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A content analysis of visual and textual elements in Esteghlal fan pages on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the representation of fan identity associated with Esteghlal Tehran Football Club on Instagram. Employing Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework, the research is grounded in Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory. The sample comprises two highly viewed posts from prominent Esteghlal fan pages during the early days of the new year, each containing an image and accompanying caption. Findings reveal that, despite critical and occasionally harsh language directed at the coaching staff, players, and club management, fans' efforts are not aimed at severing ties with team identity but rather at reconstructing it amidst crisis. Themes such as "feelings of despair over continued failures," "desire for introspection within the in-group," "blaming sub-elements to preserve group self-esteem," and "maintaining in-group solidarity through protest language" underscore the complex dynamics of fandom when facing identity threats. Overall, the study highlights Instagram as a potent platform for the emergence of new and visual forms of collective football fan identity in Iran.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of identity, given its multifaceted and dynamic nature, has consistently been a focal point in social science research (Jenkins et al., 2008). Football fandom serves as a compelling lens through which to examine identity, as the sport is widely accessible and deeply ingrained in societal culture (Giulianotti, 2002). In Iran, football holds significant popularity, with clubs like Esteghlal Tehran boasting substantial fan bases. These fan communities offer rich contexts for exploring social identity, particularly as it relates to team allegiance. Historically, media—both print and visual—despite

persistent constraints on innovation, including infrastructural and regulatory barriers in Iran, have played a role in shaping fan identities (Khodabin et al., 2023). The advent and proliferation of social media platforms, notably Instagram, have further transformed the landscape (see for example Bahmani et al., 2025; Shahghasemi & Prosser, 2019), providing fans with interactive spaces to express and negotiate their identities. Such platforms exemplify the broader digitization of consumer engagement, where algorithmic personalization reshapes collective identity construction (Toosi et al., 2024). Consequently, football in Iran has evolved into an

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interactive environment where national and local identities are both reflected and contested, with team successes or failures exerting profound psychological impacts on supporters.

Understanding the interplay between identity and football fandom necessitates a clear definition of identity itself. Individuals strive to cultivate positive social identities, often achieved through favorable comparisons with out-groups, such as rival team supporters. Henri Tajfel emphasizes that group memberships, especially those imbued with symbolic value, are integral to self-definition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within this framework, football fandom emerges as a significant group affiliation through which individuals construct and express both personal and collective identities. Fans often engage with team history, symbols, and fan communities to reinforce a shared "we" identity (Akbari, 2018). Giddens (1991) notes that modern transformations in concepts of time and space have influenced identity formation, suggesting that digital platforms like Instagram play crucial roles in contemporary identity construction. Such technological mediation of identity parallels wider societal trends where digital tools reshape collective behaviors while raising questions about privacy and algorithmic influence (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2021). In the realm of football fandom, these platforms have reshaped fan interactions and expressions. Given these considerations, this study seeks to examine how Instagram fan pages associated with Esteghlal Tehran Football Club represent fan identities, particularly in relation to the club's history and current events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research linking social identity and football fandom underscores the multifaceted and dynamic nature of fan identities, influenced by social, media, ethnic, and psychological factors. In Iran, fan identity has transitioned from individualistic expressions, such as blogging, to more participatory and visual engagements on platforms like Instagram. A network-based study analyzing media consumption behaviors of football fans during El Clásico on Facebook revealed that team identity, delineated through "us" versus "them" narratives, significantly shapes fan discourse (Latififard & Safari, 2021). Content analysis of Esteghlal fan blogs indicated that these platforms

