



The Effect of Core Product Quality on Organizational Performance Considering the Mediating Role of Fan Satisfaction (Case study: Persepolis and Esteghlal Football Club)

Mehdi Pourhossein¹, Ebrahim Alidoust Ghahfarokhi^{2*}, Mehrzad Hamidi³, Khadijeh Pourzabih Sarahamami⁴

¹ PhD Student of Sport Management, Faculty of Sport Sciences, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Mazandaran, Iran.

² Professor, Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Sports Sciences and Health, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran.

³ Associate Professor, Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Sports Sciences and Health, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran.

⁴ PhD of Sport Management, Faculty of Sport Sciences, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Mazandaran, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Establishing an equilibrium between financial performance and sporting performance is one of the most critical concerns of current managers in professional football clubs. This study aimed to develop a model to investigate the effect of a core product quality on financial and sporting performance considering the mediating role of fan satisfaction in the two most popular clubs in Iran (Persepolis and Esteghlal).

Methodology: The data was collected using the questionnaire survey and purposive and available sampling method. The statistical population of the study included all managers, experts, elites, and individuals who had sufficient knowledge and information (like club veterans) concerning the two most popular football clubs in Iran (Persepolis and Esteghlal). The data from 175 questionnaires was analyzed through the Structural Equation Modelling technique under the Partial Least Squares approach using PLS innovative software.

Findings: The results demonstrated that there was a positive and significant relationship between the core product quality and organizational (financial and sporting) performance. Also, the mediating effect of fan satisfaction in the relationship between core product quality and organizational performance was confirmed.

Originality: The model, provided as an effective tool, can help club managers analyze and choose the best club development strategies to equilibrate the financial and sporting performance of the club to more confidently achieve the organizational goals. The importance of these findings is that the application of appropriate mixed policies from fan satisfaction and core product quality will have a significant impact on improving organizational performance.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have increasingly focused on management models of sports teams. Several management and economics researchers believe that professional sports, such as football, have unique characteristics (Larson & Sinha, 1995; Vogel, 2020). Professional clubs' management should deal with the production process in clubs as well as production companies' management. In other words, their primary role is to make optimal decisions to convert inputs (facilities, players, coaches, etc.) into outputs (financial and sporting output) (Rohde & Breuer, 2018). One of the main concerns of sports club managers is the best organizational (club) performance. Organizational performance (OP) is one of the most important concepts discussed in management theories and it is undoubtedly the most critical measurement criterion of success in organizations (Baruch & Ramalho, 2006; March & Sutton, 1997; Walton & Dawson, 2001).

In the management literature, researchers have used different concepts to measure organizational performance (OP). Some studies have used subjective measures to evaluate OP such as employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, employee commitment, and other mental aspects. Other studies employed a variety of objective measures to assess OP, such as financial and market indicators (Chen & Huang, 2009; Harris & Mossholder, 1996). So, there is no standard theory about OP, and researchers have proposed different definitions according to the organization's goals and methods of success (Rojas, 2003; Winand et al., 2014).

In the context of football club management, the two convergent and divergent interests were defined by (Lago et al., 2004). Convergent interests aim to improve sporting performance, and divergent interests seek to improve economic performance (Lago et al., 2004). Sporting performance includes the game results and the club rankings, which are more visible than other evaluation indicators, and these results are examined according to the pre-determined goals and based on the available resources and facilities in clubs. Non-sporting performance in clubs also includes more financial indicators, which are important in clubs' evaluation. Sports teams are trying to balance these two interests (Lago et al., 2004). El-Hodiri and Quirk (1971) investigated team owners' behavior and provided a decision model to trade off between winnings and profits. Rascher (1997) also defined utility as a balance between profit and winning. He analyzed policies such as revenue sharing and salary caps under two profit and utility maximization models. Maximizing a combination of profits and wins has been suggested to clubs' managers as the best decision criterion (Vrooman, 2000). Also, a higher level of financial and sporting performance has been considered in European football clubs (Rohde & Breuer, 2018). Real Madrid football club, for example, is based on the two goals of financial success and sporting success, and the club's strategy focuses on these goals (Callejo & Forcadell, 2006). In the study conducted by Callejo and Forcadell (2006), the brand value of the Real Madrid football club was improved through the design and implementation of a new marketing strategy. They concluded that the critical rule of the club's success was equilibrating between sports performance and financial performance (Callejo & Forcadell, 2006). For this reason, essential to investigate the role of influential factors affecting organizational performance.

Many factors have been identified in the literature to enhance OP. Senior executives increasingly emphasized that product quality is associated with OP (Cho & Pucik, 2005) and is one of the most important factors influencing its success. Improving product quality to create a competitive advantage and enhance OP is undeniable (Lakhal, 2009; Lakhal et al., 2006).

In the context of spectator sport, the concept of service quality is standard. Service quality has a multidimensional nature, and has been proposed by various conceptualizations in the literature (Biscaia et al., 2023). Two of the most critical service quality dimensions are core product quality (CPQ) and functional quality (Theodorakis et al., 2013). Peripheral elements of service quality, such as the facility/stadium environment and the employees' quality, are introduced as functional quality (Theodorakis et al., 2013), and core product quality refers to the attributes that the consumers receive and remain for them after the production-consumption process (Theodorakis et al., 2013). Examples of attributes can be player performance and game performance. CPQ occurring at the game level is an uncontrollable variable and has created unique challenges for marketing researchers (Foroughi et al., 2016). The focus of this study is to help achieve a deep understanding of core product quality.

