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INTERNET MARKETING IN SUCCESSFUL FOOTBALL CLUBS IN IRAN AND EUROPE

***Zahra Beigomi**

Sport Management, Department of Physical Education, Zahedan University of Medical Sciences and Health Services, Zahedan, Iran

**Author for Correspondence*

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the status of Internet marketing and evaluate quality of websites of successful football clubs in Iran and Europe. The research method was descriptive that was conducted based on website quality evaluation model of Miranda *et al.*, (2009) in sport environments. It reviewed accessibility, speed, navigation capability and content of the websites. Professors in management and sport management field conducted validity and weighting of the model factors. The research sample consisted 30 websites of successful football clubs in Iran's Premier League and European major leagues including Premier League in England, Bundesliga in Germany, La Liga in Spain, Serie A in Italy and Le Champion ate in France. The research results showed that except in communicational features and speed of access, websites of Iran's football clubs had lower quality in other factors (transactional features, informational features, promotional features and navigation capability on website) than successful websites of football clubs in Europe. Based on the index, among the 30 studied websites, websites of Chelsea and Zobahan clubs had the highest (WAI) and the least quality respectively. Therefore, it is recommended to managers of football clubs in Iran's Premier League that use marketing opportunities effectively that the media has provided for them to flow money and communicate with fans and supporters by developing comprehensive policies and strategies.

Keywords: *Internet Marketing, Website, Successful Clubs, Football*

INTRODUCTION

Internet has become a useful tool by breaking place dimension that transfer data regardless geographical boundaries (Arabnarmi, 2010). Increasing Internet growth, and consequently, developing e-business worldwide increased importance of websites, as which they play an inevitable role in e-communication between organizations and institutions with customers (Sohrabi and Abedin, 2007). By increasing number of Internet users to 1.04 billion people in recent years, there has been created the belief in many areas of business that websites can offer huge marketing opportunities. Kiang and Chi (2001) classified benefits of Internet marketing in three channels: communicational benefits, transactional benefits and distribution benefits. Communicational benefits include improving data of product and price, permanent access to services, lower cost of communication, interaction and possibility of providing data based on customer request, immediate updating stocks, timely technical support, rapid response to customers' inquiries and orders based on customer needs. Transactional benefits include access to virtual store for all users, possibility of sub-transactions, reducing human errors, reducing cycle time of preparations, possibility of order distribution and sales for all customers. Distribution benefits include reducing waiting time to receive digital goods and services and following orders by customers.

Another advantage of Internet exchange goods is lack of indispensable rules and the imposed restrictions by governments for the clubs in such transactions. By eliminating intermediaries, direct purchase via Internet has reduced cost price of goods for consumer and more profitability for club (Miranda *et al.*, 2009). Ottman (1996) argues that rather than a media to buy and sell goods, Internet is an information media that provides the updated information on club news, its features, players' info, report of results of matches, club history for fans (Kriemadis *et al.*, 2010). In recent years, improving website quality has been important. If website quality is examined in terms of notification, there will be some factors that increase website quality such as enrichment of website content by creating hyperlink texts, proper

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response time to users and search engines. According to Wan, providing information as well as friendly and customer-oriented relationships with buyers play an important role to increase website quality. Thus, easy of using website for users, understanding issues easily, providing issue-related information on website, number of communicational channels with subject (the related links), competitive advantage compared to similar websites, innovation and adaptability of images related to purchase topic are matters that customers of electronic services consider them as quality (Mamaghani, 2010).

Website attraction also plays an important role to time of remaining user and increasing his/her trend to search in the website. Capability of using website is a vital condition for survive. If using a website is difficult, it is unreliable or questions of users are not answered, users will leave the website (Haghighi Nasab and Tabein, 2009).

Also, designing website is an issue that greatly depends on its use and needs of users. If there are considered not user needs in designing website or if the needs are not identified clearly, we should not expect a proper efficiency for the website (Arabnarmi, 2010). Tate *et al.*, (2007), Fride (2007), Tsai and Chai (2004) and Dolani (2009) used the following variables to evaluate quality of websites in universities: targeted, quality of information, access speed, website authors, characteristics, links, interactivity, security, services, user privacy, realism, updating, topic coverage, integrity, academic, satisfaction, user-friendly, efficiency, search engine and content; while Dragulanscu (2002) and Ameli (2006) used them to determine general features of websites (Tate *et al.*, 2007; Fride, 2007; Tsai and Chai, 2004; Dolani and Hosseini Nasab, 2009; Dragulanscu, 2002; Ameli, 2006).

