

## The Role of Relationship Marketing on Brand Equity: The Mediating Role of Brand Identification and Brand Experience (A Case Study of Isfahan Fitness Clubs)

Seyed Mohammad Javad Razavi <sup>1\*</sup>, Azam Tolabi-Mazraeno <sup>2</sup>, Fereshteh Kotobi <sup>2</sup>

1. Department of Applied Humanities, Kashmar Higher Education Institute, Kashmar, Iran

2. Department of Physical Education, Farhangian University, P.O. Box 14665-889, Tehran, Iran

Corresponding Author Email: [Razavi@kashmar.ac.ir](mailto:Razavi@kashmar.ac.ir)



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### ABSTRACT

Relationship marketing is considered an influential factor in changing customer purchasing behavior and plays an important role in the development of sport clubs' brand equity. This research aims to investigate the role of relationship marketing on brand equity with the mediating role of brand identification and brand experience in Isfahan fitness clubs during the year 2024. The study is applied in nature and was conducted using a survey method. The research instruments included standard questionnaires measuring relationship marketing, brand equity, brand identification, and brand experience. The reliability coefficients of the questionnaires were estimated at 0.82, 0.81, 0.86, and 0.74, respectively. The statistical population consisted of 384 customers of Isfahan fitness clubs. The findings revealed that relationship marketing had a significant impact on brand equity ( $\beta=0.33$ ,  $t=6.94$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), brand identification ( $\beta=0.48$ ,  $t=11.17$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and brand experience ( $\beta=0.55$ ,  $t=15.86$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Additionally, brand identification ( $\beta=0.32$ ,  $t=6.72$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and brand experience ( $\beta=0.24$ ,  $t=5.16$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) had a significant effect on brand equity. Since previous studies have mostly focused on the importance of relationship marketing in non-sport organizations, the present research underscores the importance of evaluating its effect on brand equity in sport clubs, considering the mediating role of brand identification and experience.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, relationship marketing (RM) has developed into a prominent concept due to a strategic transition from focusing merely on attracting customers to emphasizing customer retention (Hidayat & Idrus, 2023). This strategy enables service-based organizations to secure a competitive edge by fostering enduring interactions with their clientele (Juscus & Viktorija, 2011). Sustainable organizational success and long-term viability can be achieved when businesses align their operations with the core values of relationship marketing and apply retention-oriented tactics (Steinhoff et al., 2019). Essentially, relationship marketing involves identifying, involving, and preserving valuable customers over time (Madan et al., 2017). It stands out as a highly efficient method because it not only brings in new customers but also cultivates lasting engagement beyond the point of initial retention. A significant number of service-oriented businesses implement relationship marketing approaches to enhance customer loyalty to their offerings (Ghazizadeh et al., 2016). Such techniques contribute to improved customer acquisition, higher profitability, and strengthened customer commitment (Ansori, 2022).

Simultaneously, the development of a robust brand has evolved into a vital strategic advantage for organizations, with brand strength often viewed as one of the most significant assets a business can hold. In the context of sport clubs, the brand name plays a central role in shaping marketing strategies and is increasingly recognized as a key differentiator and a valuable organizational resource. Companies that successfully establish strong brand identities are typically able to command higher prices for their services and demonstrate greater resilience against competitive pressures (Razavi & Azimzadeh, 2017). As a result, considering brand equity, understood as the additional worth a brand contributes to a product or service, becomes a critical aspect for organizations (Farquhar, 1989). Applying relationship marketing

methods can effectively support the development and enhancement of strong brands (Hashemi, 2023).

Today, sport clubs in Iran, as service organizations, face numerous challenges and perform below desirable levels. Some sport clubs are state-owned and suffer from budget constraints, which has resulted in reduced service quality and public dissatisfaction (Farahani et al., 2015). Poor service quality has also negatively impacted the brand equity of these clubs (Bańbuła, 2024). Privately operated sport clubs face similar issues. In cities like Isfahan, fitness clubs struggle with increasing competition and declining customer numbers due to economic hardships (Keygabadi, 2021). This study identifies three main research gaps based on previous studies: (1) although relationship marketing and brand equity have been widely studied, most research has focused on non-sport organizations (Assaad et al., 2024; Hashemi, 2023; Onabi & Borna, 2024), and there is limited research in the context of sport clubs; (2) prior studies have confirmed the significant impact of relationship marketing on brand identification and brand experience (Chatzi et al., 2024; Assaad et al., 2024), and on brand equity in non-sport contexts (Beig & Nika, 2019; Kim & Manoli, 2022; Rahayu et al., 2024; Ramzyar & Zamani, 2015; Torres & Augusto, 2018), but little research in Iran, particularly in sport management, has examined the mediating role of brand identification and experience; (3) due to the growth of the fitness industry and intensifying competition (Bagheri, 2024), clubs need effective strategies to retain and attract consumers (Pizzo et al., 2021; Yoshida et al., 2024). Thus, it is essential to explore how relationship marketing affects brand equity and what mediating factors, namely, brand identification and brand experience, can strengthen this relationship. Brand identification refers to the customer's awareness and connection with different dimensions of the brand (Harjadi et al., 2023), while brand experience is the customer's positive memory of interacting with the brand (Kim & Manoli, 2022).

