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Crafting a Successful Seller-Customer Relationship for Sports Product: AHP Fuzzy Approach

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to investigate the criteria of successful salespersons, which is important to enhance in store customer experience. **Method:** Employed two phase sequential exploratory design, qualitative and quantitative data were collected using purposive sampling technique. For qualitative analysis, 11 sales experts with at least 4 years working experience were interviewed and the data were analyse using thematic analysis. For quantitative analysis, 20 physical education and sports science students were chosen as respondents. Criteria and sub-criteria is weighted quantitatively using Fuzzy AHP and analysed using MATLAB software. **Results:** From the qualitative analysis, 4 criteria's (customer orientation, information knowledge, ethical behaviour, and personal characteristics) and 11 sub-criteria were identified. From the quantitative analysis, ranked were provided whereby customer-orientation with a weight of 0.2647 were in the first rank, information knowledge is at the second rank with 0.2556 weight, ethical behavior is at the third rank with 0.2450 weight, and personal characteristics is at the last rank with 0.2347 weight. **Conclusions:** The findings of this paper are important for sports retail industry, to revamp their sales and marketing strategies. With enhanced understanding regarding consumer needs, sports retailer can sell their products in a more effective manner to increase their market share.
***Keywords**:* Sports products, Sellers, Customer orientation, Mixed methods

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INTRODUCTION

From a theoretical point of view, sellers will strive to build a successful seller-customer relationship. The successful relationship between seller and customer is essential because sellers who can attract and persuade customers have a high tendency for the customer to purchase their products and subsequently create customer loyalty. Creating a positive seller customer for the sports products industry is a crucial issue in Iran, especially when the competition is stiffs and the country is positioning themselves as a sport tourism destinations (Sajahroudi, Soleymani, Aghaei, & Sanei, 2013; Zeytonli, Asadi, Farahani, & Soufi, 2013). In the previous studies, confidence, honesty and seller's proper treatment has mostly been considered and analyzed as factors that build a successful seller-customer relationship (Abdul Waheed & Gaur, 2012; Jap, 2001; Khojastehpour & Johns, 2014) However, and many other factors are affecting seller-customer relationship.

Despite long term buyer and seller relationships, involve a high level of commitment and work to maintain, this paper tends to answer the question that what are the factors that the sellers must acquire to encourage customers to buy their products and subsequently build a strong relationship with the customer.

This paper contributes to the relationship marketing literature by increasing the understanding of the essential factors in crafting a successful seller-customer relationship, especially for sports product. Also, we are trying to suggest managers in sports firms and industry develop strong behavioral and emotional ties with the customer in their relationship marketing strategy.

This paper is organized into the following sections: literature review, which consists of seller-customer relationship and characteristics of a good seller was presented in the next section. Subsequently, the methodology section is presented which provide details of the procedure, sample, and measures of the empirical study, followed by the study's results. This paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings and by offering directions for further research.

Seller-Customer Relationship

Anderson (1996) Pointed out that the fundamental goal of the salespeople in the new millennium is to develop a long-term, mutually profitable partnerships with customers. This perspective emphasizes the

importance of Salesforce behaviors in gaining customer trust (Swan, Bowers, & Richardson, 1999), which is vital in developing long term seller-customer relationships. One of the critical elements in building mutually beneficial relationships in commercial sales is the ability of sellers to communicate well with customers. Besides, there is increasing evidence that factors such as ethical behavior, personality traits, and active listening play a crucial role in a successful relationship between the seller and client (Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd, 2005; Comer & Drollinger, 1999). In relationship building, seller's skills are positively related to the seller's trust, which affect the relationship between the seller and the buyer. , the vital role of the sales and marketing staff and employees should be highlighted as they have direct communication and interaction with customers.

Characteristics of a Good Seller

Researchers have defined characteristics that make a good seller (Babalola & Anifowose, 2015; Lagace, Dahlstrom, & Gassenheimer, 1991). A seller should have proper knowledge, information and provide unambiguous information about the products. A good seller also needs to have a appropriate understanding of its customer and market needs (Román & Luis Munuera, 2005). Various studies have been conducted in determining the essential criteria of a good seller. For example, (Johlke, 2015); Rahimi, darziyanazizi, and ghanavatpour (2019) investigated the effect of sales staff behavior and their performance outcome pattern of listening skill in sales staff. Results obtained from research indicate that sales staff listening has a significant positive impact on sales behavior and performance of the staff. In his 1985 study, Churchill stated that sales skills are the second most influential factor in salesforce performance (Wachner, Plouffe, & Grégoire, 2009). Sales skills are defined as the skills learned by individuals to perform the essential tasks of a sales job and include three distinct areas including interpersonal skills, individual art, sales art, and unique personal skills (Rentz, Shepherd, Tashchian, Dabholkar, & Ladd, 2002). As a result, patience is essential for customer service vendors. Hugging and patience help customers to reduce their current disappointments in choosing the right product. The ability to truly listen to customers for excellent service is essential for several reasons. Not only is it essential to look at the experiences of specific customers, but also to be careful about the

