



The Effect of Online Advertising of Football Players on Fans' Purchase Intention with the Mediating Role of Players' Popularity

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Online advertising has become a crucial tool for sports teams, marketers, and retailers looking to engage with fans and boost sales of sports-related products. This study examines the effect of online advertising of football players on fans' purchase intention, with the mediating role of players' popularity.

Methodology: The research is classified as applied, using a descriptive research method and cross-sectional survey research design. The statistical population of this study includes football fans in Iran. The sampling method in this study was non-probability convenience sampling (200 fans). A four-part questionnaire was used to collect data. Then partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS 3.0) was used for data analysis.

Findings: Paying attention to these indicators is of great importance in implementing the model of the impact of online advertising on the intention to purchase football fans. Therefore, based on the study's findings, the model of the effects of online advertising on the intention to buy football fans is confirmed. Based on the results obtained from the combined reliability, extracted variance, model fit coefficient, and goodness-of-fit index in the path analysis, the model is consistent with suitable empirical and theoretical assumptions and has a good fit. Therefore, the model of the impact of online advertising on the intention to purchase football fans is confirmed.

Originality: This research evaluated the mediating role of football players' popularity on fans' purchase intention.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Given the increasing competition in all industries, the importance of marketing communications for organizations, both for corporate, non-profit, and public sectors, is still on the rise, especially for a unified approach in planning and implementing activities (Jovanovic et al., 2016). Integrated marketing communications represent an effective and efficient way to guide messages coordinated at all touchpoints between the company and the consumer (Popescu et al., 2013). Digital marketing allows companies to reach, interact, and build long-term relationships with their target customers. In this digital age where the internet has access to almost every home, customers use social media platforms to explore and find products regardless of their position in the world. With advances in technology and transportation, the world is becoming a global village with the ability to buy and sell products and services everywhere (Ratten & Thompson, 2021). The rapid development and expansion of online technology turn the internet into a severe asset for businesses to gain competitive advantages. The Internet has become a critical commercial infrastructure that helps marketers understand and meet the various needs of consumers. As a result, the Internet is now considered a cost-effective, efficient, and highly productive marketing platform. Marketing is more than just advertising (Liu-Thompkins, 2019).

The fundamental role of advertising as a marketing communication tool is to potentially inform consumers about the advertiser's products and provide the necessary information to compare them with competing products to create awareness of potential products. Consumers who are sufficiently interested in these products will ultimately purchase an advertised product (Yang et al., 2015). Advertising has become one of the most critical business activities in the modern competitive space. Companies spend a large portion of their budget on producing and executing advertising to share information about their company and products. Technologies are rapidly advancing and helping to renovate and constantly change distribution forms. Among those forms, advertising media are widely used. Advertising is useful for displaying the image of a product (Chukwu et al., 2019). Companies and organizations also widely use online advertising to promote their products and services. This is because online advertising can seize the opportunity to access their consumers through various online platforms to create awareness for their products to guide their future sales. Online advertising is a form of advertising that uses the internet and the World Wide Web to provide marketing messages to attract customers. Online advertising includes text ads on search engine results pages, banner ads, blogs, media ads, unique network ads, interstitial ads, classified online advertising, ad networks, and email marketing, including spam emails. Many of these types of advertising are provided by an advertising server (Busen et al., 2016). The rapid growth in online advertising revenues demonstrates the sustainability of internet advertising worldwide as an alternative to traditional media. Considering the development of online advertising, there is no doubt that the Internet is a powerful and suitable substitute for conventional media advertising. Online advertising is flexible and updates information, making it easier for companies to promote their products (Chaubey et al., 2013). Moreover, social media marketing campaigns have a notable effect on the retail sports product industry. Specifically, these marketing efforts sway consumers' perceptions of brands and alter their purchasing behaviors in measurable ways (Kiani et al.,

