



Shahid Bahonar
University of Kerman



Journal of New Studies in Sport Management

Online ISSN: 2717 - 4069

Homepage: <https://jnssm.uk.ac.ir>



Iranian Scientific
Association of
Sport Management

Social Media and Sports Stakeholders Challenges and Opportunities

Vajiheh Javani¹  | Hojjat Karimivand ² 

1. Corresponding author, Assistant Professor, Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran.

Email: v.javani@tabrizu.ac.ir

2. Master student of sport management Department, Faculty of physical education and sport sciences, University of Tabriz, Iran.

Email: hojjatkarimivand@tabrizu.ac.ir

ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Original article

Article history:

Received: 3 March 2022

Received in revised form: 11
May 2022

Accepted: 16 May 2022

Publish online: 10 September
2022

Keywords:

Challenges
Football league
Opportunities
Social media
Sport stakeholders

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the challenges and opportunities of sports stakeholders in social media use. This study uses thematic analysis to analyze the literature on the research topic. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three groups of sports stakeholders, including players (N=15), teams managers (N=14), and fans (N=26) that were chosen from three professional football teams. The phenomenological method was used to explore the research questions. The study addressed seven categories of sport stakeholders' challenges and opportunities in social media: informing sports stakeholders, sharing information, advertising, shopping, dialogue, and facilitation of communication, which are offering opportunities. Moreover, two challenges, including unpleasant feelings and time consumption, are recognized as dilemmas. The findings showed common challenges and opportunities of all three sports stakeholders in using social media.

Introduction

Before the internet age, sports content was distributed through journals and broadcasters (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). After the World Wide Web launch, sports teams spread the content to their stakeholders, including athletes and fans, through team-based websites. In the internet age, many sports stakeholders (athletes, teams, and fans) in different leagues use social media to communicate directly and have dialogues (Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015; Pegoraro, 2010). This technology has made fans interact with professional athletes in new ways. They can offer advice, display gratitude, criticize and provide consolation to athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson,

How to Cite: Javani, V., Karimivand, H. (2022). Social Media and Sports Stakeholders Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of New Studies in Sport Management*, 3(3), 494-508. DOI: 10.22103/JNSSM.2022.19154.1068



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DOI: 10.22103/JNSSM.2022.19154.1068



2009). Social media is a valuable communication tool for expanding the relationship between fans and athletes (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). It allows fans to communicate directly, share information, and communicate with their favorite athletes. For example, fans in popular leagues such as the NBA and NFL follow their teams and communicate with athletes via social media (Brown, 2013). According to Sadeghi and Leng (2021), in recent years, most social media in the field of sports have become visually-centric (Sadeghi & Leng, 2021). Therefore, Instagram has become one of the best platforms for various reasons, including its development in mobile phones instead of the web and the longer life of published content. In addition, visual content such as images and videos shared on Instagram has made it a platform for greater fan participation. Moreover, many athletes use Instagram to communicate and share content with their fans.

Today, social media such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram are the leading communication platforms for selling sports products and services. However, in international football clubs, team managers, as one of the sport's stakeholders, provide information and images of teams to their fans through social media (Sadeghi & Leng, 2021). These platforms (Telegram, Instagram, and WhatsApp) are mainly used by sports stakeholders in the Iranian premier football league (Sharifzadeh, Brison, & Bennett, 2021).

Therefore, this study aimed to examine the challenges of sport stakeholders (athletes, fans, and teams) using social media in Iran's major league football. Due to the popularity of football, the sport is focused on this sport. Research questions guided the study: What challenges and opportunities do SM use for sport stakeholders? (I) why do sports stakeholders use social media during their premier Iranian football league matches? (II) Do sports stakeholders use social media to communicate with other sports stakeholders? (III) What information do sports stakeholders gather during the competition? (IV) What information do sports stakeholders collect after and before the match? (V) Which social media do sports stakeholders use more (VI)? How has social media changed the media relations of sports stakeholders? (VII) How do you feel about using social media? By utilizing semi-structured interviews, sports stakeholders' challenges in using social media were examined. There has been much research on the challenges of sports stakeholders and opportunities in social media by researchers (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2017; Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). In most previous research, stakeholders' challenges and opportunities (athletes, fans, and sport managers) in social media have been examined separately. In contrast, it needs to explore all three stockholders together and diagnose if there are any conflicts or differences between their challenges and opportunities or not. The goal of the current study was to examine the challenges and opportunities of these three groups of sports stakeholders and inform the stakeholders of the sport that the use of social media can face challenges and opportunities in the major league of Iranian football.