Another factor that plays a vital role in OP is customer satisfaction (Otto et al., 2020). One of the most important achievements of companies, especially service companies, is to cover customer satisfaction (Cronin, Jr & Taylor, 1992). This goal is also true in sports fields. Fan satisfaction is an important element in sports organizations (Sarstedt et al., 2014). Professional sports clubs form new business models based on the satisfaction and commitment of fans or spectators (Rodriguez-Pomeda et al., 2017). Customer satisfaction brings long-term benefits to clubs (Anderson et al., 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006). Customers recognize the outstanding services provided to them understand the value of services and increase their satisfaction with the service quality increase, then, they will exhibit loyal behaviors such as continuing shopping and increasing referrals. These behaviors increase the market share, revenue, and ultimately, the profitability of the service company (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Otto et al., 2020; Williams & Naumann, 2011). It can be inferred from previous research that service quality, customer satisfaction, and OP are the three main effective dimensions in football club management. In response to achieving the desired OP, club managers are required to have more focus on the issues of service quality and customer satisfaction. Managing such a complex system with such special features requires appropriate tools. Eventually, the following results have been extracted in the literature related to organizational performance (club performance):

- 1- Sporting performance and financial performance are the two main goals of private professional clubs
- 2- The two main variables affecting the OP include product quality and customer satisfaction
- 3- The most important strategies of club managers are equilibrating and benefiting from a combination of sports and financial success.

The existence of appropriate tools and methods to make optimal decisions in the field of sports management is necessary. In this research, we intended to provide a tool to equilibrate between sporting and financial performance in professional football club

management. For this reason, the role of customer satisfaction and service quality in the development and improvement of organizational (sporting and financial) performance was analyzed. This study aimed to develop a model to empirically assess the relationship between Core Product Quality (CPQ) and Financial, and between Core Product Quality and Sporting performance through the mediation of Fan satisfaction in the two most popular clubs in Iran (Persepolis and Esteghlal).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Core product quality

The sport service quality has frequently been described in the literature. In sport marketing theory, service quality is differently defined as a multi-dimensional construct in the field of spectator sport, it is generally introduced in two core product quality and functional forms (Clemes et al., 2011; Grönroos, 1984; Jae Ko et al., 2011; Milne & McDonald, 1999; Yoshida & James, 2010). Core product quality refers to the attributes that the consumers receive and retain after the production-consumption process (Foroughi et al., 2016; Theodorakis et al., 2013). It is evaluated during the spectators' interactions and sports competitions, which includes the performance of athletes or teams (Yoshida, 2017). There are different attributes in the literature for Core Product Quality. It has been conceptualized in terms of Player performance (Yoshida & James, 2010), Game performance (Ho Kim et al., 2013), Team characteristics (Foroughi et al., 2016), Game quality (Foroughi et al., 2014), Opponent characteristics (Yoshida & James, 2010), Home team (Byon et al., 2013), and Outcome quality (Theodorakis et al., 2013). Also elsewhere, match day entertainment and social environment were introduced as Core Product Quality (Yoshida & James, 2010).

Functional quality contains variables related to the facility/stadium environment, the supporting services, and the employees' quality (MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996; Yoshida & James, 2010). In the present study, due to Covid 19 Pandemic, the spectators were banned from attending the stadium, so it was not possible to examine and evaluate the functional quality. Therefore, the main focus of this research was on Core Product Quality. Four dimensions to measure Core Product Quality were considered: a) Game quality (competitiveness of the game). b) Result quality (win, lose, or equal). c) Player performance (players' on-field performance) and d) Coach Performance.

2.2. Customer (Fan) satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is defined as a pleasurable fulfillment response towards a good service, benefit, or reward (Palmatier et al., 2006). Consumer satisfaction is generally built in the degree of discrepancy between actual and expected quality (Anderson et al., 1994; Oliver, 1999). Many factors in the field of football club management have significant effects on customer satisfaction. Gustafsson and Johnson (2004) suggested that fan satisfaction can be evaluated through the leisure experience provided by club managers. According to Oliver, to judge whether a service is satisfactory, people should experience

it, but there is no such requirement for judging service quality (James & Ross, 2004; Oly Ndubisi & Kok Wah, 2005). Club managers can excel by understanding what sports customers expect and committing to the work assigned to them. Some researchers used a multi-dimensional conception with a multi-attribute framework for constructing fan satisfaction (Ringle et al., 2011; Woodruff et al., 1983). In some studies, the role of factors such as the stadium layout, functionality, and aesthetics was investigated (Ringle et al., 2011; Woodruff et al., 1983). Other studies evaluated the role of team characteristics, such as the number of star players (Baade & Tiehen, 1990; Schofield, 1983) or the team's success (Bravold et al., 1997). Rival characteristics were also considered (Madrigal, 1995; Wall & Myers, 1989).

In this paper, three dimensions were proposed to measure fan satisfaction: Game Satisfaction, Management satisfaction, and team specifications/characteristics. The secondary features of leisure experience were defined in team characteristics, for example, the number of star players (Baade & Tiehen, 1990; Schofield, 1983), the interaction and commitment between players and fans (Jae Ko et al., 2011) and between players and coaches (Kwon et al., 2005), and also, the team composition quality and public appearances of the players (Sarstedt et al., 2014). Satisfaction with the club management is related to the club management and the board duties, which include: marketing of the club, financial situation of the club, club public relations, selection of sponsors, and transfer policies of the club (Sarstedt et al., 2014). Fan satisfaction with the game experience associated with sports competition on the field was defined as game satisfaction (Yoshida & James, 2010).

2.3. Organizational Performance

Different definitions of organizational performance were provided by the authors (Ramayah et al., 2011). In this research, the club 'performances were introduced in two forms: sporting performance and financial performance (Callejo & Forcadell, 2006; Ruta et al., 2020).

