



## **The Impact of Relationship Marketing on Team Loyalty (The Case Study: Sport Team Fans of Azadeghan Football League of Iran)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Given the importance of brand management of sport teams, the objective of this study was to investigate the impact of relationship marketing dimensions, including team attachment, team trust, team involvement, and team self-expression on team loyalty of fans of sport teams participating in Iran Azadeghan Football League. Sample size of this study included 480 fans of football teams, and structural equation modeling was used for analysis of data using Lisrel software. The results confirmed all hypotheses, except one hypothesis. Therefore, there is significant relationship between team self-expression and team attachment among football sport teams in Azadeghan Football League of Iran. The results show the importance of paying attention to fans of sports teams and use of their high potential and capacity that sports teams brand managers must pay particular attention to this enormous capacity. Regarding sports teams, the impact of relationship marketing, particularly dimensions of self-expression and team involvement was investigated for the first time in Iran.*

**Keywords:** relationship marketing, team loyalty, team self-expression, team involvement, team attachment

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### **INTRODUCTION**

While millions of dollars are at stake in the sport industry, marketing managers face with many challenges in their attempt to gain better understanding of the relationship between team and its fans. The important issue that marketers face with it is to make decision in order to develop and maintain their longitudinal relationships with fans, without being aware of their team performance. Therefore, loyalty is a key factor for any longitudinal relationship that should be in the focus of contemporary sport brand management [29]. Customer loyalty brings boost for business through increased purchase and paying maximum price for goods. Another definition introduces customer loyalty as a key component of long life brand [16]. The concept of loyalty has been widely mentioned in the marketing literature and it is an important concept in strategic marketing. Some researchers believe that customer loyalty is a critical factor for organizations in the business arena [15]. Brand loyalty can be divided into continuous loyalty and emotional loyalty. The loyalty that is created for customers without a strong attachment is called continuous loyalty, but the loyalty created for customers with a strong attachment is called emotional loyalty. In emotional loyalty, customers accept a brand emotionally. In general, continuous loyalty is weaker than emotional loyalty. In emotional loyalty, alternative brands have no attraction for customers [12]. On the other hand, Lager [38] believes that loyalty to sports teams is like loyalty of customers to non-sport brands. If sport managers cannot understand the fans' dedication, they cannot do their task properly. However, loyalty of fans facilitates the task of managers, since this loyalty increases the tendency of audiences to particular team, without help of managers and requiring any better services. Building customer loyalty is the most important goal of relationship marketing activities. As researchers stated, based on the Pareto principle (20-80 rule), loyal fans are the rulers of football that is 20% of loyal fans provides 80% of income sources of sport. Therefore, in light of loyal fans, long-term and sustainable profit of sport clubs will be guaranteed [41]. In general, the main idea of RM begins with an interaction between business and customers [25]. This relationship involves an ongoing dialogue, listening to each other,

learning from each other, and finally reaching a common understanding [48]. When the business gains an appropriate understanding of its customers by fulfilling promise that they have created regarding themselves, they produce and present the value of product and customer [25]. In preserving and enhancing this process, business creates a long-term and close relationship, leading to ensured long-term profit [48]. As Christopher, Payne and Ballantine [17] showed, in a broader context, in the field of marketing benefits, RM causes increased customer retention, increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, higher profits, and increased stability and security. Adamson et al and Peppers & Rogers [48] noted that RM is broad investment approach that all employees must accept it. RM is the essence and nature of business that through which a company gains maximum profit in short-run regarding commitment to its customers. Although the importance of RM has been recognized in various industries, relationship trades are different considerably across different customers and different contexts [73]. As a result, the findings of the RM may not be generalized from one study to another [60]. Therefore, more studies will be needed to understand the applications and functionality of RM approach in certain industries, sport sector in this study. As [7], [59] and [73] have shown, limited number of studies and theoretical development have been conducted in RM in the sport sector. However, existing studies provide useful information, and these studies provide better conditions to use RM in sports organizations. In most cases, sports marketing trades include some types of RM [73]. Team, league, athletes, marketing company, and fans are interconnected that depend on the successful management of these relationships [7]. Sometimes relationship efforts are explicit, while, in other cases, they are implicit or unknown [73]. As Bee and Kahle [7] showed, to be successful in their efforts, sport organizations should view their customers as life-long partners and make an effort to understand their changing desires, interests, and values. RM provides a valid marketing approach in sports industry as opposition to addressing the short-term trading offers (for example, selling tickets) and immediate profit [59]. Through RM approach, sports marketers can communicate, listen, address the needs and demands of their customers, and maintain and increase their fans [76]. In light of developing new technologies, it will be easier to encourage sports organizations to communicate with global audiences and to maintain and enhance relationships with them [59]. On the one hand, Sarkar [53] states: Fans will have to sacrifice for their favorite sports clubs and in turn, the clubs must sacrifice for their fans. The goal in both cases is to gain value added for each of groups. Therefore, appropriate understanding of sport relationship and increased loyalty of fans, especially in the Azadeghan Football League of Iran where there is great number of fans, and understanding the emotional and financial aspects, and creating strong link with fans can help to Azadegan football League teams. It also can provide more accurate understanding and interaction between fans and clubs. The question that occupied the mind of researcher is that in what extent the relationship marketing dimensions, including team attachment, team involvement, and team self-expression affect loyalty of fans Azadegan Football League team fans. Radoula H. Tsiotsou [64] conducted a study entitled as sports team loyalty, relationship marketing integration and hierarchy of impacts. Sample of 287 fans of football teams in Eastern Europe were considered. Fitness of this model was tested using structural equation modeling and the statistical program of LISREL software. The results confirmed that all hypothesis plans created direct or indirect determinants of sport teams' loyalty. It means that hierarchy of effort-impact-perception methods can explain how strong relationships of consumers' team develop and team attachment acts as partial mediator in the relationship between the components of the conceptual model (team involvement, trust, and self-expression). Craig G. Hyatt et al [27] conducted a study entitled as involvement of fans in decision-making process of professional sports teams. The results showed that teams, that tend to increase team identification and presence of management-based fans, they should use technology to create platforms for membership dues and right to vote. Other research in the area of emotional connections of fans is a study conducted by Jing Theng So et al (2013) who conducted a study entitled as company's brand, brand loyalty, emotional attachment, and loyalty of brand. Sample of 282 consumers of luxury brands were selected and findings showed that among six dimensions of studied brands, only company link, applied benefits, and symbolic benefits have significant impact on emotional attachment. Additionally, Jao-Chuan [32] investigated the service quality of sport clubs and its impact on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. It was concluded quality of services, such as the quality of club environment plans has an impact on customer satisfaction. Results showed significant correlation between satisfaction and customer loyalty in these clubs.