Social media

The phenomenon of social media worldwide has dramatically improved in the last decade (Pegoraro, 2010). A valuable and accurate definition of social media is that social media is mainly defined as online tools for sharing content (e.g., images, video, text, news, opinion) and information between individuals and organizations (Newson, Houghton, & Patten, 2009). Generally, social media are categorized into two parts: web1 and web2. In web1, different websites are created by individuals and companies, and they fill these websites with content and then wait for people to read the content of the sites. In addition, there are minimal ways for users to communicate, interact, and share content on Web 1. On this web, users connect to the Internet with a computer (PC) or laptop and connect to other users worldwide only through email, websites, message boards, or forums (Weinberg, 2009). In the new Web 2.0, the world has drastically shifted. Users can quickly generate and share content themselves and interact with each other. People do not use websites, hosting blogs, and computers to communicate; instead, they use various social media, such as mobile, netbooks, and game consoles. Now that content is easily generated, the Internet is available to all users. Users can easily share their content (Weinberg, 2009). All over the world, people mainly use different social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter (Pfahl, Kreutzer, Maleski, Lillibridge, & Ryznar, 2012). They also use other social media, such as Instagram, to share photos; they may also use YouTube for video and audio sharing (Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014).

In recent years, social media have evolved based on visual-centric. A visual social media, Instagram, was founded in 2010 to allow members to share photos and images (Sadeghi & Leng, 2021). In 2017, Instagram reported 700 million registered users. Members use the platform more to document their life, demonstrate their creativity, and share their interests with other users via images. Instagram is a social media app used by more than one billion people worldwide to share photos, videos, and messages (Kim, Seely, & Jung, 2017). According to statistics, more than 53 million people (about 66%) use the Internet in Iran.

Moreover, most of them are connected to the Internet through their mobile phones. Furthermore, they use different social networks on their mobile phones. Telegram is the most popular social media in Iran. More than 24 million Iranian users use Instagram (Amani *et al.*, 2020). Iran takes seventh place in the list of active users of Instagram globally. With this program, users can share photos, videos, stickers, and audio up to 1.5 GB. This app is used to communicate with people (Sadeghi & Leng, 2021). WhatsApp is one of the evolutions in technology ordinarily operated on most mobile phones. WhatsApp allows its users to connect via voice, video, and photos (Weimann-Saks, Ariel, & Elishar-Malka, 2020). In some countries, such as Iran, social media like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are filtered. People mostly use social media such as Instagram, Whatsapp, and Telegram to share content (Hashemifardnia, Namaziandost, & Rahimi Esfahani, 2018). Social media has created many benefits for its users. Studies have shown that social media can develop users' services, such as sharing information and social connections (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Social media's most important benefit is its convenience: social media tools such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook are free and do not require any special software (Kuzma, Bell, & Logue, 2014).

Social media and athletes

Football has elevated many athletes or even amateur players famous through social media. They interact with their fans on social networking sites, pass on information to their fans, and create a personal brand using social media (Hutchins, 2011). Social media has become a popular tool for athletes to share content with their followers and other athletes (Abuín-Penas, Martínez-Patiño, & Míguez-González, 2019). Athletes can have a closer relationship with their fans through social media (Brown, 2013). They also can share their emotions and ideas with their fans. They can also have the opportunity to obtain their followers' feedback and interact with them (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Athletes today use various social media to have relationships and communicate with their followers. Researchers have analyzed some athletes' tweets using content analysis methods to determine how athletes have relationships and communicate with their followers through social media. They reported six categories: interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content sharing, and promotional communication (Hayes, Filo, Geurin, & Riot, 2020). Athletes use social media to achieve their goals. Hayes *et al.* (2020) examined female athletes' perceptions of new media and eventually found that athletes use social media to achieve four main objectives sharing their personal life with fans, developing connections with fans and followers, gaining sponsorship deals, and self-promotion, and revealed that social media is a valuable communication tool. They also shared content such as videos and photos of competing events and the results of matches via social media (Hayes *et al.*, 2020).

Celebrity football players use social media. They use social media to interact and share their daily activities with fans and advertise and market. For example, football players such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo and professional football teams (Manchester United and Real Madrid) spend significant resources integrating social media into their marketing strategy (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Cristiano Ronaldo, a Portuguese football player with 110 million followers on social media, or retired football player, David Beckham, is a very popular athlete on Instagram (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016). Professional athletes can share the exciting news of their personal lives on social media. They can share their personal life information with their fans (Ehrnborg & Rosén, 2009). In the online environment, professional athletes could influence fans to exchange the content of a player's SM profile. Cristiano Ronaldo had about 600000 shares in January and February 2015. During these two months, he made many updates to his Facebook profile. These updates include photos from football matches, training, meetings, and events. (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016).

Hambrick *et al.* (2010) have categorized that Professional athletes use social media into five different categories, including interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship, and promotions (Hambrick *et al.*, 2010).

During the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, Iranian football players used various social media. The most famous of which was Instagram. This event was held from June 14 to July 15. During this period of the games, about 251 Instagram posts were registered by 16 players of the Iranian football team. These posts were categorized into four categories: Athlete, Family, Personal, and; Publicity. An example of photos in this category was Mehdi Taromi's photo depicting leisure time with the coach and teammates in the Iranian national team training camp (Sadeghi & Leng, 2021).