2.3.1. Sporting performance

Sporting performance depends on the type and level of competition under study or research goals for instance, Goddard (2005) examined sporting performance in two forms: goals-based and results-based models (Goddard, 2005). The variables he uses are 'goals scored', 'goals conceded', and 'results'. If scrutinizing or evaluating the team's performance in the open league, the ranking or points obtained in the league will be an appropriate variable. Also in other research, variables such as the 'percentage of victories' (Boulier & Stekler, 2003; Dawson et al., 2000), 'number of goals scored by match' (Palacios-Huerta, 2004), and 'score/goal difference' (Boulier & Stekler, 2003; Palacios-Huerta, 2004) have been considered as sporting performance. One of the most critical indicators in evaluating the sporting performance is fans' participation and support, which in the literature is attendance in the stadium, the number of spectators watching the team's matches, or watching live team competitions through TV and social media (Hamidi et al., 2011). The attendance, active support, and participation of fans are directly related to

customer loyalty. In spectator sports, Cronin et al. (2000) and Yoshida and James (2010) have introduced a three-dimensional to measure the customer loyalty structure: attend the team's future games, recommend the team's games, and remain loyal to the team (Cronin et al., 2000; Yoshida & James, 2010). In this study, the dimensions considered for the construct of sporting performance include Fan support and efficiency. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance is banned in stadiums, and being persistent to follow for watching live matches through the mass media has been devoted as an indicator to assessing sporting performance. Efficiency, another indicator, is also defined as the team position compared to rivals, goal difference, points scored, and the average of goals scored by the team.

2.3.2. *Financial performance*

Because of the increase in sports costs and intense competitions for attracting sports capital (such as players, coaches, and stadium facilities) and gaining higher rankings in competitions, clubs are seeking to maximize revenue from available facilities (James & Ross, 2004). From the economic point of view, the objective of soccer teams is the maximization of their profit (revenues-costs). Based on this András and Havran (2015), the essential incomes of professional football clubs can include incomes associated with match day, revenues on player transfers, revenues related to broadcasting rights, and incomes earned through commercial rights including sponsorship revenues and merchandising revenues (András & Havran, 2015). Revenues in the European football industry are defined in three main areas (Dima, 2015): Broadcasting rights (earned money due to broadcast competitions), Commercial revenue (including sponsorships and revenues related to other services) and Matchday income (revenue from ticket sales).

By examining the income ways of Iranian football clubs, it was found that no broadcasting rights have yet been set for the clubs (Aghajani & Javani, 2021; Khajeheian & Sedighi, 2018; Torabi et al., 2015). Indeed, Iranian television and radio are exclusively under the control of the government (Aghajani & Javani, 2021). In this situation, and the absence of private companies, the broadcasting fee for clubs is denied by the government (Khajeheian & Sedighi, 2018). On the other hand, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of spectators in the stadiums caused clubs to lose another primary revenue, which includes "match day income", so, this parameter is not measurable (Aghajani & Javani, 2021; Parnell et al., 2022).

According to the explanations mentioned above, in this research, two dimensions were defined for the construct of financial performance: commercial income and fan income. Commercial income was identified by revenue indicators derived from main sponsorships, sub-sponsorships, and the transfer market. Fans' income was introduced with gifts and free donations from fans, membership fees, and merchandising revenues.

2.4. *Core product quality and organizational performance*

Some studies confirmed that service quality is one of the essential variables in achieving competitive advantage, which has roots in organizational performance (Cho & Pucik, 2005; Ramayah et al., 2011). Various studies have discovered a positive and significant

relationship between service quality and OP (Cho & Pucik, 2005; Ramayah et al., 2011; Yee et al., 2010). The positive impact of quality on an organization's market share has been confirmed in many studies (Buzzell & Wiersema, 1981; Larson & Sinha, 1995; Mann & Kehoe, 1994; Rayner & Porter, 1991). It is also expected to enhance financial performance through quality (Adam, 1994; Hendricks & Singhal, 2001; Lakhali, 2009). Kaynak (2003) analyzed that TQM led to organizational quality performance and was significantly connected to financial and non-financial performance (Kaynak, 2003; Singh et al., 2018). Also, Coo and Verma (2002) emphasized the necessity of understanding the role of product quality on financial performance (Coo & Verma, 2002). Therefore, it can be assumed that there is probably a positive relationship between Core Product Quality and organizational performance, and the following hypotheses were posited:

- **H1a:** Core Product Quality is positively related to financial performance.
- **H1b:** Core Product Quality is positively related to sporting performance.

2.5. The mediating role of Fan satisfaction on the relationship between Core Product Quality and OP

Recent research has indicated that not only is there a direct relationship between product quality and OP, but there is also an indirect relationship (Chong & Rundus, 2004; Hendricks & Singhal, 2001). In the literature, the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction was repeatedly examined, and the relationship was confirmed (Cronin, Jr & Taylor, 1992; Theodorakis et al., 2013). Product quality is one of the main reasons for increasing the customer satisfaction level (Larson & Sinha, 1995; Rayner & Porter, 1991). The extent to which a product or service meets the customers' needs and expectations refers to customer perception, called quality (Waldman & Gopalakrishnan, 1996). Researchers claim that quality (understanding of customers' needs) directly affects customers' satisfaction levels (Chong & Rundus, 2004; Johnson & Gustafsson, 2000). In the spectator sports literature, a significant and striking effect of CPQ on spectators' overall satisfaction was confirmed (Biscaia et al., 2023). According to the conditions of the studies, different dimensions were introduced to measure the conceptualization of outcome quality (Brady et al., 2006; Greenwell et al., 2002; Tsuji et al., 2007). Brady et al. (2006); Tsuji et al. (2007), claimed that, for instance, the level of satisfaction was influenced by game-related factors. Based on the cases mentioned, service quality's positive and direct role in fan satisfaction was evident.

Customer satisfaction is introduced as an organizational asset that is related to the efficient and effective use of organizational resources and increases OP (Otto et al., 2020). Extensive studies explored the relationship between customer satisfaction and the financial performance of companies or organizations. The results showed that a higher level of customer satisfaction is likely to positively affect the firm's financial performance and marketing performance outcomes (Anderson et al., 1994; Ittner & Larcker, 1998; Otto et al., 2020). In the model proposed by Chi and Gursoy (2009), customer satisfaction resulting from product quality led to better financial performance (Chi & Gursoy, 2009). In other words, customer satisfaction does have a direct and tangible financial benefit for firms (Fornell et al., 2016; Kumar, 2016). Fan satisfaction in the sports club is considered

a strong incentive for the capital return (Raithel et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2014). (Football) fan satisfaction seems to play a mediating role in the relationship between quality and financial performance, so the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2a: Fans' satisfaction mediates the relationship between core product quality and financial performance.

