

# The Role of Attractive Social Media Content on Fan Loyalty with the Mediating Role of Athletes' Popularity

## ABSTRACT

### Purpose

With the proliferation of social media platforms, sport clubs are leveraging these channels to foster fan engagement and nurture brand loyalty. This study investigates the intricate interplay between generating Attractive content, player popularity, and football fan loyalty.

### methodology

Data was collected via an online survey employing convenience sampling, with the target audience consisting of 300 active social media users who are fans of a particular football team. By employing structural equation modeling on the 240 complete responses received, the research unveils compelling findings.

### Findings

The analysis reveals that generating attractive content exerts a significant direct impact on both player popularity and fan loyalty. Moreover, player popularity acts as a potent mediating force, indirectly enhancing the influence of attractive content on fan loyalty. Notably, over 24% of the effect of generating attractive content on fostering fan loyalty can be attributed to the mediating role of player popularity. These insights underscore the synergistic relationship between captivating content, celebrated athletes, and devoted fan bases. The research suggests that sports managers should: 1) Focus on creating visually appealing, emotionally resonant content; 2) Leverage player popularity to amplify the impact of content on fan loyalty; 3) Foster synergies between content, players, and fans to build a devoted fan base.

### Originality

In this research, the mediating role of athletes' popularity on fans' loyalty was evaluated.

### Keywords

Athlete Popularity; Attractive Content; Fan Loyalty; Social Media.

### Paper type

Research Paper

# نقش محتوای جذاب در رسانه‌های اجتماعی بر وفاداری هواداران با نقش میانجی محبوبیت ورزشکاران

## چکیده

### هدف

با گسترش پلتفرم‌های رسانه‌های اجتماعی، باشگاه‌های ورزشی از این کانال‌ها برای تقویت درگیری هواداران و پرورش وفاداری به برند بهره می‌برند. این مطالعه تعامل پیچیده میان تولید محتوای جذاب، محبوبیت بازیکنان و وفاداری هواداران فوتبال را بررسی می‌کند.

### روش

داده‌ها از طریق یک نظرسنجی آنلاین با استفاده از نمونه‌گیری در دسترس جمع‌آوری شد، که گروه هدف شامل ۳۰۰ کاربر فعال رسانه‌های اجتماعی بود که هوادار فوتبال یک تیم خاص هستند. با به کارگیری مدل سازی معادلات ساختاری بر روی ۲۴۰ پاسخ کامل دریافت شده، این پژوهش یافته‌های جالب توجهی را آشکار می‌کند.

### یافته‌ها

تحلیل نشان می‌دهد که تولید محتوای جذاب، تأثیر مستقیم قابل توجهی هم بر محبوبیت بازیکنان و هم بر وفاداری هواداران دارد. علاوه بر این، محبوبیت بازیکنان به عنوان نیروی قدرتمند در واسطه‌گری، به طور غیرمستقیم بر تأثیر محتوای جذاب بر وفاداری هواداران افزوده می‌شود. شایان ذکر است که بیش از ۲۴٪ از تأثیر تولید محتوای جذاب بر ایجاد وفاداری هواداران را می‌توان به نقش واسطه‌ای محبوبیت بازیکنان نسبت داد. این دریافت‌ها بر رابطه همافزایی بین محتوای جذاب، ورزشکاران مشهور و پایگاه‌های هواداران وفادار تأکید می‌کند. این تحقیق به مدیران سازمان‌های ورزشی پیشنهاد می‌کند: (۱) بر ایجاد محتوای بصری جذاب و عاطفی تمرکز کنند؛ (۲) از محبوبیت بازیکنان برای تقویت تأثیر محتوا بر وفاداری هواداران استفاده کنند؛ (۳) بین محتوا، بازیکنان و هواداران همافزایی ایجاد کنند تا پایگاه هواداران وفادار بسازند.

### اصالت و ابتکار مقاله

در این پژوهش، نقش میانجی محبوبیت ورزشکاران بر وفاداری هواداران ارزیابی شده است.

### کلید واژه

رسانه‌های اجتماعی؛ محبوبیت ورزشکاران؛ محتوای جذاب؛ وفاداری هواداران.