In a research, Mamaghani (2010) considered the following key factors influencing quality of websites offering online shopping services for customers of RAJA Co: content, design, overall security of website and purchase incentives. He found a significant relationship between qualities of website with customer attitudes to online shopping. In this study, information about company and its services had the highest ranking; and multilingual website had the lowest ranking (Mamaghani, 2010). On the other hand, the world of sport experiences a new era at the beginning of the third millennium. Rapid and extensive developments and spending millions of dollars in all sport aspects have considered using methods and techniques in sport marketing (Yousefi *et al.*, 2007).

Undoubtedly, football is the most popular sport activity among sport courses with regular matches worldwide (Ramezaninejad *et al.*, 2009). Maybe a decade ago, no one could claim with certainty that football has entered a new era of business. But today, investment to develop youth sport, stadium, facilities, the trained business managers, trade and marketing infrastructures, brand development and considerable revenue from various sources suggests that football has become a big business.

According to João Havelange, head of FIFA, football's annual financial turnover in 1997 was \$ 250 billion. Many football clubs gain millions of dollars in profit from ticket sales, television rights, sponsors and etc. The rapid growth of Internet and its popularity has provided the opportunity for many football clubs to use it for developing their business processes (Kriemadis *et al.*, 2010). Using Internet and website, the club can adopt an affordable method to become a leading club in market, production, delivery and service (Haghighi Nasab *et al.*, 2009).

In Iran, football is one of the most common and the most popular sport with the highest athletes and audiences comparing with other sport courses (Ramezaninejad *et al.*, 2009). Our football clubs should also consider marketing opportunities that this powerful medium provides for them to flow revenues, communicate with fans and sponsors and add value to available marketing activities effectively. The question that arises here is that how much success of football clubs in Iran comparing with successful world football clubs? Have our clubs been able use websites to provide facilities such as ticket sales, buy and purchase products, databases' marketing and communicate with their supporters? Is Internet used as an information medium for fans of football clubs and inform them on their activities, products and services in Iran? To search answers to the questions and to review the carried out local investigations, there was found very little research related to Internet marketing in field of sport.

The obtained findings by Yousefi *et al.*, (2006) about examining the status of sport marketing through Internet with emphasis on 4P elements showed no significant difference between the opinions of experts

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with sport marketers about Internet marketing impact on 4P elements (product, distribution, promotion, price). They believe that Internet has a significant impact on sports marketing equations (Yousefi, 2007). Gholamian and Shajie (2006) studied website situation of Iran's sport organizations and federations. They found that Iranian sport organizations and federations are poor in providing information sources and their websites on Internet are nor regular and based on a codified planning and policy (Gholamian and Shajie, 2006).

Examining the quality of websites of physical education faculties in universities of Tehran from perspective of students in the conducted research by Arabnarmi (2010) showed a significant difference between students' expectations and with the current situation of the websites (Arabnarmi, 2010).

By reviewing the conducted foreign studies, in a research, Miranda *et al.*, (2009) evaluated websites of the best European football clubs quantitatively. This research investigated and compared quality of websites based on Web Assessment Index (WAI) as well as factors such as accessibility, speed, navigation on website and content. Accordingly, Lazio Football Club (Italy) and Catania Football Club (Italy) had the highest and the lowest quality value respectively. However, among the compared countries (England, Spain, Italy and portuguese), football clubs in England and Italy had the best and lowest website quality respectively (Miranda *et al.*, 2009).

Kriemadis *et al.*, (2010) studied websites of football clubs in Greece and England. They found many differences between the websites. Quality of websites of English football clubs was higher than Greece ones and they have provided more marketing opportunities. The websites were compared in terms of features such as information and communicational characteristics, promotion, sales type, collect user data and website design (Kriemadis *et al.*, 2010).

Kevin *et al.*, (2009) examined effect of websites' content on motivation and modification of consumer attitudes about events, in addition to assess the required information for websites of sporting events. They found that the data increased favorable attitude toward a sport event and desire to enter it (Kevin *et al.*, 2009).

