Sport Marketing Studies

The impact of brand symbolism on brand evangelism behavior among the supporters of Persepolis Club

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of brand symbolism on brand evangelism behavior among Persepolis Club evangelists in Mashhad during spring 2024. As an applied descriptive-correlational research, data were collected from 320 purposively sampled participants using standard questionnaires: Osmanova et al. (2023) for brand symbolism and Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) for brand evangelism. The reliability and validity of the instruments were confirmed through Cronbach's alpha, internal consistency, composite reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity tests. Structural equation modeling (SEM) via LISREL was employed for data analysis. Results show that brand symbolism significantly affects brand evangelism and its components, including purchase intention (path coefficient = 0.45), positive word-of-mouth (0.30), and negative word-of-mouth against competitors (0.12). Purchase intention further influences positive (0.51) and negative word-of-mouth (0.45), while positive word-of-mouth also impacts negative word-of-mouth toward rival teams (0.27). These findings suggest that brand symbolism positively drives evangelism behaviors such as purchasing Persepolis products and promoting the club while discouraging competitor support. Based on these outcomes, it is recommended that Persepolis Club enhance its brand symbolism through targeted marketing strategies—such as exclusive fan events, social media engagement, and branded merchandise—to deepen fans' emotional connection and strengthen brand evangelism. Such initiatives are likely to boost positive purchase intentions and supportive word-of-mouth, benefiting the club's overall brand strength.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Team sports, such as football, require the development of an effective strategy for their team brands in order to build strong and positive relationships with fans as their customers and achieve higher levels of team loyalty (Fekrat & Jaberi, 2023). This need arises because such brands ultimately belong to the customers, and gaining their defense and support for these brands is essential (Harrigan et al., 2021). Football is recognized as one of the most profitable sports worldwide, with multiple revenue streams, among which sponsorship stands as a major source that should receive particular attention in sports marketing.

In recent years, Persepolis Football Club has achieved remarkable success both domestically and at the Asian level, making it highly attractive to sponsors. With millions of fans across the country, Persepolis offers a vast market for sponsors to encourage its supporters to purchase their products through sponsorship (Zamani Dadaneh et al., 2022). However, sports teams and brands have faced challenges due to the lack of a long-term strategic focus and insufficient alignment with the core commercial interests of organizations (Wu & Wu, 2023).

Given the growing interest in customer engagement, a central question arises: *What factors contribute to the creation and strengthening of deeper customer engagement?* (Balouchi et al., 2021).

It is on this basis that marketing scholars and practitioners have recently begun to recognize the concept of brand evangelism. Brand evangelism is described as an intense form of brand advocacy behavior (Harrigan et al., 2021). It holds substantial importance for both companies and their brands. In today's highly competitive consumer environment, brand evangelists are regarded as brand managers in their own right and represent a highly influential group (Shang & Li, 2024; Hsu, 2019).

Previous studies have shown that consumers engage in purchasing and promoting brands not only for their functional performance but also for symbolic and social motivations (Igwe & Nwamou, 2017). Marketing researchers have shown increasing interest in brand symbolism (Aljarah et al., 2021). Furthermore, as noted by Dalal & Aljarah (2021), there is a scarcity of empirical studies addressing brand symbolism in the context of customer–brand relationships.

Moreover, prior literature has exhibited limitations in examining the relationship between brand symbolism and the customer–brand relationship—particularly in relation to the three dimensions of brand evangelism (purchase intention, positive brand referrals, and negative referrals toward rival brands) as an outcome of brand symbolism (Aljarah et al., 2021b).

Brand evangelism is associated with the psychological and emotional appeal of a brand (Scarpi, 2010) and is considered a direct outcome of a customer's personal identity and social identity (Liao et al., 2021). Accordingly, brand symbolism and brand evangelism represent related concepts, both reflecting the emotional attributes of a brand and serving as sources of consumers' personal and social identities (Dalal & Aljarah, 2020).

The findings of Widodo & Ginting (2024) revealed that interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality, brand image, brand symbolism, and customer satisfaction positively influenced brand evangelism at Starbucks in the Jabodetabek region. Harrigan et al. (2021) demonstrated that value creation and customer–brand engagement are key drivers of brand evangelism behaviors. Similarly, P. Becerra & Badrinarayanan (2013) argued that when consumers form symbolic and emotional connections with a brand, it strengthens brand evangelism and positive referrals.

The research conducted by Osmanova et al. (2023) found that brand symbolism is the strongest predictor of positive brand referrals. Furthermore,

the alignment between consumers' self-concept and their symbolic association with a brand's image influences their purchase intention (Sirgy, 1985). Several studies have also identified a positive and significant relationship between brand symbols and purchase intention (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Yüzgenç et al. (2022) found that individuals with high levels of brand advocacy and purchase intention are more likely to buy licensed products of their favorite team compared to those with low levels of brand advocacy and purchase intention.