2023; Norouzi et al., 2021). Social platforms provide previously unmatched opportunities for brands to engage audiences, analyze data, target messaging, and measure performance (Mohammad Rezaee et al., 2023).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and YouTube connect millions of people in society daily. Therefore, social media provides businesses with an appropriate opportunity to communicate with their stakeholders, such as potential customers (Baena, 2016). In addition, companies' attention to professional sports as a tool for economic and commercial activity has increased in recent decades. As a result, companies have started using the social media of famous sports players and clubs to reach a wide range of customers (potential). Companies are willing to pay a lot for social media posts of players or clubs that contain advertising-related content (Jensen et al., 2015). Companies are eager to pay large amounts for social media posts by players or clubs containing promotional content. Football has a huge global fanbase in the sporting world, with over 4 billion fans worldwide. Football players enjoy tremendous popularity among fans. Fans form emotional connections and deep identities with star players in their favorite teams. Players become celebrities and icons that fans admire and imitate. A player's popularity stems from sporting achievements, skills, charisma, media presence, and perceived attractiveness. Superstar players like Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo each have over 500 million followers on social networks. Fans actively follow news and updates about star players and their lives on and off the field. This degree of loyalty and dedication carries immense commercial value for football players (Liu et al., 2021).

Brands recognize star players' ability to influence fans' attitudes, preferences, and buying behaviour regarding products they endorse. Digital marketing allows brands to leverage star player popularity through targeted online advertising campaigns. Brands sign endorsement deals with players to become brand ambassadors and feature them in online and social media advertising. Popularity shapes consumer behaviour (Hofmann et al., 2019). Therefore, this research aims to examine the impact of online advertising by football players on football fans' purchase intention with the mediating role of player popularity. Specifically, this study examines whether player advertising directly impacts purchase intention and whether this relationship is mediated by player popularity.

2. Theoretical background

This study focuses on three key variables - online advertising of football players, player popularity, and fans' purchase intention. The effectiveness of product advertisers in creating a successful brand image is one of the essential topics in marketing and consumer behaviour. According to Kotler et al. (2015), for the audience to receive the necessary message, advertisers must put some motivational force into the message. This motivational power is attractive. Every advertising attractiveness indicates the attractiveness that motivates consumer desires. Product advertisers are brand representatives who provide important symbols about the brand by presenting consumption experiences. Two main approaches can help product advertisers develop a desirable brand image: according to Rosen and Sanderson (2001), talent and distinctive brand image performance ensure, but Adler (2006) mentions popularity as an essential

criterion. In the context of sports marketing, professional athletes have become highly sought-after celebrity endorsers. Football players exert tremendous influence due to their extreme fame and adoration by fans worldwide. Their status as household names across global markets makes football players prime candidates to act as product advertisers (Šíma, 2021). Online advertising refers to promotional content featuring football players distributed via digital and social media platforms. This includes social media posts, online video ads, branded website content, and other digital marketing campaigns using player endorsements (Busen et al., 2016). Player popularity reflects the level of admiration, recognition, and celebrity status a player holds among fans. The popularity stems from sporting achievements, skills, attractiveness, media presence, and overall prominence in football culture (Hofmann et al., 2019). Purchase intention refers to the willingness and likelihood of fans to buy products endorsed by football players in online advertising. It is a key metric reflecting the persuasive impact of advertisements on consumption behaviour (Sallam et al., 2016). Drawing from source credibility theory, celebrities perceived as credible, attractive and influential can enhance the persuasiveness of advertisements, thus increasing purchase intentions (Hsieh & Li, 2020). Famous players admired by fans can capitalize on their fame and influence to boost perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness regarding endorsed products. Furthermore, identification with prominent players strengthens emotional bonds between fans and brands (Hofmann et al., 2019).

Despite the proliferation of digital marketing campaigns leveraging celebrity athlete endorsements, no studies have specifically examined the impact of football players' online advertising on fans' purchases. This research addresses this gap by investigating how professional football players' online promotions influence fans' buying behaviour for endorsed products, providing novel evidence of advertising effectiveness in the context of the world's most popular sport.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

- 1- Online advertising has an impact on football player popularity.
- 2- Football Player popularity impacts football fans' purchasing intentions.
- 3- Online advertising has an impact on football fans' purchasing intentions.
- 4- Online advertising impacts football fans' purchasing intentions with the mediating role of football player popularity.