## 1. Introduction

The digitalization of human interactions with information technologies, as well as the expanding role of these technologies in daily life, have precipitated profound transformations across numerous facets of human existence. Consequently, users of these technologies have been exposed to novel experiences in their interactions with information ([Taghi Panahi, Nokarizi & Dayani, 2019](#)). In the wake of the remarkable surge in technological advancements and adoption over the past few years, a heightened interest has emerged regarding the integration of social media platforms into well-established practices such as fostering brand loyalty and nurturing customer relationships (CRM) ([Misirlis & Vlachopoulou, 2018](#)). Social media has evolved into a ubiquitous marketing tool, embraced by nearly every organization seeking to expand their business or enhance their appeal to their existing target audience ([Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017](#)).

Enterprises endeavor to amplify and entrench consumer engagement with their brands, as this phenomenon has been demonstrated to be a significant driving force behind fostering loyalty, which consequently enhances revenue streams ([Islam et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, it strengthens relational bonds ([Behnam et al., 2021](#)) and bolsters the competitive edge of the firm ([Rohm et al., 2013](#)). Consumer engagement is conceptualized as the "behavioral manifestations exhibiting a brand or firm orientation, transcending mere purchase, arising from motivational catalysts" ([Van Doorn et al., 2010](#)). The online interactions between brands and consumers, particularly those facilitated by social media platforms such as Facebook, constitute intricate multi-party discourses, resulting in a deepened state of consumer engagement ([Rohm et al., 2013](#)).

In the sporting context, fan engagement constitutes a form of customer engagement behavior that is centered on the fan's non-transactional extra-role behavior ([Yoshida et al., 2014](#)). Fans engage in a spectrum of activities on social media platforms, some active and others relatively passive in nature ([Malthouse et al., 2013](#)). The Consumers Online Brand Related Activities (COBRA) framework categorizes fan activities into consumption, contribution, and creation ([Vale and Fernandes, 2018](#)). Consumption refers to the mere viewing of the shared content, while contribution encompasses activities such as liking, sharing, or commenting on existing content, and creation involves activities conceived by users, such as posting reviews, photographs, and utilizing hashtags ([Dolan et al., 2016](#)). The disseminated content itself can be characterized by the dimensions of (1) content vividness, or the extent to which the media richness elicits sensory activation, and (2) content typology, i.e., whether the content pertains to the provision of information, entertainment, remuneration, or social activities ([Luarn et al., 2015](#)).

Consumer engagement through social media platforms holds particular relevance in the context of sports clubs, which rank among the most valuable brands globally and engage a substantial loyal fan base (Yun et al., 2020). Owing to the robust group cohesion exhibited by sports enthusiasts on the internet (Stavros et al., 2014), social media content presents itself as a potential instrument for sports clubs to foster engagement with fan communities. However, despite the exponential growth in the volume of social media content disseminated by various brands, the engagement level of social media users has not escalated proportionately (Kaul et al., 2015).

In today's digital landscape, where social media platforms have become integral to consumer engagement strategies, it is essential to investigate the impact of creating attractive content by sports clubs in virtual spaces, leveraging the popularity of athletes. This area of inquiry holds significant relevance as content disseminated through these platforms play a vital role in shaping consumer engagement (Voorveld, 2019).

This shift towards digital brand-building has become particularly pronounced in the sports industry, where athletes have amassed vast, devoted followings across various social media channels. Leveraging this popularity allows clubs to more directly influence their public perception and the way their brand is consumed by fans. Adler's research (1985, 2006) highlights how a star's brand image is fundamentally shaped by popularity-based attributes. These attributes, as defined by Stigler and Becker (1977), reflect the star's ability to cultivate consumption capital among their fanbase. Similarly, sports clubs must now consider how to harness the popularity and consumption capital of their star athletes to bolster their own brand identity and fan engagement. An essential component of this dynamic is the star's media presence and the way they are portrayed across various platforms. Effectively leveraging media channels allows stars to connect directly with fans, showcase their talents, and reinforce their unique persona. The measure of a star's eccentric appearance can be a key indicator of how visually distinctive their "human brand" is compared to equivalently talented peers. Sports clubs must apply these same principles to their digital content strategies, using social media to amplify the distinctive visual identities and personalities of their star athletes.