In a highly competitive environment, failure to apply modern marketing approaches may result in the loss of customers and financial instability (Bagheri, 2024; Sadeghinejad et al., 2022). Adopting relationship marketing as a new marketing paradigm allows firms to move from transactional to value-driven relationships (Iglesias, Alfons & Jordi, 2011). Relationship marketing enables the creation of deep, long-term connections that attract and retain customers (Ansori, 2022). Another crucial step is identifying the current level of brand identification and brand experience among customers, as both contribute to building brand equity and attracting loyal clients.

Although several studies have investigated marketing strategies in sport organizations, the specific role of relationship marketing as a novel approach has received limited attention in the sport industry (Asadzadeh et al., 2018; Taherikia et al., 2022). This study is grounded in customer relationship management (CRM) theory (Rababah et al., 2011) and the customer–brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), which emphasize strong mutual relationships between consumers and brands. The goal of this study is to examine the impact of relationship marketing on brand equity with the mediating role of brand identification and brand experience in Isfahan fitness clubs.

### **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

#### **Relationship Marketing and Brand Equity**

In recent decades, traditional marketing approaches have been increasingly challenged, and Relationship Marketing has been introduced by researchers as a modern alternative. One of the main applications of relationship marketing is the development of Brand Equity within organizations (Mahmoudabadi et al., 2019; Onabi & Borna, 2024). Berry (1983) was the first to define relationship marketing as an approach focused on maintaining, continuing, and enhancing long-term relationships with customers. This concept is grounded in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) theory, which includes strategies,

technologies, and processes aimed at helping organizations establish and maintain better communication with their customers (Rababah et al., 2011). Thus, one of the key tools for long-term customer engagement—and ensuring the long-term success of sport organizations—is relationship marketing. Its core focus is the customer, and its primary benefits include customer retention, increased loyalty, reduced customer acquisition costs, and overall organizational profitability (Javadin et al., 2014). On the other hand, enhancing brand equity is a vital objective in the development of sport clubs. Farquhar (1989) initially described BE as the additional benefit a brand imparts to a product. Later, Aaker (1991) expanded this concept, framing it as a collection of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that can enhance or diminish the value a product or service delivers. In his framework, brand equity consists of four main components: brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand awareness. Brand loyalty reflects both behavioral patterns and psychological responses that differentiate consumer purchasing tendencies. Perceived quality is the customer's evaluation of a brand's overall excellence, reliability, and distinction in comparison to competing brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Brand associations include all mental connections tied to a brand within consumer memory. Brand awareness involves a consumer's ability to identify or remember a brand within a particular product category (Aaker, 1991). For sport organizations, building a strong brand is vital. When customers perceive a brand as trustworthy and aligned with desirable values, they are more willing to pay a premium, highlighting the strategic importance of brand equity for new and developing sport institutions (Faridniya et al., 2024).

Past research confirms the relationship between relationship marketing and brand equity. For instance, Afsharian et al. (2014) found a positive link between RM and customer loyalty (a dimension of brand equity) in public swimming pools in Tehran. Likewise, Djumarno & Windiari (2021)

found that relationship marketing and brand image significantly influenced customer loyalty and satisfaction. Therefore, considering the strategic importance of BE in marketing, a strong brand can increase consumer trust and serve as a valuable asset for the organization (Chen & Chang, 2008). Hashemi (2023) also found a significant positive relationship between RM and BE in competitive product markets. Similarly, Onabi & Borna (2024) reported that relationship marketing had a significant positive impact on both brand equity and customer brand loyalty in the banking sector. However, most prior research has focused on non-sport sectors, and the few existing sport studies have only explored the effect of RM on brand loyalty, just one component of brand equity. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the broader impact of relationship marketing on brand equity.

Hypothesis 1: Relationship marketing significantly influences brand equity.