## **2. Theoretical bases and hypotheses**

### **2-1- Relationship Marketing**

The concept of relationship Marketing was presented by Barry in 1983 in the field of service organization and it was defined as a strategy to attract, maintain and enhance relationships with customers. Relationship marketing is the process to identify, create, maintain, strengthen and, if necessary, terminate the relationship with customers and other stakeholders of this relationship in a mutual benefit. [67] Successful relationship marketing plays an important role in creating loyal customers, good reputation and reduced costs to find new customers [72]. Relationship marketing is defined as to increase and to maintain essential communications with customers and stakeholders conducted by mutual exchanges and fulfillment of promises [2]. The definition of relationship marketing has been dynamic during these years. Seventy and two definitions have been provided about relationship from various aspects [2]. Using these definitions [39] in studies conducted in the field of relationship marketing, relationship marketing

was defined as strategy, process-centric, creation of value for sellers and buyers to achieve superior financial performance. In the definition provided by [55], relationship marketing is defined as a continuous process of engaging in joint activities and programs to create or increase mutual psychological, social and economic values to profitability by intermediaries and final customers. Customer loyalty is one of the most important elements in relationship marketing [12] and it is the main goal of marketing for any company that accept relationship marketing as a business center strongly associated with customer loyalty and customer satisfaction. Relationship marketing has been created due to high competitive pressure from a phenomenon that has changed the economy of the last half-century: Deregulation with technological advances made with high speed and internationalization. Relationship marketing is interested in maintaining a long-term relationship with customer. In order to build a long-term relationship, mutual trust between seller and buyer is required [9]. During this relationship, the goal is that seller and the buyer can equip each other by giving value, frequently. As a result, many business representatives started to establish a working relationship to design very valuable and/or better communications in the market. The result was created value in economy in many sectors. This assumption received special attention and customers had constructive cooperation in the creation of value [52].

### **2-1-1-Relationship marketing in sport**

In sport, having relationship with fans is one of the most important aspects of a club. Relationship with the fans has received much attention because it is has been considered that if there is a high value for fans, other stakeholders, in turn, will be able to extract value. For example, TV has bought the broadcasting rights of football matches in an attempt to increase its audiences.

However, if viewers do not watch football, the audiences will be reduced. To encourage friendship, team needs to provide value to fans and encourage the supporting behavior of fans, as value added. Sponsors of participation show that clubs must give big goal so that they can advertise to receive much money, increased financial value from sponsors, hoping that their advertising message will be sent to public. To expand fans, clubs must once again offer value for fans. Adding value to fans will increase the return on the value added to key stakeholders of sports clubs. Rooney et al [50] believe that fans' networks require strong mutual involvement. Additionally, relationship has been recognized due to high extensive theory. Scientific research carried out in recent decades encourages sports clubs to maintain a long relationship with the sponsors and other stakeholders and strengthening their views .Stoney [61]stated that all those affected by the activities of a sport club should be involved in the marketing process, which means that decisions should be based on a network of partners in the club. Hence, participatory management must be adopted. Implementing of relationship marketing philosophy in sport clubs can be viewed as an opportunity to boost market share [37].Relationship marketing is considered as a strategy that prevent from loss of popularity.

### **2-1-2- sport team attachment**

One of the key features of brand attachment is stimulation and enthusiasm of brand. By creating a link of brand with attractive entity, consumers become dependent to brand to achieve personal development opportunity [45,47]. It has been recognized that brand attachment plays vital role due to its impact on consumer's behavior. In other words, brand attachment displays an emotion between consumer and brand [62].. A strong attachment leads into consumer resistance to change and the possibility of a brand (like team sports).In the literature, brand attachment has often led into brand commitment and involvement. However, both structures are different from brand attachment in terms of the concept. Park et al[46] assume that brand attachment is more than consumer attitudinal structure and it is highly important in consumer's behavior related to relationship with commitment. In sport, Funk and James[23]relate team attachment to team loyalty in his psychology continuous model (PCM). In their model, authors proposed knowledge, interest, attachment and loyalty as four stages. Kwon (2005) showed that team attachment determines behavioral loyalty and the behavior of attending in most favourite sports. The emotional attachment is supported by love to brand, interest in brand, and relationship with brand. This emotional attachment feature seems to refer to this point that customers with strong emotional attachment might have commitment to brand and remain in long relationship with company [62]. In fact, the applied value of emotional attachment has been represented recently by Park et al [47] in marketing. They found that an emotional attachment is better predictor for actual purchase, share of brand purchase, and brand need compared with brand attitude.

### **2-1-3- Sport team Trust**

Trust arising from social psychology is inherent characteristic of any social valuable social relationship. Brand trust creates an important structure in marketing, because it has impact on positive attitudes of consumer and it causes commitment [3].Brand trust refers to tendency of typical consumer to rely on brand ability to carry out mentioned functions mentioned and it exists as long as one party has trust and consistency of exchange[40].In one study, Harris & Ogbonna[26]used centralized football fans and recognized trust as one of the four characteristics of successful relationships between clubs and fans (full understanding, contrast, and commitment were the other three characteristics). Building trust with customers is essential in building long-term relationships and increased loyalty.