On the other hand, brand evangelists—who are considered active supporters of a brand— demonstrate behavioral support by purchasing the brand's products. In addition, engaging in positive brand promotion not only enables consumers to publicly express their support for the brand but also allows them to present themselves as smart and discerning buyers. Consequently, such consumers are more likely to support a brand while simultaneously engaging in negative commentary or criticism against rival brands (Balouchi et al., 2021).

This phenomenon—the effect of positive word-of-mouth on negative word-of-mouth toward competing brands—has been documented in studies such as Hsu (2019), Sanjari Nader et al. (2020), Ashkani & Esfidani (2017), and Balouchi et al. (2015), which found that positive brand recommendations have a positive effect on negative word-of-mouth against competitors. Nyadzayo et al. (2020) further confirmed that brand evangelists are likely to refer more customers to brands and persuade them to make repeat purchases.

Due to their commitment and enthusiasm toward a brand, these individuals can serve as a highly effective marketing tool for organizations. Negative word-of-mouth represents a form of consumer brand-related behavior, defined as the customer's tendency to make harmful or unfavorable statements about rival brands (P. Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Therefore, brand symbolism not only enhances purchase intention and positive word-of-mouth for a brand but may

also generate and reinforce negative referrals toward competing brands.

Persepolis Football Club, with its rich history and numerous achievements, is recognized as one of the cultural and social symbols of Iran. The club's fans hold a strong sense of belonging and emotional attachment not only due to its sporting results but also because of its deep-rooted brand symbolism. This symbolism encompasses various aspects, including the club's history, prominent figures, sporting successes, and even the cultural and social identity associated with it.

However, the precise understanding of how this brand symbolism influences the brand evangelism behaviors of Persepolis evangelists—such as word-of-mouth promotion and positive or negative recommendations to others—remains incomplete. Existing research has primarily focused on the general effects of brand symbolism on purchasing behavior and brand support. Yet, there is still a notable gap in studies that specifically examine the link between brand symbolism and brand evangelism behavior within the context of football clubs, particularly Persepolis.

Moreover, given the intense competition in the football industry and the rising expectations of fans, it is essential for clubs to engage effectively with their supporters and leverage brand symbolism as a tool to strengthen this connection. Without a clear understanding of how brand symbolism affects brand evangelism behaviors, marketing strategies may become ineffective, potentially resulting in reduced fan loyalty.

Therefore, there is a need for a comprehensive and systematic investigation into the complex, multidimensional relationship between brand symbolism and brand evangelism behaviors among Persepolis club evangelists. Such research can help identify patterns and influencing factors in this relationship, enabling club managers to make informed decisions and design targeted marketing strategies. By doing so, the fan experience can be

enhanced, leading to increased loyalty and engagement.

Accordingly, the core objective of the present study is to examine whether brand symbolism influences brand evangelism behaviors among

Persepolis club evangelists. In line with this aim, the following model will be tested. (Figure 1).
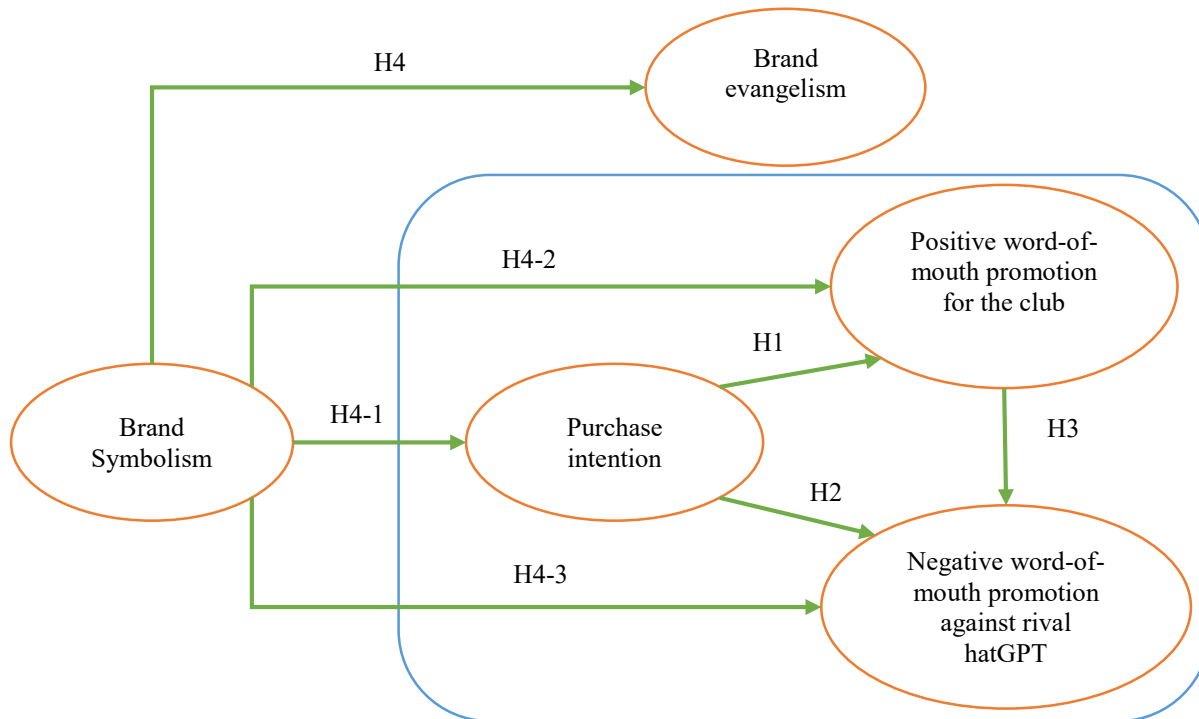
Figure 1. Conceptual model of the research (Dash and et al., 2021; Alwana and Alshurideh, 2022)

