



## ANALYSIS OF FOOLAD KHUZESTAN CLUBS BRAND WITH EMPHASIS ON BRAND ASSOCIATIONS

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### **Abstract:**

Brand is strategically valuable to organizations. The aim of this study was to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Foolad Khuzestan Club based on brand associations. Due to limitation of the research statistical population of all the senior managers of the club, were all 15 persons the sample was considered equal to the society using the statistical sampling method. In order to collect data, the association's questionnaire of brand the Ross (2006) was used. The justifiability of questionnaire was confirmed by five of sport management professors and its reliability was 0.85 achieved by Cronbach's alpha method. Binomial and Friedman test were used to analyze data. At the end a 20 items significant was obtained from 53 items in questionnaire which include, 10 strengths, 4 weakness, 4, opportunities and 2 threats. The findings according to Friedman test ( $\chi^2=39.23$ ,  $P$ value-0.05) showed that great efforts of club management for success, is the most important strength and the low fan interaction competitions, is the most important weakness and the most important opportunity is the low opponents readiness to confront the club and spending money by the club arrivals to hire a coach, is the most important threat. In general, and with regard to the number of internal and

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external factors for the club brand, this can be acknowledged that Foolad Khuzestan's club is currently in a right position, and its offered that in order to maintain and improve this position the club had better to develop and implement some strategies with considering the achieved internal and external factors.

**Keywords:** Brand, Khuzestan Foolad club, brand associations, SWOT analyze

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the value of a company was measured in terms of its real estate, tangible assets, plants, and equipment. Today, however, the economics and management researchers conclude that the real value of a company is out of its place in the minds of potential buyers. In today's world, the organization's brand is the main asset of many organizations (Moharramzadeh, 2013). The brand may be conceptualized as a name, term, sign, symbol, or a combination of them; it makes the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers to be identified and distinguishes them from other competitors (Sehat et al, 2012; Cutler, 2004). Besides having successful and powerful brand, the establishment of brand in minds of customers is more important to achieve their loyalty. The mentality of a brand is the perceptions of brand which are organized meaningfully in consumer's mind and impact on judgment of consumers about product's value (Dean, 2004). The value and sense which arises in mind of consumer and distinguishes one brand from other brands is called brand association. D.A (1991) considers the brand association as anything which is related with brand in customer's mind. According to Chen's brand association classification, the associations are the basis of purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and create value for company and their customers (Chen, 2001). The brand association enables customers to make the best choice considering specific items in mind (Parhizgar, 2012). Today, therefore, the brand management is of great importance for organizations. Melovic (2014) argues that the modern brand management reflects the integrated management of all brand contacts and consumers and is a tool to manage market communications. Due to strategic value of brand to organizations as well as its role in identifying product (Sajjadi, 2013), many research have been conducted in recent years on brand management in sports organizations. The researchers have emphasized on increasing importance of this field; therefore, the sports organizations get more willing to try in this field. In addition, the sports organizations should find solution to deal with regional and global changes. The brand and its management have the potential to take advantage of a comprehensive program and provide a competitive advantage to organization. Kapferer (2006) argues that the wealth of a football club like Manchester United is its global community with

over 4 million fans who buy its sports packages and products and are willing to watch its games. However, the success of a brand is often dependent on club success and profit of famous brands. Holt (1995) stated that the brand should help the professional sport teams to increase their emotional connection with fans in order to create brand trust and brand and organization loyalty. Gladden and Funk (2002) argued that the sports teams need managers who are aware of brand equity components, because these components may greatly affect the quality of brand equity; they emphasized on brand association to enhance brand equity. In his research, Chen (1996) provided a scale to measure customer-based brand equity; the brand association was its main tool. In their research, Gladden and Funk (2002) identified the 16 factors which shape brand association in sport: success, star players, coach, management, logo design, stadium, product presentation, team history, offered benefits, identity of fans, friends reception, nostalgia, passion in location, importance, knowledge, and influence of name. Also, Ross (2006) provided the scale to measure brand association in professional sports teams which contained 11 factors: team staff, team success, team history, team's game features, team brand, stadium, commitment, organization's attitudes, social interactions, advantages, and competition.