Many researchers have pointed out that creating customer loyalty plays an important role in gaining customer loyalty in a long-term relationship [18].

#### **2-1-4- Sport team involvement**

Dzekofski(1985) categorized involvement into two categories: goods involvement and decision-making or brand involvement. Product or goods involvement refers to profit that the consumer gains from goods, while brand involvement refers to profit that we gain when we select a brand. From the Tsotsou[63] perspective, the role of involvement in relation to the brand attachment has not been investigated, while it has been investigated in relation to brand commitment, as an introduction or as an inhibitor. Therefore, involvement or relationship is an introduction to loyalty and commitment to brand[5] and it acts inhibitor or mediator in the relationship between brand trust and brand commitment [3]. In sports, involvement or relationship has not been considered seriously in studies conducted in highly favorite sports. As a result, there are limited empirical documents regarding the relationship between consumer involvement and team attachment. Funk et al [24]conducted a study on involvement and used it as part of the incentive structure in order to make distinction among fans that had different levels of psychological relationship with their sport teams. They developed involvement for individual and group sport. They defined team involvement or relationship as the psychological motivation, incentive or interest in the team championship and relative activities harmonized with individual characteristics and organizational having characteristics of guidance [24].In the context of professional sports, Tsotsou and Alexandris[66]reported a positive relationship between involvement or relationship and basketball team attachment. In the recent studies, in the context of professional football teams, this relationship was confirmed [63].Involvement is useful concept to understand the attitudes and behavior of sports fans [24,35]. Sports fans are unique and they have high level of involvement and emotional attachment [54]. Finally, from the sports point of view, involvement refers to the level of interest or importance of fan to sport[54].

#### **2-1-5- Sport team self-expression**

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)[13] define self-expressing brand as consumer's perception of the extent that particular brand enhances the social self-expression of a person or reflects his inner self. Carroll and Ahuvia[13] define self-expressing brand as consumer's perception of the extent that particular brand enhances the social self-expression of a person or reflects his inner self. In literature of customer behavior, it has been proven that people do not select specific brands merely due to benefit of their performance, but this selection is due to symbolic characteristics [49].In this situation, the symbolic concept of brand is used as self-expressing of individual understanding with regard to himself (inner self-expression) and his status in society (social self-expression) [21].Therefore, fans of professional teams develop psychological connection with their favorite teams, and symbolic concept is used to express their personal understanding and identity [30].

#### **2-1-6- Sport team loyalty**

Customer loyalty is essential for any organization to return customers, and loyalty of customers has many advantages to organization. Loyal customers are less sensitive to price and loyal customers saves an organization's marketing activities in order to attract new customers [51].On the one hand, Oliver [43] defines customer loyalty as a "sincere commitment to a product or a distinct service that leads to repeatedly purchase of a brand or a group of similar in the, despite situational factors and marketing efforts that have the potential to change behavior. Customers are the driving force for profitable growth and customer loyalty can lead to profit [28].Adopting a communicative approach to sport marketing has several advantages. A communication theory improves scientific research on consumer loyalty [10] and thus reinforces the loyalty of sport fans. First, it promotes structures such as company or institution trust or attachment helping in distinguishing the communication and exchange services [8]. Second, research leads to cross-level that links areas of company level and customer together, and it makes us to explain how companies like sports groups arise and maintain strong customer relationships [26].For sport managers, loyal and strong relationships could enhance financial performance by positive verbal encouragement [68] and justifying the premium payments [10]. Further studies in sport marketing understand the appropriate use of marketing application [26].Some models presented in loyalty and literature of loyalty and relationship marketing are shown in Tables 1 and 2 in brief.

**Table 1- Models presented about loyalty**

Row	Title	Researcher/ researchers	Results	year
1	International Relationship Marketing in emerging markets	Bressan & Signori	The results showed that all three variables of trust, commitment, and cultural centrality have a significant positive impact on relationship marketing in emerging markets.	2014
2	The influence of customer satisfaction ,switching cost and trusts in a brand on customer loyalty	Ningsih & Segoro	The dependent variable was loyalty and customer satisfaction, cost of changing, and brand trust was independent variables. Results of regression model showed a significant positive correlation between the independent variables and loyalty.	2014
3	Impact of Relationship Marketing Tactics (RMT's) & Relationship Quality on Customer Loyalty	Abdullah et al.	The results showed that the model of relationship marketing can be expanded and relationship marketing implementation and commitment-trust theory are effective in customers and their loyalty.	2014
4	integrating relationship marketing and a hierarchy of effects	Tsiotsou [64]	The results confirmed that all hypothesis plans create direct or indirect determinants of sport teams' loyalty that hierarchy of effort-impact-perception can explain how strong relationships of consumer team advances and team attachment acts as partial mediator in the relationship between the components of the conceptual model (team involvement, trust, and self-expression).	2013
5	Brand, emotional attachment and brand loyalty	So et al.	Findings showed that among six dimensions of studied brands, only company link, applied benefits, and symbolic benefits have significant impact on emotional attachment.	2013
6	Fan involvement in a professional sport team's decision making	Hyatt et al.	The results showed that teams that tend to increase team identification and presence of management-based fans should use technology to create platforms for membership dues and right to vote.	2013
7	Investigating effects of relationship marketing types in life insurers in Taiwan	Yu & Tung	The findings show that there is a significant positive relationship between types of relationship marketing (financial link, social link, structural link) and quality of service,	2013