functioned more as individual fan magazines, lacking broader interactive communities (Dehghan & Hasani, 2021). Research on Iranian fan pages dedicated to global players like Ronaldo and Messi highlighted a "glocal" fan culture, where national identity and the Persian language coexist with international interactions (Bicharanlou & Shams, 2021). A survey examining the impact of social networks (Telegram and Instagram) on fan identity found that these platforms positively and significantly enhance fan identity and sports participation (Moradi, 2020). This reflects technology's dual capacity to democratize participation while introducing new challenges of data vulnerability and unequal access—a paradox observed across digital transformations in various social domains (Toosi et al., 2025). Analysis of chants and slogans from Tractor Sazi Tabriz fans revealed that emphasizing "Azerbaijan" as the homeland is a central identity theme (Aghamohseni, 2023). A review of 29 articles concluded that social media serves as a key avenue for fans to express team allegiance, with fan identity often analyzed through functional and needs-based theories. Content analysis of club social media posts indicated that "star appeal" has a more substantial impact than "team loyalty" in driving fan engagement, with Instagram identified as the fastest-growing platform for fan interaction (Hyatt et al., 2024). Yet in such fast-paced, emotionally charged digital spaces, the absence of media literacy can heighten risk—enabling the spread of glamorized, performative behaviors that may reinforce harmful norms or escalate symbolic tensions within fan communities (Soroori Sarabi, Aرسالani, & Toosi, 2020). A qualitative study on Esteghlal fans' reactions identified two coping strategies in response to team identity threats: emotional responses (e.g., humor and optimism) and problem-focused strategies (e.g., venting and distancing) (Jedikar et al., 2022). Underlying personality traits may also shape how fans respond to group stress, as certain psychological dispositions—such as defensiveness and emotional suppression—are linked to increased social incompatibility and reactive behaviors in high-pressure environments (Jamali, Salehi, & Chorami, 2022). These strategies reflect what media literacy scholars term 'participatory critical engagement' (Hosseini et al., 2025)—the ability to both emotionally process and analytically deconstruct mediated sports narratives while maintaining group solidarity. Structural equation modeling revealed that social

media directly and positively influences team identity and corruption control, with team identity mediating the effect of social media on fan behavior (Souri et al., 2024). This highlights a broader pattern across digitally mediated systems, where meaningful engagement requires users to trust and interpret algorithmically shaped environments—a challenge well-documented in other AI-driven domains, where concerns over explainability, literacy gaps, and ethical clarity complicate user interaction (Tomraee, Hosseini, & Toosi, 2022). An ethnographic study of Liverpool FC's online fan culture demonstrated that social media facilitates the digital transmission of fan habits and contributes to the globalization of collective identity. Analysis of Ankara Gücü fans' tweets identified four identity themes: self-deprecation, nationalism, local attachment, and spectator roles, forming the foundation of digital fan identity (Sayilkan et al., 2021). A conceptual model indicated that active fan participation (likes, comments, posts) on social media directly correlates with strengthened team identity and loyalty. However, engagement styles within digital environments can vary depending on factors such as social role, institutional context, and cultural orientation (Rahmatian, 2025). Similarly, studies on digital and cultural participation suggest that variables like education, ideology, and cultural exposure significantly shape how individuals interpret collective experiences, influencing both emotional investment and the intensity of identification (Mohammadi, Piriyaee, & Sabbar, 2025). Collectively, these studies underscore that digital platforms, particularly Instagram, are not merely channels for expressing team support but are dynamic arenas for the ongoing negotiation and representation of fan identities in relation to team performance, societal contexts, and broader interactions. This digital mediation of identity carries inherent tensions—while enabling unprecedented connectivity, it simultaneously introduces new vulnerabilities in community cohesion and self-presentation (Soroori Sarabi et al., 2023). As digital platforms become more accessible and saturated with competing narratives, meaningful participation increasingly depends on users' ability to critically evaluate content, distinguish credible sources, and interpret symbolic cues—skills that are essential for constructing and negotiating identity in online communities (Arsalani, Rahmatian, & Hosseini, 2025).

More recently, Abdallah and Arth (2024)

examined behavioral differences in social media use between fans of college football and the National Football League (NFL), applying a social identity framework to assess how fan and team identification influence online engagement. Utilizing survey responses from 586 American football fans, the study measured levels of identification alongside self-reported behaviors related to social media consumption, content creation, and sharing. The findings revealed that college football fans exhibited stronger identification with fellow fans and were generally more active across all forms of social media engagement compared to NFL fans. Specifically, fan identification was a stronger predictor of content consumption and creation, while team identification more closely aligned with sharing behaviors across both fan groups. These distinctions suggest that college football fandom may foster a more community-oriented digital culture, while NFL fandom could be more brand-centered. The study contributes to the understanding of nuanced fan dynamics in American football and offers practical implications for sports marketers aiming to tailor digital strategies to specific audience segments.