### **Relationship Marketing, Brand Identification, and Brand Equity**

Relationship marketing proposes a modern approach to marketing management, enabling organizations to invest in and apply various relationship marketing strategies to promote and elevate their brands (Hashemi, 2023). One critical factor that strengthens the relationship between relationship marketing and BE is Brand Identification. According to Customer–Brand Relationship Theory, the customer–brand connection is a type of brand relationship whereby consumers develop thoughts, feelings, and recognition of a product or brand (Fournier, 1998). Brand identification happens when consumers, upon encountering elements like packaging, logos, specific colors, or sounds (jingles, slogans), recall a brand (Harjadi et al., 2023; Irajy Noghondar, 2023). This identification fosters unconscious trust in the brand's services and products and assigns higher value to them over competing brands, thus enhancing brand equity (Almasi et al., 2020; Azimzadeh & Razavi, 2018; Sallam & Wahid, 2015). Chatzi et al. (2024) found that relationship

marketing positively affects brand identification, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty in service industries. Torres & Augusto (2018) also showed that brand attitude and willingness to pay mediate the relationship between brand identification and BE. Ramzyar & Zamani (2015) confirmed that brand recognizability ranked as the most influential factor in determining brand equity success, followed by personalization. Although past research separately studied the relationship between RM and brand identification (Chatzi et al., 2024), and between brand identification and BE (Ramzyar & Zamani, 2015; Torres & Augusto, 2018), the mediating role of brand identification in this link has been largely overlooked.

Hypothesis 2: Relationship marketing significantly influences brand identification.

Hypothesis 3: Brand identification significantly influences brand equity.

Hypothesis 4: Relationship marketing, through the mediating role of brand identification, significantly influences brand equity.

### **Relationship Marketing, Brand Experience, and Brand Equity**

The primary focus of RM is to attract, retain, and create a favorable experience for customers, which leads to long-term customer relationships and loyalty. Relationship marketing emphasizes the mutual benefit of both the service provider and customer by fostering positive experiences that change consumer behavior and enhance brand equity (Onabi & Borna, 2024). Given this importance, organizations increasingly prioritize long-term customer relationships (Hunter, 2014; Venkatesan, 2017). A vital element in this process is Consumer Experience (Hosseini & Razavi, 2016). According to Brakus et al. (2009), brand experience is the outcome of customer–brand interactions throughout the consumer journey, from pre-purchase to post-consumption. Schmitt (2009) further investigated brand experience as a collection of customer emotions, thoughts, and responses to the brand. This experience plays a key role in how customers evaluate and choose among competing

brands (Beig & Nika, 2019; Kim & Manoli, 2022; Yektayar & Khargheposh, 2021). Assaad et al. (2024) found that relationship marketing fosters satisfying customer experiences, contributing to brand loyalty, evident in customers of Bank Mellat in Isfahan. Rahayu et al. (2024) showed that brand experience had a significant positive influence on BE and served as a mediator through perceived value. Similarly, Tajzadeh & Tajzadeh (2018) demonstrated that advertising and customer experience positively influenced the dimensions of brand equity in the airline industry. However, most of this research has been conducted in non-sport sectors. Given that the preferences and expectations of sport club customers differ significantly from other service consumers, this study aims to fill that gap.

Hypothesis 5: Relationship marketing significantly influences brand experience.

Hypothesis 6: Brand experience significantly influences brand equity.

Hypothesis 7: Relationship marketing, through the mediating role of brand experience, significantly influences brand equity.

### Conceptual Model of the Present Research

Based on the theoretical foundations, the proposed hypotheses, and grounded in the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) theory, which serves as the underlying framework for the concept of Relationship Marketing (Rababah et al., 2011), as well as the Customer–Brand Relationship Theory (Fournier, 1998), the investigators aimed to develop a comprehensive model. This model explores the impact of RM on BE, with an emphasis on the mediating roles of Brand Identification and Brand Experience, from the perspective of customers of sport clubs in the city of Isfahan.