It seems that although Internet marketing had been comprehensively studied in many business parts of the country, but Internet marketing in sport requires more researches, especially in football. Despite looking at local studies, as there was not found a similar study, therefore, the present research was conducted to assess and compare the status quo of websites of successful clubs in Iran Premier Football League with football clubs in Europe.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodology

The research method was descriptive that was conducted using non-participatory approach of websites. The purpose of non-participatory observation is to observe and record phenomena without involving observer. This reduces risk of investigator bias. According to Best, if observations are frequently recorded by a researcher as well as by different observers independently, its validity and reliability will be confirmed (Kriemadis *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, to ensure reliability of the research results, there were asked from two master expert of Physical Education familiar with English language, computer and Internet as well as strong relationship with football to record their observations on websites over three separate visits during one month (September, 2012). If there were differences between assessors' observations, a third party would evaluate the websites.

Statistical population of the recent research consisted of 30 websites of successful football clubs in Iran Super-League and major European leagues including England Premier League, Bundesliga in Germany, La Ligain Spain, Serie A in Italy and Le Champion ate in France. In this study, the term of successful refers to clubs that have put in place 1-5 of their leagues over three seasons (2009-2010, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012) with the most attendance in Europe and Asia Football Champion Cup on the mentioned seasons.

Table 1 shows the selected clubs that their official websites have been evaluated and compared on this research.

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Table 1: List of the Evaluated Football Clubs in the Research

Iran	Britain	Spain	Italy	Germany	France
Sepahan	Manchester United	RealMadrid	AC Milan	Bayern Munich	Lyon
Esteghlal Tehran	Arsenal	Barcelona	Inter Milan	Bayer Leverkusen	Lille
Persepolis	Manchester City	Valencia	Napoli	Borussia Dortmund	Marseille
Tractor Sazi Tabriz	Tottenham	Atletico Madrid	Lazio	Schalke 04	Paris Saint Germain
Zobahan Isfahan	Chelsea	Sevia	Juventus	Werder Bremen	Montpellier

Conceptual model of the recent research is based on the model of Miranda et al (2009) in sport environment. This model determines four major categories to assess quality of club's website: accessibility, speed, navigation and content of website (Figure 1).

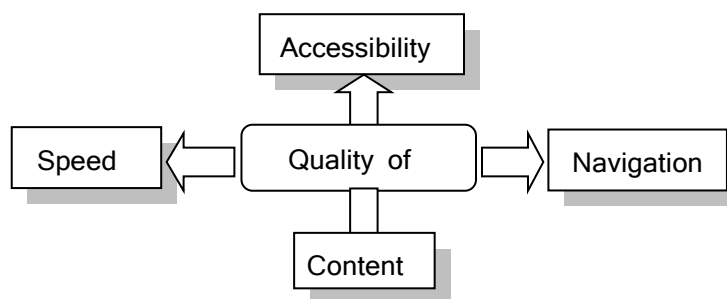


Figure 1: Evaluation Model for Quality of Football Clubs' Website

Each of the above factors has sub-factors. This model was previously used to quantitative evaluation of websites on 200 largest Spanish companies and more recently, in Spanish banks (Miranda *et al.*, 2006). According to research criteria of Kriemadis *et al.*, (2010) to compare websites of football clubs in Greek and England as well as by reviewing previous conducted studies on general criteria of evaluating indices in website, the mentioned model was completed and there was designed a new index, so-called Web Assessment Index (WAI) as the research tool.

According to Evans and Kiang, a website assessment tool should include five components: classification, factors, weights, rating and final score (Evans *et al.*, 1999; Kiang and Chi, 2001). After determining subset factors of the mentioned model, there was asked from ten professors in management and sports management courses to distribute scores 1-100 between the above-mentioned factors to ensure validity and weighting of each factor.

Accordingly, there was divided 100 points among four main factors, based on relative importance of each factor in the model. Then their subsets were weighted independently. It is noteworthy that factor of speed access to the site can be affected by factors such as its connection time and traffic. To minimize impact of the factors, the websites were reviewed using popular browsers (Mozilla Firefox) when the traffic was less.

To measure this, of each site was frequently reviewed on different days and there was calculated average access speed (using chronometer). Results of observing the websites were compared and analyzed using descriptive statistic techniques.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The research results showed that website of Chelsea Football Club (UK) has the highest WAI (96.60%), in the other words; it has the highest quality based on the research model. ZobAhan Football Club (Isfahan) has the lowest WAI (35.55%).

Table 2 shows WAI of the studied clubs and its factors. Meanwhile, Diagram1 show results of WAI in terms of the studied countries as percentage. As seen, websites of England football clubs (WAI= 90.75%) and Iran football clubs (WAI= 48.10%) had the highest and the lowest WAI respectively. After England, football clubs in Germany, Italy, Spain and France are followed respectively, in terms of website quality.