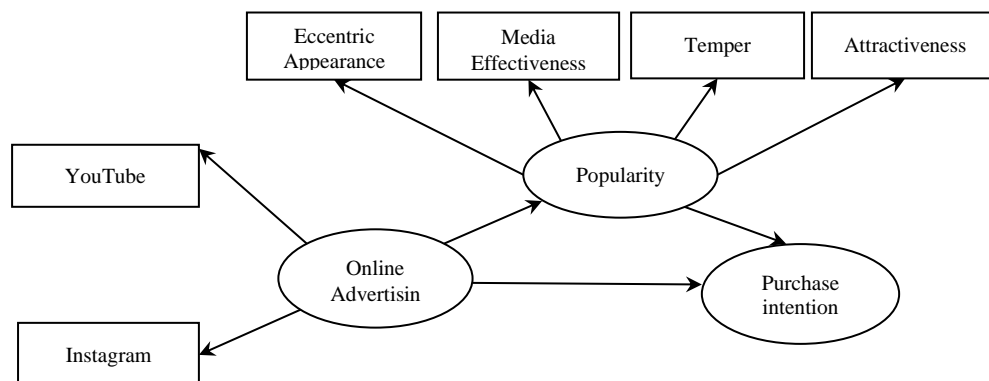


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Model.

3. Methodology

This study is classified as applied research based on its objectives. In terms of research method, it is categorized as descriptive survey research, and based on the data collection method, it is classified as a cross-sectional survey research. The statistical population of this study includes football fans in Iran. The target community has fans on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube. The sampling method in this study was non-probability convenience sampling. A four-part questionnaire was used to collect data: 4 questions on personal characteristics, nine on online advertising, 17 on football player popularity, and three on fans' intention to purchase online. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale for measurement. Questionnaires were distributed among individuals in a specific period, and those who received the questionnaire were requested to forward it to others if possible. The sample size was determined to be at least five times and up to 15 times the number of questions. Therefore, the minimum sample size for conducting the research was five times the number of observable variables (items of the questions), estimated to be approximately 200. This study used partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS 3.0) for data analysis. PLS-SEM is a statistical technique that allows the modelling of latent constructs under conditions of non-normality by estimating path models with latent variables. Cronbach's alpha confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire. Confirmatory factor analysis was used for construct validity, and CVI and CVR were used for face validity.

4. Results

Demographic information of the participants in this study was examined using three variables: gender, age, and education level. In this study, 71% of the participants were male and 29% were female. About 58% of the sample consisted of individuals under 30. About 64% of the total sample had a bachelor's degree.

Descriptive statistics based on the data collected from the research questionnaire, including mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values of the research variables, were reported in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Descriptive indices for research variables.

Variable	Variable Dimensions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Popularity	Attractiveness	3.20	0.97	1	5
	Temper	3.34	1.00	1	5
	Media Effectiveness	3.48	0.90	1	5
	Eccentric Appearance	3.27	0.97	1	5
Online Advertising	YouTube	3.52	0.91	1	5
	Instagram	3.30	0.95	1	5
Purchase intention	Purchase intention Fans	3.48	0.85	1	5

The results of data analysis were performed using software and are presented in [Figures 2](#) and [3](#). The t-value of the partial correlation coefficient was used to assess the significance of the relationships between the variables.