**Table 2- Literature of studies conducted on loyalty and relationship marketing**

Row	Title	Researcher/ researchers	Variables of study	year
1	Customer's Loyalty effects of CSR Initiatives	Yusof et al	Independent variables (customer orientation, green environment, ethics, friendly behavior) and the dependent variable (customer loyalty)	2015
2	Relations between customer engagement into value creation and customer loyalty	Banyte & Dovaliene	Independent variables (interaction to create value, satisfaction, trust, strengthen communication) and the dependent variable (loyalty)	2014
3	The Relationship between Loyalty Program, Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty in Retail Industry in Malaysia	Zakaria et al	independent variables (share purchase plan, Gifts, members day, journals, insurance coverage, discount cards and special prices) dependent variables (customer loyalty and customer satisfaction)	2014
4	Using Factor Analysis in Relationship Marketing	Dumitrescu et al	Independent variable (attempt dimension, cognitive dimension, emotional dimension) and dependent variable (attitude loyalty)	2013
5	Understanding Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty	Zhaohua et al	Independent variable (trust, service quality, perceived value, satisfaction and costs change) dependent variable (loyalty)	2010

Strength points of previous research are collection of information and their measurement scales that reveals useful platforms for better implementation of investigation. Proposed literatures provided good viewing angles for better implementation of research in terms of subject and content of backgrounds. In line with this argument and stated literature, hypotheses are expressed as follows.

**H1:** there is a significant relationship between sport team attachment and loyalty to sports teams in Azadegan Football League of Iran.

**H2** there is a significant relationship between sport team trust and loyalty to sports teams in Azadegan Football League of Iran

**H3:** there is a significant relationship between sport team self-expression and team loyalty in Azadegan Football League of Iran

**H4:** there is a significant relationship between sport team trust and sports teams attachment in Azadegan Football League of Iran

**H5:** there is a significant relationship between sport team involvement and sport teams attachment in Azadegan Football League of Iran

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 3-1-Model of study

Based on the literature and research objectives, a conceptual model [64] is proposed in the context of professional football teams shown in Figure 1.

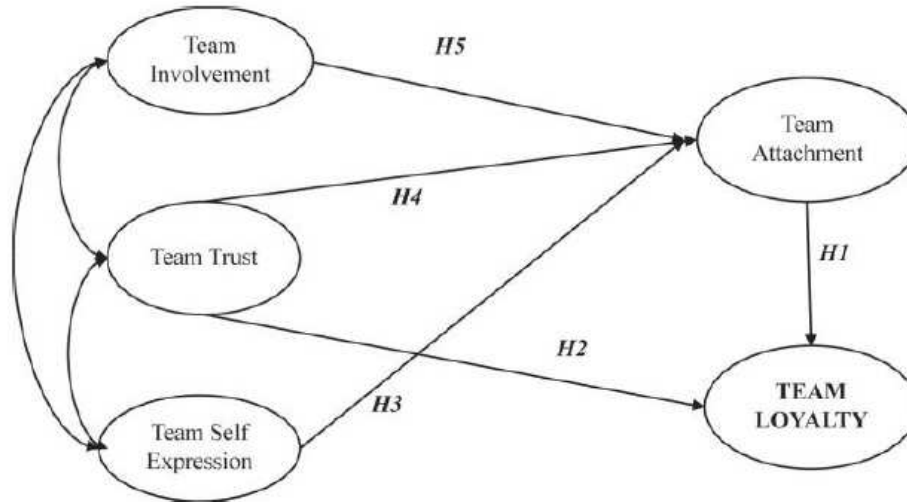


Figure 1- conceptual model adopted from [64]

### 3-2-Data collection

This study is applied in terms of goal, and it is descriptive-survey in terms of data collection. It is applied since using results of this study is effective in improving the performance of sport teams, and it is descriptive since it investigates the status quo. The population of study consisted of all Iran Azadegan Football League fans that their number is unlimited. Cochran formula was used to determine the sample size. Because there is no specific information of the population size, there is not available knowledge of population variance, therefore, the sample size was calculated using the following formula:

$$n = \frac{\left(\frac{Z_{\alpha}^2}{2} \times S^2\right)}{d^2}$$

Sample size was estimated through a preliminary study by distribution of questionnaire among 25 members of the population and by estimating the variance of initial sample variance at the confidence level of 95%.

According to the results, 472 subjects were estimated as the minimum sample of study and 550 questionnaires were distributed randomly among the sample of study for higher confidence that 480 of questionnaires were recognized as suitable for analysis. In the present study, due to the nature of the subject and studied unlimited population, non-probability available sampling method was used.

### 3-3- Measurements and scales

In order to collect information, both library and field methods were used. To develop theoretical bases and literature of study, library method was used, while questionnaire method was used to collect data from the population of study. To measure indicators of study, collecting data and needed information, questionnaire was used. Based on the goals of study and nature of subject of study, questions were developed in Likert scale of five options as a package. Data collection tool was standard questionnaire adapted from the similar samples used in previous studies [64]. Team involvement questionnaire [79] that consists of ten items was used to measure team involvement. This scale includes two involvement dimensions. The importance and pleasure mean rank of two dimensions were used as two markers of team involvement. To measure the level of self-expression, a questionnaire developed by Carroll and Ahuvia [13] was found that their scales are composed of two factors: Inner self (four items) and social self (five items). The mean rank of two factors was used as two markers of team self-expression. Sport team attachment questionnaire is composed of eight items to measure team attachment. These items were proposed and tested by James and Ross [31] in sport for the first time. To measure team trust, four items were used [14]. Brand loyalty was measured with nine items questionnaire used in the marketing literature [81]. The first four items measure team loyalty and remaining five items measure the goal of loyalty. The mean scores of two subscales were used as markers of brand loyalty. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was carried out to preparatory evaluation of the

construct and r eliminating some reducing items of this validity, if necessary (items with extraction communalities lower than 0.5) Principal Component Analysis (PCA). The results led to the removal of the first item since all data were collected simultaneously from specified people by single tool (questionnaire). In order to avoid common method variance before the necessary statistical analysis, Harman single-factor analysis was conducted. Common method variance exists when only one factor (third factor) explains the highest variance. The result of the implementation of the exploratory factor analysis through principal components analysis formed 7 factors with special values greater than 1 that most of them explain 21/71% of the total variance. Therefore, as this value was lower, it was specified that common method variance is not a threat to validity measurement in this study.