The potential for athlete fame and popularity to act as a mediator in enhancing fan loyalty warrants in-depth exploration. As sports clubs strive to nurture lasting connections with their fan base, understanding the dynamics of how compelling content, infused with the allure of renowned athletes, can captivate audiences and foster enduring loyalty is crucial. Comprehensive research in this domain is necessary to provide sports clubs with data-driven insights and actionable strategies. By uncovering the intricacies of consumer behavior, content preferences, and the influence of athlete popularity, clubs can optimize their online presence, customize their content offerings, and cultivate an engaged and loyal fan community. Ultimately, this knowledge can empower sports clubs to effectively leverage the fame and appeal

of their athletes omit, solidifying their brand identity and ensuring long-term success in the highly competitive sports industry.

## 2. Theoretical background

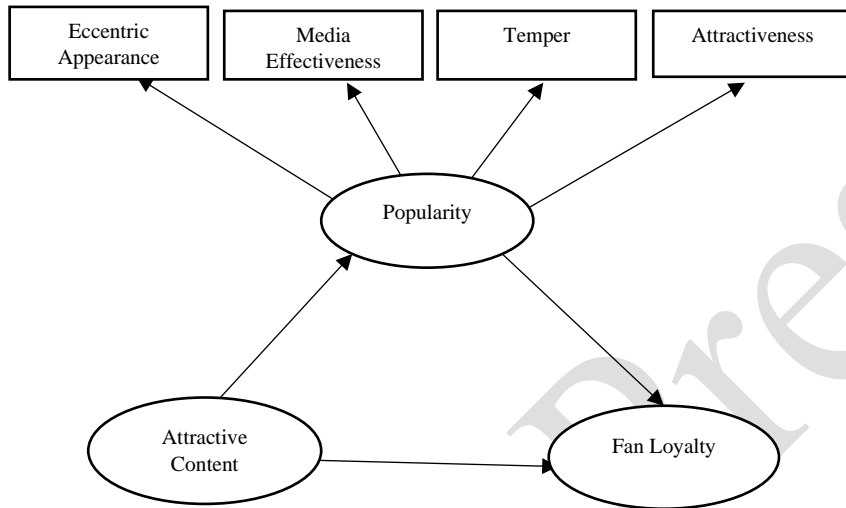
Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for sports clubs to engage with their fan base and cultivate a strong brand image. According to Annamalai et al. (2021), low-vividness content, such as photographs, garners the highest engagement on these platforms. This finding highlights the importance of visual content in capturing the attention of fans and fostering interaction.

Nisara, Prabhakar, and Patil (2017) further emphasize the significance of customer interactivity facilitated through social media platforms. Their findings suggest that heightened interactivity can be perceived as an Attractive attribute, consequently augmenting spectatorship. By actively engaging with fans through social media channels, sports clubs can create a sense of community and foster a deeper connection with their followers.

Moreover, the popularity of athletes plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior and strengthening brand image (Hofmann et al., 2021). Popularity refers to the level of recognition, acceptance, and desirability that a product, brand, or person enjoys among consumers. By strategically leveraging the fame and charisma of their star players, sports clubs can craft content that resonates deeply with fans, fostering a sense of connection and allegiance.

Furthermore, the popularity of athletes transcends geographical boundaries, enabling sports clubs to expand their reach and tap into new markets (Lardo et al., 2017). By collaborating with influential athletes, clubs can expose their brand to diverse audiences, potentially attracting new fans and broadening their support base. This approach allows sports clubs to capitalize on the widespread appeal of their star players, extending their brand's reach beyond traditional regional or national boundaries.

To our knowledge, the impact of athletes' popularity on the association between generating attractive content and brand loyalty has not been considered in the context of Iranian football fans.