Korchia (2004) found that the brand association features have no impact on brand awareness, while the unique and acceptable associations impact on creating higher brand equity and brand attractiveness. Brain et al (2011) stated that the strategic map of brand associations provides a clear, strategic, and customer-based vision to managers. Williams (2010) studied on brand associations' measurement by exploring the relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty in sports, identified 10 brand associations factors (Product presentations, socialization, location, value, popularity, physical space, logo, nostalgia, passion, and management), and concluded that there is relationship between brand associations and brand loyalty. He showed that from among the factors, there was significant relationship between location, value, logo, and passion and brand loyalty. Thilo (2014) conducted a study entitled (Strategies to develop sports brand to strengthen consumer relationships with product). Through content analysis, he identified 3 brand's development strategies: market penetration, market development, and product development. Rui (2015) studied the role of fan club membership in understanding brand equity of football teams and concluded that there was significant difference among factors including brand, social interaction, commitment, team history, organizational features, team success, coach, management, stadium, and internalization. Chanavat & Bodet (2009) provided strategies to create a global brand in professional sports teams and in this regard, they emphasized on several key factors including team, organization, and market. In this study, they found specific characteristics for each club's brand equity.

In recent years, the Iranian researchers have also studied the position of brand in sport. In a study entitled (The effect of successful teams' brands on fans' loyalty in Football Premier League of Iran), Ehsani (2012) found that the benefits of brand association is the most influential factor on fans' brand loyalty; the attitudes and assets were in next ranks. Moshabbaki Esfahani (2013) designed the model of Iran sports industry's brand identity and found that the most important factors shaping brand identity in sports are: success, color, name and logo, delivery, clothing, fans and rivals, geographical links, history, tradition, star players, performance, stadium, and non-player staff. Esfahani (2013) conducted a study entitled (Brand development strategic planning with an emphasis on brand associations at Mahan Sepahan Club) and concluded that Foolad Mahan Club's brand has 9 strengths, 3 weaknesses, 4 opportunities, and 1 threat. Alavi (1393) referred to mediator role of loyalty in relationship between loving sport brand and sport brand advocacy. In a study entitled (Modelling the fan-based brand equity (AFBBE) in football clubs in Iran), Farahani (2014) concluded that the characteristics and factors of brand association had no significant effect on brand loyalty; there was significant direct correlation between attitude factor of brand association and brand identity factor and brand loyalty of Iran Football Premier League's fans.

Despite considerable sports research on brand, the sports organizations and clubs have not tried significantly in this area. The Foolad Khoozestan Club has been one of the successful sports organizations in Iran in recent years which has always tried to benefit from scientific principles in order to progress. Despite the good position of this club in domestic and foreign leagues and its various products and services which are offered to customers and fans, there has been no brand management in this organization. However, this study tries to answer three questions: What are the most important strengths and weaknesses of Foolad Khozestan Club emphasizing on brand association? What are the opportunities and threats of Foolad Khozestan Club emphasizing on brand association? What is the strategic position of Foolad Khuzestan Club's brand?

## **2. Methodology**

This was applied-descriptive research. The population consisted of all senior managers of Foolad Khoozestan Club (N= 15). Due to limited number of population, all of these managers were selected as sample. The Ross's Brand Association Questionnaire (2006) was used as research tool; it included eleven factors (team staff, team success, team history, team game features, team brand, stadium, commitment, organization attitude, social interactions, benefits, and competition) and 53 items. The content validity of

questionnaire was confirmed by ten sport management professors. Using Cronbach's alpha, its reliability was determined to be 0.85. The SPSS software was used to analyze the data. The binomial test was used to determine the significance of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In this test, the test probability and cutoff point were determined to be 0.5 and 3, respectively. Also, the Friedman test was used to rank significant factors.