Doehler (2024) investigated the gendered experiences of women football supporters on X (formerly Twitter), offering an original contribution to the literature on sports fandom and digital interactions. Utilizing survey data from 1,624 women fans of UK-based men's football clubs, the study applied and expanded Pope et al.'s (2022) Model of Men's Performances of Masculinities to interpret the gendered dynamics of online fan engagement. Thematic analysis revealed that while social media serves as a vital space for fostering fan identity and community among women, it also exposes them to persistent gender stereotypes, abuse, and discriminatory rhetoric. Participants recounted strategies for coping with online hostility, including self-censorship and the formation of women-only fan spaces. The study underscored how masculinist norms continue to pervade digital football discourse, constraining women's participation and expression. By refining a theoretical framework and highlighting the need for safer digital environments, the research provides valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and platform regulators seeking to address inequality and harassment in online sports communities.

Kaya, Argan, and Tokay Argan (2024) developed a comprehensive conceptual model to explore how

social media engagement interrelates with team identification and loyalty among football fans. Drawing on data from an online survey of 264 dedicated supporters of three major Turkish Super League clubs, the study operationalized fan engagement through three dimensions: consumption, contribution, and creation. Employing exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis alongside structural equation modeling, the researchers tested seven hypotheses, of which four were supported. The findings revealed that fan engagement on social media—expressed through activities such as liking, sharing, and commenting—was significantly linked to stronger team identification and loyalty behaviors. These interactions were shown to foster a deeper psychological connection to clubs, reinforcing fan allegiance in the digital space. The study provides actionable insights for football club managers and sports marketers by demonstrating the strategic value of tailored social media content in cultivating committed fan communities. It also contributes to the broader discourse on sports marketing by elucidating how digital interactions translate into affective loyalty within fandom.

Romero-Jara, Solanellas, López-Carril, Kolyperas, and Anagnostopoulos (2024) conducted a comparative study to evaluate how football leagues across different global regions utilize social media to engage with fans. Addressing a gap in the literature—particularly the lack of cross-league and multi-platform analyses—the researchers examined 10,772 posts from the official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts of eight prominent football leagues in Europe, South America, and North America. Applying a relationship marketing framework and content analysis methodology, the study assessed engagement patterns relative to post frequency, content format, and platform. The findings challenged the assumption that higher posting frequency leads to greater fan interaction, instead highlighting that the quality and formatting of content are more critical drivers of engagement. Among the platforms analyzed, Instagram consistently generated the highest fan interaction, suggesting it as the most effective medium for leagues aiming to foster online fan communities. This study provides valuable insights for league managers and digital strategists seeking to optimize social media use by focusing on content strategy rather than volume.

Miranda, Gouveia, Di Fátima, and Antunes (2024) investigated the dynamics of hate speech among Portuguese football fans on Facebook, focusing on the official pages of all 18 clubs in the Portuguese League during the first three months of the 2020/2021 season. Using automated data extraction via the Facebook Graph API, the researchers compiled a dataset comprising 5,192 posts and 276,231 comments, generating over 5 million reactions from users. The study aimed to assess the prevalence and nature of hate speech within this digital fan engagement context. Despite the large dataset, the findings indicated a relatively low incidence of hate speech overall. However, the most prevalent forms identified included racism, xenophobia, and expressions of regional antagonism. Notably, these types of comments also garnered the highest levels of user engagement, suggesting a concerning amplification effect. The authors highlighted how Facebook, as a platform, facilitates not only fan interaction but also the circulation of discriminatory rhetoric, albeit at a limited scale. The study contributes to broader discussions on digital hate speech and the role of social media in shaping online fan cultures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Social Identity Theory (SIT) as the primary theoretical framework to analyze the collective behavior and identity representations of Esteghlal Football Club fans on Instagram. Originally developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. These group affiliations—whether based on ethnicity, profession, nationality, or sports fandom—contribute to an individual's sense of belonging and self-worth. The theory emphasizes that individuals strive to achieve a positive social identity, which is often constructed and maintained through favorable comparisons with relevant out-groups.