feedback from the customers' side (Ciotti, 2019). Furthermore, Punwatkar and Verghese (2014) state that seller behavior, including seller's listening ability and communication skills, plays a vital role in consumer purchasing decisions. Hence, it can be inferred that if the store employees are well trained, they can influence impulse buying behavior of consumers through meaningful and persuading dialogue (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2015). However, the absence of the seller in the purchasing process or the bad behavior of the seller can create negative emotions to the buyer (Mohan, Sivakumaran, & Sharma, 2013).

fayyazi and Moddaresnia (2017) examined the factors that lead to customer satisfaction. They also found that politeness and openness, honesty, integrity and familiarity with the company's and competitor's products as well as sales person's physical appearance are vital. Also, some researchers reported that sales behavior of a seller positively correlated with the seller and store performance (Abu ELSamen & Akroush, 2018; Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Singh & Das, 2013; Yu & Bastin, 2010). To illustrates, sales behavior causes better customer understanding and increases the experience of the seller. It causes reduction of job stress, job ambiguity, and more satisfaction, and ultimately, the seller enjoys his job, and his performance would improve.

A good salesperson has a deep understanding of how a company's products work. Moreover, without the knowledge of their product seller does not know how to help customers in the event of problems. Thus, they have to spend time every day getting to know the vendor's products. Having necessary basic information about the company's products ensures that sellers provide the best possible solutions to help the customer even in the most complex situations and convince the customer that the product is right for them. Due to the importance of customer understanding and market needs, several actions should be taken from the companies' sides. For example, staff training should be provided. Among the critical knowledge to be exposed at are the benefits of the products compared to the competitors, products' quality and also technical knowledge and expertise about the products (Adnan, Saher, Naureen, Qureshi, & Khan, 2013; Babalola Anthony & Anifowose Ojo; Seglund, 2012).

METHOD

The present study used a mix method to analyze the data. This method has been proposed as the third methodological movement after quantitative and qualitative methods. besides, it is a sequential-heuristic design; a sequential hybrid design is one in which one approach is designed and implemented following the other. For example, one can apply the qualitative method first and then the quantitative method or vice versa. Finally, both qualitative and quantitative analyzes are interpreted together (Bergman, 2008; Creswell & Clark, 2017; Onwuegbuzie, Teddlie, & Tashakkori, 2003). In the first phase, the qualitative data were collected to provide a conceptual answer for the research question and identify sports product criteria for sellers. In the early stage of data collection, 11 sales experts (2 women and nine men aged from 28 to 41 years old) who has 4 to 10 years working experience in sports clothing and equipment stores in Tehran were interviewed. After analyzing interview results, all criteria related to sports product were identified and classified using content analysis; thematic analysis approach.

Theme analysis is one of the efficient methods for qualitative analysis which is frequently adopted for identification, analysis, and reporting patterns (themes) of data (interviews or a text). The theme was identified based on how essential and frequent the responses are. The thematic analysis, unlike any other qualitative methods, does not rely on a pre-existing theoretical framework. The theme provides important information about research data and represents the meaning of pattern existing in a set of data. Overall, the theme is a repetitive and distinctive feature in the text, which indicates a particular perception and experience. Although there is no specific rule for understanding the theme, various guidelines were existing. As the theme is identified based on the repetitive information received during the interview session, any information that is not repetitive and happens to be rise just once cannot be categorized as a theme. On the other hand, although overlap in themes is somehow inevitable, the themes should be distinctive (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, the qualitative research process was repeated for several times. First, transcription of each interview was extracted so that a general understanding of the respondent's responses is obtained.

Annotation was done alongside the text of the study to make the initial coding. Next, axial coding was performed using the identified criteria's and selective coding was performed. Lastly, to ensure all the criteria were covered, responses were re-read and placed in a general category. In addition to that, to ensure the reliability of all of the criteria, the interview data were reviewed by two independent assessors, which need to ensure that each criterion is placed in the right category. Based on the assessor's responses, it was confirmed that the collected data is reliable.