**Figure 1.** Research Conceptual Model

#### 4. Methodology

This study is applied in its purpose, descriptive in its methodology, and relies on a survey-based approach for data collection. The data was collected through an online questionnaire designed by the researcher and distributed online via convenience sampling. The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions using a 5-point Likert scale. The target audience consisted of 300 active social media users in Instagram and Twitter who were Iranian football fans of a particular team. A total of 240 complete responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 60%. In structural equation modeling (SEM), a minimum sample size of 5 to 15 observations per variable is recommended. To ensure the questionnaire's effectiveness, we assessed its validity through item cross-loadings, convergent validity, Fornell-Larcker's test and average variance extracted (AVE). In addition, composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha were used to evaluate the reliability of the instrument. The detailed findings of these analyses are presented in the Results section.

#### 4. Results

Partial least squares (PLS) software utilizes a variance-based structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. This approach enables the simultaneous evaluation of both theoretical constructs and their corresponding measurement instruments. evaluation process consists of two distinct stages: the measurement model and the structural model tests.

The measurement model test focuses on establishing the validity and reliability of the measurement instruments used in the study. This ensures that these instruments accurately capture the intended theoretical constructs. On the other hand, the structural model test delves into the analysis of the research hypotheses and the relationships between the latent variables. This stage assesses the proposed theoretical model and

its ability to explain the observed data. Following this structure, the results of the measurement model test will be presented first, followed by those of the structural model test.

#### 4.1. Measurement Model Test

Table 1 shows the results of computing the extracted average variance, composite reliability, and Cronbach's alpha.

**Table 1.** Indices of mean variance extracted, composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha.

| Research Variables   | Cronbach's Alpha | Composite Reliability | Average Variance Extracted |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Attractive           | 0.870            | 0.920                 | 0.794                      |
| Eccentric Appearance | 0.884            | 0.928                 | 0.811                      |
| Fan Loyalty          | 0.896            | 0.928                 | 0.766                      |
| Attractive Content   | 0.944            | 0.960                 | 0.856                      |
| Media Effectiveness  | 0.900            | 0.937                 | 0.833                      |
| Popularity           | 0.780            | 0.872                 | 0.695                      |
| Temper               | 0.829            | 0.898                 | 0.746                      |

The analysis demonstrates the questionnaire's reliability. All composite reliability values exceed 0.7, and average variance extracted (AVE) values surpass 0.5, which are considered acceptable thresholds. Moreover, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all latent variables are above the recommended threshold of 0.7. Additionally, the examination of item cross-loadings revealed no need for item removal, indicating good construct validity.

The final test in the measurement model section was examining the quality of the measurement instruments, whose results are shown in Table 2. SSO is the sum of squares of observations for each latent variable block, SSE is the sum of squared prediction errors for each latent variable block, and SSE/SSO indicates the commonality validity index.

**Table 2.** Index of Construct Cross validity

| Research Variables   | SSO      | SSE      | Q <sup>2</sup> (=1-SSE/SSO) |
|----------------------|----------|----------|-----------------------------|
| Attractiveness       | 750.000  | 464.371  | 0.381                       |
| Eccentric Appearance | 750.000  | 462.567  | 0.383                       |
| Fan Loyalty          | 1000.000 | 437.425  | 0.563                       |
| Attractive Content   | 1000.000 | 1000.000 |                             |
| Media Effectiveness  | 750.000  | 436.158  | 0.418                       |
| Popularity           | 750.000  | 506.862  | 0.324                       |
| Temper               | 750.000  | 426.921  | 0.431                       |

A positive value for the commonality validity index (Q2) of each latent variable indicates acceptable quality in the measurement model. As shown in Table 2, all Q2 values are positive, confirming the adequacy of the measurement instruments used in this study.

#### 4.2. Structural Model Test

The data analysis results obtained from the software are presented in Figures 1 and 2. To measure the significance of the causal relationships between the variables, the t-value index was used.

