



The Effect of Open Innovation and Social Media Marketing on Football Club Brand Authenticity with the Mediating Role of Value Creation and Brand Mental Image

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ABSTRACT

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Sports Marketing; Open Innovation; Social Networks; Brand Authenticity; Brand Value; Brand Image

Excellence in the highly competitive sports industry requires appropriate marketing strategies. Marketing researchers have long identified brand authenticity as one of the key pillars of marketing and consider it critically important for consumers. The aim of this study was to examine the effect of open innovation and social media marketing on football clubs' brand authenticity, with value creation and brand mental image as mediating variables. In terms of objective, this research is applied, and in terms of strategy, it is descriptive-correlational, conducted using structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of fans of football clubs in the active leagues of the country. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, and 428 questionnaires were analyzed. To collect the required data, the following instruments were used: the Open Innovation questionnaire by Peter et al. (2016), the Social Media Marketing questionnaire by Kim et al. (2017), the Brand Authenticity questionnaire by Kadirov (2010), the Value Creation questionnaire by Zeinoddin et al. (2012), and the Brand Mental Image questionnaire by Ulrich (2009). The validity of the questionnaires was confirmed by 13 sports management professors, and the reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.88, 0.77, 0.89, 0.89, and 0.70, respectively. SPSS and SmartPLS statistical software were used for data analysis. The findings showed that open innovation and social media marketing have a positive and significant effect on brand authenticity, value creation, and brand mental image of football clubs. Furthermore, brand value creation and brand mental image have a positive and significant effect on brand authenticity. Therefore, it can be concluded that attention to factors such as innovation and social media marketing can strengthen a club's brand in terms of value creation, mental image, and authenticity.

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1. Introduction

In Successful sports clubs present themselves as brands, especially in international markets (Monazami et al., 2021). In today's world, the appeal of the sports industry is undeniable; this \$300 billion industry, having grown more than 50% in a decade, is ranked among the world's top 10 industries and is growing rapidly (Hums et al., 2023). Of course, excelling in the competitive world of the sports industry requires appropriate marketing strategies. Marketers can quickly analyze and review consumer feedback and extract important and emerging topics to contribute to more effective marketing campaigns. One of the brand-related communication topics is brand authenticity (Campagna et al., 2023). Marketing researchers have long identified brand authenticity as one of the key pillars of marketing and consider it very important for consumers (Konovalova, 2019). Customer perceptions, mental impressions, and judgments regarding products, services, and brands—and their emotional and qualitative positioning—play a major role in the development of not only brand authenticity but brands themselves, since a brand is one of the most important communication tools in the customer relationship management framework. It can function as a defensive tool to retain existing customers and an offensive marketing tool to attract new ones (Portal et al., 2019). According to Kotler, a brand can be defined as a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these, intended to identify and differentiate the goods and services of a seller from those of competitors (Kotler, 2012). One of the ways to increase brand value and, consequently, competitive advantage and competitiveness is marketing innovation through various methods, especially modern marketing approaches (Kanagal, 2015). Successful companies simultaneously guide innovation and marketing activities toward achieving superior market performance. The characteristics of successful marketing innovation include an appropriate marketing strategy, the path taken in

the market, the level of management skills within the company, and a unique organizational culture that may be difficult for competitors to imitate. It is the particular combination of these factors that determines whether marketing innovation creates strategic value for a company. A marketing innovation approach is one of the key components in defining the competitive strategy of businesses. An effective innovation-based strategy requires that new business opportunities be transformed into important value centered on the company's customers; accordingly, the focus should be on customer/market needs, not company needs (Shakeri, 2022). To maintain competitiveness, in all industries and even in the largest organizations, opening up innovative activities through collaboration with other organizations is inevitable. Based on the definition of Henry Chesbrough (2012), the father of open innovation, open innovation is the purposeful use of external and internal knowledge flows to accelerate internal innovation and to expand markets for external use of innovation. Open innovation can be highly profitable for companies as it reduces costs, speeds up time-to-market, increases differentiation in the market, and creates new revenue streams (Chesbrough, 2012). The open innovation approach means the inflow and outflow of knowledge, which can accelerate innovation development and expand its commercialization process. Open innovation assumes that startups can and should use external ideas in the same way as internal ones, applying them to create shared ideas; in this process, organizations use the created knowledge for technology capacity building and improving innovation performance (Akbari et al., 2023). In the context of marketing within organizations, media use can be an aspect of innovation. Social media are essential tools for economic growth, as they involve two-way communication and low-cost marketing to obtain information, communicate, and build relationships with customers. Leveraging marketing opportunities in sports provides the necessary platform for interaction between industry,

