



Identification of the Functions of Social Media Marketing Strategies of Iranian Premier League Football Clubs

Vajiheh Javani^{1*}, Naser Dokhtbagher², Saeid Pashazadeh³, Yaghub Badri Azarin⁴

1. Associate Professor, Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education & Sport Sciences, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran
2. Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Sport Management Faculty of Physical Education & Sport Sciences, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran
3. Professor, Professor of Computer Engineering, Department of Information Technology, Faculty of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran
4. Professor, Department of Sport Management Faculty of Physical Education & Sport Sciences, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran

* Corresponding Author Email: _v.javani@tabrizu.ac.ir



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ABSTRACT

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Marketing; Marketing Strategies; Social Media; Football Clubs

Today, social media marketing has created a growing and remarkable trend in the marketing activities of football clubs, and a significant part of the exchange of sports goods and services has been transferred to electronic platforms. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to identify the functions of social media marketing strategies of Iranian Premier League football clubs. The research was applied in terms of purpose, and data collection and analysis were carried out using the fuzzy Delphi technique in three stages. The statistical population of the study consisted of 20 experts in the fields of sport management and sport marketing, who were selected purposively. In the fuzzy Delphi process, components and indicators were first identified, and then their importance was evaluated across several stages, leading to expert consensus. The findings of the research indicated that transactional marketing strategy, relationship marketing strategy, database marketing strategy, knowledge-based marketing strategy, and customer-oriented marketing strategy can have valuable functions in the effectiveness of social media marketing activities of Iranian Premier League football clubs. These functions are realized through creating customer loyalty and satisfaction, providing the groundwork for brand recognition and brand awareness in order to enhance brand identity, increasing market share and perceptions of product quality and relative price, developing new products, increasing sales, and reducing marketing costs. The results of the study also confirmed this issue. The achievements of this study can provide appropriate solutions for the development of social media marketing activities in the football industry.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the unique characteristics of today's world is the existence of broad and extensive human communications. The expansion of communications, especially electronic communications, has distinguished the new society from previous societies to such an extent that the new era has been called the "age of communication" and today's society the "information society." In such a society, the media and mass communication tools, as a key element in communications, play an important role and provide individuals with shared interests the ability to interact, exchange information, and transfer knowledge, experience, benefits, or needs (Faizi & Ghafari Ashtiani, 2018). Prior to social media, companies faced public crises that were often addressed by conducting advertising campaigns at high costs. When social media were first introduced, organizations were mainly engaged in thinking about them as tools for communicating with customers and marketing their products (Karimi et al., 2020). These organizations never anticipated the remarkable impact of social media on their internal structures (Azami et al., 2018). These social media, through free user membership, have been able to play a fundamental role in various agenda-setting processes. Social networks are an up-to-date trend that creates an opportunity in the field of commerce for marketing, which has superiority over traditional intermediaries and connects companies directly to customers (Neti, 2011). Social media have recently become a phenomenon that is used by consumers around the world. With the emergence of social media, it is now possible for one person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about products and the companies that provide them; therefore, the influence of consumer communications in the marketplace has greatly increased (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). According to Lewis, internet users are no longer passive users. They now have the ability to create and share posts

and interactive communications. These media have shifted from passive communications to tools that facilitate dialogue among internet residents (Lewis, 2012). The main advantage of social media is convenience; social media tools such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook are all free and do not require special software (Wankel et al., 2010). Due to the free nature of these platforms and their ability to communicate with people, 74 percent of adults use social media platforms (Pew, 2014). Researchers also believe that the emergence of social media represents a real revolution in marketing communications. On the other hand, today in many businesses, the role of social media marketing in virtual networks is of great importance, especially businesses that are based on product sales, which have used this platform to develop marketing activities and have even made extensive investments in it (Shahryari & Haghshenas, 2022).

In the past decade, social media marketing has been recognized as a dominant research stream that highlights the changing aspects of consumer relationships. In such a way that, in addition to academic research in this field, social media marketing was one of the research priorities of the Marketing Science Institute during the years 2014 to 2016 (MSI, 2014) and also from 2016 to 2018 (MSI, 2016) (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). According to Tuten and Solomon (2015), social media marketing is the use of social media technologies, channels, and software to create communication and to present and exchange ideas and suggestions that are valuable to organizational stakeholders and lead to the achievement of marketing objectives. Social media marketing is a form of digital marketing that uses the power of popular social media networks to achieve marketing and branding goals (Ibrahim, 2022). Furthermore, this type of marketing provides businesses with multiple ways to access large audiences, where they are able to attract new potential customers and engage with existing

customers (Harrysson, 2012). Social media marketing is a profitable tool for businesses, because through observing consumers' online conversations, businesses are able to generate feedback, which leads to resolving product business problems and improving product quality for subsequent products (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020). This type of marketing leads to improving page rankings in searches, directing visitor traffic to websites, assisting sales communications and follow-ups, building trust and promoting the brand, creating a group around the brand name and maintaining it, and forces organizations to use social media application programs to complement traditional business methods, and proposes a new form of relationship marketing to them (Dahnil, Marzuki, Langgat, Fabei, 2014).

The importance of using social networks as marketing tools is rapidly increasing, and the application of this technology, especially in the field of marketing and sports marketing, has created fundamental changes in this sector (Pitts & Stotlar, 2002). Sports marketing is a social and managerial process through which individuals and groups obtain what they want by creating and exchanging products and value with one another. Sports marketing is an element of sport promotion that includes various sectors of the sports industry, including broadcasting, advertising, social media, digital platforms, ticket sales, and public relations (Kotler et al., 2005). Taking advantage of marketing opportunities in sport provides the necessary groundwork for interaction between industry, commerce, and sport, and is considered a strategic bridge serving the development of sport and its economic prosperity (Kazemi et al., 2008). One of these platforms is the use of social media in the field of sports services and products. Social media marketing refers to any tool, strategy, and method that leads to greater introduction of the business name and brand in the online space. The main point in online marketing is the use of internet tools to introduce businesses and products to potential customers and to encourage them to purchase products. The emergence of social media marketing

has confronted organizations and sports marketers with new technological innovations and challenges (Thompson, Martin, Gee, Eagleman, 2014). Sports institutions have also become aware of the numerous benefits of social media networks and are seeking solutions to use these platforms as part of their relationship marketing strategies and brand-building efforts (Derakhshan et al., 2024). On the other hand, many sports organizations are striving to take advantage of this unique form of marketing in the virtual world and are seeking to create long-term relationships with stakeholders and strengthen interaction with their fans through this means (Thompson, Martin, Gee, Eagleman, 2024). Marketers, and especially sports marketers, considering the integration of communities and the rapid development of social media, have recognized their importance as a powerful marketing tool and use this marketing channel to communicate with their customers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). When an organization launches a new product or event through social networking websites, users quickly obtain information about it and, before evaluating it as a product or service or participating in it as an event, are able to interact with it (Harb et al., 2019).