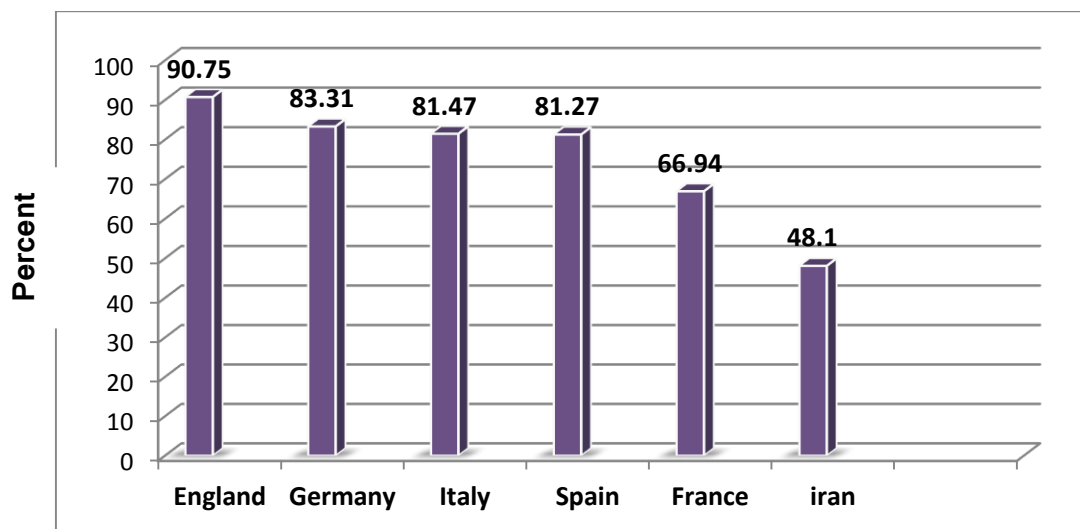


Diagram 1: Web Assessment Index (WAI) in Terms of Country

Comparing content of the studied websites showed that websites of England football clubs have the highest quality and index value (WAI=95.16%) among the considered countries; while websites of Iranian football clubs have lowest quality of informational features (WAI=33.99%). Diagram 2 shows the results.

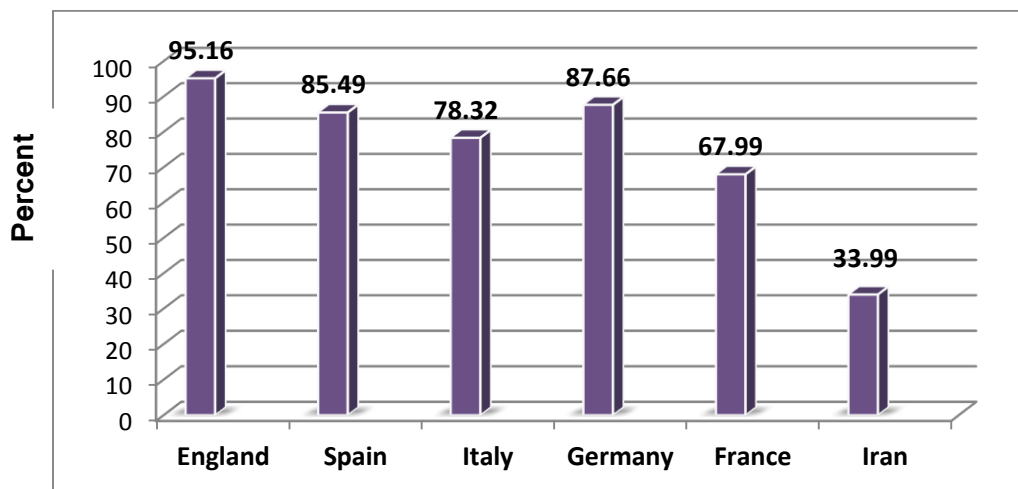


Diagram 2: Informational Features of Websites in Terms of Country

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Table 2: Values of Wai and its Aspects on Football Clubs as Percentage