In the second phase, criteria and sub-criteria are weighted quantitatively using (Chang, 1996) Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process in MATLAB software. The detail information of the analyses is presented in Appendix 1. The weighting process comprises several steps. In the first step, a pairwise comparison questionnaire was designed based on results from the qualitative assessment (the first phase). In AHP, the elements of each level are compared in pairs to their respective higher-level elements and their weight is calculated. Then by integrating relative weights, the final weight of each option will be calculated which is known as relative weight. In these comparisons, the decision-maker will use verbal judgment, meaning that if element i is compared to element j, the decision-maker will say how vital part i is to element j (ALAVI, 2012). In this study, 20 physical education and sports science students were chosen as respondents. The students were chosen because they are the most commonly referred to sports stores in Iran (Physical education students have two or three practical lessons in each semester, each of which holds two sessions per week, which in turn provides them with the opportunity to purchase sports equipment. We have more than 6,000 physical education students in the country. Purposive sampling method was used in respondent's selection process. In the next phase, the questionnaires were collected. Before respondents fill out the surveys, a detailed explanation is given to participants. Then, they were asked to score each criterion and sub-criterion to make a pairwise comparison using 1 1-9 preference scale. Each comparison is then transferred to a numerical value.

CRm and CRg were used to evaluate the validity of paired comparisons. The intermediate limit of fuzzy numbers and CRg consider the geometric mean of the first and third limit of fuzzy numbers, that is, the matrix Am is composed of intermediate values of expert preference,

and the matrix Ag is composed of the upper and lower bound of fuzzy numbers (Appendix 1). The maladaptation rate is an indicator that indicates possible inconsistencies in the matrix of paired comparisons. The maladaptation rate is one of the most important parameters in paired comparisons. Whether they have good credit or not. This rate must always be less than 0.1 (Saaty, 1986). (Gogus & Boucher, 1998) suggested that for the compatibility check, two matrices (midpoint and fuzzy number) are derived from each fuzzy matrix. Then the adaptation of each matrix calculate based on the method proposed by Saaty.

RESULTS

Qualitative results

From the interview result, four main criteria were extracted; (1) information knowledge, (2) customer orientation, (3) ethical behavior, and (4) personal characteristics. The summary of the results was presented in table 1 below. Also Figure 1 shows the model extracted from the qualitative data for the success of sellers.

Table 1: Summary of criteria for sports product sellers

Main criteria	Sub criteria	Details of the criteria
Ethical behavior	Ethics-oriented	Good-tempered and cheerful
		Ethical conscience
		Fair treatment
		Knowing people
		Calmness in behavior and speech
		Humility
	Honesty	Observance of fairness in pricing
		Honesty in dealing with the customer
		Honesty in sales
		Seller's reputation
	Trustworthiness	Trustworthiness
		Non-deception in sales
		Respect for customer's rights
		Seller's correct answer
		Personal branding
		Stability of seller
	Responsible	Efforts to compensate for errors and eliminate them in the sales process (follow up complaints)
		Planning to achieve sales goals
		Commitment
		Adaptability and flexibility in providing better customer service
		Putting customer service at the top priority

Customer orientation	Accountability	Talk less and hear more
		Listening to the customers
		Accountability to customers' questions
		Accountability to customers' complaints
	Open to criticism	Tolerance
		Open to criticism
		Flexibility in sale
		Paying attention to customers' criticisms
Information knowledge	Knowledge about product	Understanding products of store
		Physical understanding of the product
		Giving additional information to the customer
		Understanding sports brands
		Customer justification of price difference
	Knowledge about customer	Recognizing customer personality
		Customer persuasion
		Creative and innovative in delivering goods to the customer
		Attention to regional culture
		Use of social media
		Ability to negotiate in sales
Personal characteristics	Harmony between seller and product	Suitable workplace clothing
		Good dress and attractive
		Match between seller and product
		Seller's appearance
		Using the store brand
		Body fitness
	Interested in sales	Interested in seller a job
		Enthusiasm and motivation
		Interested in acquiring knowledge and expertise
		Extroverted personality
		Spontaneous and motivated
	Communication	Skills in English
		Effective tone and speech
		Familiarity with body language
		Being energetic in talking
		Eye contact with the customer