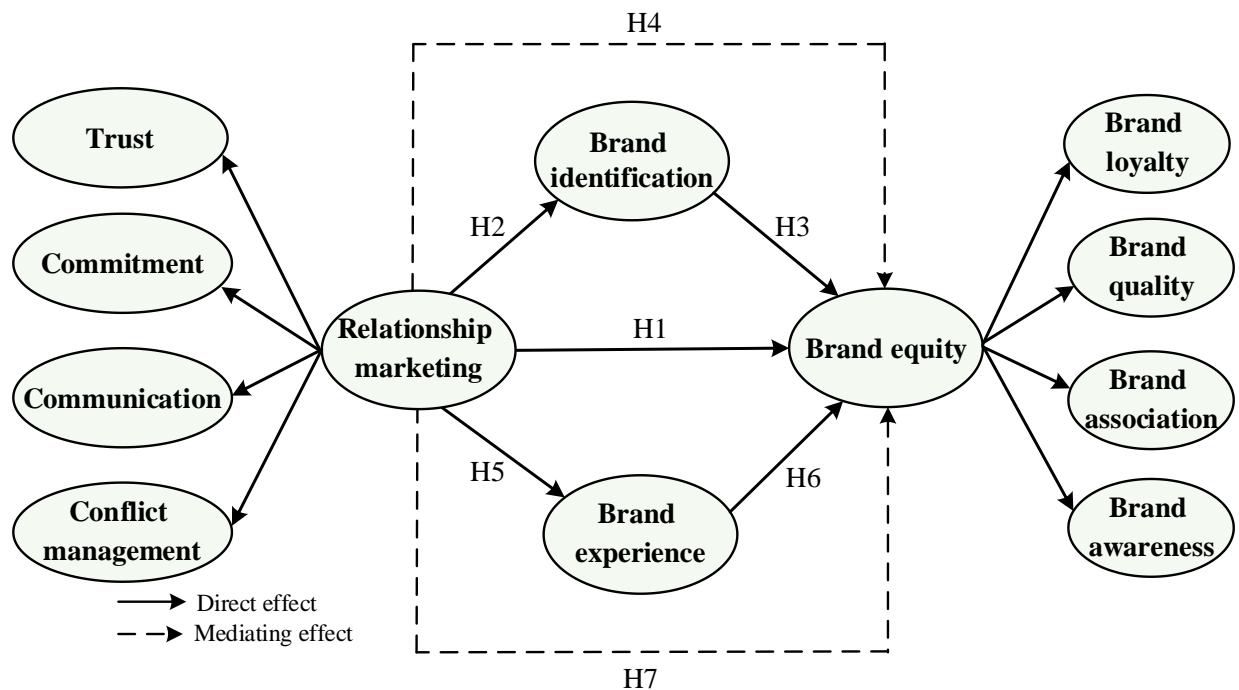


Fig 1. Conceptual model of current study

## 2. Methodology

To explain the research methodology of the present study, the researchers employed the Research Onion model proposed by Saunders et al. (2009). This model includes eight layers, and the

current research was designed based on the following layers: positivism as the research paradigm, applied as the main type of research, deductive-hypothetical as the research approach,



quantitative as the research strategy, field-based as the research nature, causal and cross-sectional as the research method, descriptive as the research objective, and finally, library research and questionnaires as the data collection techniques. The statistical population of this study included Isfahan fitness clubs. According to the official records of the Department of Sport Clubs of the General Directorate of Sports and Youth of Isfahan Province, a total of 208 fitness clubs were active in Isfahan city in 2024 (1403 in the Persian calendar). The statistical population for the present study was defined as the clients of 14 fitness clubs that had over 300 members and a minimum of 5 years of operational history. Due to the unavailability of the exact number of clients in these selected clubs, the researchers used Krejcie and Morgan's sampling table and, assuming an unlimited population, selected a sample of 384 sport club clients in Isfahan. In this study, the independent variable was Relationship Marketing; the mediating variables were Brand Identification and Brand Experience; and the dependent variable was Brand Equity. The measurement instruments included the following standard questionnaires: Relationship Marketing

Questionnaire (Omeje & Olise, 2022), comprising four subcomponents: Trust (items 1 to 5), Commitment (items 6 to 9), Communication (items 10 to 13), and Conflict Management (items 14 to 17). Brand Equity Questionnaire (Azimzadeh et al., 2019), consisting of four subcomponents: Brand Loyalty (items 1 to 3), Brand Quality (items 4 to 6), Brand Association (items 7 to 9), and Brand Awareness (items 10 to 12). Brand Identification Questionnaire (Muna et al., 2023), including 4 items. Brand Experience Questionnaire (Hwang et al., 2021), including 5 items. The reliability of these questionnaires was estimated as follows: 0.82, 0.81, 0.86, and 0.74 respectively. The validity of the questionnaires was confirmed by 10 academic experts in sports management. For data collection, the researcher personally visited the selected sport clubs over a period of three weeks. After coordinating with each club's manager, the questionnaires were distributed and collected directly from the clubs' customers. Finally, for analyzing the proposed model, Structural Equation Modeling was performed using SmartPLS 3 software.