### 3. Findings

In this study, the SWOT Analyze Foolad Khoozestan Club's brand was determined. The results are provided in following. From total of 53 items in questionnaire, 40 items are internal factors and 13 items are external factors. The binomial test result was significant for 20 items; of these, 14 items were internal factors and 6 items were external factors. Of 14 internal factors, 10 items were strengths and 4 items were weaknesses of club's brand. Also, of 6 external items, 4 items were opportunities and 2 items were threats. The table 3 provides the results of Friedman test for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

**Table 1:** Results of testing statistical hypotheses to determine the significance of internal (strengths and weaknesses) factors

| Tested item  | Observed probability | Test probability | Sig. level | Result          |
|--|----------------------|------------------|------------|-----------------|
| Club symbol is known to fans                                     | 0/80                 | 0/05             | 0/035      | Significant     |
| Club logo is known to fans                                       | 0/73                 | 0/05             | 0/118      | Insignificant   |
| Club special color is known to fans                              | 0/60                 | 0/05             | 0/607      | Insignificant   |
| Club negotiates with local clubs and companies                   | 0/73                 | 0/05             | 0/118      | Insignificant   |
| Club negotiates with foreign clubs and companies                 | 0/20                 | 0/05             | 0/035      | Significant     |
| Club knows its competitors                                       | 0/53                 | 0/05             | 1/000      | Insignificantly |
| Club is aware of its strengths and weakness                      | 0/07                 | 0/05             | 0/001      | Significant     |
| Club is prepared to deal with opponents                          | 0/13                 | 0/05             | 0/007      | Significant     |
| Availability of food in stadiums                                 | 0/67                 | 0/05             | 0/302      | Insignificant   |
| Availability of beverages in stadiums                            | 0/60                 | 0/05             | 0/607      | Insignificantly |
| Possibility of buying and selling club brand goods in stadium    | 0/60                 | 0/05             | 0/607      | Insignificantly |
| Games provide an opportunity to fans to have social interactions | 0/73                 | 0/05             | 0/118      | Insignificantly |
| Interaction between fans during games                            | 0/87                 | 0/05             | 0/007      | Significant     |
| Participation of fans as groups with their                       | 0/60                 | 0/05             | 0/607      | Insignificantly |

|   |      |      |       |                 |
|---|------|------|-------|-----------------|
| friends   |      |      |       |                 |
| A special period in history of club   | 0/33 | 0/05 | 0/302 | Insignificantly |
| Club teams' win games   | 0/13 | 0/05 | 0/007 | Significant     |
| Club's wined cups   | 0/20 | 0/05 | 0/035 | Significant     |
| Presence arte of fans at each game  | 0/47 | 0/05 | 0/057 | Insignificantly |
| Following regularly the games by fans   | 0/20 | 0/05 | 0/035 | Significant     |
| Club's loyal fans   | 0/60 | 0/05 | 0/607 | Insignificantly |
| Club fulfills the commitments to fans   | 0/73 | 0/05 | 0/118 | Insignificantly |
| Loyalty of club to fans   | 0/13 | 0/05 | 0/002 | Significant     |
| Club fulfill its duties in regard with community                                | 0/67 | 0/05 | 0/302 | Insignificantly |
| Club's head coaches popularity among fans                                       | 0/47 | 0/05 | 1/000 | Insignificantly |
| Club's coaches popularity among fans  | 0/40 | 0/05 | 0/607 | Insignificantly |
| Popularity of club's head coaches compared with the head coaches of other clubs | 0/73 | 0/05 | 0/118 | Insignificantly |
| Popularity of club's coaches compared with coaches of other clubs               | 0/53 | 0/05 | 1/000 | Insignificantly |
| Employing best coaches in club  | 0/80 | 0/05 | 0/035 | Significant     |
| Spending more money to hire a coach   | 0/33 | 0/05 | 0/302 | Insignificantly |
| Popularity of club management among fans  | 0/73 | 0/05 | 0/118 | Insignificantly |
| Club management effort for success of club                                      | 0/07 | 0/05 | 0/001 | Significant     |
| Club owner effort for success of club   | 0/07 | 0/05 | 0/001 | Significant     |
| Club's stadiums location in city  | 0/93 | 0/05 | 0/01  | Significant     |
| Unique features of stadiums   | 0/53 | 0/05 | 1/000 | Insignificantly |
| Using internal stadiums   | 0/33 | 0/05 | 0/302 | Insignificantly |
| Special features of club's teams  | 0/27 | 0/05 | 0/118 | Insignificantly |
| Point taking procedure of club teams  | 0/40 | 0/05 | 0/607 | Insignificantly |
| Club teams performance  | 0/07 | 0/05 | 0/001 | Significant     |
| Quality of club teams players   | 0/27 | 0/05 | 0/118 | Insignificantly |
| Quality of club teams   | 0/07 | 0/05 | 0/01  | Significant     |