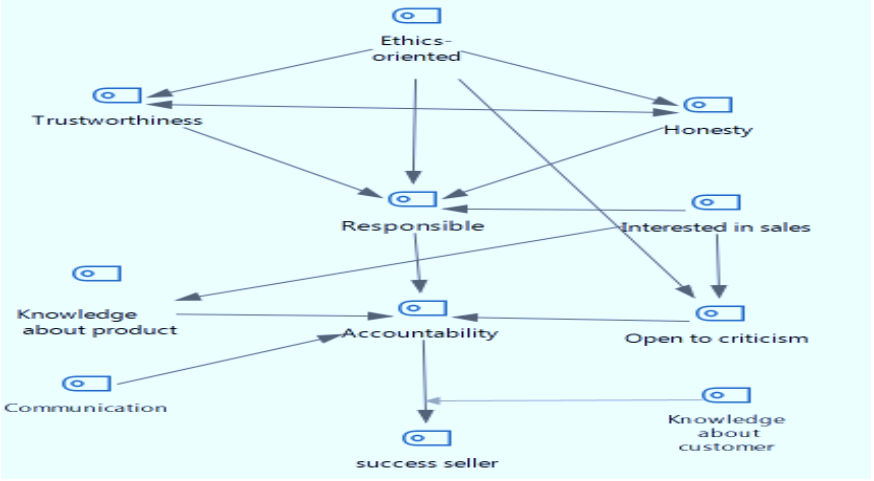

Figure 1: Model extracted from qualitative data

Quantitative results

Fuzzy Logic was introduced to the scientific and academic community in an article entitled "Theory of Fuzzy Collections" by Professor Lotfii zadeh, 1965. The main reason for its presentation was to express dissatisfaction with the inability and weakness of classical Logic (binary or binary Logic) in the set theory and mathematics to deal with the real and inaccurate worlds Table 2 below shows the result from quantitative analysis. The fuzzy triangular numbers are categorized as lower limit (L), medium limit (M), the upper limit (U).

Table 2: Linguistic variables and triangular fuzzy numbers for solutions ratings

Criteria	Priorities	The fuzzy equivalent of priorities		
		Lower limit (L)	Medium limit (M)	The upper limit (U)
1	Equally important	1	1	1
2	intermediate value between 1 and 3	1	2	3
3	Slightly important	2	3	4
4	Slightly important	3	4	5
5	Important	4	5	6
6	intermediate value between 5 and 7	5	6	7
7	strongly important	6	7	8
8	intermediate value between 7and 9	7	8	9
9	Extremely important	8	9	10

The following are the steps to form a paired comparison questionnaire; 1. In the hierarchical analysis process, we first need to identify and extract the criteria under the research criteria. This is one of the most important steps of AHP. We need to specify precisely whether the problem has multi-criteria, sub-criteria or options. 2. Next, pair wise comparisons of criteria and sub-criteria or options should be made. In this case, the experts make comparisons between the criteria and sub-criteria of the decision and determine their scores against each other. The comparison is based on Nine Quantity table. That is, first the pairwise comparison of criteria against the target and secondly the pairwise comparison of the options against each of the criteria. 3. After creating the paired comparative tables (questionnaires), we provide the experts to determine the comparisons between them based on the 1 to 9 (Saaty, 1986) range based on Table 2.

Table 3: Fuzzy Comparison Matrix for criteria (CRm: 0.023: CRg: 0.063)

Criteria	Information knowledge			Customer orientation			Psychological characteristics			Ethical behavior			Fuzzy sum of each row			Fuzzy compound expansion			Preference degree of Si on Sk			Absolute weight	Normalid weight
Information knowledge	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.82	1.10	1.58	0.97	1.22	1.52	0.54	0.81	1.17	3.34	4.13	5.28	0.16	0.26	0.41	0.97	1.00	1.00	0.97	0.26
Customer orientation	0.63	0.91	1.22	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.73	1.04	1.49	0.94	1.33	1.84	3.31	4.27	5.55	0.16	0.26	0.43	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.26
Personal characterises	0.66	0.82	1.03	0.67	0.96	1.37	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.78	1.04	1.45	3.10	3.82	4.84	0.15	0.24	0.38	0.92	0.89	0.97	0.89	0.23
Ethical behavior	0.85	1.24	1.84	0.54	0.75	1.06	0.69	0.96	1.29	1.00	1.00	1.00											

The weighted criteria and sub-criteria, as well as the reliability analysis, were presented in tables 3 to 7. As can be seen in Table 3, the customer orientation dimension was perceived as the most critical core criterion with the weight of (0.265). Information knowledge, Ethical behavior and personal characteristics ranked in second, third and fourth priority with the weight of 0.256, 0.245 and 0.235 respectively. Finally, considering that both CRm and CRg criteria, which were smaller than 0.1, it can be inferred that fuzzy matrix is consistent.

Table 4: Fuzzy Comparison Matrix for Ethical behavior (CRm: 0.001: CRg: 0.010)

Sub-Criteria	Honesty			Ethics-oriented			Trustworthiness		
Honesty	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.89	1.22	1.63	1.16	1.55	2.14
Ethics-oriented	0.61	0.82	1.12	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.79	1.11	1.50
trustworthiness	0.47	0.65	0.86	0.67	0.90	1.26	1.00	1.00	1.00

Fuzzy sum of each row			Fuzzy compound expansion			Preference degree of Si on Sk		Absolute weight	Normalized weight
3.05	3.76	4.77	0.26	0.41	0.63	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.448
2.40	2.94	3.62	0.21	0.32	0.48	0.71	1.00	0.71	0.315
2.13	2.54	3.13	0.19	0.28	0.41	0.53	0.83	0.53	0.237

Table 4 below shows the fuzzy comparison matrix for ethical behavior. Table below indicates that the highest weight is given to honesty dimension with the weight of (0.448), followed by Ethics-oriented (0.315), and trustworthiness (0.237). Finally, considering that both CRm and CRg criteria, which were smaller than 0.1, it can be inferred that the fuzzy matrix is consistent.