Since most adults in the world between the ages of 24 and 35 use WhatsApp. Given that a large proportion of athletes are in this age range. WhatsApp is a very familiar platform for athletes. WhatsApp is a familiar platform for athletes, which athletes were already comfortable using. WhatsApp provides the ability to communicate for many athletes at once through group chats, allows the sharing of images/videos/PDFs within the message itself, and enables the sender to know when messages have been read by the recipient (Ahmed, Carmody, Walker, & Ahmad, 2020).

In addition to the benefits of using social media for athletes, there are also challenges for athletes (Hayes, Filo, Riot, & Geurin, 2019). The football industry has many athletes using social media before or during competitions causes anxiety and concentration disruption (Encel, Mesagno, & Brown, 2017). Athletes also face other challenges, such as negative messages, Belittling, sarcasm, and threats, mostly sent by fans to athletes (Sanderson & Truax, 2014). However, in this study, athletes may face new challenges using social media. Some challenges may provide an opportunity for them, or even some challenges may cause them problems.

Social media and sport teams

Rapid changes in new technology have positively affected professional sports team managers and other stakeholders. Most professional sports teams and organizations connect with their fans via social media (Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014). To this end, professional sports teams have used social media to share breaking news, pictures, videos, and advanced access, such as live updates during games or special events (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013). For example, sports teams and organizations can create Facebook and Instagram pages to share information and connect with fans (Tassawa, 2019). The results showed that teams use social media to increase interaction and engagement with fans. (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2017). Teams can use Instagram to reach their current and new audiences, encourage interactions with the sport product and build positive associations with their brand. Furthermore, Instagram can have a good and positive impact on fans' attachment to their team (Broughton, 2012).

Today, professional sports teams worldwide strive to maintain two-way communication with their fans through social media (Filo *et al.*, 2015). Most professional sports teams now maintain an online presence on several social media platforms and increasingly expand to new ones (Anagnostopoulos, Parganas, Chadwick, & Fenton, 2018). One of the best benefits of sports teams' social media and websites for fans is getting the information they need through social media. It provides an excellent opportunity for managers of clubs to encourage and facilitate the fans referring to the club website, creates loyalty in fans, and increases the club's benefit from selling products of the club (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013).

Furthermore, social media provides marketing and Advertising opportunities for sports teams and organizations, such as ticket sales and product promotions, and gives information about activities to the fans team (ŞİRİN & SEVİLMİŞ, 2019). Sports teams and football players use social media to communicate with their supporters (Çavuşoğlu, Oztürk, & Kara, 2011). Sports fans can connect on social media to talk, make suggestions, and buy their team's products and services (Singh & Cullinane, 2010). In the Iranian Professional Football League, Sports teams also use social media for marketing and advertising. Four famous football clubs in the Iranian professional football league, including Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractorsazi, and Sepahan, to achieve their communication and advertising goals to communicate effectively with fans or customers and gain more market shares compared to competitors, usually use various promotional media such as TV ads, endorsements,

memorabilia, publications, websites, social networks, magazines, posters (Salari, Heidari, & Asadollahi, 2021).

In sport, social media has created many opportunities for sports stakeholders. Various sports stakeholders, such as professional sports teams, leagues, professional athletes, professional sporting events, and sports fans, use social media for marketing goals (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019). Most studies in sports marketing studies have been conducted regarding how sports stakeholders (sports teams, celebrated athletes, and fans) use social media, e.g. (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Amani et al., 2020; Da Silva & Las Casas, 2017; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). Abeza *et al.* (2013) explored sport managers' challenges in using social media in Relationship Marketing (RM). The results showed that organizations use social media for RM goals, fans' engagement, and efficient resource management. However, they faced some challenges, including the reliability of the information, lack of control over posted messages, and credibility concerns. While many scholars focused on one of the sports stakeholders' challenges in using social media, the different sport stakeholders have their specific concerns and goals in using social media. Also, they may meet various challenges, even conflict. Thus, this study targets three main sports stakeholders to obtain a consensus on their challenges and opportunities in using social media (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014).

Methodology

This study sought to explore challenges faced by three sports stakeholders, including players, team managers, and fans, using social media. Stakeholders of three popular teams in the Iranian Premier Football League were selected to study. The reason for choosing Premier Football League was the Football League's popularity among Iranians. This study used the interpretive approach to understand the interviewees' actual perceptions (Hayes *et al.*, 2020). This study has adopted qualitative research designs, where a wide range of data has been analyzed according to the research topic. Thematic analysis has been applied to interpret data from chosen studies. Long semi-structured interview questions design was used. Jones (2015) pointed out that long semi-structured interview questions could define the areas to be explored and, at the same time, allow flexibility in discussing issues in more detail. The preset questions were derived from previous studies that grounded their research in SM and sports stakeholders.