Club	WAI	Speed	Accessibility	Navigation	Content	Informational Features	Transactional Features	Communication Features	Promotional Features	Design Features
Chelsea	96.60	93.33	100	91.66	97.40	97.50	100	91.66	100	100
Arsenal	95.05	88.33	100	91.66	95.77	96.66	100	85	100	100
Ac Milan	91.30	88.33	100	71.66	91.23	92.50	85	90	100	100
Manchester United	39.70	86.66	100	56.16	94.80	90.16	97.50	78.33	100	100
Barcelona	89.15	65	100	75	92.53	95.83	90	83.33	100	100
Werder Bremen	88.75	91.66	100	83.33	88.63	89.16	90	76.66	100	100
Juventus	87.90	76.66	100	91.66	87.40	86.66	97.50	66.66	100	96.66
Real Madrid	86.90	73.33	100	89.58	86.68	83.33	98.75	66.66	100	100
Tottenham	85.86	85	100	66.55	89.28	89.16	96.25	71.66	100	100
Manchester City	85.55	80	100	83.33	85.38	93.33	82.50	63.66	100	95.83
Bayern Munich	84.90	73.33	100	91.66	83.76	90.83	80	65	91.66	100
Bayer Leverkusen	84.65	73.33	100	75	86.68	89.16	97.50	56.66	91.66	100
Inter Milan	82.75	100	100	58.33	84.09	86.66	85	70	91.66	95.83
Sevilla	81.60	93.33	100	81.25	79.54	89.16	58.75	73.33	100	95.83

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Paris Saint - German	80.0										
	5	88.33	100	50	82.79	81.66	87.50	70	87.50	100	
Borussia Dortmund	79.4										
	5	95	100	58.33	80.19	85.83	86.25	66.66	58.33	87.50	
	78.8										
Shalke o4	0	55	100	66.66	81.16	83.33	80	70	100	83.33	
Atletico de Madrid	76.3										
	0	88.33	100	66.66	75.32	82.50	75	53.33	87.50	91.66	
Napoli	76	93.33	100	83.33	72.72	66.66	66.25	78.33	83.33	100	
	73.2										
Valencia	5	83.33	100	58.33	73.05	76.66	62.50	70	83.33	87.50	
	73.0										
lyon	5	96.66	100	50	73.05	82.50	75	51.66	50	95.83	
	68.8										
Lazio	0	88.33	100	41.66	69.48	59.16	75	66.66	83.33	95.83	
	68.4										
Marseille	0	73.33	100	50	63.83	72.50	57.50	71.66	62.50	87.50	
	67.5										
Perspolis	5	71.66	100	77.08	63.63	51.66	48.75	93.33	66.66	95.83	
	58.2										
Losc Lille	5	63.33	100	62.50	54.87	63.33	47.50	26.22	79.16	83.33	
Tractorsazi Tabriz	56.0										
	5	88.33	100	37.50	53.57	36.66	63.75	50	75	91.66	
	54.9										
Montpellier	5	86.66	100	56.25	49.35	40	60	36.66	58.33	83.33	
	40.7										
Esteghlal Fooladsepahan	5	100	100	47.91	31.81	27.5	2.50	43.33	62.90	91.66	
	40.6										
n Zobahan Esfahan	0	51.66	100	52.08	34.41	28.33	13.75	60	12.50	91.66	
	35.5										
	5	96.66	100	54.16	23.70	10.80	31.25	33.33	4.16	58.33	

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Diagram 3 compares transactional features of websites in the considered countries. Among the six countries, websites of football clubs in England (WAI= 95.25%) and Iran (WAI= 32%) had the highest and lowest quality respectively.

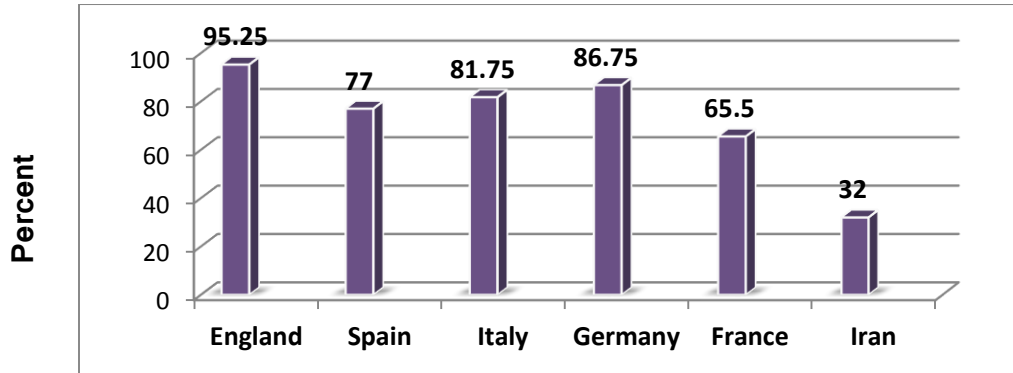


Diagram 3: Transactional Features of Websites in Terms of Country

As seen in Diagram 4, communicational features of websites of football clubs in England (WAI= 78.06%) and France (WAI= 51.32%) had the highest and lowest quality respectively. Meanwhile, WAI for communicational features of football website clubs in Iran was 55.99%.