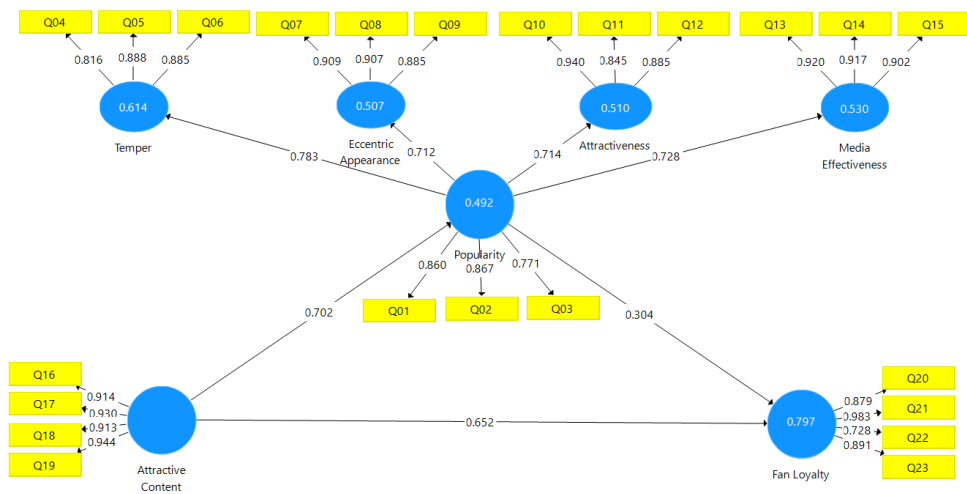
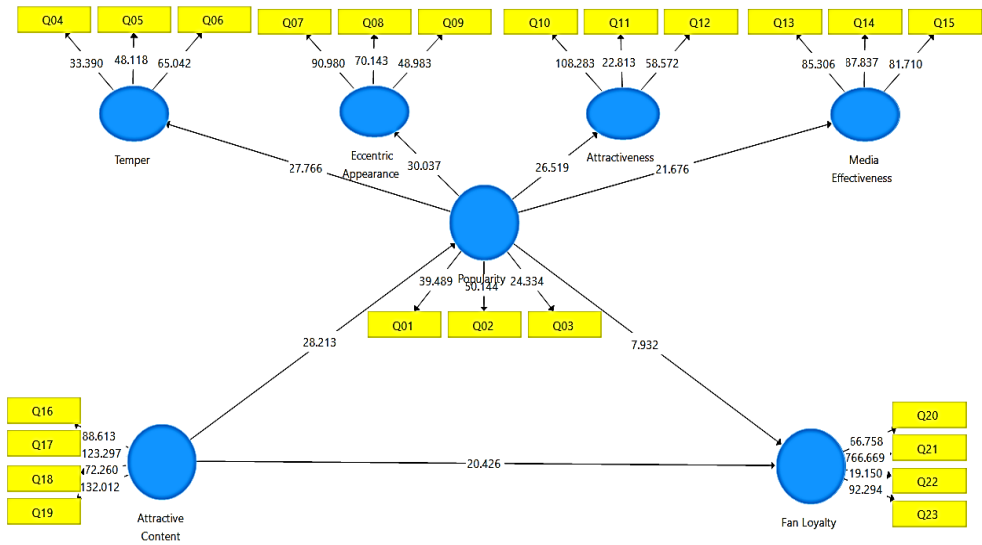


Figure 1. Path coefficients and factor loading of the variables

Within PLS software, the t-value serves as a key indicator for the significance of the relationships between variables. This statistic plays a crucial role in determining whether to accept or reject the research hypotheses. When the t-value exceeds 1.96, and 2.58, it indicates that the corresponding hypotheses are confirmed at the 95%, and 99% confidence levels, respectively. In simpler terms, t-values greater than 1.96 are considered statistically significant at the 0.05 level, while those exceeding 2.58 are significant at the 0.01 level.





**Figure 2.** t-values for testing the significance of path coefficients and factor loadings

Table 4 presents the path coefficients, standard deviations, t-values, and significance levels for all paths in the model investigating the impact of generating Attractive content by sports clubs on social media on fostering fan loyalty.

**Table 3.** Original Sample and T Statistic value

| Research Variables                | Path Coefficient | S. D  | T-statistic | Sig.  |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| Attractive Content → Fan Loyalty  | 0.652            | 0.030 | 20.426      | 0.001 |
| Attractive Content → Popularity   | 0.702            | 0.027 | 28.213      | 0.001 |
| Popularity → Attractiveness       | 0.714            | 0.028 | 25.889      | 0.001 |
| Popularity → Eccentric Appearance | 0.712            | 0.023 | 30.378      | 0.001 |
| Popularity → Fan Loyalty          | 0.304            | 0.037 | 7.932       | 0.001 |
| Popularity → Media Effectiveness  | 0.728            | 0.032 | 22.476      | 0.001 |
| Popularity → Temper               | 0.783            | 0.030 | 26.241      | 0.001 |

Table 3 reveals that the path coefficients for search engine marketing, social media marketing, content marketing, mobile marketing, and email marketing are all significant at the 0.05 error level. However, the variables of affiliate marketing and retargeting do not exhibit significance at the same level.