Participants

The primary purpose of this study was to select three major sports stakeholders' groups, including athletes, social media managers, teams, and fans from the Iranian Premier football League and sport stakeholders (N=57) of three famous football teams in the Iranian Football League, including sports managers (N=14), players (N=15) and fans (N=26), who agreed to interview. In the first step, seven months lasted to choose the appropriate sport's stakeholders relevant to the research's purpose. Previous research has confirmed the difficulty of accessing various sports stakeholders (Hayes et al., 2019) since there are 18 teams in the Iranian Professional Football League. Twelve sports teams were scheduled to gather a viable sample pool of stakeholders for seven months. After seven months, interviews were conducted with 14 managers, 15 players, and 26 fans of three professional football teams in the Iranian Major League. After completing the sport stakeholders' interviews, the interviewees' age range was 37 to 50, 18 to 34, and 16 to 54, respectively, for sport managers, players, and fans. Interviews were accomplished with stakeholders having extensive experience and knowledge of a particular phenomenon (Robinson, Mackey, Gass, & Schmidt, 2012).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used social media pages (Instagram) to get quick and easy access to sports stakeholders (team managers and players) and send a participation request in the interview. Fans were also sent participation requests in the interview through the fan page of Instagram the three teams (Request Coordination through Fan Directories) (N=30) and Telegram (Request Coordination through Fans ID in Telegram) (N=25). The Instagram page was accessible to fans via the teams' Instagram page in

which the fans were members (followers). Most stakeholders agreed to participate and coordinate the interview time. Two sports stakeholders did not respond to participation requests because they did not have enough time to interview. At first, the interviewer asked preset questions and probing questions to participants. The interviewer followed up with more detailed questions during the interview or explained more about the particular phenomenon.

Interviews lasted about ten months (between March and December 2019). Interviews with all team managers were conducted face to face (N=14). Fans were interviewed via Instagram (live video and audio) (N=7), WhatsApp (N=4), and face-to-face (N=15), and players were interviewed via Instagram (audio) (N=11) and face-to-face (N=4). Researchers have found that data saturation occurs in qualitative studies in the first twelve interviews. Therefore, the interviews with sports stakeholders continued until they reached full saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The interview lasted between 40 and 95 minutes. All interviews were recorded. Data were transcribed verbatim from the audio files into 287 pages of text. Then the data were analyzed using MAXQDA software. Data were analyzed using the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. In the last step, researchers asked six stockholders, including team managers (N=2), players (N=2), and fans (N=2), to review the extracting themes and offer feedback as to how accurately and completely the themes describe their experiences. The researchers also spent more time coding processes and reviewing themes to ensure that the information and experiences were correctly understood.

Results

The extracted themes and concepts are shown in Table 1 that explained in the following sections.

Table 1. Challenges and opportunities for sports stakeholders in using social media

Opportunities	Challenges
<p>Informed sports stakeholders. Social media provides a way for sports stakeholders to inform sports news.</p> <p>Sharing information. Sports stakeholders share sports content such as Movies, photos, and texts on social media.</p> <p>Dialogue. Social media provides a way for sports stakeholders to dialogue with each other and people.</p> <p>Advertising and shopping. Sport stakeholders use social media for advertising and shopping.</p> <p>Facilitate communication. Facilitate communication. Sport stakeholders can facilitate communication with each other through social media.</p>	<p>Unpleased feelings. Sport stakeholders feel tired, annoyed, and repetitive in using social media. They do not make other people make unpleased in using social media.</p> <p>Time consumption. Sport stakeholders consume much time on social media and become addicted to social media.</p>

Sports stakeholders (sports managers, players, and fans) use social media

This study has used different social media for all three sports stakeholders (team managers, players, and fans). Some of them used a lot of social media, and some did not use social media. Instagram is the most popular social media among sports stakeholders globally. In the Iranian Premier Football League, all three sports stakeholders have used Instagram, and it has ranked the most popular social media. The following rankings belonged to Telegram, WhatsApp, and Imo, respectively, and were used by sports stakeholders in the Iranian Premier Football League. Other social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are not popular among sports stakeholders because they are filtered in Iran.

Five opportunities were revealed regarding the research questions that dealt with sports stakeholders' challenges in using social media in the Iranian Premier Football League. Two challenges were revealed regarding the research questions that dealt with using social media for sports

stakeholders in the Iranian premier football league. The tables below show a quantity of the challenges (opportunities and challenges) for sports stakeholders using social media.

Table 2. Opportunities to use social media for sports stakeholders (N=55)

Sport Stakeholders	informed sports stakeholders	Sharing information	Dialogue	Advertising and shopping	Facilitate communication
Players	85%	94%	58%	66%	92%
Fans	92%	78%	74%	27%	81%
Team Managers	64%	49%	80%	47%	75%

Table 3. Challenges to using social media for sports stakeholders (N=55)

Sport Stakeholders	Unpleased feelings	Time consumption
Players	78%	86%
Fans	22%	67%
Team Managers	14%	28%

Opportunities to use social media for sports stakeholders

This section answered the research questions dealing with the favorite challenges for sports stakeholders in using social media in the Iranian Premier League football. Five opportunities were uncovered for sports stakeholders to use social media: informing sports stakeholders, sharing information, Advertising and shopping, dialogue, and facilitating communication. All five favorite challenges have been discussed below.