At the core of SIT lies the distinction between in-groups and out-groups. In the context of football fandom, in-groups are composed of fellow supporters of a given club, while out-groups typically include rival teams and their fans. Tajfel (1981) and Turner (1982) argue that social categorization triggers identification and comparison, processes

which serve to reinforce group cohesion and self-esteem. These processes become particularly salient during moments of crisis, such as poor team performance or internal disputes, when fans are more likely to engage in behaviors aimed at protecting or redefining their group identity.

Esteghlal supporters, as demonstrated in this study, engage in digital identity work that aligns closely with SIT's central propositions. Fans utilize Instagram not only to express allegiance but also to navigate identity threats through internal critique, exclusion of underperforming actors, and reinforcement of symbolic values. This phenomenon echoes the findings of Hunt and Benford (2004), who argue that identity construction within social movements—of which sports fandom is a cultural analogue—often involves both affirming and purging elements of the in-group to maintain symbolic integrity.

Furthermore, Elias and Dunning (2008) emphasize the emotional intensity of sports as a fertile ground for identity formation. Football fandom is not a passive affiliation but an emotionally charged social identity, deeply embedded in ritual, symbolism, and collective memory. When a football team such as Esteghlal underperforms, fans may experience what Mansfield et al. (2020) describe as a “team identity threat,” prompting protective behaviors that manifest through protest, satire, or calls for reform—precisely the kinds of discursive patterns observed in Esteghlal fan posts.

Giddens (1991) contributes further to the understanding of modern identity by emphasizing the reflexive project of the self in late modernity. Digital platforms such as Instagram offer fans a means to continuously reconstruct and negotiate their social identities in real-time. Broader shifts in digital education show how AI-driven technologies are transforming not just delivery methods, but also the formation of engagement, leadership, and identity in online environments (Rahmatian & Sharajsharifi, 2022). Through visual memes, captions, and commentaries, Esteghlal supporters engage in what Polletta (1998) refers to as “narrative identity,” constructing shared understandings of who they are as a group, especially during moments of adversity.

Thematic Analysis is among the most widely used qualitative methods for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) in textual or visual data. It facilitates a nuanced understanding of the latent experiences, beliefs, and meanings embedded within the data. This approach is particularly well-suited to the present research due to its flexibility, compatibility with diverse theoretical frameworks, and applicability to both textual and visual content.

This study draws upon the definition provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) and adopts a deductive approach, focusing on the conceptual underpinnings of Social Identity Theory to guide the extraction of themes. Simultaneously, the analytical design is structured to accommodate emergent themes beyond the initial theoretical framework.

The thematic analysis employed in this study followed the six-phase model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), enabling a systematic and interpretive approach to meaning-making in both textual and visual data. The initial phase involved familiarization with the dataset, during which captions and images from the selected Instagram posts were reviewed multiple times. This iterative process allowed the researcher to develop a deep understanding of the content's context, tone, and the subtle cues related to fan identity embedded in both the verbal and visual components.

In the second phase, initial coding was conducted using an open-coding strategy. For the textual data, phrases, sentences, and linguistic markers that suggested various dimensions of fan identity were assigned specific codes. Simultaneously, the visual data—including photographic composition, facial expressions, symbolism, body language, lighting, graphical elements, and other contextual cues—were analyzed, and each identity-relevant element was semantically coded. These parallel coding procedures ensured that both modalities of communication were meaningfully represented in the analytical framework.

The third phase involved grouping the initial codes into broader thematic categories that captured recurring patterns and conceptual constructs relevant to the research questions. In the fourth phase, these preliminary themes were systematically reviewed to identify semantic overlap or ambiguity. Some themes were refined, merged, or excluded based on internal coherence and relevance to the

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theoretical orientation of the study. This stage ensured that the themes were both empirically grounded and conceptually distinct.

During the fifth phase, each finalized theme was clearly defined and articulated in relation to Social Identity Theory, which served as the guiding conceptual framework. Themes were given descriptive names that encapsulated their analytical essence and clarified their role in illuminating how fan identity is represented and negotiated in the Instagram posts.

In the final phase, the themes were written up and interpreted with direct reference to the original data. The analysis was guided by Social Identity Theory, allowing for a theoretically informed understanding of the meaning structures present in fan discourse. In integrating visual and textual data, a synthesis process was conducted after separate coding had been completed. Corresponding or complementary codes from the two modalities were aligned and interpreted in conjunction to produce a holistic analysis of each post.