	Communalities	
	Initial	Extraction
q32	1.000	.786
q33	1.000	.810
q34	1.000	.773
q35	1.000	.517
q36	1.000	.676
q37	1.000	.873
q38	1.000	.535
q39	1.000	.730
q40	1.000	.662
q1	1.000	.999
q2	1.000	.964
q3	1.000	.292
q4	1.000	.696
q5	1.000	.555
q6	1.000	.609
q7	1.000	.575
q8	1.000	.571
q9	1.000	.665
q10	1.000	.605
q11	1.000	.785
q12	1.000	.672
q13	1.000	.553
q14	1.000	.716
q15	1.000	.738
q16	1.000	.807
q17	1.000	.513
q18	1.000	.689
q19	1.000	.558
q20	1.000	.533
q21	1.000	.572
q22	1.000	.796
q23	1.000	.511
q24	1.000	.522
q25	1.000	.620
q26	1.000	.603
q27	1.000	.953
q28	1.000	.569
q29	1.000	.898
q30	1.000	.517
q31	1.000	.610

*Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis*

Total Variance Explained											
Component	Initial Eigenvalues*			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings				
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %		
1	6.774	21.761	21.761	6.774	21.761	21.761	2.312	7.428	7.428		
2	5.901	18.957	40.718	5.901	18.957	40.718	2.443	7.847	15.275		
3	2.067	6.640	47.358	2.067	6.640	47.358	2.206	7.088	22.362		
4	1.509	4.847	52.206	1.509	4.847	52.206	2.128	6.836	29.198		
5	1.127	3.621	55.827	1.127	3.621	55.827	2.604	8.364	37.562		
6	.991	3.183	59.010	.991	3.183	59.010	1.462	4.695	42.257		
7	.904	2.903	61.913	.904	2.903	61.913	6.119	19.656	61.913		
8	.754	2.423	64.336								
9	.721	2.315	66.651								
10	.665	2.137	68.788								
11	.654	2.102	70.891								
12	.626	2.011	72.902								
13	.577	1.853	74.754								
14	.555	1.783	76.537								
15	.515	1.655	78.192								
16	.465	1.493	79.685								
17	.439	1.409	81.094								
18	.425	1.365	82.459								
19	.396	1.274	83.733								
20	.370	1.187	84.920								
21	.351	1.129	86.049								
22	.339	1.090	87.139								
23	.334	1.074	88.214								
24	.318	1.021	89.235								
25	.303	.975	90.209								
26	.293	.940	91.149								
27	.263	.846	91.995								
28	.261	.839	92.834								
29	.254	.815	93.649								
30	.237	.761	94.410								
31	.227	.728	95.138								
32	.209	.671	95.809								
33	.195	.627	96.436								
34	.189	.608	97.044								
35	.183	.586	97.631								
36	.170	.546	98.176								
37	.161	.516	98.693								
38	.143	.461	99.153								
39	.141	.454	99.607								
40	.122	.393	100.000								

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. When analyzing a covariance matrix, the initial eigenvalues are the same across the raw and rescaled solution.

Reliability is concerned with this fact that the measuring tool to what extent gives the same results in the same conditions. One of the methods of calculating the reliability is the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. If Cronbach's alpha for the scale is calculated more than 0.7, reliability of scale is desirable.

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left( 1 - \frac{\sum s_i^2}{s_x^2} \right)$$

Table 3- output of SPSS software to calculate Cronbach's alpha

Variable	Cronbach's alpha
Team involvement	0.81
Team trust	0.55
Team self-expression	0.80
Team attachment	0.77
Team loyalty	0.77

Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the total questionnaire was calculated as 0.921. Therefore, it has desirable reliability. For data analysis, SPSS22 and LISREL software was used in descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistical analysis methods included tables and graphs, distribution and frequency indicators. To investigate the normal distribution of data (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) in the inferential analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used. In addition, -Test and T-Value, factorial load, and goodness of fit were used in this regard.



### 3.4. General characteristics of respondents

To describe the general characteristics of the respondents, descriptive statistics indicators were used. Frequency of respondents was drawn based on gender, age and favorite team and related diagrams were drawn.

Gender: All 480 samples were selected among men who are allowed to go to sports stadiums.

**Table 4- frequency distribution of respondents based on gender**

gender	frequency	percentage	Cumulative frequency
male	480	100	100
female	0	0	100
total	480	100	

Age: 225 of the respondents were in the age range of less than 30 years consisting of 45% of the sample size and they had the highest frequency. One hundred thirty and two of them were 30 to 40 years old, and 92 of them are 40 to 50 years old consisting of 20% of the sample. Only 31 people were over 50 years old consisting slightly more than 5% of sample size.

**Table 5- the frequency of respondents by age**

age	frequency	percentage	Cumulative frequency
Lower 30 years old	225	46.88	46.88
30-40 years old	132	27.50	74.38
40-50 years old	92	19.17	93.54
Over 50 years old	31	6.46	100
total	480	100	

Favourite team:

Fans of nine clubs, including Damash Gilan, Mazandaran Textile Black Jamgan Mashhad, Mes Rafsanjan, gamers Tehran, the city of Tabriz, Ardabil Municipality, Army Tehran, relying Gorgan were selected. Damash Ghilan fans included 30% of the samples (144 people). Nassaji Mazandaran fans included 38/14% of sample, Siah Jamegan Mashhad fans 10.63 % of the sample, Parseh fans included 11.88 % of the sample, Shahr-dari Tabriz fans included 9.17% of the sample, Shahr-dari Ardabil fans included 5.21 % of the sample, Nirouye Zamin Tehran fans included 5% of the sample, and Etgha Gorghan fans included 4.58% of sample.