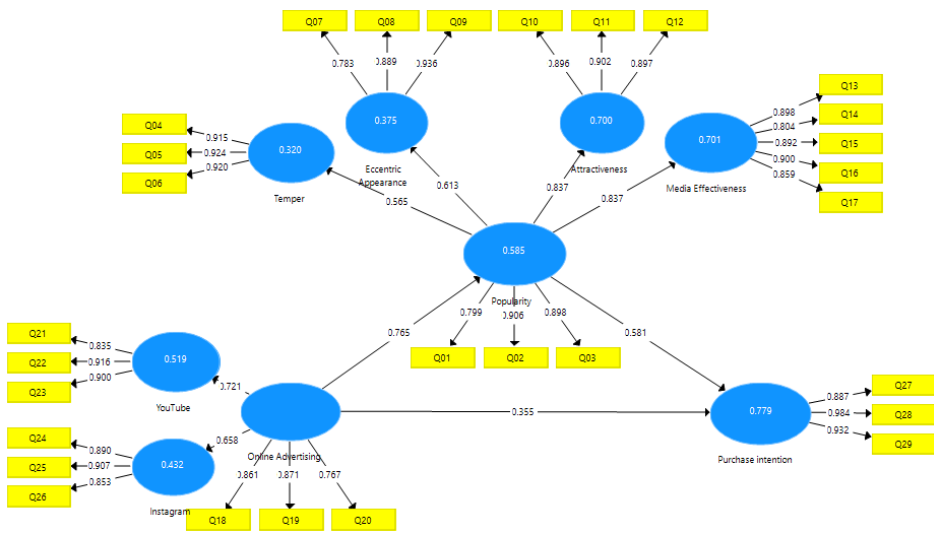


Figure 2. Path coefficients and factor loading of the variables.

In the PLS software, the t-value indicates the significance of the relationship between variables. The t-value is the main criterion for confirming or rejecting research hypotheses. If this value is more significant than 1.64, 1.96, and 2.58, the research hypotheses are confirmed at 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence levels. Values greater than 1.96 are significant at the 0.05 level, and values greater than 2.58 are marked at the 0.01 level.

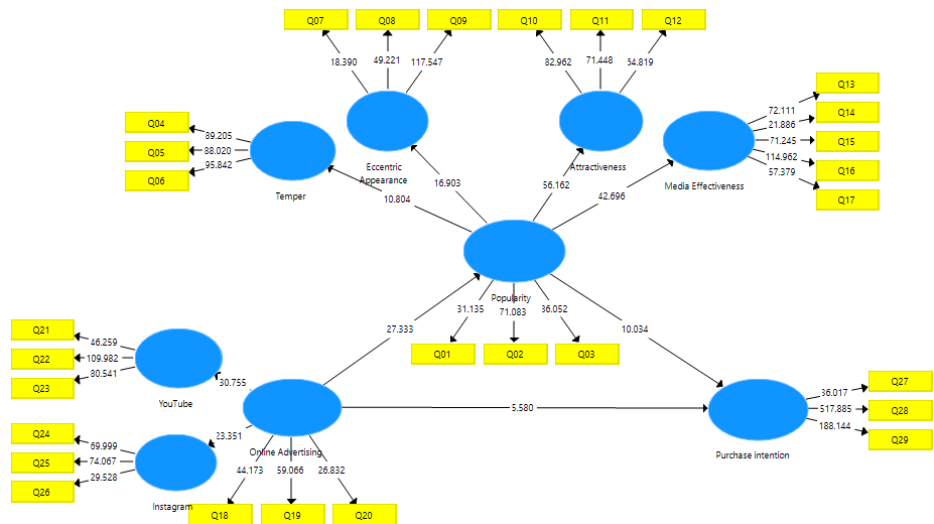


Figure 3. T-values for testing the significance of path coefficients and factor loadings.

The results of the composite reliability of each construct are reported in Table 2. Values greater than 0.70 for composite reliability are acceptable. As observed, all values are more

significant than 0.70, indicating that the composite reliabilities of the constructs are acceptable. The values of the extracted variance of the constructs are also reported in Table 2. Fornell and Larcker proposed this index. A value greater than 0.50 for this index indicates an appropriate validity of the measurement tools. As observed, the extracted variance values for all research variables are more significant than 0.50, meaning that the validity of the measurement tools is confirmed. The goodness-of-fit (GOF) index was used to evaluate the model's overall fit, which was equal to 0.781.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance of Research Variables.