**Table 2:** Results of testing statistical hypotheses to determine the significance of external (opportunities and threats) factors

| Tested item  | Observed probability | Test probability | Sig. level | Result      |
|--|----------------------|------------------|------------|-------------|
| Opponents are ready to compete with club                   | 0/87                 | 0/05             | 0/007      | Significant |
| Opponents are aware of strengths and weaknesses of club    | 0/80                 | 0/05             | 0/035      | Significant |
| Negotiations of opponents with foreign clubs and companies | 1/00                 | 0/05             | 0/000      | Significant |

|   |              |             |              |               |
|---|--------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| Negotiations of opponents with local clubs and companies          | <i>0/47</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>1/000</i> | Insignificant |
| Restrictive government regulations in the field of providing food | <i>0/67</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>0/302</i> | Insignificant |
| Providing food at stadium by opponents                            | <i>0/80</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>0/035</i> | Significant   |
| Club's competitors winning  | <i>0/53</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>1/000</i> | Insignificant |
| Club's competitors cups   | <i>0/47</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>1/000</i> | Insignificant |
| Competitors loyalty to their fans                                 | <i>0/40</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>0/607</i> | Insignificant |
| Competition spend more money to hire coach for their club         | <i>0/20</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>0/035</i> | Significant   |
| Home stadiums of rival teams                                      | <i>0/000</i> | <i>0/05</i> | <i>0/000</i> | Significant   |
| Quality of rival teams  | <i>0/67</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>0/302</i> | Insignificant |
| Quality of rival teams' players                                   | <i>0/53</i>  | <i>0/05</i> | <i>1/000</i> | Insignificant |

**Table 3:** Results of Friedman test for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats

| Influencing factors    |               | Chi-square    | Degree of freedom | Sig. level   | Test error  | Result  |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------|---|
| Organizational factors | Strengths     | <i>39/23</i>  | <i>9</i>          | <i>0/001</i> | <i>0/05</i> | There is significant difference between items |
|                        | Weaknesses    | <i>15/45</i>  | <i>3</i>          | <i>0/001</i> | <i>0/05</i> | There is significant difference between items |
| Environmental factors  | Opportunities | <i>10/447</i> | <i>3</i>          | <i>0/034</i> | <i>0/05</i> | There is significant difference between items |
|                        | Threats       | <i>7/85</i>   | <i>1</i>          | <i>0/012</i> | <i>0/05</i> | There is significant difference between items |

According to table 3, the significance level of all four lists is lower than test error value; therefore, there is significant difference between items on each list. Also, the average rating value was considered to rank each of internal and external factors according to their importance level. The results for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are provided in tables 4, 5, 6, and 7, respectively.

**Table 4:** Ranking the strengths

| No. | Factors   | Mean ranking | Total ranking |
|-----|---|--------------|---------------|
| S1  | Club manager's hard work to be successful             | 6/93         | 1             |
| S2  | Managers are aware of club's strengths and weaknesses | 6/27         | 2             |
| S3  | Good performance of club teams                        | 6/17         | 3             |
| S4  | Loyalty of organization to fans                       | 5/87         | 4             |
| S5  | High quality of club teams                            | 5/70         | 5             |
| S6  | Club is prepared to face with opponents               | 5/63         | 6             |
| S7  | Fans follow regularly the games                       | 4/90         | 7             |
| S8  | Number of club teams' wins                            | 4/77         | 8             |
| S9  | Number of cups for each club teams                    | 4/50         | 9             |
| S10 | Negotiation with foreign companies and clubs          | 4/27         | 10            |

**Table 5:** Ranking the weaknesses

| No. | Factors   | Mean ranking | Total ranking |
|-----|---|--------------|---------------|
| W1  | Fans have low interaction during the event                  | 4/57         | 1             |
| W2  | Club icon (Steel construction process) is not known to fans | 3/50         | 2             |
| W3  | Improper position of stadium at outside of city             | 3/30         | 3             |
| W4  | Not employing best coaches                                  | 2/43         | 4             |