Various industries can use social media to interact with consumers, and this issue also applies to the football industry (Broughton, 2012; Merten, 2024). The football industry, with more than 240 million players, 1.4 million teams, and 300,000 clubs worldwide, is the most popular sport in the world. In Iran as well, football is the most popular sport, such that according to unofficial statistics, the number of fans of Persepolis, Esteghlal, and Tractor Sazi teams exceeds 10 million people (Zohrevandian et al., 2017). The existence of thousands of players and millions of their fans around the world indicates that football plays an important and special role in the cultural and social life of countries and peoples. Today, football has all the necessary factors to become an industry; any industry is a part of the economy that is engaged in the production and supply of specific products or services (Rezaei, 2018). The economic impacts and income generation of football are not limited to the

holding of major international tournaments such as World Cups; rather, in many countries, the organization of professional leagues and the professional football club industry has led to desirable economic growth and development in their football industries. In countries such as Spain, England, Germany, Italy, and France, football clubs operate as economic machines that generate millions of dollars in revenue annually (Rezaei, 2018). Naghdi et al. (2013) stated that clubs are the most important part of the football industry and that the continuation of the football industry is dependent on the continuation of clubs. According to the financial report of the Deloitte economic organization (2016), the English football club Manchester United, in the 2015–2016 season, with revenues equal to €996 million, put an end to the eleven-year dominance of Real Madrid Football Club and was introduced as the highest-revenue football club in the world. In this ranking, the football clubs Barcelona and Real Madrid from Spain ranked next, with revenues equal to €620.2 million and €620.1 million, respectively. Based on the latest financial reports of the Deloitte economic organization (2018), the clubs Manchester United, Real Madrid, and Barcelona, with revenues amounting to €676.3 million, €674.6 million, and €648.3 million, respectively, were the highest-revenue clubs in the world. Football clubs worldwide, in addition to attracting sponsors and media broadcasting rights, generate income through commercial activities such as apparel sales, visits to club museums, licensing, use of trademarks, leisure tours, and so on, while the amount and diversity of revenue of Iranian football clubs are very limited. What is considered sports marketing in Iranian football is limited to ticket sales and the limited support of sponsors for some football clubs and, to some extent, the negligible television broadcasting rights (Seyfpanahi, 2012). Today, football clubs operate like multinational companies, and the football industry is subject to daily changes and transformations (Rezaei, 2017). At a point when Iranian football is gradually moving away from

being state-owned, it is the best opportunity for clubs to carry out appropriate groundwork for becoming professional. Football clubs around the world, apart from television broadcasting rights, ticket sales, and advertising around the pitch, also have other ways of generating revenue, and if they do not use them, they will face problems (Shivani et al., 2023). One of the new and suitable areas for conducting marketing activities and generating income for football clubs is the use of social media. Prominent football clubs around the world also use this tool to expand and advance their brand name at the regional or global level. Dima (2015), by examining the digital reach of top European clubs at the end of 2014 and their trends toward the end of the season, showed that the three clubs Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Manchester United ranked first to third, respectively, in terms of digital reach among the 24 top European clubs, and that sponsors are willing to invest in the benefits of social media in sport. It also showed that the digital reach of European football clubs was related to their economic outcomes, because with a significant increase in fans, their revenues also experienced a significant increase (Dima, 2015). In this regard, Manchester United Football Club has made heavy investments in database marketing in order to establish direct communication with its international fans (Christopher, 2015).

Although most football clubs are active on social media, they rarely utilize its full capacity (Kuzma et al., 2014). Football, as the world's most popular sport, uses social media as an essential part of its marketing tools (Bunting, 2012). Social media play an important role in interaction, communication, and cooperation between football teams and their fans; such that football clubs can use social media to achieve public relations objectives in their marketing, including promotion, sales, marketing, and advertising support (Peltekoglu Balta & Hurmeric, 2012). Social networks are also an environment that football clubs can use in order to achieve their objectives. They should use social networks to introduce themselves, their

background, and their achievements. Considering the development of virtual spaces and the fact that people spend a great deal of time in these spaces, virtual spaces are the best opportunity for sports clubs, especially professional football clubs that have millions of fans and must strive to gain their trust and loyalty (Lim et al., 2020).

Numerous studies have examined the importance of social media marketing in various organizations and sports leagues, including football, and acknowledge that the use of social media by sports brands as a marketing tool leads to an increase in the club's commercial profits in the short term and long term (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2017), the attraction of customers and increased interaction with them (Annamalai et al., 2021), an increase in gaining customers' trust (Milani & Zenouzi, 2019), the promotion and enhancement of the organization's brand value and the promotion of sport (Amouzadeh et al., 2020), the development of brand communications (Filo, 2014; Benthaus, 2016), positive effects on team identity and an increase in fans' satisfaction and attendance intention (Zariei & Mohammadi, 2022; Jabri, 2023), an increase in revenue (Dima, 2015), the expansion of sponsorship (Benthaus, 2016), and promotion, sales, marketing, and advertising support (Peltekoglu Balta & Hurmeric, 2012).

Additionally, Aghaei et al. (2022), in a study, addressed the design of a social media marketing revenue-generation model for Iranian football clubs. The findings included causal conditions: changes in fan culture, the media-oriented nature of football, and the growing penetration of social media; contextual conditions: prediction of fan behavior, fan dependence, and social identity; intervening conditions: inefficiency of traditional media and the unique characteristics of social media; strategies: development of the technological platform, social media marketing strategies, and strengthening media communications; and consequences, including the development of financial resources, enhancement of the club's brand value, and sponsors. The findings of this study showed that the use of social media plays a significant role in

increasing the revenues of football clubs and the development of financial resources. Movahedi and Mousavi Rad (2022), in a study, examined the effect of social media on sports marketing. The results of this study showed that social media influence the processes of how sports products and brands are advertised and how marketing efforts are carried out in social media and online marketing. The results of this study also showed that traditional marketing has higher integration and credibility in consumers' perspectives. Bapir and Ozgit (2018), in a study, examined the impact of social networks on the development of sports marketing strategy: a case study of football clubs. The results of this study indicate that the development of social media tools for football sports clubs is very important in order to strengthen sports marketing strategy. The findings also showed that football clubs should adopt social media as a strong channel for the development of sports marketing strategy. Through this development, football clubs will be able to make significant progress in the areas of advertising, increasing the number of fans, developing marketing strategies, and improving financial capacity. Although numerous studies have been conducted in this field, the applied results of these studies have not been remarkable. Today, considering the financial controls implemented by UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations, the importance of developing long-term profitability has become more important than ever; therefore, football clubs must generally reconsider their marketing strategies in order to maintain communication and preserve their customer base. Social media marketing strategy helps clubs make correct decisions in order to perform successfully. In general, based on the studies and research conducted in the field of social media marketing, marketing strategies can be divided into five categories: transactional marketing strategy, database marketing strategy, relationship marketing strategy, knowledge-based marketing strategy, and customer-oriented marketing strategy (Aghazadeh & Esfidani, 2007).

