

Examining the Role of Social Space in the Competitiveness of Sports Press Using a Structural Equation Modeling Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the Role of Social Space in Sports Press Competitiveness: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach. The statistical population of the research was administrators and bloggers in the field of online media, research activists in the field of media and sports press, sports reporters and sports writers, and managers of media and sports press. Sampling was done in a targeted manner and using the judgment and Rezazadeh approach, 130 people were estimated, and finally 126 questionnaires were completed and analyzed. Ten scientific and executive experts were asked to evaluate content validity. Then, the combined reliability and validity of the construct was checked and confirmed in the final stage using PLS software. The results of the factor analysis of the structures of each of the 8 main variables showed that all the components have a significant explanatory role. The path analysis also showed that the relationships between 8 main variables in a sequence of five levels (background variables of sports press competition in online space, factors related to the role of online space for sports press, systemic factors of sports press competitiveness in online space and outcome variables of competition) Acceptability of sports press in the online space) from independent variables to dependent variables is positive and significant and the conceptual model has a favorable fit. It should

be acknowledged that according to today's documents and evidence, the competition of the sports press in the online space is inevitable, and the sports press should know that the society has been pushed towards the media and the digital space and the existing social networks, and the sports audience and other sports enthusiasts in this area constitute the majority of people in the society.

Keywords: online space, sports industry, social networks, sports press, social space online media.

1-Introduction

In today's era, there are three major challenges facing economic and industrial societies: profitability and income, customer relationships, and intense competition. Most organizations have realized that relying solely on traditional competitive levers such as improving quality, reducing costs, and differentiating in offering products and services is not sufficient. Concepts such as speed, flexibility, and connection with people and society have become prominent in competition. The tendency to introduce new products and services to the market underscores this shift in perspective (Akhbari & Taghavi Fard, 2007). The intensity of competition within an industry largely depends on the number and diversity of organizations active in that industry. As the number of competitors increases, the benefits and advantages of the industry undergo significant changes (Naeimi et al., 2019). Furthermore, today's production and service organizations face various events such as challenges, disruptions, and numerous opportunities. Survival and success in such conditions heavily depend on their competitiveness. Farahani et al. (2021), in their analysis of the content of sports press with a focus on public sports, demonstrated that given the undeniable influence of the press on audiences, it is essential for authors and publishers of sports press to pay more attention to public sports. Relevant authorities should also conduct comprehensive supervision over their content and performance. Additionally, since today's interpersonal relationships in society have transformed into a global network of social, economic, and political connections, spatial and temporal dominance holds great significance. Knowledge about the social production of space follows the same trend (Moghaddas & Soroush, 2011). Thinking globally and acting locally entails paying attention to how social interactions occur both within and beyond the places we live. The global social world constructs its unique spaces—spaces of production, consumption, representation, leisure, play, and imagination. The type of space a society produces influences the quantity and quality of social relationships, as well as the permissible and prohibited activities. The design, shape, size, organization, and control of specific functional spaces impact these activities. Thus, space and social relationships mutually influence each other. This interaction between space and society has led to diverse perspectives and viewpoints within this social space, where individuals perceive issues based on their unique viewpoints (Ebrahimi, 2009).

On the other hand, the large number of sports press outlets and quick access to information sources have created an intensely competitive environment for the press in the era of communication and technology. Greater press freedom and fewer restrictions on media oversight enhance the press's ability to monitor effectively in the country. Accordingly, media outlets and the press enable public awareness and help achieve financial oversight and transparency over the government and its components (Amiri, 2014). The widespread use of the internet, particularly on mobile phones, and the ease of access to online social spaces have fostered a form of decentralization in family communications, increasing horizontal interactions among family members, especially adolescents and young adults. As a result, the social space created through online media and advertisements about various sports topics has allowed individuals to stay informed about discussions presented by different sports press outlets and the shortcomings of various publications. This has led to a competitive environment among sports press outlets. One of the key characteristics of today's successful organizations and enterprises is their competitiveness, which primarily stems from adopting new perspectives. Simultaneously,

environmental and temporal factors have brought significant changes to competitiveness indicators. Therefore, the researcher seeks to answer this question: What is the role of the online social space in the competitiveness of sports press outlets?

2- Literature review

It is important to note that conceptual frameworks for competitiveness can only have lasting applicability if they are sufficiently flexible to adapt to managerial processes and environmental changes (Naghi Lou et al., 2020). Competitiveness encompasses both efficiency (achieving goals with minimal cost) and capability (having the right goals), making the selection of appropriate objectives critically important. Competitiveness includes both the goals and the means to achieve them (Naeimi et al., 2019). Organizations are compelled to gain a competitive advantage to survive in today's competitive environment. Barney defines competitive advantage as follows: "An organization has a sustainable competitive advantage when it implements a value-creating strategy that is not simultaneously being implemented by current or potential competitors, and when rival firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy" (Naghi Lou et al., 2020). Tavin (2001) identified five factors at the firm level that characterize competitive capability: cost leadership, product quality, process flexibility, after-sales service, and customer service. The emergence of new media and social networks has posed a challenge to print newspapers. Audience habits appear to be changing, as users turn to the internet for free news and information. This news source is not only free but also operates quickly. Additionally, the immediacy of social media and online news has become a smart choice for consumers, leading to its global acceptance (Youdens, 2018).