Table 5: Fuzzy Comparison Matrix for Customer Orientation (CRm: 0.025: CRg: 0.010)

Sub-Criteria	Open to criticism			Responsible			Accountability		
Open to criticism	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.85	1.24	1.75	0.85	1.21	1.68
Responsible	0.57	0.81	1.18	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.98	1.31	1.75
Accountability	0.59	0.83	1.17	0.57	0.77	1.02	1.00	1.00	1.00

The fuzzy sum of each row			Fuzzy compound expansion			Preference degree of Si on Sk		Absolute weight	Normalized weight
2.70	3.45	4.43	0.23	0.38	0.60	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.39
2.55	3.11	3.92	0.22	0.34	0.53	0.89	1.00	0.89	0.346
2.17	2.59	3.20	0.19	0.28	0.43	0.68	0.79	0.68	0.264

In table 5, the fuzzy comparison matrix for customer orientation is presented. As a result, Openness to criticism was perceived as the most critical core criterion with the weight of (0.39). Responsibility (0.346) and accountability (0.264) ranked in second and third priority. Finally, considering that both CRm and CRg criteria, which were smaller than 0.1, it can be inferred that the fuzzy matrix is consistent.

Table 6: Fuzzy Comparison Matrix for seller's information knowledge

Sub-Criteria			Customer knowledge			Product knowledge		
Customer knowledge			1.00	1.00	1.00	0.49	0.62	0.81
Product knowledge			1.23	1.62	2.06	1.00	1.00	1.00
Fuzzy sum of each row			Fuzzy compound expansion			Preference degree of Si on Sk	Absolute weight	Normalized weight
1.49	1.62	1.81	0.30	0.38	0.49	0.12	0.12	0.104
2.23	2.62	3.06	0.46	0.62	0.82	1.00	1.00	0.896

In table 6, the fuzzy comparison matrix for seller's information knowledge is presented. As a result, product knowledge with a weight of 0.90 gained the priority. Customer knowledge with the weight of 0.10 gained the second priority. Since there are two sub-criteria in this dimension, the incompatibility rate for these two components are not calculated.

Table 7: Fuzzy Comparison Matrix for seller's personal characteristics (CRm: 0.05: CRg: 0.02)

Sub-Criteria	Harmony between seller and product			Communication			Interested in sales		
Harmony between seller and product	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.90	1.20	1.57	0.89	1.12	1.46
Communication	0.64	0.84	1.12	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.09	1.46	2.02
Interested in sales	0.69	0.89	1.12	0.50	0.68	0.91	1.00	1.00	1.00
The fuzzy sum of each row			Fuzzy compound expansion			Preference degree of Si on Sk		Absolute weight	Normalized weight
2.79	3.32	4.03	0.25	0.36	0.52	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.38
2.73	3.30	4.13	0.24	0.36	0.54	0.99	1.00	0.99	0.376
2.18	2.57	3.04	0.19	0.28	0.39	0.64	0.66	0.64	0.244

The last table, table 7 shows the fuzzy comparison matrix for seller's personal characteristics. Harmony between seller and product with weight of 0.38 gained the first priority. Communication with weight of 0.377 and interest in sale with weight of 0.244 gained second and third priorities. Finally, considering that both criteria's of CRm and CRg were smaller than 0.1, it suggests that fuzzy matrix is consistent.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis shows that 4 criteria (customer orientation, information knowledge, ethical behavior, and personal characteristics) and 11 sub-criteria (ethics-oriented, honesty, trustworthiness, responsible, accountability, open to criticism, knowledge about product, knowledge about customer, harmony between seller and product, interested in sales and communication) were important in crafting a successful seller-customer relationship, especially for sports product.

Customer orientation was the first criteria (0.265) in crafting seller-customer relationship. This finding indicates that, from customer's point of view, customer orientation has a significant role in sport marketing context. This is consistent with fayyazi and Moddaresnia (2017) findings in which one of the sub-criteria in customer orientation is Openness to criticism. Criticism and Openness to criticism should be implemented at various working levels because that it can enhance the quality of the services offered, the reputation of the company, the customer shopping experience and many more. In the context of sales, sellers should also care about customer criticisms, be flexible in dealing with the customer and be patient in providing the services so that the customer will be satisfied with provided the services and willing to be one of the loyal customers. The second and lowest weight for customer orientation criteria is the responsibility of sellers (0.346) and accountability (0.264). Trust is a crucial element in service delivery. When sellers are committed to the customers and provide service delivery to customers as the priority, then customer's satisfaction will be higher. Besides, sellers also need to be accountable in the services they offer more specifically address customer complaints. The result of this paper was consistent with findings by (Abu ELSamen & Akroush, 2018; Rahimi et al., 2019).