Finally, considering the points that have been stated, it can be noted that football clubs are examples of organizations that increasingly use social media marketing to communicate with their audiences in a more transparent manner (McCarthy, 2023). In today's competitive world, sports clubs, especially football clubs, in order to succeed, must necessarily use new and innovative ideas, one of the ideas that assists these businesses in achieving success being a social media-based marketing strategy; because football clubs, in the course of their activities, cannot allocate huge budgets to the marketing of their products, and this causes them to be unable to cover their costs financially, but through social media they can partially overcome this problem and obtain an appropriate position for themselves. Now, the issue that exists here is that if a football club intends to use social media as one of the branches of marketing, it will face numerous problems in formulating and implementing social media-related strategies; over the past years, for various reasons, the use of social media for marketing in the sports industry, especially in football, has been met with neglect, which, considering its increasing expansion throughout the world, is by no means acceptable, and for many football clubs it has been an ambiguous point as to how and through what means it should be used.

Therefore, one of the main concerns has been to be able to use the capacities of social media in the football industry through identifying the functions of social media marketing strategies. The use of social media marketing strategies for football clubs and other sports organizations and institutions

2. Methodology

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and mixed (quantitative-qualitative) in nature, and it was conducted using a pragmatist approach. In the qualitative phase of the study, in order to identify the functions of social media marketing strategies of Iranian Premier League football clubs, library studies and a systematic review of the research

brings valuable functions such as providing the grounds for customer loyalty and satisfaction, reducing marketing costs, creating communication with consumers and fans, sharing news, updates, and providing information, introducing the club's goods and products, attracting new customers, and so forth. Therefore, these functions of social media marketing strategies are an effective technique for approaching target groups. Accordingly, the present study seeks to identify the functions of social media marketing strategies of Iranian Premier League football clubs in five domains: customer, brand, market, innovation, and financial. By doing so, in addition to enabling Iranian Premier League football clubs to become aware of and potentially use the functions of social media marketing strategies, it will also bring about greater interaction with fans and customers, provide economic resources for clubs by incurring lower costs, and can even be regarded as a competitive advantage. Given that, to date, no integrated evaluative effort focusing on identifying the functions of social media marketing strategies in the football industry has been conducted, on this basis, the present research intends, by employing scientific methods, to identify the functions of social media marketing strategies in the Iranian Premier League so that Iranian Premier League football clubs can use them as a solution for the implementation and execution of social media marketing. Furthermore, this study provides insights into the functions of social media marketing strategies for Iranian Premier League football clubs that may not have previously regarded social media as a targeted tool.

literature were employed. Accordingly, معتبر domestic and international scientific articles, books, theses, and specialized documents related to sports marketing and social media marketing were reviewed, and the relevant concepts, dimensions, and indicators were extracted. The data obtained from the research literature were examined using

the content analysis method, and after refinement and aggregation of concepts, ultimately 25 functions of social media marketing strategies were identified, which formed the basis for designing the research instrument in the quantitative section.

In the quantitative phase, in order to achieve expert consensus and reduce uncertainty in human judgments, the Delphi method with a fuzzy Delphi approach was used. The statistical population of this section included experts in the fields of sport management, sport marketing, and social media marketing, and the samples were selected using purposive sampling. In total, 20 experts participated in the fuzzy Delphi panel. The data collection instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire consisting of 25 factors, which was developed based on the results obtained from the review of the research literature. To measure the importance of each factor, a five-point verbal Likert scale including very low, low, medium, high, and very high was used. In order to analyze the data under conditions of uncertainty, verbal variables were converted into triangular fuzzy numbers.

The process of implementing the fuzzy Delphi was carried out in several stages. In the first stage, expert opinions were collected and fuzzified; in the next stage, after calculating the mean of group opinions and the degree of difference between each opinion and the mean, feedback information was provided to the experts to allow for revision of their judgments. This process continued until relative

The stages of implementing the fuzzy Delphi method are as follows (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004):

Step one – Collection of expert opinions:

In the first Delphi round, a structured questionnaire was designed based on the results of the first phase of the study, and the experts were asked to determine the level of importance of each

agreement was achieved. To obtain defuzzified (crisp) values, the center of gravity method was used, and when the degree of disagreement among experts between two consecutive stages was less than the threshold value of 0.2, the Delphi process was terminated. Finally, qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis of the research literature, and quantitative data were analyzed by performing the relevant fuzzy Delphi calculations.

The implementation stages of this approach consist of a combination of the traditional Delphi method and data analysis at each stage based on fuzzy set theory, and triangular fuzzy numbers were used to fuzzify expert opinions. Fuzzy numbers are fuzzy sets that are defined, along with numerical data, when dealing with uncertainty regarding a phenomenon. In this study, triangular fuzzy numbers were used. A triangular fuzzy number is represented by three real numbers as $M = (l, m, u)$. The upper bound u represents the maximum value of the fuzzy number M , the lower bound l represents the minimum value of the fuzzy number M , and m represents the most plausible value of a fuzzy number. The membership function of a triangular fuzzy number is defined as follows (Fink-Hafner et al., 2019).

Relation (1):

$$u_M(x) = \begin{cases} \frac{x-l}{m-l} & l \leq x \leq m \\ \frac{u-x}{u-m} & m \leq x \leq u \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

of the identified stages using the verbal variables very low, low, medium, high, and very high.