Figure 2 presents the multiple determination coefficient (R-squared) value for this study at 0.94. Considering the general benchmarks of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 as weak, moderate, and strong values for this index, respectively, the obtained value can be considered acceptable for the designed model. This implies that the independent variables account for 94% of the variance in the dependent variable.

The combined analysis of composite reliability, extracted variance, model determination coefficient, and goodness-of-fit index strongly suggests that the proposed path analysis model aligns well with both empirical observations and theoretical assumptions. This indicates very good model fit.

Following the data analysis protocol, the research variables are assessed after validating the measurement model's fitness. This evaluation considers the path coefficient, t-statistic, and information presented in Figures 1 and 2 (factor loadings, path coefficients, and their significance levels). The path coefficient reflects the directional influence of one construct on another. Positive coefficients signify a direct relationship, while negative coefficients indicate an inverse relationship. Notably, a path coefficient is considered statistically significant at the 95% confidence level if its corresponding t-statistic exceeds 1.96. This signifies a confirmed relationship between the associated variables.

According to the research findings based on the significance of paths, the variable of Generating Attractive Content with a path coefficient of 0.652 and the variable of player Popularity with a path coefficient of 0.304 have a significant effect on fan loyalty. All these paths are significant at the 0.05 level and the path coefficients are in good condition, confirming the conceptual model designed.

This study employed the Variance Accounted For (VAF) measure to assess the strength of the indirect effect mediated by the variable. VAF ranges from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating a stronger indirect effect. It essentially quantifies the proportion of the total effect that can be attributed to the indirect pathway. Using formula (1) the VAF in this study was calculated to be 0.246. This value suggests that over 24% of the influence of generating Attractive content sports club on social media on enhancing fan loyalty can be indirectly explained by the mediating effect of player popularity.

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

The combined analysis of composite reliability, extracted variance, model determination coefficient, and model goodness index provides strong evidence supporting the model's alignment with both empirical observations and theoretical underpinnings. This signifies good model fit. Therefore, the model of the impact of generating Attractive content sports club on social media on enhancing fan loyalty is confirmed.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings from this comprehensive study provide compelling evidence that generating attractive content has a significant impact on fostering brand loyalty, with player popularity serving as a critical mediating force. Through rigorous analysis, it became clear that when brands prioritize the creation of content that captivates and resonates with their target audience, it triggers a potent ripple effect that strengthens consumer attachment and allegiance. Remarkably, this influence is future chance by involvement of popular players or personalities within the respective domain. As

these celebrated figures amplify and lend their influence to the content, it enhances its appeal and reach, consequently bolstering brand loyalty among fans and followers. This intricate interplay between content appeal, player fame, and consumer devotion to brands unveils a strategic pathway that savvy organizations can harness to cement enduring relationships with their audiences.

Social media has exploded in popularity over the past few years, becoming a powerful tool for sports clubs to boost their players' fame. As Bruns, Weller & Harrington (2014) and Annamalai et al (2021) state that the use of social media by sports clubs has significantly increased in recent years, with platforms like Twitter and Facebook being key tools for fan engagement. In today's digital age, having a strong online presence is crucial. Clubs that effectively use social media to share exciting, engaging content about their players gain a major advantage. Social media allows this content to spread quickly and reach fans everywhere, not just locally. Platforms like Instagram & Twitter make it easy for clubs to directly connect with their fan base in ways that just weren't possible before. Fans feel closer to the players when they get a glimpse into their lives off the field. As social media continues growing rapidly, its importance in driving player popularity keeps increasing. Sports clubs must make creative, Attractive content for social media a top priority to ensure their stars stay relevant and beloved by fans worldwide. The advent of social media has ushered in a paradigm shift in how sports clubs and players connect with their fans and cultivate popularity. These digital platforms have emerged as indispensable tools for clubs to generate and disseminate Attractive content that resonates with their audience. By leveraging the ubiquity and real-time nature of social media, clubs can seamlessly share behind-the-scenes glimpses, highlight reels, and personal stories, fostering a sense of intimacy and connection with their players. This constant stream of engaging content not only entertains and informs fans but also amplifies the visibility and relatability of players, propelling them into the limelight. As social media usage continues to surge exponentially, its ability to shape narratives and mold perceptions, and drive conversations has become increasingly influential. Consequently, clubs that adeptly harness the power of social media to deliver captivating content are poised to elevate the popularity of their players, cultivating ardent fanbases and forging deeper emotional bonds with their audiences.