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance	R2	GOF
Attractiveness	0.881	0.926	0.807	0.700	
Temper	0.909	0.906	0.846	0.320	
Media Effectiveness	0.920	0.940	0.759	0.701	
Eccentric Appearance	0.839	0.904	0.760	0.375	
Popularity	0.837	0.902	0.756	0.585	
YouTube	0.860	0.915	0.782	0.519	0.781
Instagram	0.859	0.914	0.780	0.432	
Online Advertising	0.780	0.872	0.696	-	
Purchase intention Fans	0.930	0.954	0.875	0.779	

Based on the results obtained in Figures 2, the present study's multiple determination coefficient (R-squared) is 0.780, considered acceptable for the model. According to the values of 0.190, 0.330, and 0.670, considered weak, moderate, and strong for this index, the obtained coefficient is acceptable for the designed model. This means that the independent variables have explained 78% of the variation in the dependent variable. Therefore, based on the results of composite reliability, extracted variance, R-squared, and goodness-of-fit index, it can be concluded that the model proposed in the path analysis is appropriate for the empirical-theoretical hypotheses and has a perfect fit. Table 3 shows the path coefficient, standard deviation, t-statistic value, and significance level associated with each path for the model of the effect of online advertising on football fans' purchase intention.

Table 3. Original Sample and T Statistic value.

Variables	Original Sample (O)	Standard Deviation	T Statistic	P Values
Online Advertising→ Instagram	0.658	0.027	24.56	0.001
Online Advertising→Popularity	0.765	0.028	27.07	0.001
Online Advertising→Purchase intention	0.355	0.061	5.81	0.001
Online Advertising→YouTube	0.421	0.023	31.98	0.001
Popularity→ Attractiveness	0.837	0.014	58.66	0.001
Popularity→ Eccentric Appearance	0.613	0.037	16.51	0.001
Popularity→ Media Effectiveness	0.837	0.020	42.57	0.001
Popularity→ Purchase intention	0.581	0.056	10.46	0.001
Popularity→ Temper	0.565	0.053	10.68	0.001

Based on the results in the table, the path coefficients of online advertising and player popularity are highly significant at the 0.05 level.

4.1. Variable testing

Following the data analysis algorithm, after examining the fit of the measurement models, the research variables are tested based on the path coefficient and the t-statistic, as well as the shapes 1 and 2 (path coefficients and factor loading of variables, significance of path coefficients and factor loadings). The path coefficient indicates the effect of one structure on another. Positive path coefficients indicate a direct relationship between variables, while negative path coefficients indicate an inverse relationship between variables. However, if the significance value of any of the paths is greater than 0.96, the corresponding path is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, and the variable is confirmed.

According to the study's findings, based on the significance of the path coefficients, the online advertising variable with a path coefficient of 0.355 and the player popularity variable with a path coefficient of 0.581 significantly impact the intention to purchase football fans. These paths are significant at the 0.05 level, and the path coefficients are in appropriate conditions, confirming the conceptual model designed.

It can be concluded that paying attention to these indicators is of great importance in implementing the model of the impact of online advertising on the intention to purchase football fans. Therefore, based on the study's findings, the model of the effects of online advertising on the intention to buy football fans is confirmed. Based on the results obtained from the combined reliability, extracted variance, model fit coefficient, and goodness-of-fit index in the path analysis, the model is consistent with suitable empirical and theoretical assumptions and has a good fit. Therefore, the model of the impact of online advertising on the intention to purchase football fans is confirmed.

4.2. Research hypotheses test results

This paper presents the results of hypothesis testing conducted to examine the impacts of online advertising on football player popularity and fans' intention to purchase. The following sections detail the outcome of four research hypotheses that were developed and tested using quantitative analysis.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Online advertising has an impact on football player popularity.

Based on the results in Table 3, the path coefficient of online advertising on player popularity is equal to 0.780, which is significant at the 0.05 level. Therefore, it can be concluded that online advertising has a positive and significant effect on player popularity, and hypothesis 1 of the research is confirmed.

- **Hypothesis 2:** Football Player popularity impacts the intention to purchase football fans.

Based on the results in Table 3, the path coefficient of player popularity on the intention to purchase football fans is equal to 0.581, which is significant at the 0.05 level. Therefore, it can be concluded that player popularity has a positive and significant effect on the intention to purchase football fans, and hypothesis 2 of the research is confirmed.

- **Hypothesis 3:** Online advertising impacts the intention to purchase football fans.

Based on the results in Table 3, the path coefficient of online advertising on the intention to purchase football fans is equal to 0.355, which is significant at the 0.05 level. Therefore, it can be concluded that online advertising has a small but statistically significant positive effect on the intention to purchase football fans, and hypothesis 3 of the research is confirmed.