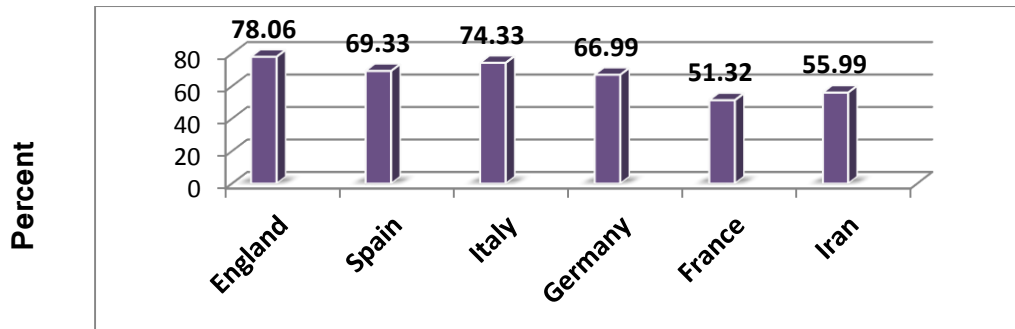


Diagram 4: Communicational Features of Websites in Terms of Country

In terms of quality of Communicational features, websites of football clubs in England (WAI= 100%) and Iran (WAI= 44.16%) had the highest and lowest quality respectively.

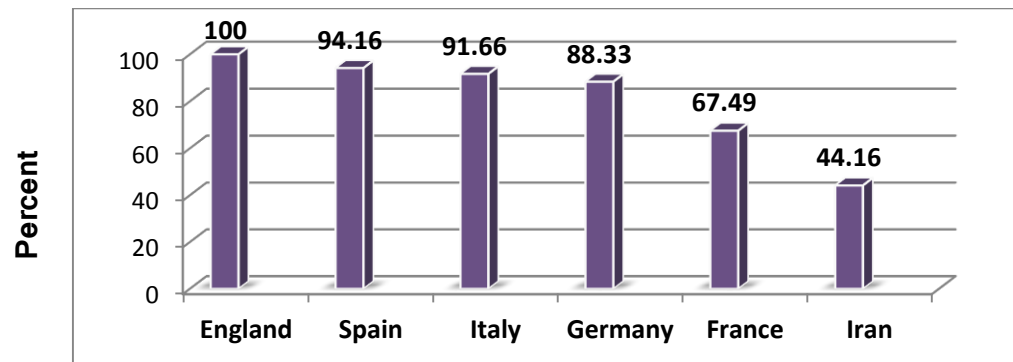


Diagram 5: Promotional Features of Websites in Terms of Country

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Diagram 6 shows that in terms of Navigation capabilities, websites of football clubs in England (WAI= 77.49%) and Iran (WAI= 53.74%) had the highest and lowest quality respectively.

