‌کنندگان کالاهای ورزشی داخلی اعم از برند دایی، مجید و مومنوم با میانجی‌گری تعصب مشتری بود.

روش: پژوهش حاضر به لحاظ هدف کاربردی و براساس شیوه گردآوری داده‌ها توصیفی از نوع پیمایشی - همبستگی بود که به صورت میدانی انجام گرفت. جامعه آماری کلیه مصرف‌کنندگان کالاهای ورزشی داخلی (برند دایی، مجید و مومنوم) و نمونه‌های تحقیق شامل ۱۹۱ نفر بودند که به صورت تصادفی ساده انتخاب شدند. ابزار پژوهش شامل ۳ پرسشنامه اصالت برند کادیروف (۲۰۱۰)، تعصب مشتری لی و همکاران (۲۰۱۳) و وابستگی عاطفی تامسون و همکاران (۲۰۰۵) بود. رویای صوری و محتوایی آن‌ها به تأیید خبرگان رسید. پایایی پرسشنامه‌ها نیز به ترتیب معادل ۰/۹۲، ۰/۹۵ و ۰/۹۷ برآورد شدند. تحلیل نتایج با استفاده از نرم‌افزارهای SPSS نسخه ۲۵ و Smart-PLS.3.2.8 انجام شد.

یافته‌ها: نتایج، رابطه مثبت و معناداری را بین اصالت برند و وابستگی عاطفی و نیز بین اصالت برند و تعصب مشتری را نشان داد. لیکن، بین تعصب و وابستگی عاطفی مشتری رابطه معناداری به‌دست نیامد.

اصالت و ابتکار مقاله: تاکنون پژوهشی میانجی‌گری تعصب مشتری در ارتباط بین اصالت برند و وابستگی عاطفی مصرف‌کننده را مورد بررسی قرار نداده است. لذا، این تحقیق از این جهت دارای اصالت می‌باشد.

کلیدواژه

اصالت برند
برند ایرانی
تعصب
مشتری
مصرف‌کننده

نوع مقاله

پژوهشی

تاریخ دریافت: ۱۴۰۲/۰۴/۱۰

تاریخ پذیرش: ۱۴۰۲/۱۱/۲۹