In reviewing service quality models in the literature, the relationships between service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty were reported (Biscaia et al., 2023; Calabuig Moreno et al., 2015; Theodorakis et al., 2013; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996; Yoshida & James, 2010). The positive and strong relationship between customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions was confirmed in recent studies (Biscaia et al., 2023; Williams & Naumann, 2011). In a study conducted by Wakefield and Blodgett (1996), after assessing the type of relationship between perceiving customer service quality, customer satisfaction, and repurchase intentions, they investigated that customer satisfaction was a predictor of repeat patronage (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). The repurchase intentions can predict Actual loyalty behavior (Bolton, 1998; Mittal et al., 1999). CPQ directly affects satisfaction and indirectly influences customer loyalty (Biscaia et al., 2023). In other words, satisfaction mediates the relationship between core and peripheral service quality and customer loyalty (Brady et al., 2006; Tsuji et al., 2007; Yoshida & James, 2010). Researchers have shown that high attendance is directly related to loyalty or behavioral intentions in sports clubs. If the spectators are satisfied with the team quality, they are more likely to participate in team-related games in the future (Anderson et al., 1994; Williams & Naumann, 2011). In the current study, fan support (customer loyalty) and efficiency dimensions were devoted to measuring the sporting performance construct. Based on findings in the literature, we intended to investigate the mediating role of fan satisfaction through CPQ on sporting performance. So, the hypothesis was set as follows:

H2b: Fan' satisfaction mediates the relationship between core product quality and sporting performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

The study's statistical population included all managers, experts, elites, and people with sufficient knowledge and information (like club veterans) concerning the two most popular football clubs in Iran (Persepolis and Esteghlal Club). Purposive and available sampling methods were used, and the questionnaires were distributed online. Sixty incomplete cases were removed, and 175 valid questionnaires were finally applied for data analysis. the questionnaire used five-point Likert-scale for responses-rate (5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree). Demographic variables included Gender, Age, Education, Job experience, Occupation situation, and Team expert shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of demographics variables.

Profile respondents		
Category	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	140	80
Female	35	20
Age		
Less than 30	34	19.4
30 to 50	133	76
Above 50	8	4.6
Education		
Associate Degree and below	10	5.7
Bachelor	35	20
MS/MA	45	25.7
PhD student	17	9.7
assistant professor and above	68	38.9
Job experience		
Less than 2	16	9.1
2 to 6	27	15.4
Above 6	132	75.5
Occupation situation		
Sport expert	23	13.1
Football expert	65	37.1
Veteran	18	10.3
Football researcher/ Master	58	33.1
Club member	11	6.3
Team expert		
Persepolis	111	63.4
Esteghlal	64	36.6

3.2. Measurement variables

A questionnaire based on the literature was prepared (see Appendix A). Likert-type scales ranging from 1 to 5 were applied for response items. First, it was tried to translate English items into Persian items; then, to understand and remove the ambiguity of the questions, a precise and regular process was used to keep the validity of the questionnaire. The variables, dimensions, and references are shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Variables, dimensions, and references.

Variable	Dimension	Item	Reference
Core product quality	Game quality	4	(Clemes et al., 2011; Theodorakis et al., 2013; Yoshida & James, 2010)
	Result quality	3	(Theodorakis et al., 2013; Yoshida & James, 2010)
	Player performance	7	(Theodorakis et al., 2013; Yoshida & James, 2010)
Fan satisfaction	Coach performance	6	(Chen, 2003; MacLean & Zakrajsek, 1996; MacLean & Chelladurai, 1995)
	Game satisfaction	3	(Foroughi et al., 2014; Theodorakis et al., 2013; Yoshida & James, 2010)
	Management satisfaction	7	(Sarstedt et al., 2014)
Financial performance	Team specification	5	(Sarstedt et al., 2014)
	Commercial income	5	(Ajadi et al., 2020; Callejo & Forcadell, 2006; Jones & Bridge, 2017)
	Fan income	3	(Ajadi et al., 2020; Hudson, 2012; Jones & Bridge, 2017)

Variable	Dimension	Item	Reference
Sporting performance	Fan support	3	(Alexandris et al., 2001; András, 2003; Bloemer et al., 1999; Theodorakis et al., 2013)
	Efficiency	4	(Barajas et al., 2005)

3.3. Statistical analysis

The PLS-SEM approach (Gefen et al., 2000; Hair et al., 2012) and Smart PLS version 3 software (Hair et al., 2022) were applied to analyze, evaluate and estimate the model. The advantages of using this software are its suitability for determining the relationship between variables and structural indicators (Hair et al., 2012; Hayes et al., 2017), the effective identification of the relationship between construct variables, and the lack of the need for the normality of the data distribution (Rajabi et al., 2023). In the present study, the sample size of 175 was relatively small. Reflective-reflective constructs with higher-order constructs were also used in our model.

4. Results

Two approaches, the evaluation of the measurement model and the testing of the structural model, were used to analyze software output data. A bootstrapping approach was also used to test the mediation.

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

4.1.1. Convergent validity

Four criteria are used to evaluate the measurement model (convergent validity) in this study (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2022):

- 1- Factor/outer loading assessment: The threshold value for the outer loading is at least 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022).
- 2- Cronbach's alpha: Acceptable values for Cronbach's alpha are 0.70 (Hair et al., 2012).
- 3- Composite validity: In structural reliability, acceptable values are between 0.60 and 0.70, and values between 0.70 and 0.95 are considered generally good (Gefen et al., 2000; Hair et al., 2012).
- 4- Average Variance Extracted (AVE): AVE is obtained from the mean squared loading of each indicator for the construct. Its threshold value is at least 0.5 (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 3 summarizes the criteria values. The test results in Table 4 show that, in general, the construct expresses appropriate reliability levels.

Table 3. Summary results for convergent validity.