Step two – Conversion of verbal variables into triangular fuzzy numbers:

In implementing the fuzzy Delphi method, the verbal variables are first fuzzified. For the purpose of fuzzification, a five-point Likert scale with equal intervals was used, as shown in Table

Table 1. Corresponding Triangular Fuzzy Numbers to Linguistic Variables

Triangular Fuzzy Number	Linguistic Variables
(1, 1, 0.75)	Very High
(1, 0.75, 0.5)	High
(0.75, 0.5, 0.25)	Medium



(0.5, 0.25, 0)	Low
(0.25, 0, 0)	Very Low

Thus, triangular fuzzy numbers were assigned to the opinion of each expert, and the set of

triangular fuzzy numbers for each expert was obtained using Relation (2).

Relation (2):
$$\tilde{A}^{(i)} = (a_1^{(i)}, a_2^{(i)}, a_3^{(i)}) \quad i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, n$$

Step three: In this stage, the mean of the sets $m(\tilde{A}_i)$ was calculated from all the sets \tilde{A}_i through Relation (3).

Relation (3):

$$\tilde{A}_m = (a_{m1}, a_{m2}, a_{m3}) = \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n a_1^i, \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n a_2^i, \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n a_3^i \right)$$

Then, for each expert, the degree of deviation from the mean was calculated using Relation (4).

Relation (4):

$$(a_{m1} - a_1^{(i)}, a_{m2} - a_2^{(i)}, a_{m3} - a_3^{(i)}) = \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n a_1^{(i)} - a_1^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n a_2^{(i)} - a_2^{(i)}, \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n a_3^{(i)} - a_3^{(i)} \right)$$

In the second stage, in order to examine the level of agreement among experts, the first-stage questionnaire, after applying the necessary modifications, along with the mean of expert opinions and the previous deviation of each expert's opinion from the mean, was resent to the members of the expert panel, and they were asked to review

their responses and, if necessary, reconsider their opinions and judgments.

Step four: After the initial feedback was provided to the experts and the second Delphi round was conducted, the revised expert opinions were converted into triangular fuzzy numbers in the form of Relation (5). Relation (5):

$$\tilde{B}^{(i)} = (b_1^{(i)}, b_2^{(i)}, b_3^{(i)}) \quad i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, n$$

In this stage, since $S_j = \frac{u_j + m_j + l_j}{3}$ mean of the revised expert opinions in the second Delphi round was calculated using Relation (6).

Relation (6):

$$\tilde{B}_m = (b_{m1}, b_{m2}, b_{m3}) = \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n b_1^i, \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n b_2^i, \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n b_3^i \right)$$

Relation (7):

Step six – Calculation of the degree of disagreement among experts across two rounds:

The degree of disagreement among experts in two Delphi rounds was calculated using Relation (8). The Delphi stages were repeated until the level of disagreement among experts between two consecutive survey rounds decreased to less than the very small threshold value (0.2), in which case the survey process was terminated.

Step five – Defuzzification:

There are various methods for defuzzifying the final values of each indicator. In this study, the simple center of gravity method based on Relation (7) was used to defuzzify the values of each Delphi stage.

Relation (8):

$$S(\tilde{B}_m, \tilde{A}_m) = \left| \frac{1}{3} [(b_{m1}, b_{m2}, b_{m3}) - (a_{m1}, a_{m2}, a_{m3})] \right|$$

round of the Delphi method were distributed and collected in person, and in cases where access to experts was not possible, they were distributed and collected electronically.

It should be noted that after determining the members of the panel, the questionnaires for each

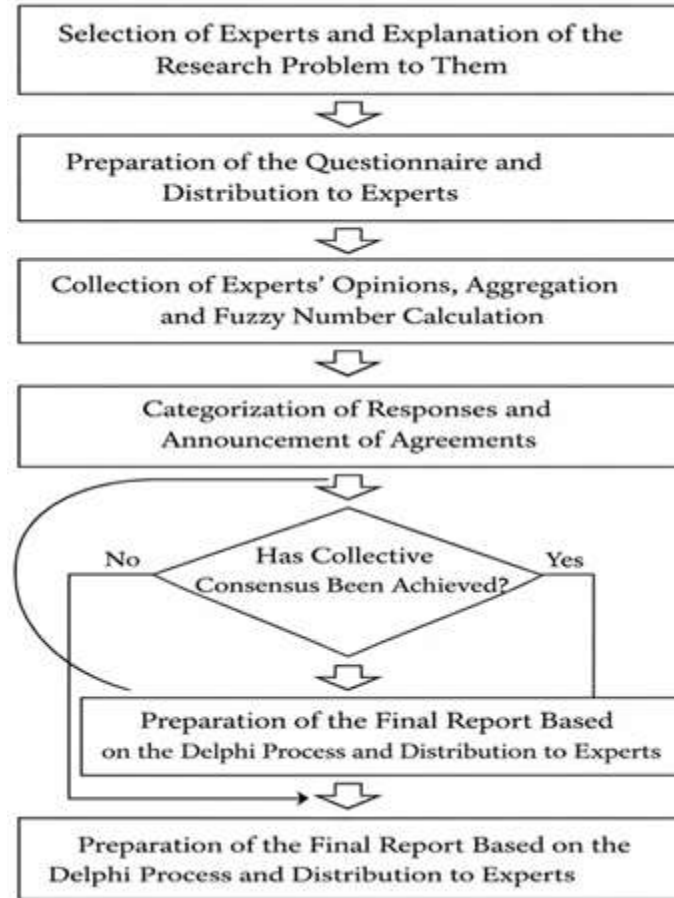


Figure 1. Delphi-fuzzy technique steps (Qobadi Yaganeh, 2019)

3. Findings of the Research

The mean age of the expert panel members in this study was 51.34, and other demographic information of the panel members is presented in Table 2.

Table2. Demographic Status of Research Sample

Gender		Position			Educational Degree			Characteristic of Panel Members
M	F	Social Media Marketing Specialists	Sports Marketing Specialists	Ph.D.	University Professors	Ph.D.	Master	
18	2	3	3	5	5	13	7	Frequency

First Stage of the Fuzzy Delphi: As mentioned in the methodology section, based on the review of the research literature and expert opinions, a total of 25 functions of social media marketing strategies of Iranian Premier League football clubs were

proposed. Considering the linguistic variables defined in Table 1, a questionnaire was designed in the first Delphi round to be administered to the experts. At this stage, no new suggestions were received in addition to the proposed factors. The



fuzzy mean values and the defuzzified values of the factors are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Average of Experts' Opinions in the First Round of Delphi