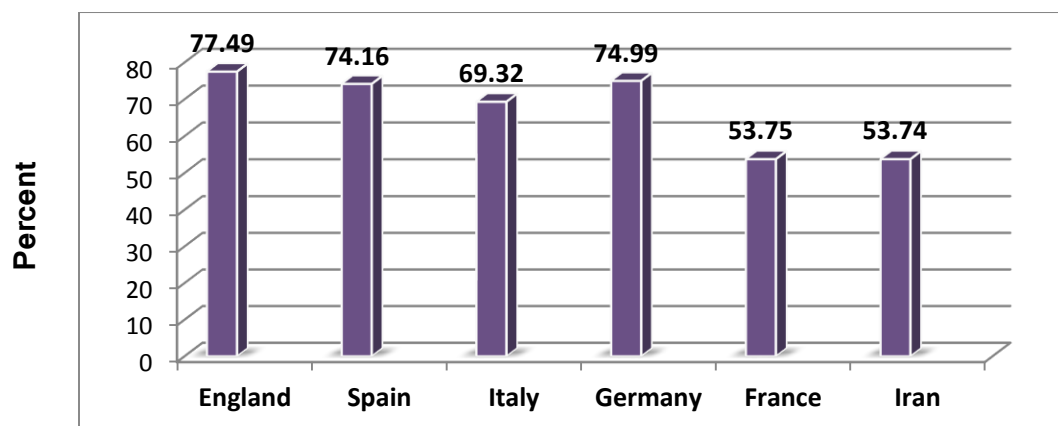


Diagram 6: Navigation Capabilities of Websites in Terms of Country

Diagram 7 shows distribution of speed of access to websites in studied countries. Speed of access to websites of football clubs in Germany and Italy allocated minimum time and maximum time to themselves respectively.

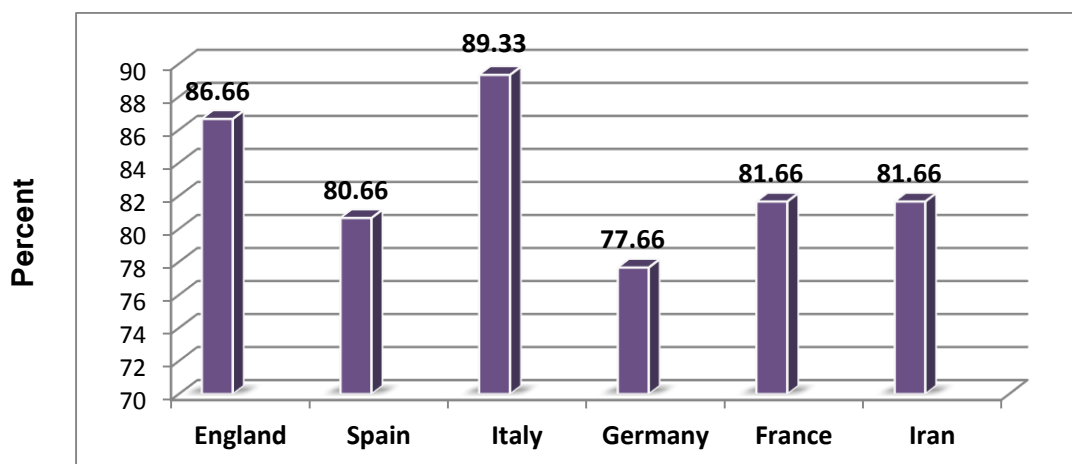


Diagram 7: Speed of Access to Websites in Terms of Country

Discussion

The aim of this research was to assess the status quality of websites of successful football clubs in Europe and Iran. As seen in the research results, websites of Iranian football clubs had lower quality than websites of successful football clubs in Europe, except in communicational features of speed access to websites. Among 30 studied websites, Chelsea Football Club gained the highest WAI. It is not consistent with the obtained results by Miranda *et al.*, (2009). In their study, websites of Lazio Football Club and Chelsea Football Club were ranked in the first and the second place respectively. As many large organizations constantly update their website and offer new services to their users, perhaps reason of this difference is possible improvement of quality of Chelsea's website the previous and present studies. On the other hand, in line with the obtained results by Miranda *et al.*, (2009), websites of England football clubs had the highest WAI among the surveyed countries.

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The recent research was conducted based on the four-factor model of website quality (WAI). In navigation capability of the websites, there were investigated accessibility to different parts of sites using factors such as the fixed menu, keyword search and website map. Among the studied websites, 77.33% of them had keywords search; while only about half of the websites (56.66%) provided their sitemap. The sitemap not increases its rank in search engines, but it is considered as guidance for visitors and prevents their confusion. As its name implies, sitemap should show Navigation that visitors can pass to the site. Search engines monitor websites using sitemap. Therefore, sitemap is one of necessary factors for e-commerce.

The fixed menu offers quick access to different parts of each page, especially on sites with a lot of contents. In this study it was seen that unfortunately, most of the surveyed websites had no a fixed menu on their English version and sometimes, there were seen major differences between menu of original language versions (native) with English ones. In this case, the researchers were repeatedly forced to check club's original website and translate it into English and Persian that was time-consuming. It seems that it is not pleasant for foreign clubs' fans who visit their favorite club website and they cannot achieve detailed information about the club.

As mentioned previously, speed of access to the websites was measured using chronometer until their loading completely. In this sector, websites of Iranian football clubs had better average than football clubs in Germany and Spain. It can be considered lack of videos and images with high size and graphics on websites of Iranian football clubs as the reason of loading acceleration. Some studies have shown a significant correlation between website speed of loading and user satisfaction. Pages of websites with slow loading dissatisfy users (Miranda *et al.*, 2009). This is important for websites offering online services that should be taken in club's marketing plans.