Construct	Indicators	Loadings	Construct	Indicators	Loadings
Game quality			Game satisfaction		
	GQ1	0.74		GS1	0.87
	GQ2	0.83		GS2	0.89
	GQ3	0.67		GS3	0.77
	GQ4	0.81	Management satisfaction		
Result quality				MS1	0.68
	RQ1	0.83		MS2	0.79
	RQ2	0.76		MS3	0.68
	RQ3	0.85		MS4	0.78
Player performance				MS5	0.75
	PP1	0.65		MS6	0.74
	PP2	0.81		MS7	0.70
	PP3	0.83	Commercial income		
	PP4	0.70		GI1	0.72
	PP5	0.71		GI2	0.73
	PP6	0.75		GI3	0.62
	PP7	0.63		GI4	0.82
Coach performance				GI5	0.78
	CP1	0.69	Fan income		
	CP2	0.78		FI1	0.84
	CP3	0.70		FI2	0.80
	CP4	0.77		FI3	0.72
	CP5	0.73	Fan support		
	CP6	0.71		FS1	0.81
Team specification				FS2	0.81
	TS1	0.70		FS3	0.84
	TS2	0.72	Efficiency		
	TS3	0.78		E1	0.76
	TS4	0.77		E2	0.80
	TS5	0.80		E3	0.75
				E4	0.66

Table 4. Summary results for convergent validity.

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Composite reliability
Game quality	0.772	0.595	0.854
Result quality	0.758	0.673	0.86
Player performance	0.855	0.537	0.889
Coach performance	0.83	0.542	0.876
Game satisfaction	0.804	0.719	0.884
Management satisfaction	0.858	0.542	0.892
Team specification	0.815	0.575	0.871
Commercial income	0.79	0.545	0.856
Fan income	0.702	0.628	0.834
Fan support	0.769	0.684	0.866
Efficiency	0.74	0.563	0.837

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	Composite reliability
Core product quality	0.921	0.68	0.93
Fan satisfaction	0.90	0.69	0.919
Financial performance	0.849	0.83	0.884
Sporting performance	0.80	0.74	0.858

4.1.2. Discriminant validity

The Heterotrait-monotrait ratio of the correlations (HTMT) method was used to measure discriminant validity. The HTMT value should be less than 0.9 (Hair et al., 2022). Latent variable or construct ratios less than 0.9 indicate that the constructs are different (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) analysis.

HTMT	Core product quality	Fan satisfaction	Financial performance	Sporting performance
Fan satisfaction	0.3	*		
Financial performance	0.636	0.71	*	
Sporting performance	0.81	0.72	*	*

4.2. Structural Model Assessment

Four-step approach to structural model measurement was introduced: (1) structural model path coefficients, (2) coefficient of determination (R² value), (3) effect size f², and (4) predictive relevance Q² and blindfolding. Each step is described below:

4.2.1. Path coefficients and significance of the structural model

Each standardized beta coefficient in the ordinary least squares regression indicates the path coefficient in the PLS structural model. Recognizing the sign, magnitude, and significance when assessing the estimated values of path relationships in the structural model is critical. The positive path coefficient indicates the positive effects of one variable on another. To test the significance of the hypotheses, the bootstrap test was used, and a partial index of t-value was used. The t-values in our model are shown in Table 6. To confirm the hypotheses, t-values needed to be greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96. Values between the two indicate a lack of significance. After evaluating the hypotheses, results indicated that CPQ had a positive and significant impact on financial performance ($\beta = 0.203$; $t = 2.23$; $p < 0.05$). Also, a positive and significant effect of CPQ on sporting performance was confirmed ($\beta = 0.524$; $t = 6.84$; $p < 0.001$). However, the direct impact of CPQ on sporting performance was more substantial than its effect on financial performance.

4.2.2. Coefficient of determination (R² value)

Coefficients of determination are the main criteria for evaluating endogenous latent variables in the confirmation path model. The values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 for the

endogenous latent variables have been described as significant, moderate, and weak, respectively (Chin, 1998).

4.2.3. Effect size f^2

The effect size (f^2) is used to evaluate how the endogenous structure is described by the exogenous structure. Chen 1998 defined three ranges for the f^2 : $0.02 < f^2 < 0.15$ for the weak range, $0.15 < f^2 < 0.35$ for the moderately weak range, and $f^2 > 0.35$ for the substantial effect range (Chin, 1998).

4.2.4. Predictive relevance (Q^2) and blindfolding

This criterion was introduced by Geisser (1975); Stone (2018), who determined the predictive power of the model in dependent variables (Geisser, 1975; Stone, 2018). Henseler et al. (2009) set the model's predictive power values for endogenous structures at three values: 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 (Henseler et al., 2009).

For creating standard error and t-values, a resampling bootstrap method with 5000 was used (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2012). The sign and magnitude of path coefficients were also used to evaluate structural path relationships between the latent variables. Table 6 summarizes the results, as Figure 1 shows.