Defuzzified Mean	Fuzzy Mean	Item	Row
0.77	(0.52 .0.79 .0.96)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Transactional Marketing Strategy	1
0.53	(0.30 .0.53 .0.75)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Relationship Marketing Strategy	2
0.48	(0.27 .0.48 .0.69)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Database Marketing Strategy	3
0.53	(0.30 .0.53 .0.75)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	4
0.50	(0.73 .0.50 .0.25)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	5
0.58	(0.80 .0.59 .0.34)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Transactional Marketing Strategy	6
0.48	(0.69 .0.48 .0.27)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Relationship Marketing Strategy	7
0.68	(0.88 .0.69 .0.44)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Database Marketing Strategy	8
0.68	(0.88 .0.69 .0.44)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	9
0.74	(0.90 .0.75 .0.53)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	10
0.77	(0.96 .0.79 .0.52)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Transactional Marketing Strategy	11
0.74	(0.90 .0.75 .0.53)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Relationship Marketing Strategy	12
0.73	(0.88 .0.75 .0.50)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Database Marketing Strategy	13
0.70	(0.88 .0.71 .0.46)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	14
0.70	(0.88 .0.71 .0.46)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	15
0.61	(0.83 .0.62 .0.37)	Producing New Products through Transactional Marketing Strategy	16
0.59	(0.79 .0.60 .0.37)	Producing New Products through Relationship Marketing Strategy	17
0.63	(0.85 .0.63 .0.38)	Producing New Products through Database Marketing Strategy	18
0.75	(0.92 .0.77 .0.52)	Producing New Products through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	19
0.55	(0.73 .0.56 .0.31)	Producing New Products through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	20
0.70	(0.88 .0.71 .0.46)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Transactional Marketing Strategy	21
0.70	(0.88 .0.71 .0.46)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Relationship Marketing Strategy	22
0.59	(0.59 .0.60 .0.35)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Database Marketing Strategy	23
0.67	(0.84 .0.69 .0.44)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	24
0.52	(0.75 .0.52 .0.27)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	25

The definite mean obtained in Table 3 indicates the intensity of experts' agreement with each of the factors.

Second round: In the second stage, another questionnaire was prepared in which the proposed

options, along with each individual's previous opinions and the degree of their discrepancy with the viewpoints of other experts (defuzzified mean), were resented to the members of the panel group, the results of which are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of Comparing the Overall Average of Experts' Opinions in the Previous Round and Your Previous Opinion

Your Previous Opinion	Overall Average of Experts' Opinions in Previous Round	Item	Row
0.75	0.77	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Transactional Marketing Strategy	1
----	0.53	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Relationship Marketing Strategy	2
0	0.48	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Database Marketing Strategy	3
----	0.53	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	4
0.50	0.50	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	5
0.50	0.58	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Transactional Marketing Strategy	6
0.0	0.48	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Relationship Marketing Strateg	7
0.75	0.68	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Database Marketing Strategy	8
0.75	0.68	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	9
0.75	0.74	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	10
0.75	0.77	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Transactional Marketing Strategy	11
0.75	0.74	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Relationship Marketing Strategy	12
0/75	0.73	Increasing Market Share / and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Database Marketing Strategy	13
0.75	0.70	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	14
0.25	0.70	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	15
0.100	0.61	Producing New Products through Transactional Marketing Strategy	16
----	0.59	Producing New Products through Relationship Marketing Strategy	17
0.75	0.63	Producing New Products through Database Marketing Strategy	18
0.50	0.75	Producing New Products through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	19
0.50	0.55	Producing New Products through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	20
0.50	0.7	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Transactional Marketing Strategy	21



0.50	0.7	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Relationship Marketing Strategy	22
0.100	0.59	/Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Database Marketing Strategy	23
0.25	0.67	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	24
----	0.52	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	25

In the second round, the members of the expert group responded again to the presented questions by taking into account the viewpoints of the other group members; accordingly, the fuzzy mean of the

results obtained from counting the responses provided in the second round, similar to the first round, is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Average of Experts' Opinions from the Second Round Survey

Defuzzified Mean	Fuzzy Mean	Item	Row
0.86	(1 ∙0.88 ∙0.63)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Transactional Marketing Strategy	1
0.86	(1 ∙0.88 ∙0.63)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Relationship Marketing Strategy	2
0.20	(0.42 ∙0.17 ∙0.02)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Database Marketing Strategy	3
0.50	(0.75 ∙0.50 ∙0.25)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	4
0.56	(0.81 ∙0.56 ∙0.31)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	5
0.59	(0.84 ∙0.59 ∙0.34)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Transactional Marketing Strategy	6
0.20	(0.42 ∙0.17 ∙0.02)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Relationship Marketing Strateg	7
0.83	(1 ∙0.85 ∙0.60)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Database Marketing Strategy	8
0.83	(1 ∙0.85 ∙0.60)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	9
0.79	(0.98 ∙0.80 ∙0.55)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	10
0.50	(0.75 ∙0.50 ∙0.25)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Transactional Marketing Strategy	11

0.79	(0.98 ±0.80 ±0.55)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Relationship Marketing Strategy	12
0.77	(0.94 ±0.78 ±0.53)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Database Marketing Strategy	13
0.70	(0.90 ±0.71 ±0.46)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	14
0.70	(0.90 ±0.71 ±0.46)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	15
0.65	(0.87 ±0.65 ±0.40)	Producing New Products through Transactional Marketing Strategy	16
0.58	(0.81 ±0.58 ±0.35)	Producing New Products through Relationship Marketing Strategy	17
0.56	(0.81 ±0.56 ±0.31)	Producing New Products through Database Marketing Strategy	18
0.81	(0.81 ±0.58 ±0.35)	Producing New Products through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	19
0.37	(0.96 ±0.83 ±0.58)	Producing New Products through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	20
0.76	(0.62 ±0.37 ±0.12)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Transactional Marketing Strategy	21
0.76	(0.94 ±0.77 ±0.52)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Relationship Marketing Strategy	22
0.62	(0.83 ±0.63 ±0.38)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Database Marketing Strategy	23
0.43	(0.66 ±0.41 ±0.22)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	24
0.55	(0.77 ±0.55 ±0.30)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	25

Based on the viewpoints presented in the first round and their comparison with the results of the present round, if the difference between the two rounds is less than the absolute Table 6 presents the extent of the difference in experts' viewpoints between the first and second rounds of the Delphi survey.

value of the very small threshold (0.1), the survey process is terminated.