commerce, and sport, and serves as a strategic bridge in the service of sports development and its economic prosperity. Football clubs are among the primary organizations providing sports products and services, enjoying high popularity among people as consumers of these products. Using the concept of open innovation—jointly exploiting internal and external ideas—along with creativity achievable through social media marketing, these clubs can be positioned as valuable brands at various national and international levels and create value. Product quality and customer awareness of what makes the product unique and different are the two main factors that these clubs must monitor and control to enhance the image customers have of their brand in their minds. Brand mental image is a set of an individual's perceptions that form in the minds of consumers when they recall a specific brand name (Ahadi et al., 2020). Brand value creation and brand mental image have been considered as two mediating variables in this study, so that researchers can determine how the brand authenticity of football clubs in Iran is influenced by open innovation and social media marketing. In a review of previous studies, Rouh Bani and Kiakjuri (2022) investigated the performance of private clubs and found that cooperation (cooperation-competition) does not directly affect club performance; however, it affects performance through the mediating variables of external knowledge use and open innovation. It was also found that open innovation explains the highest percentage of variance in club performance. Therefore, an environment of cooperation and competition—through the use of external knowledge and open innovation—can lead to improved club performance. Ziyaei Ghochan Atigh et al. (2022) also found in their research—which examined the role of social media in the online social identity of the brand and customer loyalty of sports clubs—that there is a significant relationship between the opinion-seeking and entertainment value of the club's social media and participation and engagement on social media, the brand's online social identity, and customer loyalty. There is a significant relationship between

participation and engagement on social media and the brand's online social identity with customer loyalty in bodybuilding and aerobic clubs in Mashhad. As the level of engagement and participation among customers increases, long-term relationships will form among them, the brand's online social identity will be strengthened, and ultimately, customer loyalty will increase. Considering that sports clubs have always played an important role in the sporting activities of various segments of society, it can be said that sports clubs are the main drivers of sports development. However, a current issue in sports clubs—particularly football clubs—is the lack of adequate attention to innovation and engaging in innovative performance in their marketing practices. The concept of open innovation and its role in sports businesses, especially football clubs, remains largely unknown, as the researcher found no study or report addressing this research area specifically, either in scientific articles or news sources. On the other hand, despite its high capacities in all domains, our country is a developing nation and does not have a knowledge-based, innovation-oriented economy like developed and economically advanced countries; as a result, innovation and exploration of its types and applications are not pursued and emphasized as they should be—particularly when this pursuit pertains to brand authenticity in football clubs and its development through modern marketing methods, keeping pace with rapid advances in science and technology in the sports industry. Sports clubs in our country have not shown adequate performance in service delivery and achieving organizational goals and have been unable to fulfill their primary mission across various arenas. Non-customized and generic service provision, lack of quantitative and qualitative improvement of services, administrative bureaucracies and inefficient and ineffective processes, failure to encourage players and members to innovate and the absence of a creative environment in clubs, lack of exchange of ideas among members, and knowledge sharing (Fathi et al., 2019), staff attitudes and organizational culture

stagnation, as well as the low level of professional and communication knowledge and skills of managers and team members in football clubs (Iraji et al., 2017) are among the reasons for declining productivity in football clubs that have led to their poor performance at various levels. Moharana and Bhattacharjee (2023) concluded in their research that community brand identification increases brand advocacy and purchase intention. Sports clubs and sponsors should cultivate consumers' identity with the club's brand community, which yields dual benefits and leads to greater effectiveness, measured in terms of club brand engagement and sponsor-brand support. Lee (2022), in research titled 'Development of a Brand Authenticity Scale for Professional Sports Clubs,' introduced 42 items and 8 factors for the brand authenticity scale of professional sports clubs, including continuity, authenticity, commitment to quality, heritage, symbolism, credibility, stakeholder-related integrity, and consumer-related integrity. The findings also showed that the scale developed in this study provides a vital foundation for understanding the structure of brand credibility in the context of sports fans and its impact on sports consumer behavior. On the other hand, Sallinen et al. (2020) stated in their research that brand value increases purchase enthusiasm, improves purchasing behavior, and increases customers in the sports industry. In the sports industry, due to the breadth of the target audience, increasing brand value can contribute to an increase in customers. Nevertheless, excelling in