2. Methodology

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in terms of methodology, as it aims to examine the relationship between brand symbolism and brand evangelism behavior among Persepolis Club evangelists. The statistical population consisted of Persepolis Club evangelists in Mashhad during the spring quarter of 2024.

A purposive sampling method was employed because the study focuses on investigating the impact of brand symbolism on brand evangelism behavior among Persepolis evangelists. Brand evangelists are defined as individuals with higher emotional and cognitive commitment to the club who actively participate in word-of-mouth promotion and the reinforcement of the club's symbols. Accordingly, during questionnaire distribution, individuals were selected based on

responses to several screening questions regarding their support for Persepolis.

Using structural equation modeling (SEM) as the analytical approach, the sample size was determined accordingly. Based on the rule of thumb, the required sample size ranged between 105 and 315. Considering researchers' recommendations to increase statistical accuracy, 350 questionnaires were distributed, of which 320 valid responses were collected and analyzed.

To measure the variable Brand Symbolism, the questionnaires developed by Osmanova, Ozerden, Dalal, and Ibrahim (2023), Steg (2005), and Bhat and Reddy (1988) were used, and Purchase Intention was measured using the questionnaires developed by P. Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) and Balochi et al. (2015).

To assess the reliability of the instrument, internal consistency measures were examined, including composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and average variance extracted (AVE).

Table 1 presents the coefficients of internal consistency indicators. All composite reliability coefficients exceeded the critical threshold of 0.7 , and all Cronbach's alpha coefficients were above 0.5 (Balouchi & Siahsarani Kojuri, 2023). Therefore, it can be concluded that the measurement models exhibit acceptable reliability.

Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values for the variables, reported in Table 1, indicate sampling adequacy for the research variables. Content validity was evaluated through expert opinions and faculty reviews. The results demonstrate that the measurement instrument (questionnaire) has satisfactory reliability and validity.

Table 1. Structure of the Questionnaire and Its Validity and Reliability; Source: Research Findings (2024)

Variable / Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	CR (Composite Reliability)	AVE	KMO	Mean	Standard Deviation
Brand Symbolism	6	0.879	0.887	0.908	0.622	0.869	2.887	0.749
Brand Evangelism	15	0.777	0.795	0.869	0.689	0.914	2.716	0.703
Purchase Intention	5	0.870	0.875	0.906	0.659	0.828	2.843	0.834
Positive Word-of-Mouth for Own Brand	5	0.885	0.888	0.916	0.686	0.863	2.636	0.860
Negative Word-of-Mouth for Competitor Brands	5	0.857	0.859	0.897	0.637	0.857	2.668	0.841

The average variance extracted (AVE) values in Table 1 and the factor loadings of the items in Table 2—all of which exceed the threshold of 0.5—as well as the composite reliability values, all above 0.7 (Balouchi & Siahsarani Kojuri, 2023), indicate that the measurement model for all main research variables demonstrates satisfactory reliability and validity. Additionally, the convergent validity of the indicators with respect to the main research variables is at a relatively high level.

In the second-order factor analysis related to the brand evangelism variable, the factor loadings for the dimensions of purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, and negative word-of-mouth are 0.81, 0.74, and 0.80, respectively. The corresponding significance values are 6.74, 7.91, and 6.89, which confirms the validity of these dimensions for the construct.

3.Findings of the Research

The extracted variance values in Table (1) and the factor loadings of the items in Table (2), all of which are above 0.5, as well as the composite reliability values, all exceeding 0.7 (Balouchi & Siahsarani Kojuri, 2023), indicate that the measurement model for all the main variables of the research possesses satisfactory reliability and validity, and that the convergent validity of the indicators with the main variables of the research is at a relatively high level. In the second-order factor analysis related to the brand evangelism variable, the factor loadings for the dimensions of purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth advertising, and negative word-of-mouth advertising are 0.81, 0.74, and 0.8, respectively, and the corresponding t-values are 6.74, 7.91, and 6.89, indicating confirmation of these dimensions for this variable.