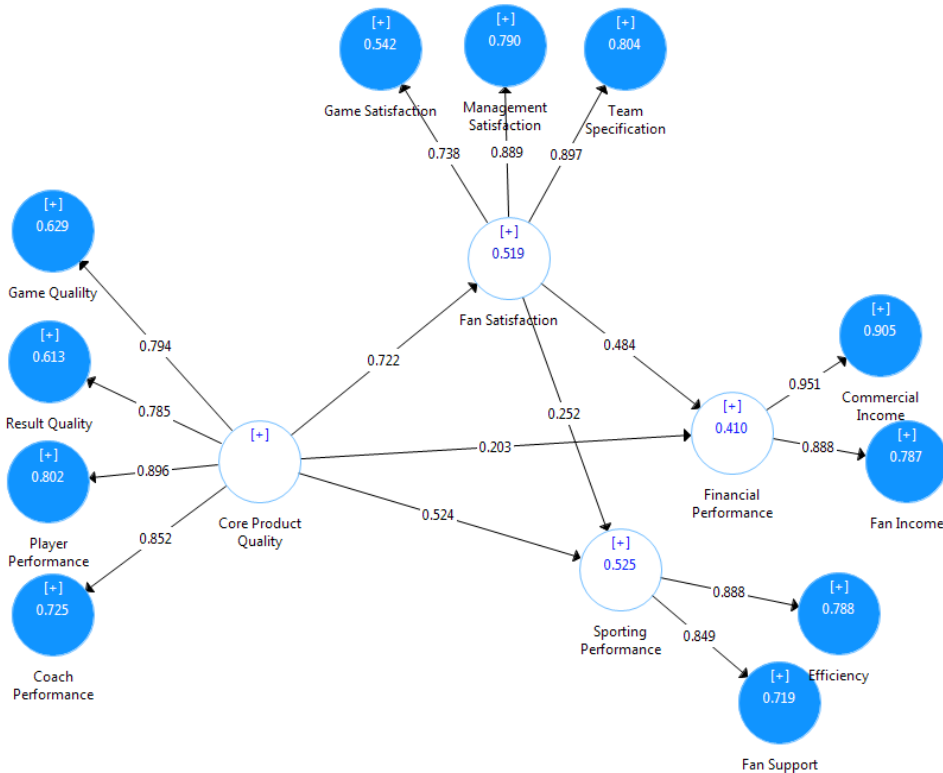


Figure 1. Structural model.

Table 6. Significant testing results of the structural model path coefficients.

Structural path	Path coefficient	t-value	Effect size (f2)	97.5 Confidence interval	Conclusion
CPQ-> FS	0.722	19.82	1.09	(0.64,0.78)	
CPQ->FP	0.203	2.23	0.034	(0.01,0.37)	H1a supported
CPQ->SP	0.524	6.83	0.28	(0.36,0.66)	H1b supported
FS->FP	0.484	5.73	0.192	(0.31,0.65)	
FS->SP	0.252	3.07	0.065	(0.1,0.41)	

4.3. Test of mediation by bootstrapping approach

4.3.1. Significance of the mediating effect

The non-parametric bootstrapping method investigates the mediating effects of satisfaction in the relationship between quality and performance (Hair et al., 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The significance of mediator influence means that fan satisfaction absorbs part of the direct effect of quality on OP. All the results are shown in Table 7 to investigate the significance of the mediator. Examination of the bootstrapping approach exhibits that both indirect effects are significant. Significant analysis of the path of quality -> satisfaction -> financial performance is $\beta = 0.184$, t value = 6.186 and Significant analysis of the path of quality -> satisfaction -> sporting performance is $\beta = 0.184$, t value = 6.186.7

4.3.2. Size of the mediating effect

Both direct and indirect effects are significant. To supplement the non-parametric bootstrapping method, the indirect effect size about the sum of the direct and indirect effects (total effect) was determined by variance account for (VAF) (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2013). The VAF analysis determines the intensity of the mediating effect. This analysis showed a complete mediation for more than 80%, indicating partial mediation for more than 20% and less than 80%, and finally, it assumes no mediation for less than 20%. Table 7 shows VAF results. The results show that the mediating effect of fans' satisfaction on financial performance is average (vaf=63%). Also, the size of the mediating effect of fans' satisfaction on sporting performance is partial (vaf=25%). Also, it means that the mediating role of fans' satisfaction in the relationship between CPQ and financial performance was more prominent and striking than in the relationship between CPQ and sporting performance.

Table 7. Test of mediation by bootstrapping approach.

Effect of	Direct effect (t-value)	Indirect effect (t-value)	Total effect	VAF (%)	Interpretation	Conclusion
CPQ->FS->FP	0.203** (2.23)	0.35*** (5.18)	0.553	63	Partial mediation	H2a supported
CPQ->FA->SP	0.524*** (6.83)	0.182** (2.95)	0.706	25	Partial mediation	H2b supported

Note: ** |t| >= 1.96 at p=0.05 level; *** |t| >= 3.29 at p = 0.001 level.

5. Managerial implications

Management implications were discovered in this study. CPQ, both directly and indirectly, had a significant role in the performance of clubs. In evaluating the construct related to CPQ, the influence of player and coach performance was more substantial than the other dimensions. This means that clubs' managers can have a significant impact on fan satisfaction and ultimately, on OP by using the appropriate systemic process of human resource management (player and coach) and targeted strategies to improve human resources performance. Especially in Iran, it is suggested that club managers when achieving desirable sporting performance, can focus more on strategies like using professional coaches, designing talent identification programs to select young and skilled football players, and training them to achieve high-quality players.

The subsequent implication that can be mentioned in which the three dimensions of "game satisfaction," "management satisfaction" and "team characteristics" are used in measuring fan satisfaction is that the results showed that team characteristics and satisfaction with management had a more substantial impact on fan satisfaction. In other words, "performance of the club marketing department," "selection of appropriate sponsors," "social participation of clubs," and "proper management of contracts" in the club management, as well as items such as "transparency of transfer policies," "player commitment to clubs" and "the correct number of star players in the team" in terms of team characteristics are some factors that affect fan satisfaction. To satisfy fans, and significantly improve financial performance, the managers of Esteghlal and Persepolis clubs should have extraordinary tact in the organizational structure and processes of the club, including marketing, management, and planning part. The club structure should be redesigned according to the striking role of these sections so that fans actively participate in the club's strategic decision-making. It is essential for club managers to understand the importance of critical dimensions of fan satisfaction and their influential role in financial performance.

6. Discussion and conclusion

One of professional football club managers' most important concerns is making optimal decisions to equilibrate between financial and sporting performance. This study aimed to provide a relationship model between core product quality, fan satisfaction, financial performance, and sporting performance in the two most popular football clubs in Iran (Persepolis and Esteghlal) under conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study contributed to sports marketing theories by extending previous research on core product quality, fan satisfaction, and organizational performance. In this study, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, CPQ introduced four dimensions: game quality, result quality, player performance, and coach performance. Fans' satisfaction was introduced in the dimensions that attract fans to watch the competitions, as well as satisfaction through the club management actions and the characteristics of the team. Also, OP was defined as financial performance and sporting performance. Financial performance refers to earning money (through commercial and fan income).