the competitive world of the sports industry requires appropriate marketing strategies. Therefore, open innovation can lead to the creation of new opportunities and, through the use of ideas and views of creative human resources, contribute to increased productivity, dynamism, and brand building for clubs. Accordingly, examining the effect of open innovation on consolidating the brand authenticity of football clubs is a novel study that addresses the necessity of preserving brand position and authenticity from a different perspective, and appears to be necessary. Moreover, today numerous sports clubs have been established throughout the country, and unfortunately most of them face problems attracting customers and members; consequently, at every stage, a large number of them go bankrupt and close. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting quarantine negatively impacted the commercial activities of football clubs and caused a major decline in their customers and athletes. Therefore, in the post-pandemic period and as society returns to physical activity, it is appropriate for clubs to promptly find solutions to attract customers and resources on the one hand, and to retain existing customers on the other, in the current competitive market. Therefore, in the present study, the researcher seeks to answer the question: Does open innovation and social media marketing affect football clubs' brand authenticity with the mediating role of value creation and brand mental image?

2. Methodology

This research is applied in terms of objective and descriptive-correlational in terms of strategy. The statistical population consisted of fans of football clubs in the active leagues of the country. Given the use of structural equation modeling, the sample size was recommended based on the number of questionnaire items—10 individuals per item—with a minimum of 250 and a maximum of 500 participants. In this study, 450 questionnaires were distributed and 428

questionnaires were collected. Cluster random sampling was used: first, a number of clubs were selected by cluster, and then questionnaires were distributed among players randomly and collected. To collect data, the Open Innovation questionnaire by Peter et al. (2016) was used, consisting of 24 items and 5 dimensions: planning (5 Q), participation (4 Q), governance (4 Q), cultural competency and mindset (4 Q), and competitive outlook (4 Q). The questionnaire used a 5-point

Likert scale, with scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 assigned to 'strongly disagree,' 'disagree,' 'no opinion,' 'agree,' and 'strongly agree,' respectively. The reliability of this questionnaire was reported as 0.88. The Social Media Marketing questionnaire by Kim et al. (2012) consists of 13 items and 3 dimensions: entertainment aspect (5 Q), level of interaction (4 Q), and word-of-mouth marketing (4 Q). Scoring was on a 5-point Likert scale with scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 assigned to 'very low,' 'low,' 'moderate,' 'high,' and 'very high,' respectively. The reliability of this questionnaire was reported as 0.77. The Brand Authenticity questionnaire by Kadirov (2010) consists of 14 items and 7 subscales: real-fake (2 Q), extreme performance (2 Q), commerciality (2 Q), uniqueness (2 Q), rich history (2 Q), community (2 Q), and empowerment (2 Q). Scoring is on a 5-point Likert scale with scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 for 'strongly disagree,' 'disagree,' 'no opinion,' 'agree,' and 'strongly agree,' respectively. The reliability was reported as 0.89. The Value Creation questionnaire by Zeinoddin et al. (2012) includes 13 items on a 5-point Likert scale and measures three dimensions: functional value (4 Q), emotional value (5 Q), and value creation (3

questions). Its reliability was reported as 0.89. The Brand Mental Image questionnaire by Ulrich (2009) has 15 questions in 4 dimensions: trust in management (4 Q), trust in employees (4 Q), satisfaction (3 Q), and loyalty (4 Q). Scoring is on a 5-point Likert scale with scores of 1 to 5 for 'very low' to 'very high.' Its reliability was reported as 0.70. The validity of all questionnaires was confirmed by 13 sports management professors, and the content validity of the questionnaire constructs was examined using confirmatory factor analysis, showing appropriate validity. All questionnaire reliabilities and their components were obtained using Cronbach's alpha above 0.7. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation) were used for data description. Skewness and kurtosis tests were used to determine the normality of data distribution; confirmatory factor analysis was used for content validity; and structural equation modeling was used to test research hypotheses and draw the model. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS and SmartPLS software. The significance level for hypothesis testing was set at 0.05.