To ensure validity and reliability, a portion of the data was recoded after a one-week interval. The researcher then assessed consistency with the initial codes to confirm the stability of the coding framework. Theoretical coherence was maintained throughout the process by continual reference to Social Identity Theory during the theme development and interpretive stages.

The sampling strategy followed a purposeful sampling approach aimed at selecting Instagram content most relevant to the study's objectives. Two prominent fan-operated pages—*smodern*, which represents an analytical-critical perspective, and *esteghlalovers.ir*, which conveys a more emotional-supportive stance—were selected based on their sustained activity during the period from March 10 to April 8. These pages were identified through hashtag searches and prior familiarity with their content patterns, and together they represent a broad spectrum of Esteghlal fan discourse.

One post from each page was selected, both corresponding to Esteghlal's first official match in the Persian year 1404 (2025). Selection criteria included the immediacy of the post in response to the match result, the presence of critical analysis of team performance and internal dynamics,

representational depth regarding the team's condition, and the conveyance of clear emotional or cognitive responses from fans. All relevant posts within the designated time frame were reviewed, and only those that most closely aligned with the study's thematic focus were chosen for analysis.

Each selected Instagram post was treated as an independent unit of analysis. These units consisted of one primary image—either a photograph or a digitally altered graphic—and one caption authored by the page administrator. Thematic analysis was applied separately to the visual and textual components before being synthesized into an integrated interpretation.

Thematic analysis was conducted separately for each component, and in the integration phase, visual and textual codes were cross-referenced and interpreted to generate a cohesive analytical outcome.



ANALYSIS OF IMAGE AND INITIAL CODING

The image captures the bench of Esteghlal Football Club after the game against Khaybar Khorramabad, where the head coach and his translator are sitting alone, away from the rest of the team. Each of them gazes in a different direction, their faces reflecting confusion and sorrow. The shadow created by the floodlights and the bench's canopy intensifies the contrast between light and darkness, symbolizing a duality of hope and despair. At the bottom of the image, the phrase "Winning is natural" is written in

large white letters. This text, when viewed in the context of the post-game result, presents a paradox, juxtaposing the club's prestigious past with its current crisis.

1. Initial Coding

1. Presence of the Coach and Translator: Represents the internal, football-related aspects of the Esteghlal team. Their presence emphasizes the technical and managerial side of the team that is being focused on.

2. Faces of Confusion and Sorrow: The sorrowful and confused expressions of the coach and translator reflect dissatisfaction and concern over the game's result, signaling a sense of disappointment and uncertainty.

3. "Winning is Natural": This key phrase in the caption emphasizes that victory should be an inherent right for Esteghlal, but its absence highlights a significant disconnect between the team's past glory and current struggles. This phrase can be interpreted as both a declaration of the expectation of success and a subtle protest about the prolonged lack of victories.

4. Stadium and Bench Background: The setting of the stadium and the bench signifies the competitive sports environment in which the team operates. It conjures images of the competition field where intra-group dynamics are at play.

2. Extracted Themes

a) Victory as a Natural Right, Yet Elusive: The image conveys that winning should be a natural and inherent part of Esteghlal's identity, but it is currently out of reach. This theme stresses the expectation of success, which remains unfulfilled. The gap between the club's historic identity and the present situation creates a crisis of identity.

b) Need for Re-evaluation of Intra-group Dynamics: From the image, which depicts the coach and translator's confused and sorrowful expressions alongside the "Winning is Natural" slogan, the theme of "active patience overflow" in fans emerges. It seems to suggest that a long period has passed without results, implying that the fans must reconsider their approach to fandom and their expectations.

3. Interpretation and Analysis of Themes Based on Social Identity Theory

In the context of Social Identity Theory, the theme of "Victory as a Natural Right of the Group" is a reminder of the need to preserve the group's collective self-esteem. Given the paradoxical nature of the image, this type of portrayal can evoke a sense of group protest among the fans. They may feel weak in comparison to rival out-groups, as Esteghlal, contrary to its claim, has not tasted victory for a long time.