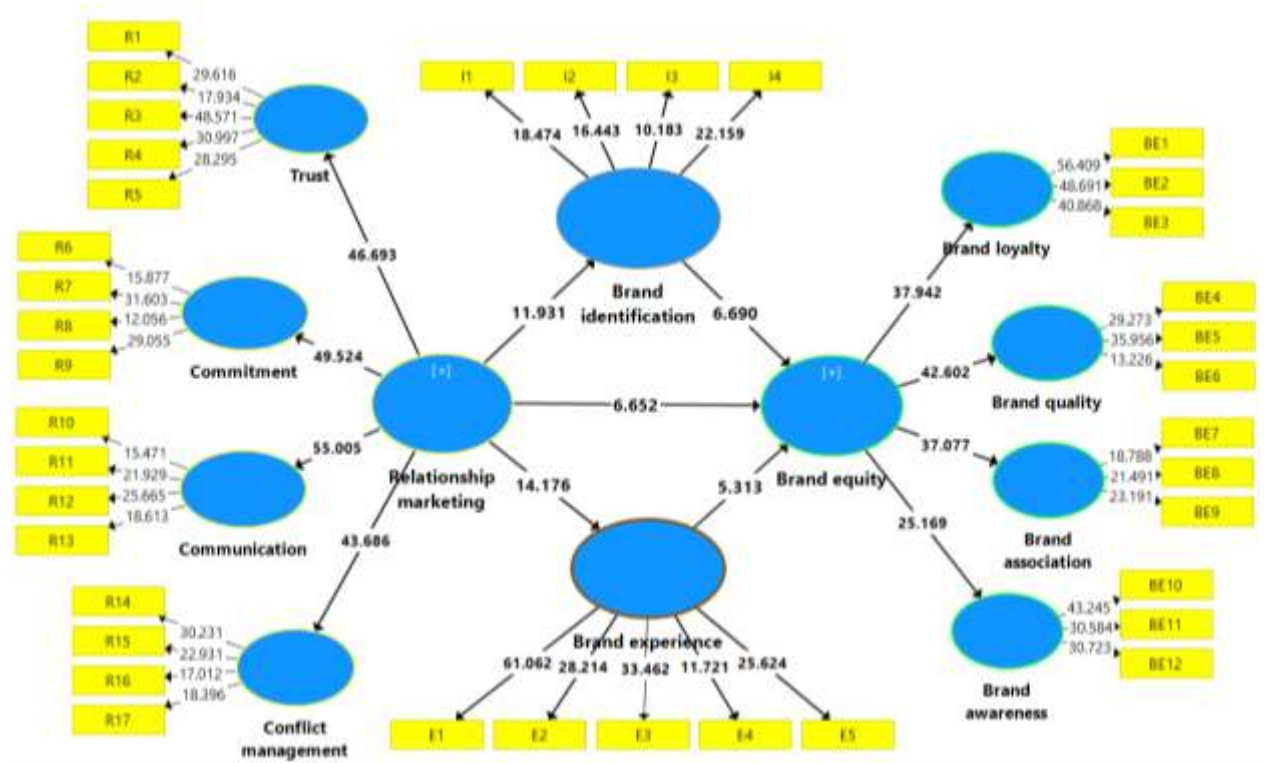
### 3. Findings of the Research

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of sport club consumers

Sample characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Age	Less than 20 years	46	12%
	20–29 years	92	24%
	30–39 years	131	34%
	Over 40 years	115	30%
Gender	Male	146	38%
	Female	238	62%
Membership	Over 24 months	88	23%
	19–24 months	100	26%
	13–18 months	73	19%
	7–12 months	69	18%
	1–6 months	54	14%

Based on the findings showed in Table 1, the majority of the sample participants were aged

between 30 and 39 years, were female, and had a membership duration of 7 to 12 months.



**Figure 2.** The research model in the case of significant coefficients t

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual model of the research based on the significance of coefficients (t-values). This model evaluates all measurement

equations (factor loadings) and standardized path coefficients using the t-statistic.

### Model Fit Assessment

In structural equation modeling (SEM) using SmartPLS version 3, the goodness-of-fit of the measurement model is assessed based on several indicators, including Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha, Average Variance Extracted

(AVE), and Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ ). According to standard benchmarks, values greater than 0.70 for CR and Cronbach's Alpha, and values above 0.50 for AVE indicate acceptable reliability and validity of the measurement model indicators.

**Table 2.** Structural model review indicators

Variable	Convergent validity			
	Average variance extracted	Composite reliability	Cronbach's $\alpha$	$R^2$ square
Relationship marketing	0.53	0.91	0.82	-
Brand identification	0.54	0.78	0.86	0.23
Brand experience	0.56	0.83	0.74	0.33
Brand equity	0.52	0.85	0.81	0.54

The findings of the present study regarding convergent validity assessment indicated that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) for all four latent constructs, Relationship Marketing, Brand Identification, Brand Experience, and Brand Equity, were at acceptable levels. Moreover, the Coefficient of

Determination ( $R^2$ ), which is calculated only for endogenous variables, was reported for the constructs of Brand Identification, Brand Experience, and Brand Equity as the dependent variables in the conceptual model. The results confirmed that the model indicators exhibited an acceptable model fit.