The ability to craft Attractive, captivating content is a potent driver of brand loyalty in today's content-saturated landscape. When brands consistently deliver content that resonates with their target audience, they forge a profound connection that transcends the transactional nature of typical consumer relationships. Attractive content has the power to evoke emotions, spark conversations, and establish a sense of community around the brand. Mu et al (2022) emphasize the importance of high-quality, original, and goal-consistent content, particularly highlighting the hedonic features of products. Weiger, Wetzel & Hammerschmidt (2017) further support this, demonstrating the positive impact of marketer-generated appeals on brand equity and engagement intensity in online brand communities. Schreiner & Riedl (2018) underscore the role of emotion in content engagement, calling for the use of neurophysiological methods to better understand its effects. Lastly, Brubaker & Wilson (2018) highlight the need

for a combination of visual and text-based content to drive engagement and conversation, ultimately strengthening brand relationships. As consumers engage with this content, they develop a deeper affinity and investment in the brand, perceiving it as an entity that understands and speaks to their values, interests, and aspirations. This emotional bond cultivates a sense of loyalty that extends beyond mere product or service satisfaction. Consumers become advocates, actively seeking out and engaging with the brand's content, while also defending and promoting it within their social circles. Ultimately, generating Attractive content serves as a catalyst for building a loyal and passionate consumer base that remains steadfastly committed to the brand, even in the face of competitors' offerings.

Player popularity wields a potent influence on brand loyalty within the sports industry. When athletes ascend to stardom and captivate the hearts of fans, they inevitably become inextricable from the brand they represent. Parmentier & Fischer (2012) explores the brand-building practices of athletes, emphasizing the role of professional image and mainstream media persona. Brown et al (2022) delve into the impact of athlete activism on brand image, finding that fan attitudes and activism type can significantly influence perception. Their on-field exploits, personas, and personal narratives forge an emotional connection that transcends mere athletic prowess. Fans develop a fierce allegiance not just to the player, but also to the team and associated brands. This brand loyalty manifests in unwavering support, merchandise sales, and a fervent desire to align with the player's image and values. Consequently, organizations that nurture and promote player popularity can leverage this phenomenon to cultivate a devoted consumer base that remains steadfastly loyal to their brand. The star power of popular players becomes a valuable asset, fostering a deep-rooted sense of pride and identification among fans, ultimately translating into enduring brand loyalty that withstands the test of time.

In conclusion, the findings of this study illuminate a powerful synergy between content appeal, player popularity, and brand loyalty. By developing captivating and resonates with their audience, sports organizations can harness the influential power of their star players to forge unbreakable bonds with fans. As popular athletes amplify and lend their star power to the Attractive content, it catalyzes a self-perpetuating cycle where fan engagement and brand allegiance continually reinforce one another. To fully capitalize on this dynamic, sports marketers should prioritize investing in compelling storytelling, leveraging the latest digital platforms, and fostering authentic connections between players and fans. Collaborating with players to co-create content that offers a window into their lives beyond the game can deepen the sense of intimacy and loyalty. Additionally, harnessing data-driven insights to customize content for specific audience segments can further enhance its appeal and resonance. Ultimately, by seamlessly integrating Attractive content strategies with strategic player promotion, sports brands can unlock a potent pathway to cultivating a fervent and enduring fan base that remains steadfastly devoted to their organizational identity.

## Disclosure statement

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