As membership in the fan group defines an individual's self-identity, the current lack of victories can lead to feelings of shame and a loss of self-esteem among the fans. Much like other digital systems that must maintain continuity under pressure, online fan communities use technology to manage instability and protect collective identity amid crisis (Nosraty et al., 2025). Thus, social identity is compromised by the absence of expected success. The theme also invites fans to reflect on their actions and re-evaluate their responses to the team's current plight.

On the other hand, the theme of "Invitation to Protest" is connected to the concept of intra-group solidarity and maintaining group coherence during a crisis. One aspect of Social Identity Theory emphasizes individuals' confrontation with group challenges. According to the theory, there are two possible outcomes: 1) leaving the group (though less common in devoted fans), or 2) redefining the group's identity with creativity and alternative strategies.



4. Description and Analysis of the Fan Post about Esteghlal FC

The selected fan post offers a critical view of the club's decision-making regarding the appointment and technical performance of Esteghlal's head coach.

The phrase "third-rate coach" points to a perceived lack of expertise or adequacy in the coach, highlighting a code of managerial and technical weakness from the beginning. The mention of "trial and error in forming the team lineup" refers to the coach's ongoing attempts to find the right combination and strategy, interpreted as a learning process. The reference to "learning from matches" implies the coach is slowly gaining experience. Meanwhile, the "issues in both defensive and offensive structures" indicate deep-rooted tactical and structural deficiencies within the team.

5. Two main themes emerge from this content

5-1. The Trial-and-Error Process and the **Coach's Learning Curve**. This theme highlights the coach's gradual adaptation and struggle to establish a stable technical identity for the team. It also reflects a lack of confidence in the coach as the internal leader of the group.

5-2. Structural Problems and the Need for Reform. The repeated mention of problems in both attack and defense underscores the team's fundamental tactical weaknesses. This reflects a disconnection between the team's historical identity as a winning club and its current performance, creating a crisis of identity. These critiques may be compounded by algorithmic biases in fan platforms, which studies show disproportionately amplify negative performances—creating visibility imbalances that shape collective memory and intensify scrutiny of targeted players (Sakhaei et al., 2024).

6. Interpretation through the Lens of Social Identity Theory

According to social identity theory, when a group (such as a football team) faces setbacks due to tactical or structural issues, its members (in this case, the fans) may feel that their collective identity is under threat. This post shows how a fan seeks to protect the team's identity by directing criticism toward a specific part of the in-group—the head coach—without rejecting the group as a whole. This mechanism of internal critique helps preserve group loyalty while expressing dissatisfaction.

The coach is indirectly portrayed as unqualified to guide the team strategically, which undermines his role as a "mentor" or social guide within the group. This mirrors the identity conflict among the fans, who are struggling to maintain their emotional and symbolic connection to a team that is no longer performing according to its proud legacy.

In essence, both the image and the caption convey a dual message: dissatisfaction with the current state of the team and an attempt to preserve hope through internal critique. The image of a lonely bench with stunned faces, alongside the paradoxical caption "Winning Takes Time," symbolizes a rupture in the collective self-esteem of Esteghlal fans. They find themselves at odds with a once-successful identity that now seems uncertain and unstable.

Ultimately, the post reflects a form of loyal fandom that, rather than falling silent in crisis, chooses to engage critically in hopes of reconstructing the group identity from within.



Mohammadreza Azadi, Esteghlal's striker and the team's only goal-scorer in the match, is captured in an image leaning against the goal net, looking away from the camera with an expression of exhaustion and anxiety. This scene corresponds to a missed opportunity he had, which contributed to the team's failure to win in their first match of the new year. The graphic cover accompanying the image features the match result, Esteghlal's logo with two stars—symbolizing the club's prestigious history in Asian competitions—and the text: "Esteghlal failed to win

again at the start of the new year **×**.” The bold font of this phrase visually intersects with Azadi’s figure in the image.

Initial Coding

Esteghlal player caught in the goal net: The image strongly conveys the dire internal state of the team during the match. Codes include despair/confusion of the player and symbolically “Esteghlal trapped in the net,” intended to make the viewer feel the team’s entrapment in its current crisis.