Table 6. Difference in Experts' Viewpoints between First and Second Rounds of Delphi Survey

Difference	Round 2	Round 1	Item	Row
0.09	0.86	0.77	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through a Transactional Marketing Strategy	1
0.33	0.86	0.53	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Relationship Marketing Strategy	2
-0.28	0.20	0.48	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Database Marketing Strategy	3



-0.03	0.50	0.53	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	4
0.06	0.56	0.50	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	5
0.01	0.59	0.58	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Transactional Marketing Strategy	6
-0.28	0.20	0.48	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Relationship Marketing Strateg	7
0.15	0.83	0.68	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Database Marketing Strategy	8
0.15	0.83	0.68	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	9
0.05	0.79	0.74	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	10
- 0.27	0.50	0.77	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Transactional Marketing Strategy	11
0.05	0.79	0.74	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Relationship Marketing Strategy	12
0.04	0.77	0.73	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Database Marketing Strategy	13
0	0.70	0.70	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	14
0	0.70	0.70	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	15
0.04	0.65	0.61	Producing New Products through Transactional Marketing Strategy	16
- 0.01	0.58	0.59	Producing New Products through Relationship Marketing Strategy	17
- 0.07	0.56	0.63	Producing New Products through Database Marketing Strategy	18
0.06	0.81	0.75	Producing New Products through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	19
- 0.18	0.37	0.55	Producing New Products through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	20

0.06	0.76	0.70	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Transactional Marketing Strategy	21
0.06	0.76	0.70	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Relationship Marketing Strategy	22
0.03	0.62	0.59	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Database Marketing Strategy	23
- 0.24	0.43	0.67	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	24
0.03	0.55	0.52	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	25

As shown in Table 6, in most options the members of the expert group reached a consensus, and the level of disagreement between the first and second rounds was less than the very small threshold (0.1); therefore, the survey process regarding the above components was terminated. This indicates that the **Third fuzzy Delphi round:** In this stage, while applying the necessary modifications to the factors, a third questionnaire was prepared and resent to the experts along with each individual’s previous viewpoint and the degree of its difference from the

members of the expert group agreed with these components; however, in some components, a noticeable degree of disagreement was also observed. Accordingly, a third Delphi round was required.

mean viewpoint of the other experts; with the difference that, at this stage, out of the 31 factors existing in the previous stage, the survey was conducted only on those factors whose level of disagreement exceeded the threshold.

Table 7. Average of Experts' Opinions from the Third Round Survey

Defuzzified Mean	Fuzzy Mean	Item	Row
0.22	(0.45 ,0.20 ,0)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Relationship Marketing Strategy	2
0.64	(1 ,0.93 ,0.68)	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Database Marketing Strategy	3
0.32	(0.56 ,0.31 ,0.10)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Relationship Marketing Strategy	7
0.86	(1 ,0.88 ,0.63)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Database Marketing Strategy	8
0.86	(1 ,0.88 ,0.63)	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	9
0.35	(0.60 ,0.35 ,0.10)	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Transactional Marketing Strategy	11
0.36	(0.59 ,0.34 ,0.16)	Producing New Products through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	20
0.22	(0.45 ,0.20 ,0)	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	24

Table 8. Difference in Experts' Viewpoints between Second and Third Rounds of Delphi Survey

Difference	Round 3	Round 2	Item	Row
- 0.02	0.22	0.24	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Relationship Marketing Strategy	2
- 0.24	0.64	0.88	Providing the Ground for Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction through Database Marketing Strateg	3
- 0.07	0.32	0.39	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Relationship Marketing Strategy	7
0.03	0.86	0.83	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Database Marketing Strategy	8
0.03	0.86	0.83	Providing the Ground for Brand Identification and Awareness to Increase Brand Identity through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	9
- 0.02	0.35	0.37	Increasing Market Share and Perception of Product Quality and Relative Price through Transactional Marketing Strategy	11
- 0.07	0.36	0.43	Producing New Products through Customer-Oriented Marketing Strategy	20
- 0.02	0.22	0.24	Increasing Sales and Reducing Marketing Costs through Knowledge-Based Marketing Strategy	24

As shown in Table 8, the level of disagreement among the experts in the second and third rounds for most of the remaining options became lower than the very small threshold (0.1), and therefore the

4. Discussion and conclusion

Social media are among the important platforms for the sports industry, fans, as well as clubs and their members. The number of social media consumers in the sports industry is increasing significantly on a daily basis. Fans and ordinary individuals communicate with sports and sports clubs through social media, follow the pages of their favorite teams and athletes on platforms, and also receive almost all updated sports content immediately. The use of social media for sports businesses has advantages such as establishing communication with consumers and fans, reducing marketing costs, and also increasing sales. Sports businesses can use social media to establish two-way communication and engage in bilateral discussions among fans and the public. The role of social media as an important platform for creating attachment between fans and teams is undeniable (Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007; Merten et al., 2024). Today, social media are mainly used to share news, updates, and provide information, etc.; therefore, these functions of social media are an effective

survey process was terminated in this round. In fact, it can be stated that in this round, a good consensus was achieved among the experts.

technique for approaching target groups (Hussain et al., 2021). Accordingly, the present study was conducted with the aim of identifying the functions of social media marketing strategies of Iranian Premier League football clubs in five domains: customer, brand, market, innovation, and financial.

The findings of the study showed that marketing strategies affect customer loyalty and satisfaction factors. Among the strategies examined, transactional marketing strategy had the greatest impact on providing customer loyalty and satisfaction from the experts' point of view, and after transactional marketing strategy, relationship marketing strategy and knowledge-based marketing strategy, according to the experts, had an equal level of impact on the level of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Customer-oriented marketing strategy ranked third in terms of its impact on the level of customer satisfaction and loyalty. According to the experts' opinions, database marketing strategy ranks last in terms of its impact on customer loyalty and satisfaction. The results of the findings of this

section of the study are consistent with the results of the studies conducted by Kordlou and colleagues (2020) and Rastgar and colleagues (2021). Kordlou et al. (2020) and Rastgar et al. (2021) concluded in their studies that when using social media as a platform for marketing, greater emphasis should be placed on components that attract customers' attention. In this regard, by benefiting from the social media marketing model, greater customer attention can be attracted so that they are satisfied with the marketing carried out. In explaining this consistency, it can be stated that when using social media marketing in the marketing activities of organizations and sports clubs, all components and social media marketing strategies that are effective in the marketing activities of the organization and club and lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty should be used. Customer satisfaction means the customer's satisfaction and contentment with the products or services provided by the club. A satisfied customer feels that an appropriate value has been obtained from the desired club. Customer satisfaction is considered an important criterion in evaluating the quality and performance of a football club. If customers are satisfied with the quality of the club's services, they are likely to continuously interact with the club and purchase more products or services. The level of customer satisfaction determines the level of customer loyalty to the club. By understanding customers' needs and expectations and continuously improving processes and services, Premier League football clubs can improve customer satisfaction and increase their competitiveness in the market. In this regard, by applying an appropriate strategy aligned with the club's social media marketing activities and gaining a deep understanding of customers and their interests, needs, and desires, and making efforts to meet these needs and desires, the conditions for customer satisfaction and loyalty to the club can be provided.