In the next stage, correlation analysis and discriminant validity of the research variables were conducted. The values of the average variance extracted indicate the convergent validity of the

main research variables. Furthermore, the discriminant validity of the variables is confirmed.

Table 2. Standardized Coefficients and t-Values of the Research Items

| Variable / Dimension	Item Code	Standardized Coefficient	t-Value	Variable / Dimension	Item Code	Standardized Coefficient	t-Value
Brand Symbolism	SY1	0.68	13.04	Brand Evangelism (Positive Word-of-Mouth about Own Brand)	PW1	0.72	14.27
	SY2	0.72	13.90		PW2	0.82	17.18
	SY3	0.85	17.70		PW3	0.75	15.24
	SY4	0.72	14.13		PW4	0.82	17.25
	SY5	0.78	15.58		PW5	0.79	16.19
	SY6	0.79	16.77				
Brand Evangelism (Purchase Intention)	PI1	0.73	14.54	Brand Evangelism (Negative Word-of-Mouth about Other Brands)	NW1	0.74	14.61
	PI2	0.83	17.27		NW2	0.81	16.71
	PI3	0.77	15.70		NW3	0.75	14.90
	PI4	0.77	15.48		NW4	0.71	13.80
	PI5	0.69	13.43		NW5	0.69	13.33

At this stage, the research hypotheses were examined using the structural equation model. The structural model analyzes the relationships between exogenous and endogenous latent variables. In the model below, brand symbolism is the exogenous and independent latent variable, while brand evangelism is the endogenous and final variable.

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficient for examining the relationship among the research variables

|	Positive WOM	Negative WOM	Purchase Intention	Brand Evangelism	Brand Symbolism
Positive WOM	0.828	----	----	----	----
Negative WOM	0.519	0.798	----	----	----
Purchase Intention	0.529	0.576	0.811	----	----
Brand Evangelism	---	----	----	0.830	----
Brand Symbolism	0.382	0.333	0.267	0.400	0.789
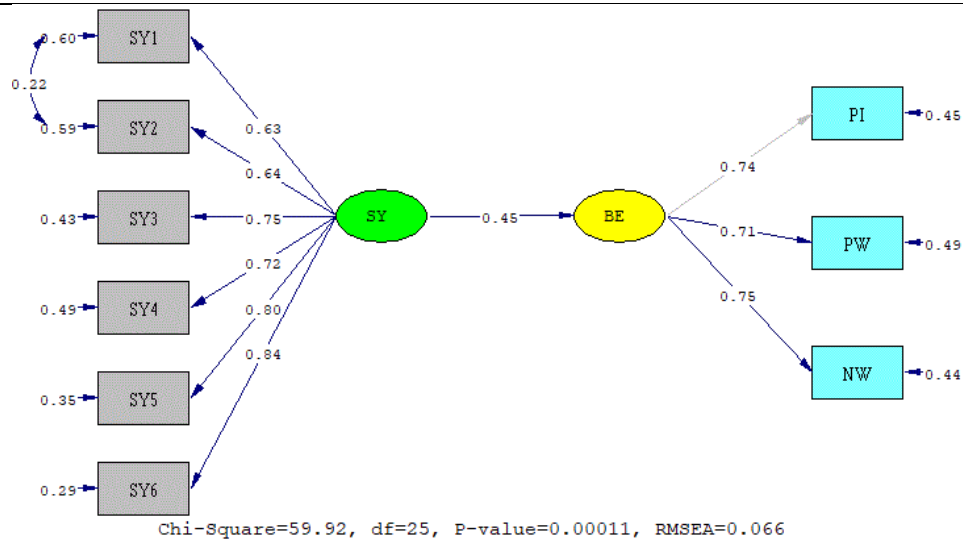
**Figure 2.** Model assessment with standardized coefficients
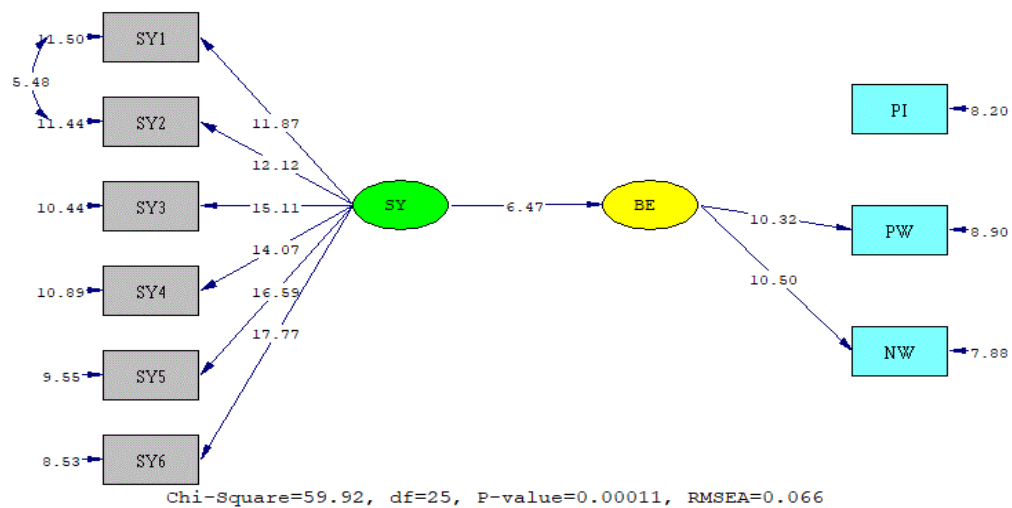
Figure 3. Model assessment with significance values