3. Research Findings

Descriptive information about the research samples is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic status of research samples

Variable	Statistical Index		Total	
	Subjects	Frequency	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	134	428	100
	Female	294		
Marital Status	Single	196	428	100
	Married	232		
Education	Diploma	52	428	100
	Associate Degree	71		
	Bachelor's Degree	199		
	Master's Degree	87		
	Ph.D.	19		
Age	Under 25 years	42	428	100
	26 to 30 years	118		
	31 to 40 years	164		
	41 to 50 years	82		
	Over 50 years	22		
Fan History	Under 10 years	74	428	100
	11 to 20 years	272		
	Over 20 years	82		

As shown in the table above, most of the research samples were male (68.7%), married (54.2%), held a bachelor's degree (46.5%), were in the age range of 31 to 40 years (38.3%), and had a fan history of 11 to 20 years (36.6%). Before conducting statistical tests, skewness and kurtosis tests were used to determine the normality or non-

normality of the data distribution—as a prerequisite for deciding whether to use parametric or non-parametric tests. Since the significance levels of the variables were greater than 0.05, the data distribution is normal and parametric statistics were used.

Table 2. Statistics of skewness and kurtosis tests

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Distribution
Social network capabilities	0.328	-0.490	Normal
Technological factors	0.825	0.441	Normal
Organizational factors	0.829	-0.205	Normal
Social media marketing	-0.827	-0.180	Normal
Trust in management and operations	-0.299	0.903	Normal
Trust in employees	0.754	0.427	Normal
Satisfaction	-0.645	0.650	Normal
Loyalty	-0.859	-0.830	Normal
Brand mental image	0.506	0.590	Normal
Competitive brand value	0.322	-0.883	Normal
Brand communication value	0.236	-0.250	Normal
Brand credit value	0.864	0.103	Normal
Brand value creation	-0.707	-0.422	Normal
Real – fake	0.123	0.055	Normal
Extreme performance	0.385	-0.739	Normal
Being commercial	0.420	0.828	Normal
To be unique	0.612	-0.726	Normal
Rich history	-0.725	-0.419	Normal
Community	-0.273	0.591	Normal
Empowerment	0.302	-0.733	Normal
Brand authenticity	0.066	-0.848	Normal
Customer participation	-0.059	-0.709	Normal
Involvement of suppliers	-0.257	0.156	Normal
Participation of competitors	-0.124	0.515	Normal
Participation of universities	-0.470	0.820	Normal
Participation of experts	0.479	-0.699	Normal
Open innovation	0.576	0.883	Normal

Structural equation modeling was used to develop the structural model of the effect of open innovation and social media marketing on football clubs' brand authenticity with the mediating role of value creation and brand mental image. According to the research hypothesis, the model of the effect of open innovation and social media marketing on football clubs' brand authenticity with the mediating role of value creation and brand mental image has an appropriate fit. To evaluate the

overall model, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was used; a value less than 0.1 or 0.08 for this index is considered appropriate (Hou et al., 2014). Figures 1 and 2 display the structural model of the effect of open innovation and social media marketing on football clubs' brand authenticity with the mediating role of value creation and brand mental image, in two modes: factor loading and t-value.