**Table 6- the frequency of respondents based on their favourite team**

Team	Frequency	Percent
Damash Ghilan	144	30
Nassaji Mazandaran	69	14.38
Siah Jamegan	51	10.63
Mes Rasfanjan	44	9.17
Parseh Tehran	57	11.88
Shahr-dari Tabriz	44	9.17
Shahr-dari Ardabil	25	5.21
Nirouye Zamin Tehran	24	5
Etgha Gorghan	22	4.58
Total	480	64.17

## RESULTS

As studies are based on structural model based on the assumption of normality of the data, the normality test was carried out firstly. In confirmatory factor and structural equation modeling, normality of all data is not required, but factors must be normal [34].

**Table 7- normality test of data (sub-factors)**

	Pleasure	Importance	Trust	Inner self	Social self	Attachment	Behavioral	Voluntary
N	480	480	480	480	480	480	480	480
Mean	4.197	3.772	3.965	3.843	3.888	3.835	3.860	3.979
SD	0.561	0.614	0.583	0.578	0.562	0.515	0.454	0.582
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	4.929	2.853	3.725	4.395	3.847	3.275	2.270	6.139
Significance	0.087	0.070	0.145	0.143	0.152	0.135	0.070	0.097

Table 8- normality test of data (main factors)

	Team involvement	Team trust	Team self-expression	Team attachment	Team loyalty
N	480	480	480	480	480
Mean	3.985	3.965	3.867	3.835	3.919
SD	0.519	0.583	0.506	0.515	0.443
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	2.834	3.725	2.747	3.275	2.107
Significance	0.116	0.125	0.058	0.248	0.079

According to results inserted in in table, significant value was greater than 0.5 in all cases. Therefore, there is no reason to reject the hypothesis. It means that distribution of data of measurement of each dimension is normal. Therefore, we can use parametric tests and confirmatory factor analysis. This structural model has been saturated in three stages. Fitting indicators show favorable values. Chi Square value was obtained as 1.389 that is within the acceptable range of 1 to 5. Therefore, structural model has a good fitness.

$$\frac{\chi^2}{df} = \frac{301.61}{217} = 1.389$$

In addition, as the fit index of RMSEA was obtained as 0.032 and it is smaller than 0.05, the model has a good fitness. Other indicators of goodness of fit indices were in the appropriate range.

Table 9-Goodness of fit indicators of structural model of the main hypothesis

IFI	NNFI	NFI	AGFI	GFI	RMSEA	SRMR	Fitness index
0 - 1	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.1	<0.05	Accepted values
0.96	0.96	0.98	0.98	0.96	0.032	0.031	Calculated values

After confirming the factor structure of study factors, to examine the relationships between variables, structural equation modeling was used. The results of the analysis are presented separately. The general model of study has been presented. In this model, the relationships between variables can be seen in the output of LISREL software.