Informing sports stakeholders. The first opportunity for sports stakeholders to use social media is to inform them. Informing sports stakeholders has been defined as an opportunity to learn, understand, and know sports stakeholders (Abeza *et al.*, 2019). All three sports stakeholders used social media to be informed regarding sports news. Sports news included teams and players in the Iranian premier football League and other foreign leagues such as the English and Spanish Football League. Most sports stakeholders were informed of sports news through social media, including Instagram and Telegram. Respondent 12 (fan, 25) revealed that he used various social media to get news about players and teams in the Iranian Football League:

I love my team, and I follow the team's news every day. I follow team news such as Team Results and Transfer News from Team Instagram Page. On Instagram, I can follow the personal lives of some of the players. I am also a member of my team's telegram channel and follow most team and player news.

Respondent 6 (team manager, 44) revealed that social media informed us of other teams' information: We get information from other teams in the league through social media like Instagram and Telegram. We get information such as player earnings and player transfers and about the teams, such as team revenue and team sponsors.

Players in the league used social media to inform league news and foreign leagues. Respondent 15 (player, 30) stated that: In addition to following the Iranian Premier League football news, I am interested in following foreign league news. I follow the news of famous players like Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi on Instagram and would love to see their plays. Among the world's favorite teams, I am a fan of Manchester United, and I get informed regarding this famous team's news through Instagram.

Sharing information. The second opportunity for sports stakeholders to use social media for sharing information. The theme of sharing information has been defined as all content such as photos, videos,

and text shared by sports stakeholders during and after football league matches. Most players are reluctant to share videos and pictures during the match and prefer to share them. Respondent 6 (player, 33) revealed that "I was collecting beautiful and sensitive scenes in the matches, and after completing the matches, I shared them via my Instagram page." team managers shared important team information. Respondent 3 (team manager, 39) stated, "I share important team information including new team transfers, the introduction of new team sponsors, Information on team finances, and the date of upcoming team competitions." Social media has enabled fans to share photos and live videos during matches. Respondent 17 (fan, 28) explained, "I go to the stadium every week to watch my team match and closely watch the game. I take many photos of the stadium's fans and the players during the match and share them through my Instagram page. I also share live video from the stadium through my Instagram story."

Dialogue. Dialogue is the third opportunity for sports stakeholders to use social media. Sports stakeholders use social media as a tool for having a dialogue. The theme was defined as the sports stakeholders' dialogue on social media. Social media such as Instagram and WhatsApp are valuable tools for having dialogue among sports stakeholders. Respondent 13 (fan, 19) explained how he used Instagram to write comments to players: I can comment on the page of my favorite players on Instagram. I thank and appreciate my favorite players through the Instagram directory by writing comments. Of course, I sometimes criticize them by writing comments.

WhatsApp was one of the best software for sports managers in dialogue and was accepted by all sports managers. Most managers have a dialogue with their fans through this software. Respondent 1 (team manager, 42) revealed that "I have created a chat group in WhatsApp for the team, and many of the team's fans are members in the chat group. In this chat group, I have a dialogue with fans by writing comments or sending voices, and I receive fans' requests, comments, suggestions, and criticisms from the team's sports managers."

Players can have a dialogue with their fans via social media. They can discuss their personal lives and sponsor themselves. Respondent 11 (player, 22) revealed that "most fans write many comments on my Instagram directory and ask many questions about my personal life. Questions like the number of children, house and car prices and spouse's name". Another Respondent 9 (player, 19) revealed that "most fans would like to know more about my sponsors. Most of my fans like to know which companies are my sponsors, and I answer their questions via video chat on Instagram".

Advertising and shopping. The fourth opportunity for sports stakeholders to use social media is advertising and shopping. The theme has been defined as advertising sport and non-sport products by sports stakeholders. Wide advertising of companies' products by sports stakeholders such as football stars and favorite teams has increased the shopping of products by people and other stakeholders. In Iranian Premier League football, most players had sponsors, and they had signed contracts with the companies they sponsored.

Furthermore, they had to advertise the products of those companies. Respondent 7 (player, 19) stated that "Saba and Star Tract companies that produce sports equipment are my sponsors. Moreover, I advertise these companies' sports shoes. I do this advertisement via Instagram (sharing photos and videos of sports shoes). My advertising has had a massive impact on these companies' sales, and people are buying more of these sports shoes.

Most fans do their shopping through social media and use them less for advertising. They buy their sports products through social media. Respondent 22 (fan, 20) summarized how he used social media to purchase sports and non-sporting goods: My friends and I make our sport and non-sport purchases through telegram channels. Our favorite team has created a telegram channel to sell sports products, and we use this channel to buy sports products. Team managers need more social media to do their advertising. Most teams partner with sponsored companies in the Iranian premier football League to advertise their products. Of course, most of their products are non-sports. Respondent 5 (team manager, 48) said, "The sponsor company has a contract with our football team, and we advertise companies' products on the team's Instagram page. Most of these products are non-sports; products such as food, hygiene, and clothing are of this kind.

Facilitating communication . The Final opportunity for sports stakeholders to use social media to facilitate communication. The theme has been defined in how social media provides a basis for sports stakeholders to contact each other quickly and other people. In this study, all three sports stakeholders used social media to communicate, and all stakeholders stated that social media had facilitated their communication. Fans used social media to communicate with other fans and friends. Respondent 14 (fan, 29) revealed that "I use social media like Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp to communicate with friends and other fans, and these social media have facilitated my communication."