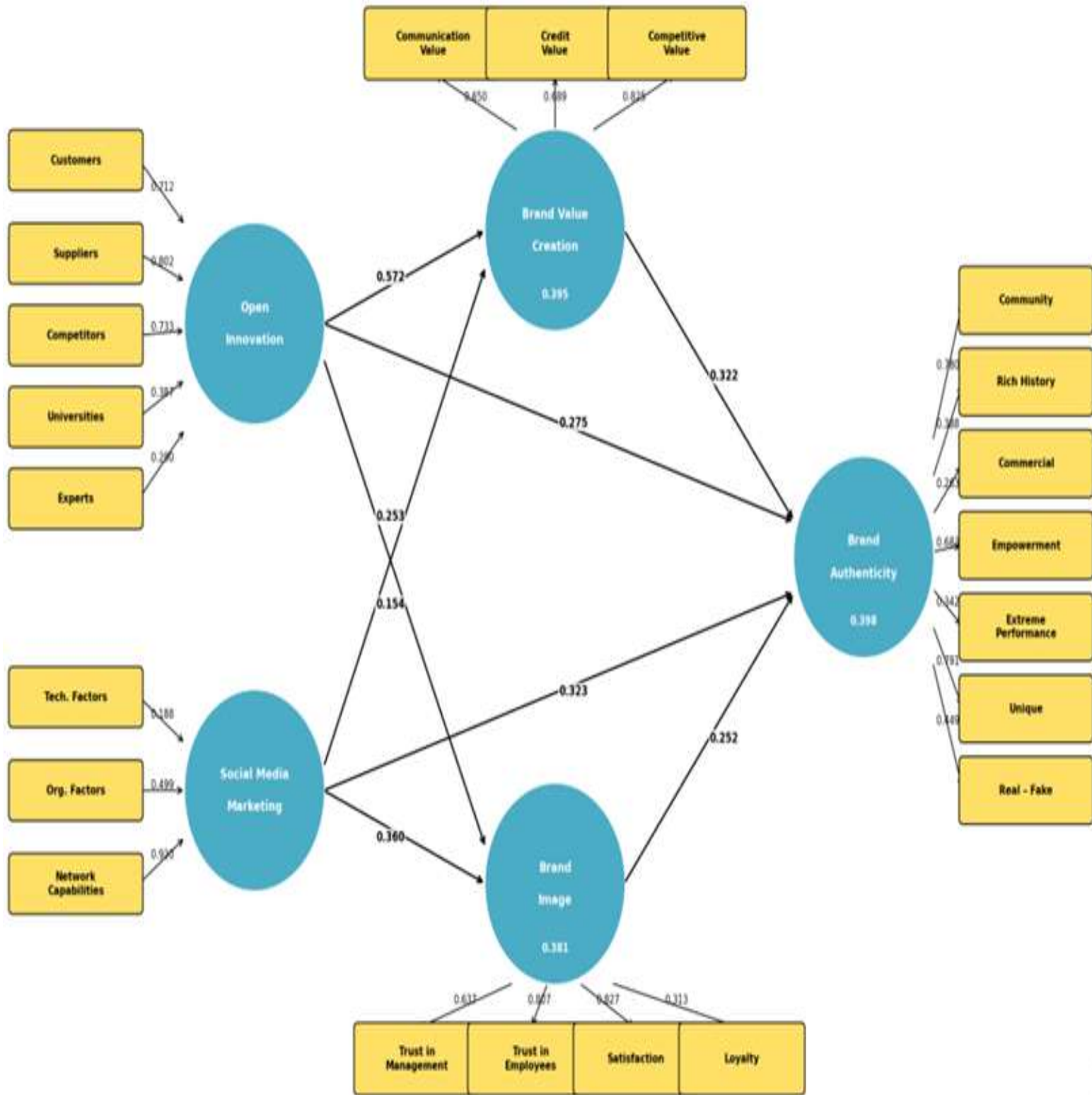


Figure 1. The structural model of the impact of open innovation and social media marketing on the brand authenticity of football clubs with the mediation of value creation and brand mental image in standard mode