- **Hypothesis 4:** Online advertising indirectly impacts the intention to purchase football fans through the mediating role of player popularity.

In this study, the VAF measure was used to determine the strength of the indirect effect through the mediating variable, which is a measure between 0 and 1 and indicates the more vital the value is towards 1, the stronger the indirect impact is, and it measures the proportion of indirect effects in the total effect. VAF is calculated using the formula (1), and the value of 0.556 was obtained in this study. This value indicates that more than 55% of the effects of online advertising on the intention to purchase football fans are explained indirectly through the mediating variable of player popularity. Therefore, hypothesis 4 of the research is confirmed based on the impact of online advertising on the intention to purchase football fans with the mediating role of player popularity.

$$VAF = \frac{a \times b}{(a \times b) + c} \quad (1)$$

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study examines the impact of online advertising of football players on football fans' purchase intention, with the mediating role of football players' popularity. This study makes significant theoretical contributions by demonstrating the persuasive impact of football players' online advertising on fans' purchase intentions, with player popularity acting as a critical mediator. The findings strongly support celebrity endorsement theory, as players with greater fame and public recognition showed enhanced advertising effectiveness and ability to sway buying behaviour. This reinforces source credibility models linking celebrities' perceived expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness to their endorsement influence (Hsieh & Li, 2020).

Online advertising has become essential for athletes and sports teams to build brands and connect with fans. The hypothesis "online advertising affects the popularity of football players" shows that by using social media platforms, targeted advertising campaigns, and other online marketing strategies, athletes can reach more audiences and increase their visibility in the public eye. Goldfarb (2014) states that online advertising can impact exposure. When fans see online advertisements featuring their favourite players, it can help strengthen their loyalty and interest in the player and even encourage them to purchase products or participate in games to show their support. Additionally, online advertising can help shape a sports player's public image and fame.

The hypothesis "the popularity of football players affects fans' purchasing intentions" shows that a player's popularity among fans can affect their intention to buy products or goods related to that player. In other words, fans may have a greater inclination to purchase items such as jerseys, hats, or other products that feature the name or image of a famous player. As Watanabe et al. (2016) suggest, there is a correlation between the popularity of

players and an increase in consumer interest in sports products. Furthermore, current research shows that not only star players, but all team members or roster members can help create consumer demand. In other words, the popularity of a team or roster can positively impact the sale of sports products, not just individual player popularity. This emotional connection that fans may feel with their favourite players is crucial for marketers and sports organizations in developing marketing and advertising strategies.

The hypothesis "online advertising affects football fans' purchasing intentions" shows that online advertising can influence the likelihood of sports fans buying products or goods related to their favourite football teams or football players. In other words, when fans are exposed to online advertisements for sports-related products, their inclination to buy may increase, and they may show support for their team or player. [Ayuningtyas and Sijabat \(2022\)](#) found that online advertising positively correlates with related purchase decisions. One of the critical advantages of online advertising is its ability to create awareness and interest in sports-related products among a wide range of fans. By using social media platforms, targeted advertising campaigns, and other online marketing strategies, sports teams and marketers can reach more audiences and increase the visibility of their products and goods ([Ratten & Thompson, 2021](#)). In addition to creating awareness and interest, online advertising can help foster fans' emotional connection with their teams and favorite players. By developing precise advertising and social media posts highlighting the emotional connection between fans and their teams or players, marketers can help create a more positive and meaningful relationship between fans and the products they advertise.

The hypothesis that "online advertising affects the purchasing intention of football fans with the mediating role of football players' popularity" suggests that the impact of online advertising on fans' purchasing intention is partly due to the popularity of players featured in the ads. In other words, when fans are exposed to online advertisements featuring famous players, they may be more inclined to purchase sports-related products or goods. As ([Maddock, 2018](#)) suggests, various factors influence consumer behaviour, and player popularity is a crucial driver of consumer behaviour when buying sports-related products and goods. When fans emotionally invest in a particular player, they may be more likely to purchase products or goods associated with that player to demonstrate their support and attachment to the player and their team. Therefore, players' popularity can mediate the relationship between online advertising and consumer behaviour.