Moreover, sporting performance was meant to enhance club efficiency and fan support. Reviewing the research literature, the relationships model was recognized, and hypotheses were considered in the context of the football club. The first hypothesis examined the direct relationship between CPQ and financial performance. The second hypothesis assessed the direct relationship between CPQ and sporting performance. In the third and fourth hypotheses, it was evaluated and discovered whether fan satisfaction had a mediating relationship between CPQ and financial performance and the mediating relationship between CPQ and sporting performance.

Based on the results, the core product quality was a striking component of the service quality construct and positively affected fans' satisfaction and OP in professional football clubs. Indeed, CPQ was the dominant predictor of organizational (club) performance. Also, the results showed that the direct impact of the CPQ on sporting performance was more substantial than its direct effect on financial performance. This issue received less attention in the context of spectator sports, while several studies in non-sports fields repeatedly emphasized the role of quality in OP (Akroush, 2008; Akroush & Khatib, 2009; Ramayah et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2018). Total quality management implementation's direct and positive effect on OP in the service and manufacturing industry was confirmed by (Singh et al., 2018). Akroush (2008) detecting that service quality in the banking context had a positive and significant role in organizational performance. In fact, by improving service quality, organizations can differentiate themselves from competitors and create a competitive advantage. In the context of spectator sports, Ho Kim et al. (2013) emphasized that Game Quality (game performance) had a striking role in sporting performance (revisit intentions) (Ho Kim et al., 2013). Also, Theodorakis et al. (2013) found that CPQ (outcome quality), compared to functional quality, had a more substantial effect on sporting performance (customer loyalty). They also emphasized that the critical section of service quality was CPQ. This means that in the football club context, CPQ predicts customers' future behavior (Ho Kim et al., 2013) and improves organizational profit.

Furthermore, it was shown that the mediating effect of fan satisfaction in the relationship between CPQ-financial performance and the relationship between CPQ-sporting performances was significant and partial. The effect of fan satisfaction through CPQ on financial performance was more substantial than its effect on sporting performance. The results are consistent with the literature in the context of the banking and hotel industry (Al-Hawari & Ward, 2006; Chand, 2010; Teklay et al., 2023). Indeed, by paying attention and responding to customer needs through desired quality, the organization's profitability can be improved (Chand, 2010). Moreover, this, known as a competitive advantage, increases customer satisfaction, improving organizational performance (Akroush, 2008; Akroush & Khatib, 2009). On the other hand, in the sports context, the role of service quality and fan satisfaction on customer loyalty aligns with recent studies. Theodorakis et al. (2013); Yoshida and James (2010) proved that service quality constructs, which were measured through two dimensions of core and functional quality, had appropriate predictive power for customer satisfaction (Theodorakis et al., 2013; Yoshida & James, 2010), (Brady et al., 2006) and (Tsuji et al., 2007) revealed that CPQ had a more substantial effect on fan satisfaction (Brady et al., 2006; Tsuji et al., 2007). It was also reported that fan satisfaction

mediated the relationships between service quality and customer loyalty/ behavioral intentions (Cronin et al., 2000; Sarstedt et al., 2014). This study added to the body of knowledge in literature by understanding the mediating role of fans' satisfaction between core product quality and organizational performance.

In conclusion, the model provided in this paper is an efficient and effective tool for managers of professional football sports clubs. Because it can help them analyze and choose the best club development strategies to equilibrate the financial and sporting performance of the club to achieve organizational goals more confidently. The important implication of these findings is that the application of appropriate mixed policies from customer satisfaction and CPQ will have a significant impact on improving OP. Therefore, managers should pay special attention to resource management (accurate hiring, optimal allocation, and efficient use) and sports marketing (e.g., selection of appropriate sponsors, social participation of clubs, and proper management of contracts) to achieve organizational goals faster and more accurately through the selection of optimal policies.

6. Limitations and future recommendations

In any research, several limitations prevent the achievement of results with a high level of reliability. A careful and thorough examination of any subject requires sufficient time and provision of all conditions that are only sometimes available. Like other research, there were limitations, and an attempt was made to examine the present research in a specific and logical framework so that the results would be helpful for sports managers. Some of these limitations were inherently related to the research. Others may occur during the research; the present study was no exception to this rule. Some of the limitations of the study include:

- One of the research limitations was the statistical population of the study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of centers, and restrictions in the country, it was not possible to access more samples. More samples will certainly reduce errors and increase modeling accuracy.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some essential and practical dimensions in this research were removed or changed. The removal of the "match day income" component, one of the most important ways to achieve income for football clubs, can be mentioned.
- Due to the state ownership of the two most famous clubs, Persepolis and Esteghlal, it was impossible to examine the "broadcasting fee" in this study. In other words, allocating the budget related to broadcasting is done indirectly and very limited to the clubs.

To develop the research, the following can be suggested:

This paper is conducted for the two football clubs of Persepolis and Esteghlal. The researchers can examine the model presented in this research for other sports with conditions different from those of football clubs. In our research, the variables under the control of the club management and affect the club's performance were considered. Given that these two Iranian football clubs are managed under the auspices of the government,

indeed the club's performance is affected by other variables such as the effects of sanctions and government policies (Ministry of Sports and Youth). The effect of these variables on club performance can be considered and addressed in future research.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Scale items.

Core Product Quality	
Game Quality	Competitiveness of the games.
	Games are usually fast and flowing.
	High level of play.
	Spectacular games.
Result Quality	Team has good win record.
	Team has good lose record.
	In general, team has great results this season.
Player Performance	In general, your team's players perform well-executed plays.
	Your team gives 100% every game.
	Team plays hard all the time.
	Players on your team always try to do their best.
	Star/Popular players perform well-executed plays.
	Star/Popular players give 100% every game.
Star/Popular players of team are completely at the service of the team.	