The players, as well as sports stakeholders, use social media to facilitate communication. They use social media to communicate with sponsors, families, friends, fans, coaches, and other players. Respondent 1 (player, 20) revealed that he communicated with friends and family through social media such as Instagram and IMO. He also stated that "for most of the matches I was away from my family, I communicated with them via video chat with IMO and Instagram." Respondent 12 (player, 27) revealed that if there were no Instagram and telegram social networks, she would not be able to communicate with players in other countries: "Instagram is one of the best communication tools to communicate with other players worldwide. This tool has facilitated my communication. Through Instagram, I have become able to find and communicate with players across the world easily."

Sports managers use social media extensively in their communications. Most sports managers knew social media as an essential tool for team communication with other league teams. Respondent 10 (team manager, 46) stated, "I use social media to communicate with other teams' sports managers, consult with them on team problems, and ask them for help. Sports managers also communicated with their team members via social media". Respondent 4 (team manager, 50) revealed that he used social media to communicate with coaches, players, technical staff, fans, and other team managers.

Challenges to using social media for sports stakeholders

This section has answered the research questions dealing with sports stakeholders' undesired challenges in using social media in Iranian Premier League football. Two challenges were uncovered for sports stakeholders to use social media: unpleasant feelings and time consumption. Both challenges have been discussed below.

Unpleased feelings. The first challenge for sports stakeholders in using social media is unpleasant feelings. This theme has been defined as when sports stakeholders get tired, repetitive, and annoyed using social media .Respondent 2 (fan, 18) revealed that social media's excessive use could make you tired. He said, "Instagram is one of the best software.

Furthermore, I use it more than any other software in the football league. Too much use of Instagram has made me feel tired. Sports managers also felt unpleased in the use of social media. Most sports managers have repeated the use of social media. Respondent 7 (team manager, 37) revealed, "I use social media including Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp, Now I feel that social media has been a repetitive process for me, and I am looking for new software." Players were among the stakeholders annoyed by fans on social media. The fans annoyed players by writing immoral and offensive comments to players. Respondent 13 (player, 29) described his experience in the following sentences:

I check my comments on Instagram and Telegram every day. My fans send me several comments per day, maybe three hundred (300). Among these comments, a few fans annoy me by writing immoral and offensive comments; however, I do not write any comments for them.

Time consumption. The second challenge for sports stakeholders to use social media is time-consuming. This theme has been defined as Sports stakeholders who spend most of their time on social media. Players spend most of their time searching for information about other football leagues and players worldwide. Respondent 9 (player, 19) stated, "most of my time is spent finding players from the US and Australian football leagues on social media.

Furthermore, I do not have enough time to do other things. Fans on social media talk to other fans and friends, which consumes time. Respondent 22 (fan, 20) stated, "I use WhatsApp social media to talk to my friends. I talked to him mainly via WhatsApp video call and spoke with him for about half an hour. Sports managers also spend most of their time on social media. Managing the team's telegram group and Instagram page, team managers consume most of their time. Respondent 14 (team

manager, 49) stated that he used social media to manage the Telegram group and Instagram page team, and he responded to the comments from the fans on Instagram and Telegram. Managing the social media team is a difficult task, and most of the time is consumed.