Information knowledge had been found to be the second essential criteria (0.256) in crafting seller-customer relationship. The information knowledge criterion is divided into two sub-criteria: learning about the product and learning about the customer. The results showed that the knowledge about the product (0.896) had a higher weight. Therefore, sellers should have full experience about the products, and it is vital to recognize the products in stores. Then, the seller will be able to provide the customer with additional information of the product details. Besides, the sellers with proper knowledge of the brands will be able to convince

the customers and providing them with better services. Learning about the customer is ranked second with a weight of 0.104. Without understanding customer needs, the seller would not be able to deliver the best services to the customer successfully. Therefore, it is vital to identify existing and potential customers. Then, the probability of seller to have high ability in negotiation with the customer is also higher; subsequently, affect the better sale of products and services. The results are consistent with findings by fayyazi and Moddaresnia (2017), which stated that understanding customer needs and familiarity with company products is important, especially for marketing staff. Therefore, understanding, knowledge, and awareness toward the product and customers can help sellers provide appropriate services. With the integration of seller's abilities regarding products and services of sports stores, they can deliver the best services to customers based on customer needs.

Sellers' ethical behavior was the third important criteria (0.245). This result implies that the more the customer perceived that the sellers are act based on ethical conduct and provide appropriate treatment to the customers, the more customers use the products and services. The seller's ethical behavior was measured based on the three sub-criteria: sellers' honesty, fairness, and reliability. Seller's honesty (0.448) was ranked as the priority among these sub-criteria. Honesty includes all aspects of sales, from fairness in price to reputation of the seller. Hence, sellers should treat the customer with honesty and be honest at all stages of purchase, including price determination, product representation, and the quality of the product. Ethical orientation, on the other hand, was ranked second and third, with a weight of 0.316 and 0.237, respectively. The results from other researches in this field also emphasized the importance of ethical behavior in delivering sales to customers (Dai, Viken, Joo, & Bente, 2018; fayyazi & Moddaresnia, 2017; Tuan, 2015).

Personal characteristics (0.253) was one of the most effective criteria for sports product sellers. Personal characteristics are divided into three sub-criteria: harmony between seller and product, communication, and interest in sales. Harmony between seller and product (0.380) gained higher weight as the first priority compared to other sub criteria. The harmony between seller and product implies coordination and fit between the seller with the product or services they offer. A seller of sports products should use appropriate clothing in the workplace. In other

words, customers are expecting the seller to use the brand and the product that they offer in its store. These factors form the harmony and fit between the seller and product. Communication between seller and customers weighted 0.376 and ranked second as the sub-criteria for seller's characteristics. Since customers always need more information and knowledge about the product before buying, communication between sellers and customers are vital.

Furthermore, the use of effective tone and speech, appropriate body language and eye contact is also essential. Interest in sale factor (0.244) ranked third for personal characteristics' sub- criteria. This sub-criterion implies that a good sports seller must have a full interest, enthusiasm and motivation in his job. The results are consistent with findings by (Fagerstrøm, Pawar, Arar, & Sigurðsson, 2018; fayyazi & Moddaresnia, 2017; Punwatkar & Verghese, 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aims to identify critical criteria that would help the seller in building a good relationship with its customer. A two-phase sequential exploratory design is used to collect qualitative and quantitative data using purposive sampling technique. Based on the qualitative analysis, 4 criteria's (customer orientation, information knowledge, ethical behavior, and personal characteristics) and 11 sub- criteria (ethics-oriented, honesty, trustworthiness, responsible, accountability, open to criticism, learning about the product, knowledge about the customer, harmony between seller and product, interested in sales and communication) were identified. Then, based on quantitative analysis, the weight of each criterion and sub-criteria is examined. Findings indicate that trusting the customer is essential because they are the ones who have in-depth knowledge on sports products. If the seller wants to make inaccurate conversations or information, they will lose the customer for future sales, and the customer will not refer them again.

From sales perspectives, ethical behavior and attention to morality provided by the seller to a consumer can positively change customers view. Customer-oriented ethical behavior helps managers and staffs in creating a desirable environment, which will subsequently attract and retain the customers. In other words, by providing a positive and helpful image of the sports shop to the customers, chances to customer retention will be higher. Regarding the seller's information knowledge, the

findings also suggest that sellers should have right information in all aspects of product and experience about the customers to be able to provide the right service. In terms of customer orientation, the seller should pay attention to their relationship with customers and by taking responsibility and accepting criticisms from customers. Personal characteristics of sellers also is one of the significant criteria in influencing customer purchase. Thus, the seller should be interested in his profession and should be able to provide appropriate services using excellent communication and listening skills.