**Table 6:** Ranking the opportunities

| No. | Factors  | Mean ranking | Total ranking |
|-----|--|--------------|---------------|
| O1  | Low preparedness of opponent clubs to face with this club  | 3/87         | 1             |
| O2  | Rivals are not aware of club's strengths and weaknesses    | 2/73         | 2             |
| O3  | Rivals have little negotiations with foreign companies and | 2/37         | 3             |
| O4  | Rivals do not provide food products in stadiums            | 2/03         | 4             |

**Table 7:** Ranking the threats

| No. | Factors   | Mean ranking | Total ranking |
|-----|---|--------------|---------------|
| T1  | Rivals spend more money to recruit best coaches | 2/01         | 1             |
| T2  | Stadium of rivals is in good condition          | 1/60         | 2             |



#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings showed that the Foolad Khoozestan Club's brand has some strengths. According to table 4, it has 10 strengths: good performance of club teams, club manager's hard work to be successful, loyalty of organization to fans, the managers are aware of club's strengths and weaknesses, prepared to face with opponents, negotiation with foreign companies, the number of cups for each club teams, fans follow regularly the games, number of club teams' wins, and high quality of club teams. Considering the strengths of club, it can be said that the club brand is in good condition. The strengths are the activities which are performed well by organization or the resources which are under the control of organization. Therefore, the organization should try to maintain and improve them and enhance its performance. According to findings, the Foolad Khoozestan Club's brand has these weaknesses: the club icon (Steel construction process) is not known to fans, fans have low interaction during the event, improper position of stadium at outside of city, and not employing best coaches. The weaknesses are those activities which are not performed well by organization or the resources which should be available, but are not. Therefore, it is necessary to take strategies to turn these weaknesses into strengths based on opportunities and threats. Also, the findings show that the Foolad Khoozestan Club's brand has these opportunities: low preparedness of opponent clubs to face with this club, the rivals are not aware of club's strengths and weaknesses, the rivals have little negotiations with foreign companies and clubs, and the competitors do not provide food products in stadiums. The opportunities are the situations which have absolutely clear benefits; if certain actions are taken, they may be realized. It should be noted that the Foolad Khoozestan club should benefit from strengths to achieve opportunities and use these opportunities to eliminate weaknesses and threats. The findings showed that this club's brand has these threats: the competitors spend more money to recruit best coaches and the stadium of rivals is in good condition. The threats are the potential situations that if necessary actions are not taken, they will led to harmful consequences (Khabiri & Memari, 2012). Esfahani (2013) conducted a study entitled (Brand development strategic planning with an emphasis on brand associations at Mahan Sepahan Club) and concluded that Foolad Mahan Club's brand has 9 strengths, 3 weaknesses, 4 opportunities, and 1 threat. Comparing the internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) of brands of Foolad Khoozestan Club and Foolad Mahan Sepahan Club, it was found that these two teams are different in these regard: the size of Foolad Khoozestan Club is larger than Foolad Mahan Sepahan Club, Foolad Khoozestan Club has teams at different age ranges in football and Foolad Mahan Sepahan Club has teams in different sports, Foolad Khoozestan Club has a football academy, and etc. Since the internal factors of a sport

organization are associated with administrative activities of staff, members, sports programs, and facilities, these factors are available to organizations and managers; the managers may influence them. Although the external factors are important for today's sport even more than internal factors, the sport managers often ignore these factors. Comparing the external factors (opportunities and threats) of two clubs' brands, it was found that they have similarities. The external environment of a sport organization consists of technical advances in communications and administration, political environment, sports' social environment, economic stability of sponsors, other attractive sports activities, public perception about sports, interests and tendencies of young people to different sports, and etc. Due to similarity of some of external (opportunities and threats) factors, the two teams (Foolad Mahan Sepahan and Foolad Khoozestan) which work in a community may have some of these mentioned factors. In general, it may be said that considering the external and internal factors, the Foolad Khoozestan Club's brand is in relatively good position. It is expected that the managers of this club to design and implement strategic plans in accordance with internal and external factors of club's brand to maintain and improve this position.

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