Other findings of the study indicate that the application of marketing strategies in social media marketing activities is effective in the area of brand identification and brand awareness of the club, as

well as in increasing the club's brand identity. Based on the statistical analyses, it can be stated that customer-oriented marketing strategy ranked first, database marketing strategy and knowledge-based marketing strategy were at the same level and ranked second, transactional marketing strategy ranked third, and finally relationship marketing strategy ranked fourth in terms of their effects on brand identification and brand awareness of the club, as well as increasing the club's brand identity. The findings of this part of the study are consistent with the results of the studies conducted by Seo and Park (2018), Amouzadeh et al. (2020), Roozfaragh et al. (2021), and Kazemi et al. (2023). According to the findings of the aforementioned studies, the features and advantages of social media marketing elements, such as electronic word-of-mouth advertising and providing trending, up-to-date, and attractive content, will increase the likelihood of visiting brands on social media; and these attractive pages will strengthen user engagement and increase users' knowledge and awareness of the brand. Seo et al. (2018) also stated in a study that examined the effect of social media marketing activities on brand equity and customer responses that social media marketing plays an indispensable role in brand awareness. Kazemi et al. (2023) also concluded in their study that social media marketing enables brand messages to reach a group of audiences and leads to increasing the level of customer brand awareness, customer loyalty to the company, improving customers' attitudes toward the organization, and ultimately increasing brand equity. In explaining the consistency of the findings of this part of the study with the aforementioned studies, it can be pointed out that social media marketing managers of Iranian Premier League football clubs should, by considering all features and elements of social media marketing, select the best and most appropriate strategy from among social media marketing strategies in order to take action toward identifying and increasing club brand awareness.

The findings of the study showed that marketing strategies affect the factors of increasing

market share and the perception of product quality and relative price. According to the experts' opinions, relationship marketing strategy ranked first, transactional marketing strategy and database marketing strategy were at the same level and ranked second, knowledge-based marketing strategy ranked third, and finally customer-oriented marketing strategy affected the increase in market share and the perception of product quality and relative price. The findings of this part of the study are consistent with the results of the studies conducted by Bansbardi et al. (2014), Sharifi et al. (2024), and Mohsen et al. (2024). Bansbardi et al. (2014), regarding product quality and pricing, concluded that although fans may purchase club products or services due to their interest in and loyalty to a club, it is the quality that leads to repeat purchases. In fact, if the product or service provided lacks the necessary quality, brand expansion will not only be unsuccessful, but the club's brand value may also be jeopardized and lead to the formation of negative attitudes among fans toward the club. Appropriate pricing, considering the product or service provided as well as the competitive market, is another factor that should be considered in social media marketing so that the new product or service attracts the attention not only of fans but also of the general public. Sharifi et al. (2024), in a study, identified accurate product pricing as one of the success factors of online collaborative marketing and suggested that companies price their products accurately in order to attract customers while maintaining profitability. To do so, they can use appropriate pricing strategies and methods. The results of the study by Mohsen et al. (2024) also show that increasing market share is a complex process and is strongly influenced by marketing strategies and managerial factors. In this regard, it can be stated that market share plays a very important role in social media marketing and is a key indicator of the competitive position and overall success of a football club in its business. Football club marketing managers, by monitoring and analyzing market share data, gain valuable insights

into customer behavior, industry trends, and their own performance. Increasing market share allows a football club to gain a competitive advantage, be influential in the business in which it operates, and increase its revenue growth and profitability. In addition, a higher market share leads to greater customer retention and acquisition and also attracts investor confidence. By understanding the importance of market share and improving product quality and appropriate pricing in social media marketing, and by implementing and applying the most appropriate strategies to increase these indicators, Iranian Premier League football clubs can position themselves on the path toward long-term success.

Based on data analysis and according to the experts' opinions in the field of new product development, knowledge-based marketing strategy has the highest effectiveness. Following the knowledge-based marketing strategy, database marketing strategy ranked second in terms of its impact on new product development, transactional marketing strategy ranked third, and relationship marketing strategy ranked fourth in terms of the level of impact, and at the final level was customer-oriented marketing strategy. The findings of this part of the study are consistent with the results of the study conducted by Ejigbe (2021). Ejigbe, in his study, concluded that greater efforts should be made by sports organizations to ensure appropriate marketing strategies for producing valuable products and services for customers in order to outperform their competitors. One of the most important actions of football clubs in the field of their business is the production and introduction of new products for customers and audiences and attracting their attention. Although the use of social media has been widespread for a long time, Iranian Premier League football clubs have not made much use of this potential capacity to increase revenue and introduce their new products. Therefore, Iranian Premier League football clubs should carefully consider the best and most appropriate marketing

strategy for introducing their new products on social media.

Based on the analysis of findings in the areas of increasing sales and reducing marketing costs, transactional marketing strategy and relationship marketing strategy are at the same level and have the highest effectiveness. According to the experts' opinions, knowledge-based marketing strategy, database marketing strategy, and customer-oriented marketing strategy ranked second to fourth, respectively, in terms of their impact on increasing sales and reducing social media marketing costs of Iranian Premier League football clubs. The results of the findings of this part of the study are consistent with the results of the studies conducted by Khaleghi et al. (2019), Kiani and Nazari (2022), Pirayesh and Rastgarniya (2023), Purnomo (2023), and Hajizadeh (2024). According to the results of the study by Pirayesh and Rastgarniya (2023), the establishment of social media marketing among customers leads to an increase in brand name and reputation, and the result of this increase is greater customer استقبال of the brand, which has a direct impact on increasing its sales and profit. The findings of the studies by Purnomo (2023) and Hajizadeh (2024) also indicate that social media-based marketing strategies can help improve and increase business sales. By using data and user feedback, necessary improvements can be applied to social media marketing strategies and alignment with the needs and preferences of audiences can be achieved more precisely. Moreover, active interaction with customers on these platforms enhances brand credibility and increases customer trust, which in turn helps to increase sales. Additionally, according to the findings of the study by Khaleghi et al. (2019), given that many people use social media, companies are advised to disseminate their advertising messages at a lower cost and across a wider scope. Kiani and Nazari (2022), in their study, concluded that social media marketing, through revenue generation and cost reduction, can be an effective step toward improving financial problems and the sports industry. Reducing marketing costs is one of the

main foundations for football clubs to achieve success in their business. Such an approach will guide football clubs toward more effective marketing while saving the club's budget. There are several effective online marketing tools that can help football clubs reduce their marketing costs while simultaneously increasing sales. One of these tools is the use of social media. By using social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and by selecting and applying the most appropriate strategy in social media marketing activities, football clubs can communicate with potential and existing customers, create brand awareness, and drive traffic to their website, and ultimately, due to the free nature of using these platforms, the marketing costs of the club will be reduced while sales of the club's products and services will increase.