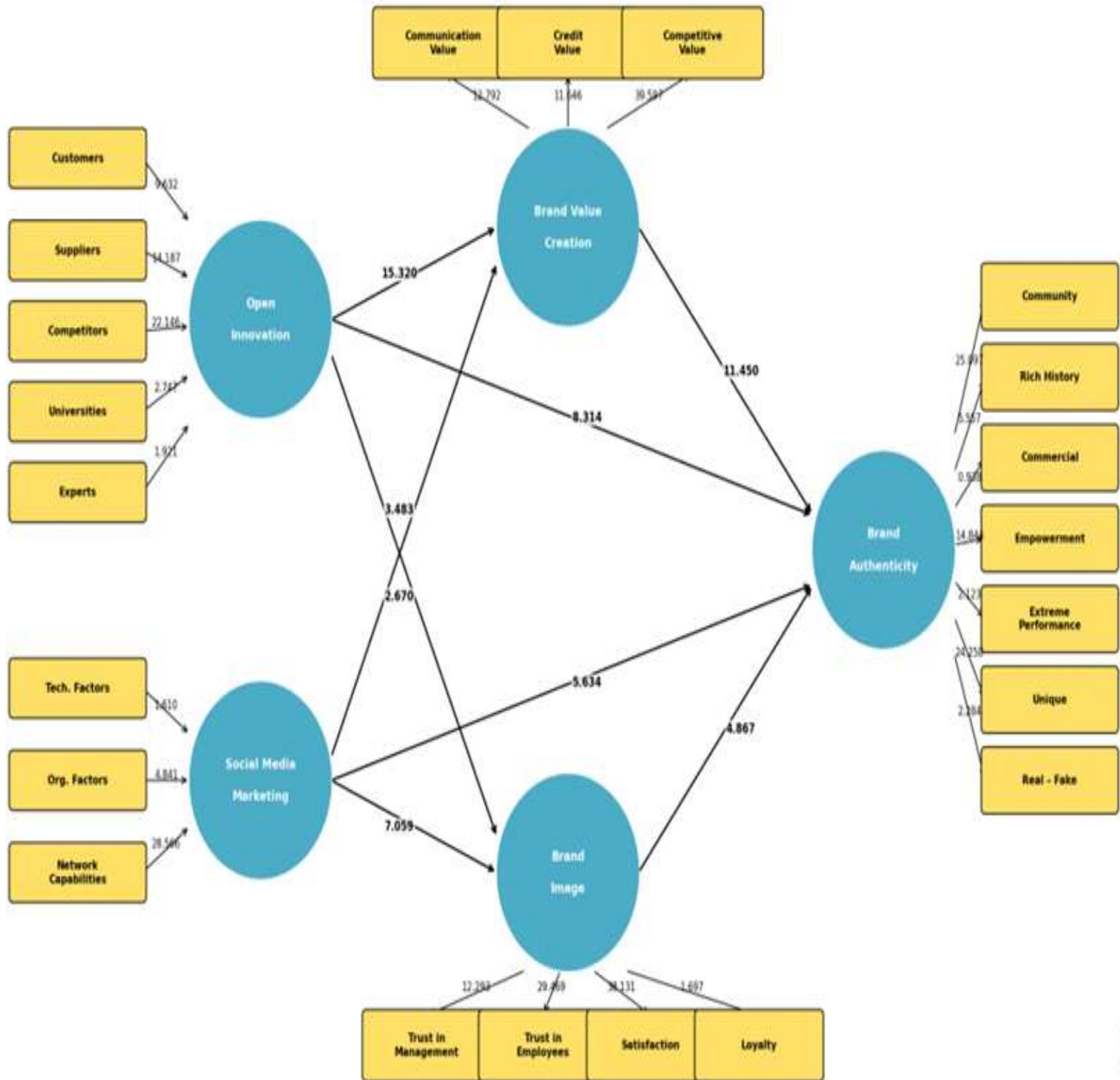


Figure 1. The structural model of the impact of open innovation and social media marketing on the brand authenticity of football clubs with the mediation of value creation and brand mental image in a significant state

Table 3 presents the path analysis of the research variables at a significance level of 0.01.

Table 3. Analysis of model paths

Path	Factor Loading	t-Value	Significance Level
Open innovation → Brand value creation	0.572	15.320	0.001
Open innovation → Brand mental image	0.154	2.670	0.001
Open innovation → Brand authenticity	0.275	8.314	0.001
Social media marketing → Brand value creation	0.253	3.483	0.001

Social media marketing → Brand value creation	0.360	7.059	0.001
Social media marketing → Brand value creation	0.323	5.634	0.001
Brand value creation → Brand authenticity	0.322	11.450	0.001
Brand mental image → Brand authenticity	0.252	4.867	0.001

In the partial least squares (PLS) approach, the quality and fit of the model is assessed using several criteria. The first criterion for evaluating the structural model is the R² coefficients for the endogenous (dependent) latent variables of the model, which indicate the effect of an exogenous variable on an endogenous variable. The values 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 are considered as benchmarks for weak, moderate, and strong values, respectively. The higher the R² for the endogenous constructs in a model, the better the model fit. Henseler et al. (2009) argue that if an endogenous construct in a model is influenced by one or two exogenous constructs, an R² value of 0.33 or above indicates a strong relationship between that construct and the endogenous constructs. The presence of more independent variables leads to an increase in R². Therefore, the more independent variables there are in explaining a dependent variable, the higher the R² needed for a good

model fit. The second criterion for evaluating the structural model is Q², introduced by Stone and Geisser (1975), which indicates the model's predictive power for the dependent variables. They argue that models with acceptable structural fit must be able to predict the indicators of the endogenous constructs. That is, if the relationships between constructs in a model are correctly defined, the constructs will be able to exert sufficient influence on each other's indicators, and through this, hypotheses will be correctly confirmed. Values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 have been determined as weak, moderate, and strong predictive power, respectively. Also, to evaluate the overall model, after the Goodness-of-Fit (GOF) criterion became obsolete, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is used, with a value less than 0.1 or 0.08 being considered appropriate (Hou et al., 2014).