Core Product Quality	
Coach performance	<p>Overall, with the presence of this coach, athletes/ team performance and playing style are improved.</p> <p>The coach selects and utilizes appropriate tactics and strategies in the games.</p> <p>The coach has a good relationship with the athletes and tries to motivate athletes toward higher levels of achievement.</p> <p>The coach recruits and selects quality athletes and a specific number of athletes according to the club goals and available facilities.</p> <p>The coach adheres to budget issues, procedures, rules and regulations in club and acts in accordance with them.</p> <p>The coach has appropriate communication and public relations behaviors activities with the community, media and peers.</p>
Fan satisfaction	
Game satisfaction	<p>Overall, fans are satisfied to watch team' competitions live.</p> <p>Overall, fans are happy to watch team' competitions live.</p> <p>Overall, fans are dissatisfied to watch team' competitions live.</p>
Management Satisfaction	<p>Marketing sector of the club is active and has a great performance.</p> <p>Public relations performance of the club is satisfactory.</p> <p>Suitable sponsors are selected for the club.</p> <p>In general, club's management is high- quality (Meeting fans' expectations, commitment to the club).</p> <p>Social involvement of the club is admirable.</p> <p>Former players and veterans in club are properly involved and applied.</p> <p>The process of contract management with players and coach is well done.</p>
Team Characteristics	<p>Transfer policy is clear and satisfactory.</p> <p>Number of team' stars (players and coach) is suitable and sufficient.</p> <p>Players have enough commitment to the club and the fans.</p> <p>Interaction of players with fans and their public appearances of the players with fans is very desirable.</p> <p>Overall, quality of the team composition (selection and position of players) is in the best condition.</p>
Financial performance	
Commercial income	<p>Club's income is great through main sponsors.</p> <p>Club's income is great through sub-sponsors.</p> <p>The club earns great income from transfer market.</p>
Fan income	<p>The club earns sufficient income through advertising around pitch.</p> <p>The club earns sufficient income through advertising by famous players or coach (endorsement).</p> <p>Fans' membership fees and related income are very reasonable.</p> <p>The club's products are well bought by the fans.</p> <p>The club benefits greatly from gifts and grants from fans.</p>
Sporting performance	
Fan support	<p>Fans increasingly watch and follow team's competitions live on TV during the season.</p> <p>Fans increasingly follow and watch and follow team's competitions through websites and social media during the season.</p> <p>Fans increasingly watch and follow team's competitions through news and newspapers during the season.</p>
Efficiency	<p>Team' position in the league is very suitable.</p> <p>The amount of points gained by the team in the league is very satisfactory.</p> <p>In general, the average number of goals scored by the team in competitions is excellent.</p> <p>In general, the goal's difference of team is very good.</p>



تأثیر کیفیت محصول اصلی بر عملکرد سازمانی با در نظر گرفتن نقش میانجی رضایت هواداران (مطالعه موردی: باشگاه فوتبال پرسپولیس و استقلال)

مهدی پورحسین^۱، ابراهیم علیدوست قهفرخی^{۲*}، مهرزاد حمیدی^۳، خدیجه پورذبیح سرحمامی^۴

^۱ دانشجوی دکتری مدیریت ورزشی، دانشکده علوم ورزشی، دانشگاه مازندران، بابلسر، مازندران، ایران.
^۲ استاد، گروه مدیریت ورزشی، دانشکده علوم ورزشی و تندرستی، دانشگاه تهران، تهران، ایران.
^۳ دانشیار، گروه مدیریت ورزشی، دانشکده علوم ورزشی و تندرستی، دانشگاه تهران، تهران، ایران.
^۴ دکترای مدیریت ورزشی، دانشکده علوم ورزشی، دانشگاه مازندران، بابلسر، مازندران، ایران.

کلیدواژه

باشگاه فوتبال
رضایت هواداران
عملکرد مالی
عملکرد ورزشی
کیفیت محصول

نوع مقاله

پژوهشی اصیل

چکیده

هدف: ایجاد تعادل بین عملکرد مالی و عملکرد ورزشی یکی از مهم ترین دغدغه‌های مدیران فعلی در باشگاه‌های حرفه ای فوتبال است. هدف این مطالعه ساخت مدلی برای بررسی تأثیر کیفیت محصول اصلی بر عملکرد مالی و ورزشی با در نظر گرفتن نقش میانجی رضایت هواداران در دو باشگاه پرطرفدار ایران (پرسپولیس و استقلال) بود.

روش: داده‌ها با استفاده از پیمایش پرسشنامه جمع‌آوری شده و از روش نمونه‌گیری هدفمند و در دسترس استفاده شده است. جامعه آماری پژوهش شامل کلیه مدیران، کارشناسان، نخبگان و افراد دارای دانش و اطلاعات کافی (مانند پیشکسوتان باشگاهی) مربوط به دو باشگاه پرطرفدار فوتبال ایران (باشگاه پرسپولیس و استقلال) بود. داده‌های ۱۷۵ پرسشنامه با استفاده از روش مدل‌سازی معادلات ساختاری با رویکرد حداقل مربعات جزئی با استفاده از نرم‌افزار PLS مورد تجزیه و تحلیل قرار گرفت.

یافته‌ها: نتایج نشان داد که بین کیفیت محصول اصلی و عملکرد سازمانی (مالی و ورزشی) رابطه مثبت و معناداری وجود دارد. همچنین، تأثیر میانجی رضایت طرفداران در رابطه بین کیفیت محصول اصلی و عملکرد سازمانی تأیید شد.

اصالت و ابتکار مقاله: مدل ارائه شده به عنوان یک ابزار موثر می‌تواند به مدیران باشگاه کمک کند تا بهترین استراتژی‌های توسعه باشگاه را برای ایجاد تعادل بین عملکرد مالی و ورزشی باشگاه به منظور دستیابی با اطمینان بیشتر به اهداف سازمانی تجزیه و تحلیل و انتخاب کنند. اهمیت این یافته‌ها در این است که اعمال سیاست‌های ترکیبی مناسب از رضایت طرفداران و کیفیت محصول اصلی تأثیر بسزایی در بهبود عملکرد سازمانی خواهد داشت.

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