Therefore, transactional marketing strategy, relationship marketing strategy, database marketing strategy, knowledge-based marketing strategy, and customer-oriented marketing strategy can have valuable functions in the effectiveness of social media marketing activities of Iranian Premier League football clubs. This is achieved through providing the conditions for customer loyalty and satisfaction, providing the conditions for brand identification and brand awareness in order to enhance brand identity, increasing market share and the perception of product quality and relative price, developing new products, increasing sales, and reducing marketing costs, and the results of the study also confirmed this important matter. In line with the results of the present study, the findings of previous research also showed that the utilization of social media by sports brands as a marketing tool leads to increased commercial profits of the club in the short term and long term (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Karimi et al., 2023), attracting customers and fans and increasing interaction with them (Annamalai et al., 2021), increasing customer trust (Milani & Zenouzi, 2019), promoting and increasing the organization's brand value and promoting sport (Amouzadeh et al., 2019), developing brand communications (Filo,

2014; Benthaus, 2016), having a positive impact on team identity and increasing fan satisfaction and attendance intention (Mohammadi & Zariiei, 2022; Jaber, 2023), increasing revenue (Dima, 2015), expanding sponsorship (Benthaus, 2016), and promotion, sales, marketing, and advertising support (Peltekoglu Balta & Hurmeric, 2012). Therefore, sports clubs, especially football clubs, in order to achieve success, must necessarily use new and innovative ideas, one of the ideas that assists these businesses in achieving success being social media-based marketing strategy; because football clubs, in the course of their activities, cannot allocate a large budget to the marketing department of their products, and this causes them to be unable to cover their costs financially, but through social media they can, to some extent, resolve this problem and obtain a suitable position for themselves. Now, the issue that exists here is that if a football club intends to use social media as one of the branches of marketing, it will face numerous problems in the formulation and implementation of strategies related to social media; over the past years, for various reasons, the use of social media for marketing in the sports industry, especially in football, has been met with neglect, which, considering its rapidly increasing expansion worldwide, is by no means acceptable and has been an obscure point for many football clubs as to how and through what means it should be used. Therefore, one of the main concerns has been to make use of the capacities of social media in the football industry by identifying the functions of social media marketing strategies. By doing so, in addition to Iranian Premier League football clubs being able to use its capabilities potentially, it also brings about greater interaction with fans and customers and provides economic resources for the club at lower costs; therefore, based on the results obtained, it is suggested to club managers and marketing officials that by using social media marketing, and due to the fact that there are no boundaries between media and audiences and many intermediaries have been eliminated, which

consequently reduces marketing costs, they should use social media in the process of selling their products and services by adopting marketing strategies aligned with the club's objectives. Furthermore, in order to introduce the club brand through social media, it is suggested to club marketing managers that information related to the club's products and services be disseminated through the club's social media platforms by applying the most appropriate social media marketing strategy, and that by forming campaigns aligned with the club's objectives, they contribute to improving the club brand. In addition, through social media platforms, it is suggested to clubs that use these platforms for marketing their products and services to establish two-way interactions with customers and fans by applying appropriate marketing strategies in order to accurately identify their needs, and to create a space for receiving feedback, criticisms, and suggestions from consumers. Finally, it is recommended that Iranian Premier League football clubs pay special attention to the role of various social media marketing strategies in their social media marketing actions and activities, and by studying, reviewing, and benchmarking social media marketing systems and strategies used by major football clubs around the world, take action to design, plan, and implement their own social media marketing activities.

Conclusion

As has also been pointed out in the research conducted in this field, today football clubs make use of various social media platforms to market products and services, establish communication with consumers and fans, reduce marketing costs, as well as increase club sales and commercial profits, promote and enhance the organization's brand value, and so forth. In line with these objectives, it is necessary for Iranian Premier League football clubs to accurately identify effective social media marketing strategies in this field and base their social media marketing activities on them in order to achieve their marketing goals aimed at eliciting desirable responses from consumers. Today, fans

and customers are among the most important factors of the economic–commercial success of football clubs; and with a high level of relational commitment, they strengthen brand equity. Therefore, creating and maintaining a strong relationship with fans in order to increase their level of commitment is important and leads to appropriate responses from them. Now, when social media is used for marketing and for establishing communication with fans and customers, this leads to savings in the time and cost of fans and customers, enabling them to obtain essential services more easily with less time and lower costs; therefore, under such conditions, customers are encouraged to communicate with the club and continue their relationship with it. The purpose of employing social media marketing strategies by football clubs is to obtain an appropriate market for sales, increase market share, offer new and diverse products, gain the satisfaction of fans and customers, and introduce the club brand, which is achievable through the use of social media; because through this means it is possible to provide services and products to fans and customers in the best possible manner and to create conditions in which fans and customers become familiar with the club's marketing activities. Therefore, under such conditions, an appropriate opportunity is created for establishing a relationship between the club and customers, and this in turn enables the club to achieve its predetermined objectives. In general, the

application of social media marketing strategies in the social media marketing activities of football clubs is important and necessary and has advantages, including the use of virtual networks to reduce marketing costs, establishing two-way communication between buyer and seller, focusing on the sale of goods and services, exchanging information among fans, customers, and the club, increasing customer satisfaction and creating stronger and longer-term relationships with customers and fans, attracting new fans and customers while retaining existing fans and customers, receiving immediate feedback from customers, storing customer information, cost leadership and reduction of product costs, acquiring important market insights, product customization, and introducing the club brand.

It is suggested that football clubs, by employing social media marketing strategies through the marketing units of Iranian Premier League football clubs, create an appropriate mechanism for establishing communication and increasing trust between the club and customers and fans. Closer and more extensive communication with the club through social media increases customers' trust in the club brand and encourages them to purchase the club's products. By using social media, customers participate more actively and extensively in the marketing process, the purchase of products, and the use of the club's services, and they experience a closer sense of connection with the club.

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