Draw against a weaker team: The failure to secure a win is especially disappointing considering the opponent—Kheybar Khorramabad—is newly promoted and less experienced than Esteghlal. Thus, the draw is perceived by fans as equivalent to a loss. Related codes: “Esteghlal halted by a smaller rival” or “failure to meet expectations.”

The phrase “again... failed to win **×**”: This textual element indicates the continuation of a negative pattern. Codes include: “recurring failure,” “starting the year without a win,” and “fan frustration and dissatisfaction.” The red “**×**” also signals disapproval, protest, and unacceptability.

Temporal context—Start of the New Year: This sets the emotional tone, with collective beliefs and a shared internal history. The message reminds fans that failures at the beginning of the year have become a recurring pattern.

Emerging Themes

From these codes, two main themes are identified:

Decline in Group Authority Due to Repeated Failures: This theme captures the perception among fans that the club’s identity is weakening. Esteghlal’s inability to win in a situation where victory was expected causes collective disappointment.

Formation of an Intragroup Critical Narrative:

The repeated use of the phrase “again failed to win at the start of the year” signals a developing collective story among fans, framing these early-year failures as part of a continuing pattern. This narrative reflects both criticism and a blow to the fans’ collective self-esteem.

Interpretation Through Social Identity Theory

Within the framework of social identity theory, these findings point to a perceived threat to group identity

experienced by fans due to the team’s repeated failures. The theme of “declining group authority” illustrates how recurring failures directly impact fans’ sense of self-worth, as much of their fan identity is tied to collective success. When the team falters, fans may experience collective disappointment and feel their fan identity is vulnerable to ridicule, especially in comparison to rival groups.

This post represents a serious protest in response to the disappointing result. As stated, the lack of victory temporarily reduces group pride and weakens collective confidence. However, the theme of “constructing an intragroup critical narrative” also shows how fans attempt to resist this identity threat. The critical tone in the phrase “again failed to win” acts as an internal problematization, directing blame inward—towards players, coaches, or managers.

Such internal criticism allows fans to express their frustration while still preserving the core identity of the club. As in other high-stakes digital environments, the ability to engage meaningfully during moments of instability relies on learned interpretive skills—much like education equips individuals to meet technological challenges, leverage digital tools effectively, and maintain shared values in complex systems (Zamani, Hosseini, & Rahmatian, 2024). In essence, they attribute failure to elements that are not part of the club’s true identity, framing those elements as causes of the decline. This kind of shared narrative may also strengthen empathy and solidarity among fans, who all participate in the grief, criticism, and collective protest—making it a meaningful aspect of fan culture.



Text Description

The caption of this post delivers a critique of Esteghlal Football Club's performance. The administrator of the page analyzes individual performances—often naming specific players—and attributes the players' poor performances partly to ineffective club management and decision-making. While the text briefly acknowledges moments of improvement during the match, its dominant tone is one of disappointment and frustration.

Initial Coding

Tedious Draw: A sense of boredom and frustration stemming from repeated draws and the failure to secure wins. Code: "Dissatisfaction with recurring results."

Individual Mistakes: The impact of players' recurrent mistakes that led to conceding goals. Code: "Individual errors."

Herdani and His Mistakes: Persistent critique of Saleh Herdani's errors. Code: "Lack of individual accountability and performance errors."

Catastrophic Performance by Mohammad Hossein Moradmand: His error-filled performance is labeled catastrophic. Code: "Negative impact on team flow and result."

Rafael Silva and the Need for Departure: Criticism of Silva's performance, asserting the necessity of his removal. Code: "Defensive line reinforcement via Silva's exit."

Joel Kojo's Performance Errors: Mistakes linked to possible decisions influenced by player agents. Code: "Criticism of managerial interference and brokerage."

Captain Hosseini's Mistake: A failure to meet leadership expectations. Code: "Leadership failure."

Lack of Trust in Coaching Staff: Expression of distrust toward the technical team. Code: "Distrust in technical team."

Despair Over Hazfi Cup Success: A bleak outlook regarding success in the Hazfi Cup. Code: "Doubt about future success."

Extracted Thematic Categories

Weak Individual Performance and Structural Issues: Repeated criticism of player errors, especially in defense.