Table 4. The values of the fit indices for the variables of the research model

Variable	Q ²	R ²	SRMR
Brand value creation	0.395	0.780	
Brand authenticity	0.398	0.835	0.807
Brand mental image	0.381	0.619	

As According to Table 3, the obtained values for the Q² index are greater than 0.35 (strong). Furthermore, the R² values are in the strong range,

and the SRMR value is also less than 0.1, indicating the appropriate quality of the tested model.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This The results showed that the model of the effect of open innovation and social media marketing on football clubs' brand authenticity with the mediating role of value creation and brand mental image has an appropriate fit. This finding was consistent with the findings of Rahimi Kalour and Dehghani (2021), Seif Allahi and Dehghani (2021), Monazami et al. (2020), Salvati et al. (2019), and Osorio et al. (2023). In general, it can be said that open innovation and social media

marketing have a significant impact on football clubs' brand authenticity and can contribute to value creation and brand mental image. Open innovation refers to operations that lead to collaboration with the club's external stakeholders, creating new values and improving existing processes. These collaborations can include interaction with fans, cooperation with business partners, collaboration with technology firms and football-related companies, and exchange of

knowledge and experience with other clubs. Open innovation allows clubs to use external resources, gain access to new technical and managerial knowledge, and apply creative solutions to their activities. These innovations can lead to major improvements in the club's development process, team performance, fan experience, and improvement of the club's management systems and processes. As a result, open innovation can strengthen brand authenticity and help the club be recognized in the market and among fans as an innovative and pioneering brand. Social media marketing is one of the powerful tools in advertising and communicating with fans (Nazarpour et al., 2022). These networks allow clubs to share engaging and attractive content with fans, publish important news and information, and interact with fans. Marketing on social media can help clubs strengthen their relationship with fans and meet their needs. Furthermore, these networks enable clubs to build a strong and authentic mental image of themselves and emphasize brand authenticity. Continuous and effective communication with fans on social media creates a sense of satisfaction and loyalty in fans, leading them to trust clubs as a strong and responsive brand. Furthermore, brand value creation can have a direct impact on the intensity of the effect of open innovation and social media marketing. A strong and valuable brand facilitates marketing and innovation for the club. Brand value creation encompasses factors such as identity, values, commitment to quality, honesty, and transparency. Clubs that have a strong and authentic brand and maintain these values in all aspects of their activities will have the greatest impact on open innovation and social media marketing. The club's values and identity help clubs create content that aligns with their values and share it with fans. Also, brand authenticity makes the club's interactions on social media appear more credible and trustworthy, creating a closer relationship with fans. Brand mental image helps clubs establish themselves in the minds of fans as a specific and unique brand. A strong and authentic mental image

of the club attracts fans toward the club and connects them to the club and its brand identity. Moreover, the club's brand mental image can lead to positive improvements in fan decision-making related to cooperation with the club, financial support, and fan experience. The club's mental image can create a sense of satisfaction and trust in fans toward the club and also make marketing interactions and open innovation on social media more effective. Fans who have a positive mental image of the club in their minds pay more attention to the club's content and actions and actively participate in interacting with it. In general, open innovation and social media marketing, through their mutual effects, strengthen the brand authenticity of football clubs and allow clubs to be recognized in the market as a strong, innovative, and responsive brand. Value creation and brand mental image play an important role in facilitating the impact of these processes and improving their effectiveness. By correctly perceiving the role of these factors, clubs can adopt appropriate marketing and innovation strategies to improve brand authenticity and enhance their position in the market and among fans. Therefore, it is recommended that football clubs prioritize maintaining their unique and distinctive identity compared to other clubs and develop an executive plan for this purpose. This identity can include the club's specific colors, logo, slogan, and values. These clubs should also strengthen their two-way communication with fans. Effective communication with fans and creating a positive experience for them can strengthen brand authenticity. Providing unique and special experiences for fans, such as events and interactive activities, can enhance the connection between fans and the club. Given the finding that fan and stakeholder participation in important processes and decisions can contribute to brand value creation, football clubs should provide necessary support to fan bases and, while appointing appropriate individuals to manage these bases, use the fan base's opinions in club decision-making.



5. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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