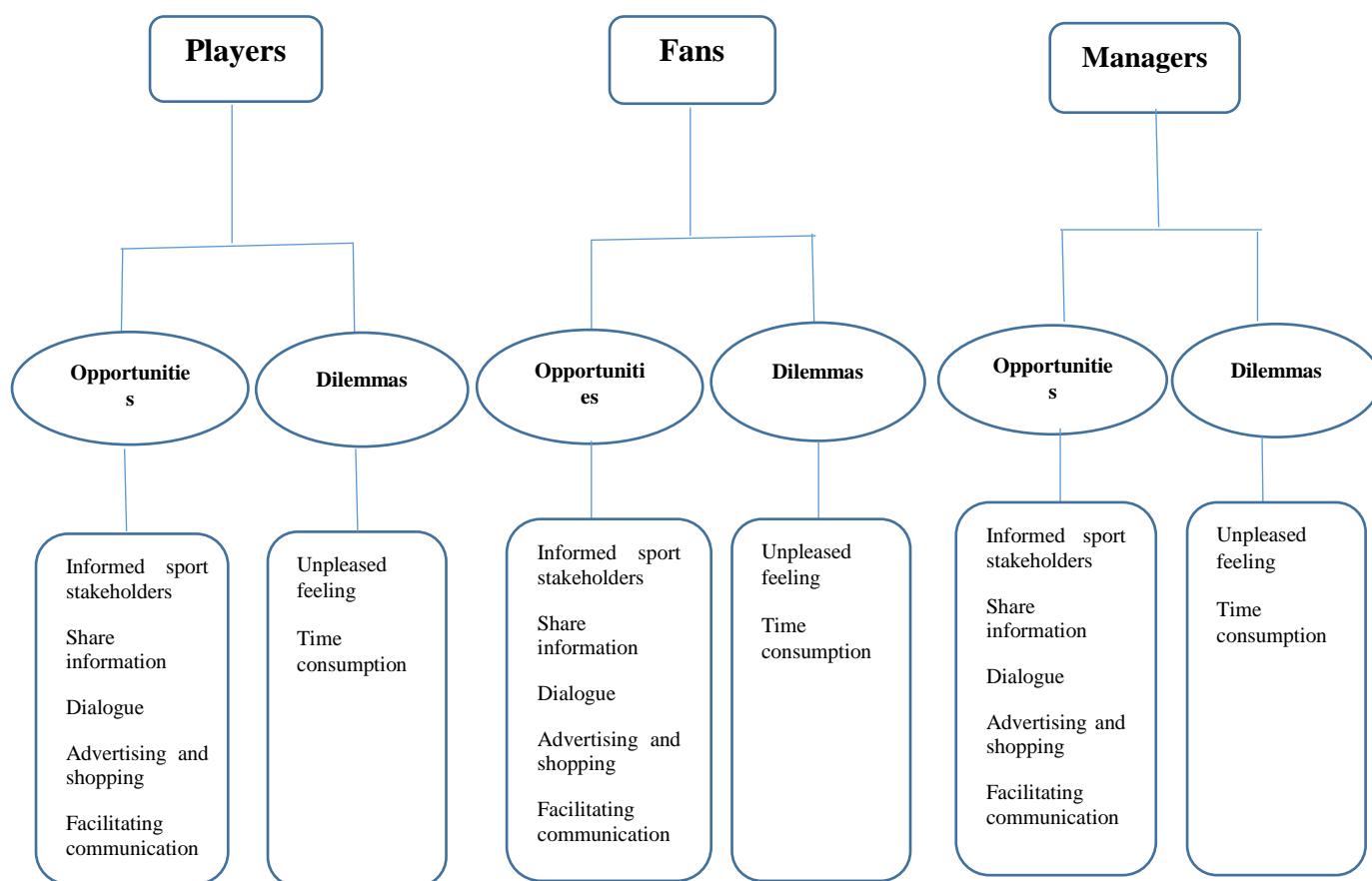


Figure 1. Interrelation of challenges for each sport stakeholder to use social media

Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the opportunities and challenges of sports stakeholders in using social media in Iranian Premier League football. The sports stakeholders in this study included players, sports managers, and fans. In this research, five opportunities were found concerning the investigation questions, including informed sports stakeholders, sharing information, advertising and shopping, dialogue, and facilitating communication. Much previous research (Abeza et al., 2019; Hayes et al., 2019) has been conducted on sports stakeholders' opportunities and challenges.

Each of the seven research questions examined stakeholders' use of social media rather than focusing on one particular platform. In this section, all seven questions Included, (I) why do sports stakeholders use social media during their matches in the premier Iranian football league? (II) Do sports stakeholders use social media to communicate with other sports stakeholders? (III) What information do sports stakeholders gather during the competition? (IV) What information do sports stakeholders collect after and before the match? (V) Which social media do sports stakeholders use more (VI)? How has social media changed the media relations of sports stakeholders? (VII) How do you feel about using social media? Our discussion concluded together. The first question asked, "Why do sports stakeholders use social media during their matches in the premier Iranian football league?" and revealed 5 five uses, including informing the news, sharing information, advertising and shopping, dialogue, and communication. The themes align with previous research(Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). All three sports stakeholders include players, fans, and team managers' disclosure of social media to inform the news. Much previous research has been done on the

opportunities for sports stakeholders. Some of these researches were in line with the findings of this study. The informing sports stakeholders theme was in line with the research (Abeza et al., 2017), which revealed that team managers used social media to know, understand, and learn. But in this study, sports stakeholders used social media to inform news (league transfer news, news of rival teams in the league, and news of foreign football leagues). They increase their information by being informed of the news. They also revealed that social media gives us false statements and tells us false news. It is suggested that sports stakeholders in the premier Iranian football league do not do it.

Sharing information was in line with (Hayes et al., 2020) studies. They researched one of the sport's stakeholders (athletes) at major sports events. They disclosed that athletes' information was collected and shared during or after the events. In this study, sports stakeholders gathered content during competitions and then shared it after the match (Hayes et al., 2019). Of course, sports stakeholders also shared photos and videos of their personal lives in addition to sports content. These themes align with uses previously identified in professional athlete social media research (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), revealing similarities in how athletes adopt social media every day 6 lives and during major sport events. However, some sports stakeholders were reluctant to share their sports and confidential information. Perhaps they were afraid of revealing their information through social media.

All three sports stakeholders used social media to dialogue with each other and other people. They also created two-way conversations to understand each other's needs (Abeza et al., 2019). Sports stakeholders' interaction or dialogue happens through direct and indirect channels (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Their dialogue used more social media, such as Instagram and Telegram, and rarely used phone calls to interact. Sports stakeholders have created news feeds, blogs, interactive websites, and discussion boards and established social media presence to have dialogue or interact (Williams et al., 2014). Sports stakeholders may solve each other's problems by having a dialogue or interacting with one another through social media or dispelling each other's needs and desires.