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity between research variables

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Brand association	0.85											
Conflict Management	0.64	0.92										
Trust	0.62	0.63	0.89									
Commitment	0.64	0.55	0.45	0.88								
Brand Identification	0.69	0.53	0.83	0.49	1.00							
Brand Loyalty	0.54	0.40	0.57	0.43	0.65	0.88						
Brand Awareness	0.58	0.46	0.60	0.45	0.72	0.73	0.86					
Brand Quality	0.39	0.24	0.46	0.31	0.60	0.43	0.49	0.82				
Relationship Marketing	0.56	0.43	0.58	0.48	0.74	0.56	0.62	0.46	0.85			
Communication	0.74	0.52	0.62	0.47	0.68	0.51	0.51	0.47	0.48	0.84		
Brand Experience	0.63	0.56	0.55	0.43	0.58	0.47	0.49	0.52	0.46	0.64	0.87	
Brand Equity	0.74	0.52	0.72	0.47	0.51	0.44	0.51	0.47	0.42	0.52	0.71	0.86

After assessing and confirming the convergent validity, the researcher proceeded to examine the discriminant validity. According to [Hair et al. \(2011\)](#), if discriminant validity is confirmed, the shared variance between each construct and its indicators should be greater than the variance shared with other constructs. The criterion is that if the

square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which appears on the diagonal in the matrix, is greater than the values in the corresponding rows and columns for a given construct, then discriminant validity is considered confirmed. As a result, based on the data presented in Table 3, the discriminant validity of the study was confirmed.

**Table 4.** Factor load coefficients & significant coefficients of research model

Variables	Dimensions	Factor Loading	t value	Meaningful
Relationship Marketing	Trust	0.85	46.69	0.001
	Commitment	0.84	49.52	0.001
	Communications	0.86	55.00	0.001
	Conflict Management	0.83	43.69	0.001
Brand Identification	I'm interested in hearing what others think about this brand.	0.70	18.47	0.001
	I feel upset when someone criticizes this brand.	0.68	16.44	0.001
	This brand's successes are my successes.	0.58	10.18	0.001
	When I talk about this brand, I usually say "we" rather than "they."	0.72	22.16	0.001
Brand Experience	I feel energized when using the services of this brand.	0.85	61.06	0.001
	I feel a strong emotional connection to this sports club brand.	0.76	28.21	0.001
	This brand helps solve my problems in doing sports activities.	0.79	33.46	0.001
	I feel good after using this sports club brand.	0.60	11.72	0.001
	When I think of the brand, I remember how it succeeded through creativity.	0.73	25.62	0.001
Brand Equity	Brand Awareness	0.82	25.17	0.001
	Brand Quality	0.81	42.60	0.001
	Brand Loyalty	0.80	37.94	0.001
	Brand Association	0.71	37.07	0.001

Based on the findings presented in Table 4, it can be stated that for all dimensions of Relationship Marketing, Brand Identification, Brand Experience, and Brand Equity, all indicators demonstrated

significant factor loadings, with statistical significance at the 99% confidence level. Among the sub-dimensions of relationship marketing, the Communication component showed the highest



factor loading, while Conflict Management had the lowest. Within the dimensions of brand identification, the item “I feel upset when someone criticizes this brand” had the highest factor loading. Among the items related to brand experience, the item “I feel energized when using the services of

this brand” exhibited the highest loading. Additionally, within the components of brand equity, Brand Awareness had the highest factor loading, while Brand Association showed the lowest.