Since there is no comprehensive research in factors determining a successful relationship between seller and customer, especially in the context of sports product sellers and customers, this paper takes the initiative to study such a relationship. This paper is useful to those working in the customer service industry, especially in the sports retail industry, as it can be a basis for providing better services in the context of products in sports stores. According to Boles, Brashear, Bellenger, and Barksdale Jr (2000), sellers play a significant role in attracting and retaining customers through improving customer satisfaction, creating commitment, and trust, and ultimately creating loyal customers. Therefore, this paper suggests that sales managers should choose and recruit the right sports seller. High ability of seller and long-term communication with the customer will establish a competitive advantage for the store and brand (Plank & Reid, 1994). As this paper provides four major and eleven sub criteria's in selecting an appropriate seller, managers of sports stores can select their sellers with higher accuracy.

Most sports stores customers are consumers of physical education, and they have a better understanding of sports products than ordinary people. It is recommended that researchers apply the findings of the study to each specific sport and investigate both academic and practical knowledge of the customers. Then, seller-buyer relationships can be defined based on people's behavior for each sport. By studying such research, you can create a dashboard of sports sellers tailored to each discipline.

The study is limited in scope as it was conducted in the small sports sector of the Iranian market, it implies a basic understanding regarding the buyer-seller relationship in the Iranian sports market. Thus, future studies can use the findings of the study to design their research in sports

marketing besides, future research should look into other cultures and contexts and compare the results with this study. Also, the decision-making method used to obtain the weights in this study could be modified and adapted to determine the corresponding weights in other multi-criteria decision ranking methods such as TOPSIS, ELECTRE, VIKOR and PROMETHEE in their fuzzy versions. These branches provide possible lines of research to be explained in future studies.

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Appendix 1:

Chang Development Analysis Method

Assume $\tilde{A} = \{\tilde{M}_{ij}\}$ is a fuzzy pairwise comparison matrix, which is defined as follows:

$$\tilde{A} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & \tilde{M}_{12} & \cdots & \tilde{M}_{1n} \\ \tilde{M}_{21} & 1 & & \tilde{M}_{2n} \\ \vdots & & \ddots & \vdots \\ \tilde{M}_{n1} & \tilde{M}_{n2} & \cdots & 1 \end{bmatrix}$$

Then the relation $\tilde{M}_{ji} = 1/\tilde{M}_{ij}$ is always established.

Chang development analysis steps are as follows (Patil and Kant, 2014).

Step 1; If M_{gi}^{1} ، M_{gi}^{2} ، .... ، M_{gi}^{m} are values of development analysis of ith criterion per ideal m, then Fuzzy compound expansion of ideal m for ith criterion is defined as follows:

$$S_i = \sum_{j=1}^{m} M_{gi}^{j} \otimes \left[\sum_{i=1}^{n} \sum_{j=1}^{m} M_{gi}^{j} \right]^{-1} \quad (1)$$

Where m is representative of each of ideals. If $M_{gi}^{j} = (l_{ij}, m_{ij}, u_{ij})$, then $M_{gi}^{j} = (l_{ij}, m_{ij}, u_{ij})$is defined as follows by fuzzy sum operator on development analysis of ideal m:

$$\sum_{j=1}^{m} M_{gi}^{j} = (l_{i1}, m_{i1}, u_{i1}) \oplus (l_{i2}, m_{i2}, u_{i2}) \oplus \ldots \oplus (l_{im}, m_{im}, u_{im})$$
$$= (\sum_{j=1}^{m} l_{ij}, \sum_{j=1}^{m} m_{ij}, \sum_{j=1}^{m} u_{ij} = (l_i^{'}, m_i^{'}, u_i^{'})$$

In addition, in order to obtain $\left[\sum_{i=1}^{n} \sum_{j=1}^{m} M_{gi}^{j}\right]$by applying fuzzy sum operator, it would be:

$$\sum\sum M_{gi}^{j} = \sum_{i=1}^{n}(\sum_{j=1}^{m} l_{ij}, \sum_{j=1}^{m} m_{ij}, \sum_{j=1}^{m} u_{ij})$$
$$= (\sum_{i=1}^{n} l_i^{'}, \sum_{i=1}^{n} m_i^{'}, \sum_{i=1}^{n} u_i^{'})$$

$$\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n}\sum_{j=1}^{m} M_{gi}^{j}\right)^{-1} = \left(\frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} u_i^{'}}, \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} m_i^{'}}, \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} l_i^{'}}\right)$$

Thus:

$$S_i = \sum_{j=1}^{m} M_{gi}^{j} \otimes \left[\sum_{i=1}^{n}\sum_{j=1}^{m} M_{gi}^{j}\right]^{-1}$$

$$(l_i^{'}, m_i^{'}, u_i^{'}) \otimes \left(\frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} u_i^{'}}, \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} m_i^{'}}, \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} l_i^{'}}\right) = \left(\frac{l_i^{'}}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} u_i^{'}}, \frac{m_i^{'}}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} m_i^{'}}, \frac{u_i^{'}}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} l_i^{'}}\right)$$