One of the opportunities that sports stakeholders use social media is advertising and shopping. The advertising and shopping theme was in line with (Runyan, Lear, & Whitaker, 2009), who revealed that sports stakeholders, including athletes, coaches, and fans, advertise a product in various ways. However, this research disclosed that sports stakeholders use modern methods of advertising and shopping. They use social media, including Instagram and Telegram, prevalent in advertising and shopping. For example, players advertise company products through social media, or fans mainly advertise their favorite players. They also do much shopping through social media, including sports products (T-shirts, shoes) and non-sports products (food and clothing). Of course, several sports stakeholders were not interested in online shopping through social media. We recommend encouraging these sports stakeholders to shop online through social media. Sports stakeholders also use social media for advertising online sports betting (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez, & Griffiths, 2017). Among the sport stakeholders, famous players advertised betting sites and channels for fans and others. They may have made more income by advertising on betting sites.

Communication facilitation was the final theme for sports stakeholders to use on social media. This theme was in line with (Hayes et al., 2019). They suggested that social media has facilitated communication between sports stakeholders. Their research results showed that social media is a way for athletes to communicate with family and friends at sporting events. However, this study's findings showed that social media facilitated communication among all three stakeholder groups and that sports stakeholders could better communicate with their families and friends. Social media has facilitated and fastened sports stakeholders' communication by changing communication forms (Sanderson, Snyder, Hull, & Gramlich, 2015). Sports stakeholders have not used traditional media in communication; they replaced new social media with traditional media by facilitating sports stakeholders' communication through social media. They may have no problems communicating worldwide with other sports stakeholders (coaches, team staff).

Two challenges were found concerning the research questions, including unpleased feelings and Time consumption. In the current study, all interviewees felt displeased by social media. Sports stakeholders revealed the reasons for their unpleased feelings with social media as being more annoyed by fans (writing immoral comments for players on Instagram Direct by fans) and other people, being tired of overusing social media, Asking repetitive questions in WhatsApp and

Telegram groups ,and repetitiveness (excessive use of social media such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram) of social media. These reasons (unpleasant feelings) can have adverse effects on the sport's stakeholders. They may not use social media or rarely use it.

Further, the low usage of social media also makes sports stakeholders not addicted to social media. All three sports stakeholders in Iran's premier football league are displeased with social media. This problem (unpleasant feeling) may be solved in the future, and sports stakeholders may feel pleased with social media use.

The second challenge for sports stakeholders in using social media is time-consuming. Many of the current research participants revealed that they have become addicted to social media, which has consumed most of their time. Sports stakeholders consumed most of their time on mobile phones, searching on social media, and finding friends. However, sports stakeholders' time consumption on social media may cause them to have enough time for other jobs or separate them from family and friends. Below are three models for each of the stakeholders of the sport.

According to the results, it was observed that some of the obtained results (themes) were shared with previous studies. However, in this study, all three sports stakeholders were studied together. Therefore, we assume the findings of this study showed common challenges and opportunities that all three sports stakeholders face in using social media.

Limitations

This study also had some limitations. First, the interviewees were unable to answer the interview questions. Because some of them did not feel comfortable, and some could not answer the questions. The study depended on the study tools' effectiveness and the interviewees (sports stakeholders) to answer the interview questions (Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014). Therefore, before the interviews, a justification meeting was held for the interview participants to get acquainted with the interview questions and to answer them calmly. Second, since social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are filtered in Iran, sports stakeholders cannot use these social media. We could not use these tools for interviewing sports stakeholders.

Moreover, the sampling method of this study had limitations. Third, among the sport stakeholders in the study, we asked six female fans to participate in the interview, but none participated in the stadium. Female fans in Iranian football stadiums are prohibited (According to the Laws and Culture in Iran, female fans' access to stadiums is impossible). Even female fans who watched the team's games on TV and mobile (social media consumers) and did not attend the stadium could not participate in the interview. Finally, previous research has shown that there is some difficulty collecting data through interviews. Problems include attracting enough participants (stakeholders) and lack of time to participate.

Future Research

In this study, three ways have been suggested for future research. First, researchers can do this research in a variety of sports fields. In this study, the challenges of sports stakeholders in social media were examined. Therefore, researchers can research volleyball, basketball, and other leagues in future studies. Second, this study can be done on other sports stakeholders such as coaches, staff, and sports volunteers in the premier Iranian football league. Researchers can also do similar research for II and III football leagues and compare them with premier leagues (current research). Third, a similar study can be conducted over a specific time since social media is developing and its use continuously grows (Abeza *et al.*, 2019). In this study, sports stakeholders' use of social media is maturing with time; therefore, a similar study is suggested over a specific time.

Acknowledgments

We would also like to show our gratitude to all participants for sharing their pearls of wisdom with us during the course of this research.

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