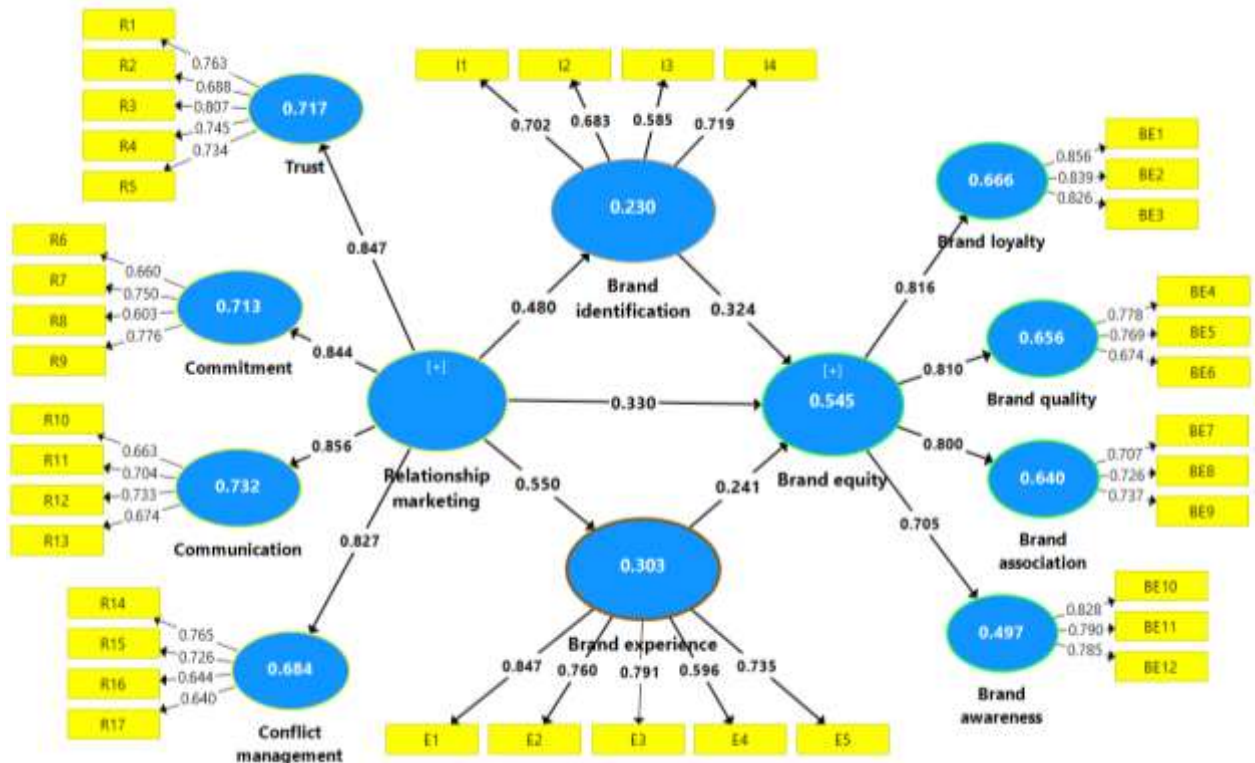


Figure 3. Research model in standard coefficient estimation mode

Table 4. Path coefficient values & t-statistics

Research variables	Path coefficient B	t value	Meaningful	Conclusion
Brand Equity → Relationship Marketing	0.33	6.94	0.01	Confirmed
Relationship Marketing → Brand Identification	0.48	11.17	0.01	Confirmed
Relationship Marketing → Brand Experience	0.55	15.86	0.01	Confirmed
Brand Identification → Brand Equity	0.32	6.72	0.01	Confirmed
Brand Experience → Brand Equity	0.24	5.16	0.01	Confirmed

According to the findings presented in Table 5, Relationship Marketing had a significant impact on BE ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $t = 6.94$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), Brand Identification ( $\beta = 0.48$ ,  $t = 11.17$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and Brand Experience ( $\beta = 0.55$ ,  $t = 15.86$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Furthermore, Brand Identification had a positive and significant effect on BE ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $t = 6.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and Brand Experience also showed a positive and significant influence on BE ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $t = 5.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 4.** The value of indirect effect coefficients

Research variables	Mediating effects	t value	Standard Deviation	Meaningful	Conclusion
Relationship Marketing → Brand Identification → Brand Equity	0.15=0.32*0.48	6.20	0.025	0.01	Confirmed
Relationship Marketing → Brand Experience → Brand Equity	0.13=0.24*0.55	4.73	0.028	0.01	Confirmed

As shown in the research model (Figure 6), RM had a significant impact on BE through the mediating variable of Brand Identification ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $t = 6.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), as well as through the mediating

variable of Brand Experience ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $t = 4.73$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), among sport clubs offering fitness services in the city of Isfahan.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

In today's world, the primary asset of sport clubs is their brand, and they invest heavily in the development of this modern concept. One of the key dimensions contributing to brand stability is brand equity, which plays a vital role in the development of Isfahan fitness clubs. On the other hand, relationship marketing and establishing effective connections between sport clubs and customers are among the most influential factors shaping consumers' perception of the brand. Developing RM in fitness clubs can lead to a positive mental association with the brand among customers. Therefore, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive model to investigate the effect of relationship marketing on BE with emphasis on the mediating roles of brand identification and brand experience in Isfahan fitness clubs. Findings related to the first hypothesis indicated that relationship marketing had a positive and significant effect on BE of fitness clubs in Isfahan (Afsharian et al., 2014; Hashemi, 2023; Onabi & Borna, 2024).

Hashemi (2023), for instance, confirmed that relationship marketing significantly enhanced brand equity in competitive product markets. The growing competition among fitness clubs and the importance of customer retention have driven clubs to establish and sustain long-term relationships with their clients. This, in turn, has improved brand equity in the eyes of consumers. Accordingly, managers of Isfahan fitness clubs are recommended to promote a culture of relationship marketing and utilize its

components, such as trust, commitment, long-term communication, and conflict management, to improve brand equity. As sport clubs rely on community engagement for survival and growth, integrating relationship marketing into their goals and strategies can contribute substantially to brand value.