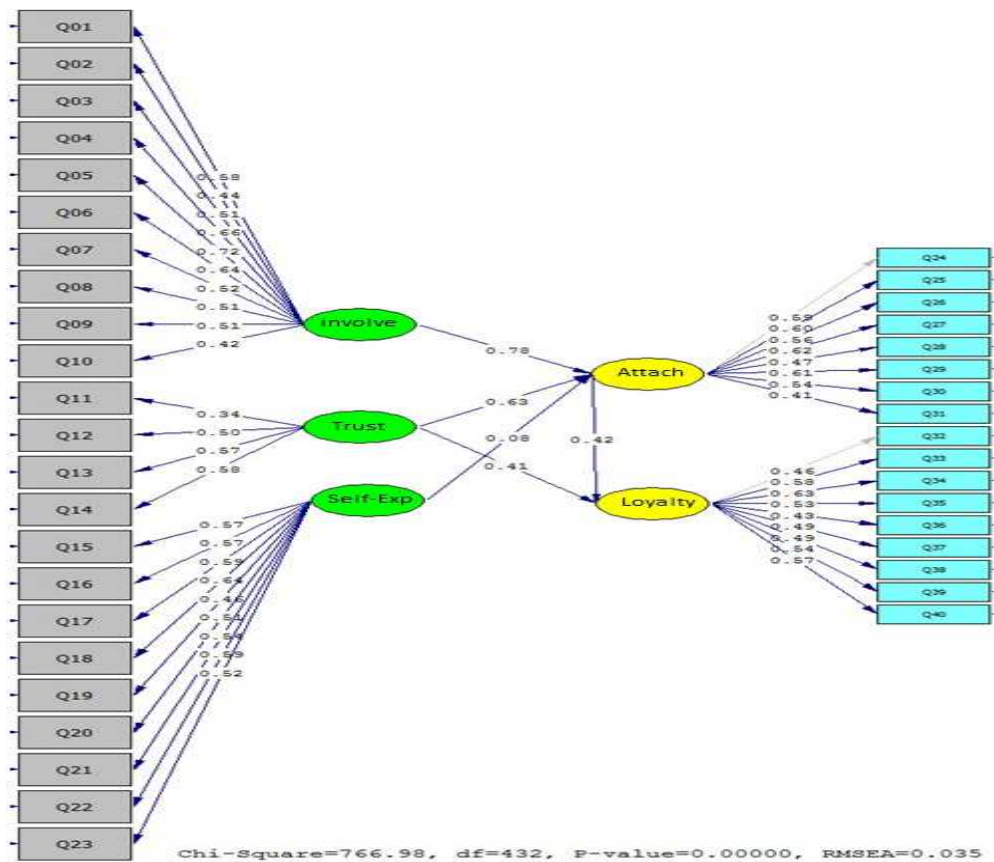


Figure 10- standard factorial load to test hypotheses of study

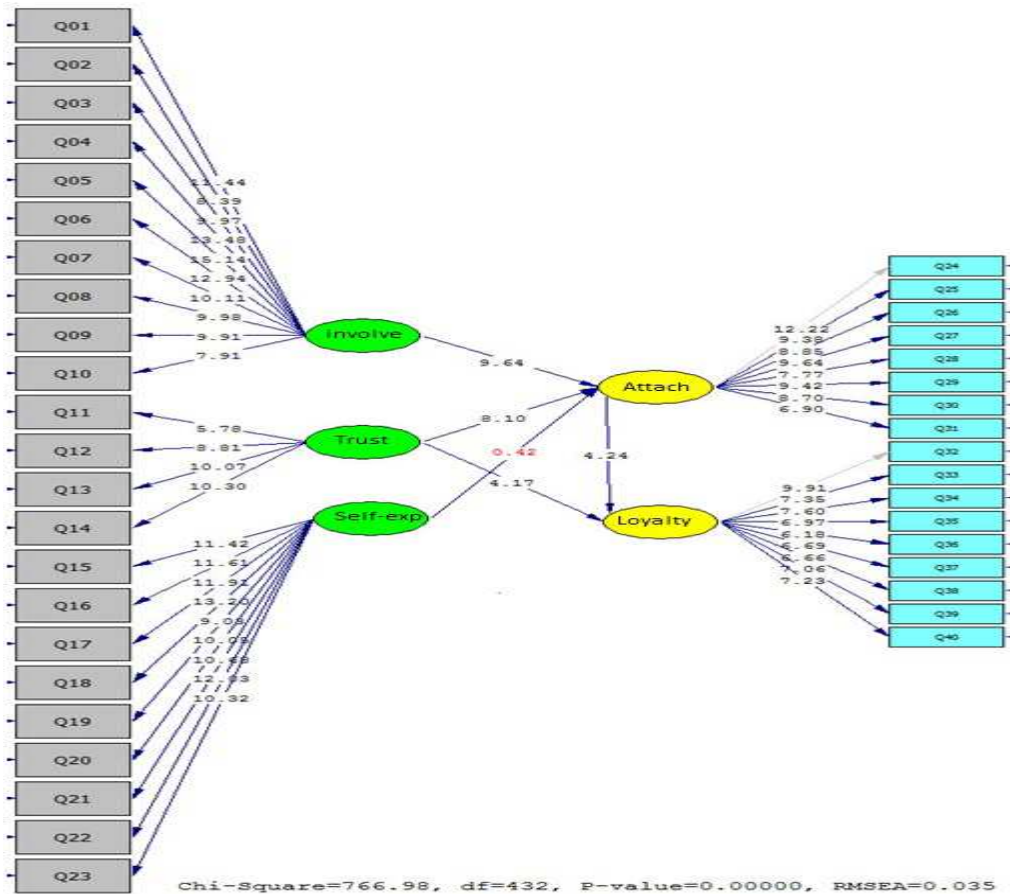


Figure 11- statistic t-value to test research hypotheses

The power of relationship between team attachment and team loyalty was calculated as 0.44 that is acceptable value. The statistic of test was also obtained as 3.74 that this value is higher than critical value of t at the error level of 5% that was 1.96. It shows that the observed correlation was significant. Therefore, there is significant correlation between team attachment and team loyalty.



Figure 12- factor load of the impact of team attachment on team loyalty

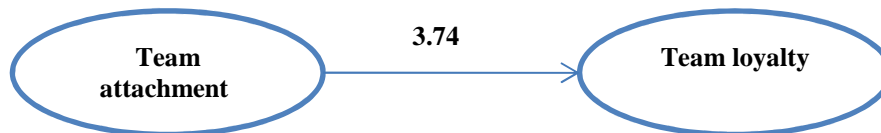


Figure 13- t-value statistic of the impact of team attachment on team loyalty

The power of relationship between team trust and team loyalty was calculated as 0.51 that is acceptable value. The statistic of test was also obtained as 5.78 that this value is higher than critical value of t at the error level of 5 % that was 1.96. It shows that the observed correlation was significant. Therefore, there is significant correlation between team trust and team loyalty.

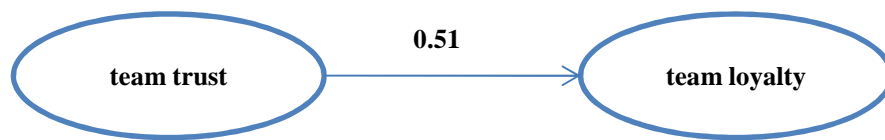


Figure 14- factor load of the impact of team trust on team loyalty



Figure 15) t-value statistic of the impact of team trust on team loyalty

The power of relationship between team self-expression and team attachment was calculated as 0.18 that is very low value. The statistic of test was also obtained as 0.44 that this value is higher than critical value of t at the error level of 5 % that was 1.96. It shows that the observed correlation was not significant. Therefore, there is no significant correlation between team self-expression and team attachment.

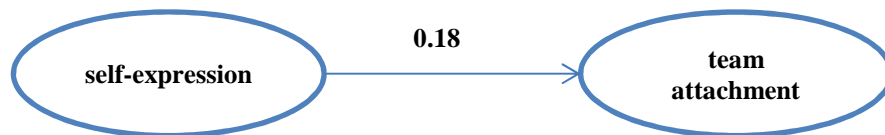


Figure 16- factor load of the impact of team self-expression on team attachment



Figure 17- t-value statistic of the impact of team self-expression on team attachment

The power of relationship between team trust and team attachment was calculated as 0.65. The statistic of test was also obtained as 8.13 that this value is higher than critical value of t at the error level of 5 % that was 1.96. It shows that the observed correlation was significant. Therefore, there is significant correlation between team trust and team attachment.



Figure 18- factor load of the impact of team trust on team attachment

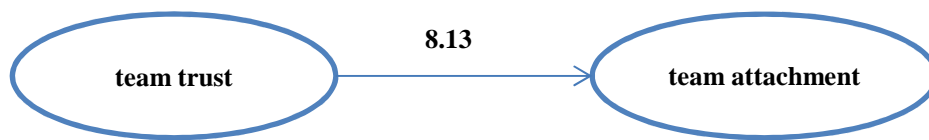


Figure 19- t-value statistic of the impact of team trust on team attachment

The power of relationship between team involvement and team attachment was calculated as 0.74. The statistic of test was also obtained as 8.67 that this value is higher than critical value of t at the error level of 5 % that was 1.96. It shows that the observed correlation was significant. Therefore, there is significant correlation between team involvement and team attachment.