Criticism of Management and Brokerage: Attribution of failures to mismanagement and corrupt recruitment processes.

Hopelessness Toward Future Success: Expressions of pessimism regarding the club's future achievements.

Distrust in the Technical Staff: The coaching staff is seen as a core factor in the lack of team cohesion and morale. In emotionally charged environments, the perceived absence of leadership support can intensify collective dissatisfaction and emotional strain—a pattern observed in both professional and communal settings where support structures play a critical role in psychological stability (Toosi, 2025).

Thematic Interpretation Using Social Identity Theory

The critique in the text aims to reshape the collective identity of Esteghlal fans. It anticipates that by engaging with such content, fans will adopt a critical stance and assert their group identity through protest. This identity construction begins with evaluating and distrusting the team's leadership and ends in a sense of despair, with the intention of activating collective concern.

A key element is the accusation of agent interference in player recruitment, representing management's corrupt practices. By highlighting these problems, the post encourages fans to critically examine leadership and strengthen group unity.

through resistance.

The emotional impact is visually reinforced by an image showing a player entangled in the net, symbolizing entrapment in failure. The player's confused expression and the image's cold tones amplify this message. The phrase "Once again, no victory" calls attention to a repeating pattern of underachievement, prompting collective realization: "This isn't an isolated loss—it's a painful trend."

The accompanying caption identifies those expected to be saviors—captain, striker, foreign defender—as key sources of failure. In doing so, the post seeks to redefine group identity by excluding underperformers and those who no longer represent group values. Unlike formal systems where responses to failure are governed by principles of proportionality and individualization, collective digital reactions—such as those found in fan communities—often unfold without clear standards, leading to emotional judgments that may lack consistency or fairness (Siahpour, Bahmanpouri, & Salehi, 2024).

This process aligns with the concept of group identity reconstruction during crisis within Social Identity Theory. While the tone is critical, the post still expresses loyalty to the club by differentiating between the "true us" (loyal fans and deserving players) and the "internal other" (ineffective management and underperforming athletes).

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Esteghlal Football Club fan identity is represented on Instagram by analyzing two posts from influential fan pages. The results reveal that fans do not distance themselves from the group during failure; instead, they employ narrative critique, internal assessment, and efforts to restore collective pride.

As posited by Social Identity Theory, individuals derive self-worth from group affiliation. When the group is in crisis, members may feel personally threatened. A common response is in-group boundary redefinition, which involves excluding those deemed responsible for group failure in order to preserve the group's symbolic core.

The first post uses irony—the coach's bewildered expression paired with the phrase "Taking time is natural"—to reflect internal conflict and a search for

identity. The second post, combining a visual of a trapped player and critical text, constructs a narrative of chronic failure. It not only expresses disappointment but seeks to rally fans around a reformed group identity.

Instagram, therefore, is not merely a reflection of Esteghlal's struggles but a platform for collective identity negotiation and protest. Yet these negotiations occur within corporate-controlled digital spaces that lack public infrastructure and transparency—conditions studies show often subordinate community interests to data commodification, necessitating governance models that prioritize collective resilience over platform profits (Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi & Sharajsharifi, 2025a). Esteghlal fans utilize social media as a space for expressing discontent, reinforcing loyalty, and redefining group membership. This kind of fan participation reflects a broader need for digital literacy frameworks that emphasize not just technical skills, but also critical, ethical, and culturally informed engagement—allowing users to navigate, interpret, and actively shape the symbolic dynamics of digital environments (Khodabin et al., 2022). Their actions align with Social Identity Theory, suggesting that even amid failure, fans work to preserve group integrity by distinguishing the committed "us" from the harmful "them."

Future studies should further investigate the "us vs. them" dynamic in this context—including how fan identity is shaped in contrast to rivals, corrupt management, and failing players. Such investigations should also consider how digital sovereignty and governance gaps in social media platforms—where transnational algorithms increasingly mediate fan interactions—may distort or commodify collective identities, necessitating frameworks to protect fan communities' autonomy (Sharifi Poor Bgheshmi & Sharajsharifi, 2025b). This positive differentiation, central to Social Identity Theory, is evident in fan discourse, where true loyalty remains—but only for those who embody collective values and aspirations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of Interest declared by the author(s).

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