In the model of sub-hypotheses, brand symbolism is the independent and exogenous variable; purchase intention and positive word-of-mouth are mediating and endogenous variables; and negative word-of-mouth is the dependent and endogenous variable.
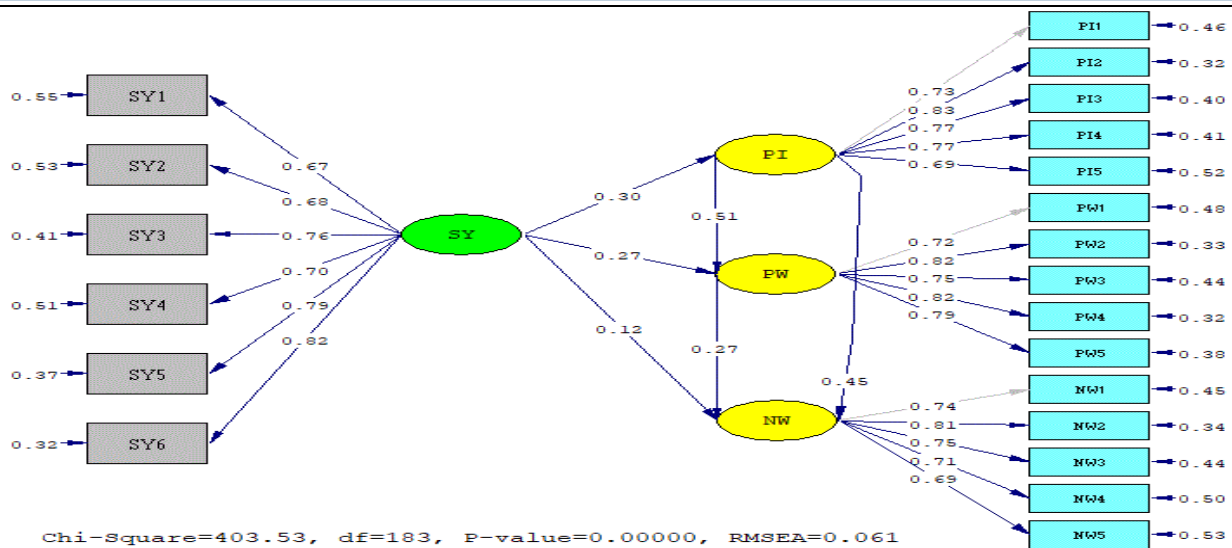
Figure 4. Assessment of the model dimensions with standardized coefficients
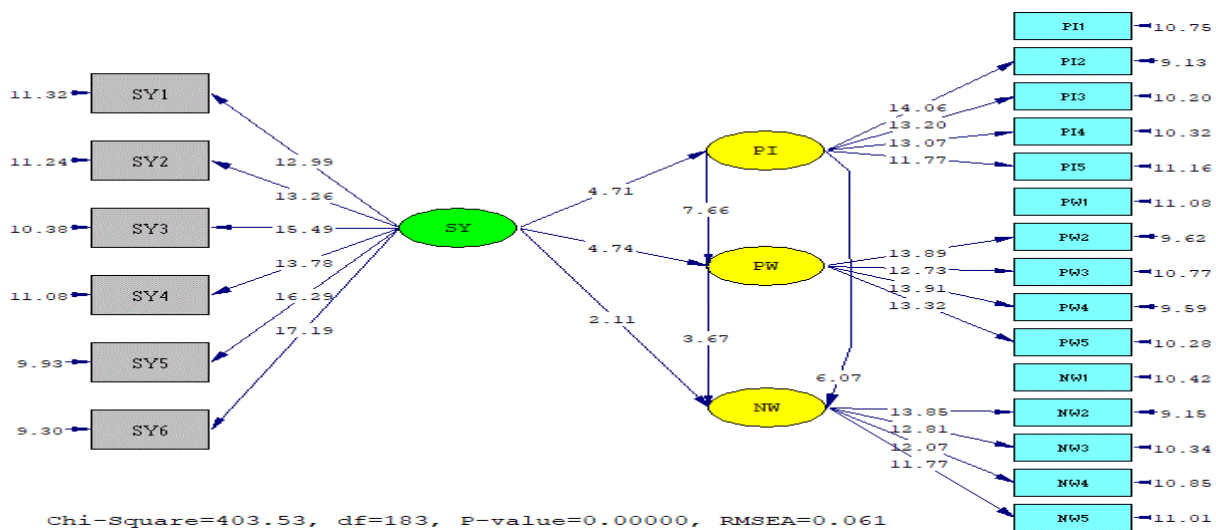
Figure 5. Assessment of the model dimensions with significance values