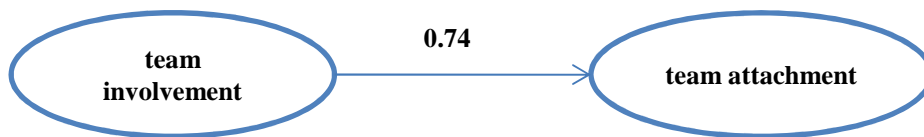


Figure 20- factor load of the impact of team involvement on team attachment

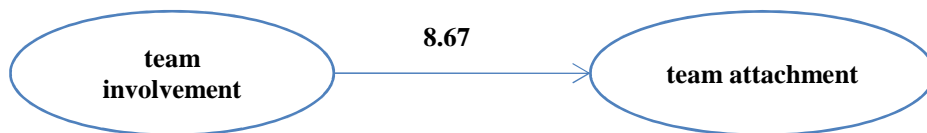


Figure 21- t-value statistic of the impact of team involvement on team attachment

**3-6- Summary of results**

Findings of study are shown in Table 10 in brief.

Table 10- Results of hypotheses test

Hypotheses	Path coefficient	T-Value	Result
Impact of team attachment on team loyalty	0.44	3.74	Confirmed
Impact of team trust on team loyalty	0.51	5.78	Confirmed
Impact of team self-expression on team attachment	0.18	0.44	Rejected
Impact of team trust on team attachment	0.65	8.13	Confirmed
Impact of team involvement on team attachment	0.74	8.67	Confirmed

Table 11- Path analysis

Paths	Direct	Indirect
Involvement- attachment- loyalty	-	0.3256
Trust- attachment- loyalty	0.51	0.286
Self-expression- attachment- loyalty	-	0.0792
Attachment-loyalty	0.44	-

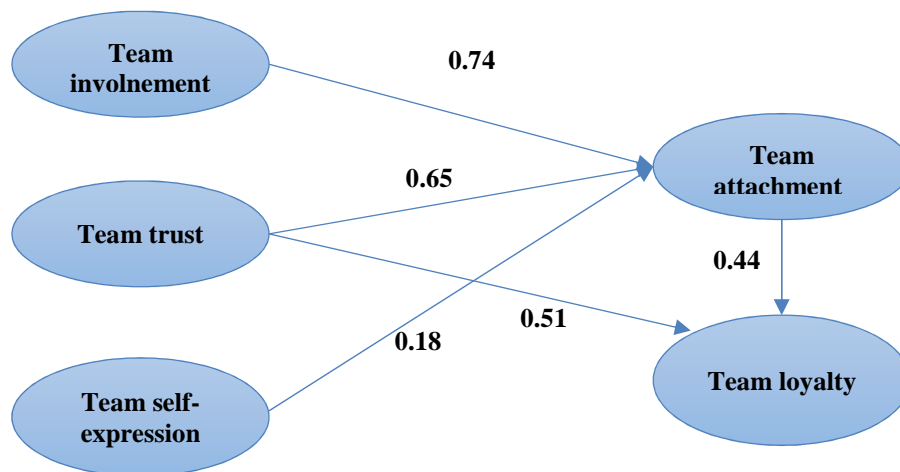


Figure 22- results of final model confirmation

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of relationship marketing dimensions on team loyalty among fans of teams participating in Azadegan Football League of Iran. As results showed, all components of relationship marketing had significant impact on team loyalty, while only the relationship between team self-expression and team attachment in sport teams participating in Azadegan Football League of Iran was not confirmed from the perspective of fans of these teams. This study contributed, both in theoretical and practical areas, to understand the structure of loyalty of sport team (Funk and James, 2006). The present study investigated the mechanism that which of the basic structures of relationship marketing used in the field of sports helps to team loyalty growth. It also helped in better understanding of their roles in the customer-sport team relations. From a theoretical perspective, this study expanded our experimental knowledge on team loyalty and their relations with other key concepts such as participation, self-expression, attachment, and trust. Managers must measure team trust, team attachment, and team loyalty when they are analyzing the evaluation of sport brand, since loyalty has been found as determining factor in brand performance [14] and team attachment plays key role in the team loyalty structure. If team managers want to develop emotional bonds with consumers of brands, they must invest their resources on increasing the self-expression value of their sports team, partnership with consumer, and trust, since team self-expression increases social self and inner self of consumers. This is vital to develop an image of sport team that supports the identity of the goal part. Team loyalty plays an important role in prediction of sport fan's behavior such as intention to attend in future matches [6957]. Sport team managers must plan advertising to develop their team's fans participation and interests and encourage them and gather members of team (such as players and coaches) for fans through public service activities. Increased loyalty may increase attendance in match leading to increased financial performance. This study emphasizes on strong emotional relationship with fans and significant role of this relationship was revealed in this study. Results of study suggest high impact of emotional bonds of fans with sport teams.

### 5- Limitations and Recommendations

The researcher believe that the most important limitation of the study relates to the fact that it was investigated exclusively in Azadegan League and it did not investigate the lower rank leagues and Iran Super League. Another limitation of the study is that it was limited to football and other sports were not investigated, so results of these studies cannot be generalized to other sports. Given the results of study and significant relationship between team attachment and team loyalty, and confirmed relationship between team trust and team loyalty in Azadegan Football League of Iran. It is recommended for football teams to use this capacity, since they can increase their revenue by using capacity of their fans due to financial problems that most of these teams face. As study indicated that loyal fans are prepare help financially for their teams, clubs can take advantage from financial capacity of fans by adopting principal financial mechanisms through various ways such as stock offering.

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