Website multilingual of the clubs was one of important factors in informational features. Among 25 websites of football clubs in Europe, websites of AC Milan, Inter Milan and Manchester United had more than seven languages; while websites of Tottenham, Montpellier and Lazio football clubs were single-language. Among Iranian football clubs, websites of Esteghlal Tehran and Zobahan Isfahan were single-language (Persian).

It should be admitted that ability to communicate with new international audiences in their own language increases sales and awareness of brand, products and services. In fact, by adding a new language to website, sales volume of the club will be increased 100% (Miranda *et al.*, 2009).

Today, many football clubs attempt to promote themselves worldwide. In particular, those clubs that attract players from other countries can provide an appropriate opportunity to offer their products and services to fans of those countries by adding another language on their website; as a result, they can increase selling their products.

Providing full information on players, history and structure of club, the latest news, how to travel and general information on ticket sales, prices and local stores were remarkable in websites of some clubs such as Chelsea, Arsenal, AC Milan, Manchester United and Barcelona. In this sector, Iranian clubs' website had much lower average compared with European clubs.

In transactional features of the websites, which it is the most important sector in terms of marketing activities, there were investigated items such as possibility of ticketing, goods exchange and club products as online as well as facilities including possibility of online reservation of services, hospitality, tourism tours, mobile services, the disabled etc.

As seen, websites of Iranian football clubs had much lower mean than websites of football clubs in Europe and they provided far fewer opportunities for marketing their products and services. Unfortunately, no club had online ticketing, except Tabriz Tractor Football Club and Zobahan Football Club.

Websites of Tabriz Tractor Football Club and Persepolis Football Club were websites that provide online buying products for their users. However, websites of all 25 successful football clubs in Europe provided possibility of attracting more customers by providing a wide range of commodities needed by users (men, women and children). It seems that they had enjoyed from the potential of online marketing.

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None of Iranian football clubs offered hospitality services to their fans, or at least they did not inform on their websites. Internet marketing programs of football clubs should be based on full knowledge of market and state of competitors; otherwise, there is no success for the programs. Knowledge of environmental factors can affect predicting behavior of users. Perhaps, institutionalizing culture of purchasing through Internet is reason of fewer tendencies of clubs' managers to develop marketing strategies of clubs in this sector.

According to the results of the provided thesis by Shekarriz (2004), Yousefi *et al.*, (2007) considered aims of using Internet from perspective of users in Iran as follows: 47% for recreation, 18% for access science resources, 34% for news and 1% for businesses and trade (13). In a research, by examining attitudes of Iran's national team coaches to apply science and technology in sports, Mohammadi *et al.*, (2012) stated that despite positive attitude of elite coaches towards using sport technologies, they are not generalized on competitive sport environments, even when using IT for other activities (Mohammadi *et al.*, 2012).

Although it is expected that this pattern has been changed in recent years and due to develop Internet applications. However, managers should exploit the great provided opportunities by the medium for revenue, communicate with fans and supporters and adding value to club's brand using a careful planning, considering ways to enhance security of online purchases, providing the required goods, services and facilities for their fans and providing incentives to promote purchase motivation. Clubs can achieve long-term and bilateral relationships with their customers and a relationship based on recognition and loyalty through the recognized brand by enhancing communicational features of their websites (Nikookar *et al.*, 2008). In this study, quality of communicational features of websites of Iranian football clubs was lower than England, Spain, Italy and Germany; while it was higher than France.

Promotional features of websites of Iranian football clubs was ranked in a lower position than European clubs. Successful clubs in Europe introduced their sponsors completely by representing them on their homepage. Recognizing club brand and ability of audiences to recall the advertised brand are main objectives of online advertising. The created attitudes among users toward advertisements will influence consumers' attitudes to brand and purchase intentions (Abbasi and Mohammedian, 2007).

In physical characteristics of the websites, updating was another important studied item. All websites were updated and provided the latest information for visitors, except website of Zobahan Football Club. Although the recent research had limitations on collecting data in a limited time period and as web is a dynamic and changing media, it seems that repeating the research on other times will show likely different results. However, it seems that the used conceptual model in this study has high flexibility and can identify strengths and weaknesses of the websites by repeating the test at other times.

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