If the significance coefficient is greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96, the null hypothesis is rejected and the existence of a significant relationship is confirmed. The results of the hypothesis testing in LISREL software are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. LISREL software analysis of relationships and model fit indices

Hypothesis	Statement	Standardized Coefficient	Significance	Result
1	Purchase intention of football brand evangelists has a positive and significant effect on their positive word-of-mouth advertising for their team.	0.51	7.66	Confirmed
2	Purchase intention of football brand evangelists has a positive and significant effect on negative word-of-mouth advertising against rival teams.	0.45	6.07	Confirmed
3	Positive word-of-mouth advertising by football brand evangelists has a positive and significant effect on negative word-of-mouth advertising against rival teams.	0.27	3.67	Confirmed

Hypothesis	Statement	Standardized Coefficient	Significance	Result
4	Brand symbolism of football brand evangelists has a positive effect on the brand evangelism of their club.	0.45	6.47	Confirmed
4-1	Brand symbolism of evangelists has a positive effect on their purchase intention from the club.	0.30	4.71	Confirmed
4-2	Brand symbolism of evangelists has a positive effect on positive brand referrals.	0.27	4.74	Confirmed
4-3	Brand symbolism of evangelists has a positive effect on negative brand referrals.	0.12	2.11	Confirmed

To assess the fit of the conceptual model, eight common indices along with their acceptable thresholds, as recommended in previous studies (Balouchi and Nematolahi, 2021), were used. According to Table 4, it can be concluded that the conceptual model of the present research demonstrates a good fit with the collected data.

Table 5. Model Fit Indices and Standard Values

	X²/df	RMSEA	RMR	NFI	NNFI	CFI	GFI	AGFI
Model 1	2.39	0.066	0.038	0.97	0.98	0.98	0.96	0.93
Model 2	2.205	0.061	0.046	0.95	0.97	0.97	0.89	0.86
Standard Values	<5	<0.08	<0.08	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.80	>0.80

4. Discussion and conclusion

When consumers feel that a brand aligns with their personal identity and values, they are more likely to recommend and promote it to others. This behavior is particularly important in the sports domain and for brands associated with teams and players, as fans not only support the brand but actively strive to strengthen the brand image and reduce the influence of competing brands. This study was conducted to examine the impact of brand symbolism on brand evangelism behavior among the evangelists of Persepolis Club.

The first hypothesis of the study stated that the purchase intention of Persepolis Club brand evangelists has a positive and significant effect on their positive word-of-mouth advertising for their team. The path coefficient between purchase intention and positive word-of-mouth advertising was found to be 0.51, which, given the significance value of 7.66, clearly indicates a strong significance of this relationship. These findings align with the theory of fan-brand attachment and the effects of word-of-mouth advertising. The results are consistent with the studies by Yüzgenç et al. (2022), Hsu (2019), Sanjari Nader et al. (2020), Ashkani and Esfidani (2017), and Balochi et al. (2015).

It can be argued that in Iranian football, the success of teams, especially Persepolis, is directly related to increased fan willingness to purchase and engage in word-of-mouth promotion. For example, when Persepolis reaches the final stages of domestic or Asian competitions, fans become more active in promoting the team and encouraging others to support it. Purchase intention for team products also increases during this period, as fans feel they are part of the team's success and can spread this sense of achievement among others through purchasing and word-of-mouth advertising.

Moreover, Persepolis fans, as brand evangelists, exhibit high loyalty to their team. This loyalty causes them to act as informal brand ambassadors and contribute to brand promotion through positive word-of-mouth advertising.

he second hypothesis of this study focused on whether an increase in the purchase intention of Persepolis brand evangelists could strengthen their negative word-of-mouth advertising about rival teams. The path coefficient between purchase intention and negative word-of-mouth advertising was 0.45, and with a significance value of 6.07, this hypothesis was confirmed. These results are consistent with the studies by Yüzgenç et al. (2022), Hsu (2019), Sanjari Nader et al. (2020), Ashkani and Esfidani (2017), and Balochi et al. (2015).

It can be argued that in the context of Iranian football, especially in intense competitions such as the rivalry between Persepolis and teams like Esteghlal, fan loyalties are very strong. These loyalties create a "us versus them" mentality among fans. When Persepolis fans decide to purchase team products, this action reinforces their team identity and simultaneously intensifies the competition and the tendency to undermine rival teams through negative word-of-mouth advertising. In this regard, negative advertising can serve as a tool to disparage competitors and assert the superiority of one's own team.