Step 2: Calculation of preference degree (probability degree) of S_i over S_k

If $S_i=(l_i,m_i,u_i)$ and $S_k=(l_k,m_k,u_k)$ are triangular fuzzy numbers, then preference degree of S_i over S_k, that is represented by $V(S_i > S_k)$, is defined as follows:

(2)
$$V(S_i > S_k) = \begin{cases} 1 \; m_i \geq m_k \\ 0 \;\; l_k \geq u_i \\ \dfrac{l_k - u_i}{(m_i - u_i) - (m_k - l_k)} \; otherwise \end{cases}$$

Step 3: calculation of preference degree (probability degree) of a fuzzy number S that is larger than fuzzy number K S_i:i=1,2,…,k, which is defined as follows:

(3)
$$V(S \geq S_1, S_2, \ldots, S_k) = (V\big((S \geq S_1), (S \geq S_2), \ldots, (S, S_k)\big)$$
$$= \min(V\big((S \geq S_1), (S \geq S_2), \ldots, (S, S_k)\big)$$
$$= minV(S \geq S_i) \; i = 1,2, \ldots, k$$

If for each k = 1, 2, ..., n $k \neq i$ we assume that $d^{'}(A_i) = min\, V(S_i, S_k)$Then the weight vector is obtained as follows:

$$W' = (d'(A_1), d'(A_2), \dots, d'(A_n)) \quad (4)$$

Step 4: vector normalization

$$W = (d(A_1), d(A_2), \dots, d(A_n)) \quad (5)$$

b Compatibility in judgments

Gogus and Boucher (1998) proposed that two matrices (mid-number and fuzzy number limits) are derived from each fuzzy matrix and then the compatibility of each matrix based on the clock method was calculated to determine compatibility. The steps to calculate the compatibility rate for the pairwise comparisons fuzzy matrices are as follows:

Step 1: In the first step, triangular fuzzy matrix is divided into two matrices. The first matrix is composed of min-numbers of triangular judgments $A^m = [a_{ijm}]$, and second matrix includes geometric mean of the upper and lower limits of triangular numbers $A^g = \sqrt{a_{iju}.a_{ijl}}$.

Step 2: Weight vector of each matrix is calculated using clock method:

Equation 1
$$w_i^m = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}\frac{a_{ijm}}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} a_{ijm}}$$

Equation 2
$$w_i^g = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}\frac{\sqrt{a_{iju}a_{ijl}}}{\sum_{i=1}^{n}\sqrt{a_{iju}a_{ijl}}}$$

Step 3: Specific value for each matrix is calculated using the relations below.

Equation 3
$$\lambda_{max}^m = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}\sum_{j=1}^{n} a_{ijm}\left(\frac{w_j^m}{w_i^m}\right)$$

Equation 4

$$\lambda_{max}^{g} = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n}\sum_{j=1}^{n}\sqrt{a_{iju}a_{ajl}}\left(\frac{w_j^g}{w_i^g}\right)$$

Step 4: Compatibility criteria is calculated using following relations:

$$CI^m = \frac{(\lambda_{max}^m - n)}{(n-1)}$$

Equation 5

Equation 6

$$CI^g = \frac{\left(\lambda_{max}^g - n\right)}{(n-1)}$$

Step 5: For calculating incompatibility rate, CI criteria is divided by random criteria (RI) value. If the resulting value is smaller than 0.1, matrix is recognized as compatible and usable. In order to obtain the values of random criteriaes (RI), Saati made 100 matrices with random numbers with the condition of the interrelation of the matrices and calculated their incompatibility values and mean values. However, since the numerical values of fuzzy comparisons are not always integer number, and even in this case, the geometric average makes them generally non-integer numbers, even if Saati's scale (1-9) is used, the random criteriaes (RI) table cannot be used. Thus, Gogus and Boucher produced random criteria table (RI) with 400 random matrices for fuzzy pairwise comparison matrices.

Table 1: Random criteriaes (RI)

Matrix size	RI^m	RI^g
1	0	0
2	0	0
3	0.4890	0.1796
4	0.7937	0.2627
5	1.0720	0.3597
6	1.1996	0.3818
7	1.2874	0.4090
8	1.3410	0.4164
9	1.3793	0.4348
10	1.4095	0.4455
11	1.4181	0.4536
12	1.4462	0.4776
13	1.4555	0.4691
14	1.4913	0.4804
15	1.4986	0.4880

With calculation of incompatibility rate for two matrices based on following relations, they are compared with threshold 0.1.

$$CR^g = \frac{CI^g}{RI^g}$$

Equation 7

$$CR^m = \frac{CI^m}{RI^m}$$

Equation 8

If both of these criteriaes are less than 0.1, then the fuzzy matrix is consistent. If both are above 0.1, decision-maker is asked to review priorities, and if only $CR^m (CR^g)$ is larger than 0.1, decision.