For advertisers, these findings underscore the importance of partnering with football players who enjoy broad celebrity appeal and fame within the target fan community. Tapping into the most prominent, buzzworthy players will maximize advertising effectiveness. Campaigns can highlight achievements, skills, lifestyle, and other attributes contributing to a player's popularity.

This study concentrated on football, but subsequent research should investigate whether these findings extend to other sports and entertainment domains. The integrative model, which incorporates celebrity, social adaptation, and cognitive processing theories, establishes a robust foundation for scrutinizing the effects of celebrity endorsement in various contexts. Further investigations could delve into demographic and individual variances in fan responses to player advertisements. Factors like age, gender, playing experience, and fan loyalty may potentially influence susceptibility to celebrity

endorsements. Additionally, longitudinal designs could track how the evolving popularity of players and fan perceptions impact advertising effectiveness over time.

By offering more comprehensive theoretical integration and practical insights into celebrity athlete endorsement, this study significantly contributes to sports marketing literature. The implications of the findings are substantial for capitalizing on digital platforms and influential players in persuasive advertising campaigns aimed at maximizing fans' purchase intentions.

For football players contemplating online advertising, endorsing brands they genuinely use is advisable, enhancing their credibility exclusively. Players should also consider the alignment between the partner brand and their public persona when selecting collaborations. For instance, a religious player should refrain from promoting a brand that contradicts their beliefs. Lastly, players can actively share promotional content on their favoured social media pages to enhance visibility.

Similarly, it is recommended for sports brands to select famous players who inherently embody their brand. Engaging these players in creative online promotional activities, such as organizing competitions or producing compelling videos, can be beneficial. Ultimately, providing opportunities to showcase these players in their dedicated fan communities can amplify the effectiveness of advertisements.

Overall, online advertising showcasing football players and their products or services can impact fans' decision-making process, and player popularity can mediate this relationship. These findings suggest online advertising can increase sales and strengthen e-commerce, especially in football and sports marketing.

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تأثیر تبلیغات آنلاین بازیکنان فوتبال بر قصد خرید هواداران با نقش میانجی محبوبیت بازیکنان

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کلیدواژه

تبلیغات آنلاین
قصد خرید
محبوبیت
فوتبال
هواداران

نوع مقاله

پژوهشی اصیل

چکیده

هدف: تبلیغات آنلاین به ابزار مهمی برای تیم‌های ورزشی، بازیابان و خرده‌فروشان تبدیل شده است که به دنبال ارتباط با هواداران و افزایش فروش محصولات مرتبط با ورزش هستند. این پژوهش با هدف تأثیر تبلیغات آنلاین بازیکنان فوتبال بر قصد خرید هواداران با نقش میانجی محبوبیت بازیکنان صورت گرفته است.

روش: پژوهش حاضر از نظر هدف از جمله پژوهش‌های کاربردی، از نظر روش انجام پژوهش در طبقه‌بندی پژوهش‌های توصیفی و به لحاظ نحوه گردآوری داده‌ها جز پژوهش‌های پیمایشی-تحلیلی است. جامعه آماری این پژوهش شامل هواداران فوتبال در ایران بود. روش نمونه‌گیری در این پژوهش نمونه‌گیری غیراحتمالی در دسترس (۲۰۰ هوادار) بود. برای جمع‌آوری داده‌ها از پرسشنامه چهار بخشی استفاده شد، سپس از مدل سازی معادلات ساختاری حداقل مربعات جزئی (PLS 3.0) برای تجزیه و تحلیل داده‌ها استفاده شد.

یافته‌ها: نتایج تحقیق نشان داد که تبلیغات آنلاین بر محبوبیت بازیکنان تأثیرگذار است. از سوی دیگر محبوبیت بازیکنان و تبلیغات آنلاین بر قصد خرید آنها تأثیر دارد. در نهایت، فرضیه، تبلیغات آنلاین بر قصد خرید هواداران با نقش میانجی محبوبیت بازیکنان تأثیر دارد، تایید شد.

اصالت و ابتکار مقاله: در این پژوهش نقش میانجی محبوبیت بازیکنان فوتبال بر قصد خرید هواداران مورد ارزشیابی قرار گرفت.

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