Moreover, Persepolis fans develop a strong emotional and affective bond with their team that often goes beyond the sporting aspects. This deep connection causes any competition with other teams to be perceived not just as a sporting rivalry but as a threat to the fans' identity. When purchase intention increases, it reflects a heightened loyalty and attachment of fans to their team. Consequently, this stronger loyalty leads to increased negative word-of-mouth against rival teams, as fans aim to present their own team as superior and weaken the competition.

The third hypothesis of the study indicates that positive word-of-mouth advertising by Persepolis club brand evangelists has a significant effect on increasing negative word-of-mouth advertising against rival teams. The path coefficient of 0.27 and the significance value of 3.67 demonstrate a strong and significant relationship, suggesting that the more the brand evangelists promote Persepolis positively, the more likely they are to simultaneously engage in negative advertising against rival teams. These findings are consistent with the studies of Sanjari Nader et al. (2020), Hsu (2019), Ashkani and Esfidani (2017), and Balochi et al. (2015).

This relationship can be explained by a psychological phenomenon where sports brand fans, due to their strong emotional attachment to their favorite team, not only promote positive advertising for that team but also seek to undermine competitors in order to defend the position of their preferred brand. In brand behavior research, especially in the sports domain, brand evangelists tend to express their intense loyalty by promoting their favorite brand. At the same time, strong attachment to the brand generates a tendency to disparage competing brands. Therefore, positive advertising about Persepolis acts as a driving factor that reinforces negative advertising against main rivals such as Esteghlal and other teams. This behavior aligns with fan bias theory, where highly loyal supporters are more inclined to defend their team against competitors.

The fourth hypothesis stated that brand symbolism of Persepolis brand evangelists has a positive effect on brand evangelism of their club. The path coefficient between brand symbolism and brand evangelism of the club was 0.45, and with a significance value of 6.47, this hypothesis was confirmed.

This means that Persepolis brand symbolism not only influences the evangelistic behaviors of fans but also fosters stronger emotional bonds between fans and the brand. These results are consistent with the research of Dalal and Aljarah (2020), Widodo and Ginting (2024), and Harrigan et al. (2021). Previous studies have also confirmed this emotional connection, showing that positive

feelings related to brand symbolism can enhance evangelistic tendencies.

It can be argued that Persepolis brand symbolism refers to the deepest values and cultural identity of the team's fans. Fans typically form emotional bonds with the colors, history, and cultural symbols of their team. This sense of belonging to a collective identity not only strengthens positive feelings but also increases evangelistic motivations. Therefore, fans are more inclined to promote and support the brand with every positive interaction with Persepolis.

Moreover, Persepolis brand symbolism affects not only individual feelings but also social connections among fans. By sharing their experiences and emotions related to the team and its symbols, fans create a dynamic social network that helps strengthen brand evangelism. This social network, through events, gatherings, and social media, creates a supportive environment in which fans actively promote the brand.

Hypothesis 4-1 stated that the brand symbolism of Persepolis brand evangelists has a positive effect on their purchase intention from the club.

The path coefficient between brand symbolism and purchase intention was 0.30, and with a significance value of 4.71, this hypothesis was confirmed.

Persepolis brand symbolism is deeply intertwined with the history and cultural identity of the team's fans. Fans experience a sense of belonging and pride through the red color, club symbols, and its glorious history. This cultural identity not only enhances evangelistic motivations but also strengthens positive emotions among fans. When fans use Persepolis symbols in their social interactions, they share this sense of belonging with others, which in turn reinforces positive word-of-mouth advertising.

These findings align with the studies of Sirgy (1985), Escalas and Bettman (2005), and Osmanova et al. (2023). According to Sirgy (1985), the congruence between a consumer's self-

concept and brand image greatly influences purchase intention. When Persepolis fans feel that brand symbols align with their personal identity and values, this alignment increases their willingness to purchase related goods and services. Therefore, Persepolis brand symbolism, especially in terms of brand identity and image, can play a key role in purchase decisions.

Escalas and Bettman (2005) also emphasize that brand symbolism impacts purchase decisions. The study by Osmanova et al. (2023) further shows that brand symbolism acts as an important factor in both purchase intention and positive word-of-mouth advertising.

Hypothesis 4-2 stated that the brand symbolism of Persepolis brand evangelists has a positive effect on positive brand referrals. The path coefficient between brand symbolism and positive brand referrals was 0.27, and with a significance value of 4.74, this hypothesis was confirmed.

These results are consistent with the studies of Nyadzayo et al. (2020), Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013), and Osmanova et al. (2023). Persepolis brand symbolism enables fans to form a deeper emotional connection with the brand. This emotional bond, formed through team symbols such as colors and logos, leads to a positive impact on brand referrals. In other words, fans who have positive feelings toward brand symbols are more likely to recommend the brand to others.