Results of the second hypothesis showed that RM had a significant and positive effect on brand identification in fitness clubs (Assaad et al., 2024; Chatzi et al., 2024). Based on the Customer-Brand Relationship Theory (Fournier, 1998), brand relationships emerge when consumers think about and develop recognition of a product or brand. Chatzi et al. (2024) also found that relationship marketing positively influenced brand identification in service sectors. Building long-term emotional bonds with customers through relationship marketing helps them better identify with the brand. If sport club managers apply relationship marketing as a modern approach, they can influence customers and foster stronger brand associations.

Findings from the third hypothesis demonstrated a positive and significant impact of brand identification on BE, aligning with studies by Chatzi et al. (2024) and Ramzyar & Zamani (2015). For example, Ramzyar and Zamani found that brand recognition ranked first in driving brand equity, followed by personalization. The more consumers recognize a club's brand, the more valuable it becomes in their minds. Therefore, if Isfahan fitness

clubs provide customers with opportunities to recognize and positively experience their brand, their brand equity will improve. Enhanced brand recognition leads to greater consumer trust and willingness to pay for services, which ultimately increases BE.

The fourth hypothesis confirmed that brand identification mediates the relationship between relationship marketing and BE. This is consistent with findings from [Torres & Augusto \(2018\)](#) and [Chatzi et al. \(2024\)](#), who indicated that relationship marketing significantly influences brand identification and that brand recognition positively affects BE. Hence, brand identification can serve as a key mechanism that strengthens the relationship between relationship marketing and BE in Isfahan clubs. Managers should prioritize brand recognition through effective service delivery and emotional engagement to enhance brand equity.

Results from the fifth hypothesis indicated that relationship marketing significantly influenced brand experience in Isfahan's fitness clubs, aligning with studies by [Onabi & Borna \(2024\)](#) and [Assaad et al. \(2024\)](#). [Assaad et al. \(2024\)](#) showed that relationship marketing created a satisfying customer experience in the banking sector in Isfahan. Considering the importance of customers in the success of relationship marketing ([Yang & Chao, 2017](#)), fitness clubs should not merely focus on providing services at the right time, place, and price, but rather strive to establish deep, lasting relationships that encourage repeat use and positive word-of-mouth. Therefore, long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with current and potential clients via relationship marketing will enhance brand experience among Isfahan fitness club consumers.

The sixth hypothesis confirmed that brand experience had a significant and positive effect on BE in fitness clubs, supporting the findings of [Rahayu et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Torres & Augusto \(2018\)](#). [Rahayu et al. \(2024\)](#) indicated that improved brand experience positively influenced brand equity. Brand experience also contributes to brand

awareness and brand loyalty, two core dimensions of BE ([Azimzadeh et al., 2019](#)). Thus, enhancing brand experience can significantly boost brand equity. Since perceived service quality plays a major role in shaping brand experience, Isfahan fitness club managers should focus on delivering high-quality services, such as innovative programs and smart fitness equipment, to strengthen brand value. The seventh hypothesis revealed that brand experience mediated the relationship between RM and BE. This finding is in line with studies by [Chatzi et al. \(2024\)](#), [Rahayu et al. \(2024\)](#), and [Torres & Augusto \(2018\)](#). While [Assaad et al. \(2024\)](#) highlighted the effect of relationship marketing on customer satisfaction, [Rahayu et al. \(2024\)](#) confirmed the positive impact of brand experience on BE. Directing marketing resources toward relationship marketing and fostering strong, reciprocal relationships with customers—alongside delivering services tailored to customer needs—can strengthen the link between relationship marketing and brand equity. To build long-term brand equity, Isfahan fitness club managers should utilize customer feedback to identify strengths and weaknesses, maintain regular interaction with customers, and provide mechanisms to address complaints. Creating a two-way relationship through quality services aligned with customer expectations results in better brand experiences and enhanced brand equity.

### Limitations and Recommendations

Like all research, the present study has limitations. It focused solely on four variables: relationship marketing, brand identification, brand experience, and brand equity. Results are therefore specific to these constructs, and the inclusion of other variables might yield different findings. Additionally, the target population consisted only of customers of Isfahan fitness clubs. Hence, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to other service-oriented sport organizations. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Develop and utilize relationship marketing techniques to influence customer attitudes and behaviors in order to enhance brand equity.

Strengthen communication and engagement between fitness clubs and their customers to foster improved brand identification and positive brand experiences.

Empower and educate sport club managers in Isfahan through training in relationship marketing principles and strategies.

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## 5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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