These findings align with Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013), who suggest that emotional relationships with a brand can increase the likelihood of positive referrals. Persepolis fans, as brand evangelists, can help strengthen brand credibility through positive referrals. This social support encourages others to show greater interest in the brand and regard it as a credible option. Therefore, brand symbolism not only influences positive referrals but can also enhance brand credibility within the target community.

This point is consistent with the findings of Osmanova et al. (2023), which indicate that brand

symbolism can contribute to strengthening positive referrals.

Hypothesis 4-3 stated that the brand symbolism of Persepolis brand evangelists has a positive effect on negative brand referrals. The path coefficient between brand symbolism and negative brand referrals was 0.12, and with a significance value of 2.11, this hypothesis was confirmed. The results align with the studies of Dalal and Aljarah (2021), Moharramzadeh, Fathi, & Nouri (2022), Blek (1988), Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013), and Osmanova et al. (2023).

Since Persepolis fans are strongly attached to their brand symbolism, any threat to this brand (such as victories by rival clubs) is perceived as a threat to their individual identity. Consequently, fans may actively seek to damage the image of their competitors and provide negative referrals about them. This phenomenon is particularly evident in matches and fan rivalries.

This effect is especially visible in the realm of sports brands, where brand loyalty and group identity play a crucial role. Because consumers identify with brands like Persepolis Club, any threat to the brand's reputation and image can lead to negative feelings toward rival brands. For Persepolis fans, threats to the brand (e.g., losing a match) are not only seen as harm to their group identity but can also trigger negative referrals against rival brands such as Esteghlal. These social and psychological effects demonstrate the power of brand symbolism in shaping fan behaviors.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the results of the statistical analysis, the following practical recommendations are proposed:

Strategic Utilization of Persepolis Fans as Brand Evangelists:

The Persepolis Club can leverage these findings to more effectively engage their fans as brand evangelists. Given the fans' strong attachment and enthusiasm toward the team's brand, the club can design marketing campaigns centered on fan participation to encourage positive word-of-mouth advertising. For example, offering special discounts to fans who share their purchases or creating dedicated fan platforms can increase positive promotion for the team. **Organizing Exclusive Events for Fans:**

Persepolis Club can hold special events such as festivals or fan meetups where supporters have the opportunity to interact with players and coaching staff. These events not only strengthen fans' sense of belonging and loyalty to the team but also promote positive word-of-mouth through shared positive experiences.

Creating Content Focused on Comparison and Differentiation:

The club can develop engaging and meaningful content that highlights its strengths and achievements in comparison to rivals. This content may include articles, videos, or social media posts showcasing the team's accomplishments, history, and core values. By generating such content, fans are encouraged to engage in negative word-of-mouth against competitors while simultaneously increasing their motivation to share positive experiences about their own team.

Enhancing Brand Symbols in Products and Services:

Persepolis Club can strengthen emotional connections with fans by designing and offering products and services that incorporate cultural symbols and elements associated with the brand. These may include sportswear, accessories, and promotional gifts featuring distinctive Persepolis logos and symbols. This initiative not only reinforces fans' sense of identity and belonging but also contributes to brand evangelism.

Conducting Advertising Campaigns Focused on Brand Symbolism:

Persepolis Club can design special advertising campaigns that emphasize brand symbolism. These campaigns may include storytelling about the club's history, achievements, and values. Using various media channels, including social networks and television commercials, these messages can be conveyed to fans, encouraging them to act as brand

evangelists by sharing their positive experiences with others.

Strengthening Brand Narratives and Storytelling:

The club can enhance brand symbolism by focusing on storytelling in its marketing communications. This includes sharing success stories of the team, biographies of key players, and fans' experiences. Such efforts help build a deeper emotional connection between fans and the club, thereby increasing positive brand referrals.

Organizing Social and Cultural Events:

Persepolis Club can establish closer ties with fans by hosting social and cultural events such as conferences, festivals, and sports competitions. These events contribute to reinforcing brand symbolism and fostering a sense of unity among fans. Additionally, by providing a platform for sharing opinions and experiences, these gatherings can positively influence and reduce negative brand referrals.

Among the limitations of this study is the cultural and social diversity of Persepolis fans. This means that fans come from various cultural and social groups, which may affect how they perceive and experience brand symbolism and brand evangelism, potentially complicating the research results. Another limitation concerns the influence of media and social networks. Media and social networks can have a significant impact on fans' perceptions and behaviors. Examining these effects separately requires additional resources and time, which may not have been available for this study.

Given these limitations, future research should be carefully designed to better understand the impact of cultural and social diversity as well as media and social networks on brand symbolism and brand evangelism. Employing appropriate sampling methods, multi-method analyses, in-depth interviews, content analysis, longitudinal studies, and collaboration with experts can help improve the quality and accuracy of research findings.

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