Online user interactions are mediated rather than face-to-face, and many internet researchers prefer using the term "community" to refer to groups of users. In general, social networks can be defined as websites that, starting from simple platforms like search engines, offer users sharing capabilities by adding features such as chat, email, and other functionalities. Social networks are spaces where hundreds of millions of internet users gather to interact and exchange information, regardless of borders, language, gender, or culture (Toloui Eshlaghi, 2010). Media and press serve as tools to provide public awareness and enforce the principle of public oversight on governments and governing bodies. Undoubtedly, the growth and expansion of media in recent decades, in terms of diversity, have heightened the issue of competition among media outlets more than ever. Media also play a significant role in society as powerful tools for advertising and political influence (Aliyari, 2014). In this context, accurate, transparent, and regulated information can facilitate the proper and optimal use of communication tools. Additionally, the adoption and development of mass communication tools can contribute to development in the form of poverty reduction, unemployment alleviation, decreased inequality, increased industrialization, improved communication, the establishment of a justice-based social system, and greater public participation in ongoing affairs (Hays & Kelly, 2018). In such cases, mass communication tools, including the press, stand at the forefront of factors shaping public opinion (Zheng & Lowrey, 2020).

The press plays the role of a social watchdog over the government and various social organizations. On one hand, it is responsible for promoting transparency and expanding accountability for essential institutions supporting human rights in government, and on the other, it combats bureaucratic corruption in modern societies (Dang Dong, 2015). Today, a critical criterion for evaluating the success of any branch of the press is examining the number of its audience, the frequency of its use, and the motivation or changes it brings to audience behavior. The audience is a fundamental factor in the sustainability of the press, and attracting an audience is considered a competitive advantage in the press market (Salmani, 2017). Imanian et al. (2015) found that coverage of sports for people with disabilities was very limited. Based on their findings, they recommended that the press and relevant authorities focus more on

disability sports to encourage greater participation among individuals with disabilities. Similarly, Razavi et al. (2020) demonstrated that the roles of media have a direct, positive, and significant impact on sports participation (0.33) and sports attitudes (0.83). Sports attitudes also have a direct, positive, and significant impact on sports participation. Indirectly, it was revealed that 62% of the total effect of media roles on sports participation is mediated through sports attitudes. Additionally, Gharazi et al. (2020) showed that factors such as technological readiness, product market efficiency, economic environment, relevant institutions, labor market efficiency, higher education and training, market size, infrastructure, financial market development, and business sophistication influence competitiveness. Taqinejad et al. (2022) demonstrated that social innovation serves as a mediator in the relationship between IT capabilities and the competitiveness of sports stores. Thus, leveraging IT and social innovation is essential for sports store vendors to achieve a better competitive position.

Gharazi et al. (2022) validated an indigenous model of competitiveness for the Iranian press, emphasizing ethical oversight and transparency. Their findings showed that competitiveness, with a focus on ethical oversight and transparency, was validated across three dimensions: innovation and progress factors, productivity enhancement factors, and ethical requirements, as well as eleven components. The indigenous model of competitiveness focusing on ethical oversight and transparency can be utilized to gain a competitive advantage in the press industry. The study by Taqinejad et al. (2022) aimed to examine the impact of IT capabilities on the competitiveness of sports stores, with social innovation serving as a mediating factor. The research by Afshar-Safavi et al. (2021) sought to identify the factors influencing the competitiveness of print media against social networks to ensure their survival, using the *Khorasan* newspaper as a case study. Farahani et al. (2021) analyzed the content of sports press with a focus on public sports and found no significant differences in the performance of the newspapers studied regarding various sports topics. Notably, 72% of their content was dedicated to football. Naghi Lou et al. (2020) proposed a conceptual framework for competitiveness in Iran's sports services industry, demonstrating that neglecting any element or component could disrupt the relative order and balance of the competitive market structure in the sports services sector.

Yan and Lv (2020), in their study on the impact of immersive virtual reality systems on online social programs, demonstrated that the efficiency of user intent expression in immersive virtual reality social systems was very high. Body-tracking devices with more tracking points can provide a better representation of body expressions. The purpose of Bramoullé's (2020) study was to analyze users' perceptions of sports-related interaction communication on social networks for sports activities from a relativist and constructivist perspective. Lavoie and Roberlard (2018), in an analytical study on the competition among sports press outlets, stated that sports journalists, while competing with producers of spectator sports news content, are becoming producers and curators of social media content. Yan and Lu (2020), in their study on the impact of immersive virtual reality systems on online social programs, demonstrated that the efficiency of user intent expression in immersive virtual reality social systems was very high. Body-tracking devices with more tracking points can provide a better representation of body expressions. The purpose of Bramoullé's (2020) study was to analyze users' perceptions of sports-related interaction communication on social networks for sports activities from a relativist and constructivist perspective. Lavoie and Roberlard (2018), in an analytical study on the competition among sports press outlets, stated that sports journalists, while competing with producers of spectator sports news content, are becoming producers and curators of social media content.

3- Research Methods

This research, based on its objective, is categorized as applied research and employs a descriptive-correlational method. It aims to contribute to the competitiveness of sports press by designing an appropriate conceptual model to examine the role of the social environment. The statistical population

consisted of admins and bloggers in the field of online media, research professionals in media and sports press, sports journalists and writers, as well as managers of sports media and press. The sample size, sufficient for model testing, was selected purposefully and through the snowball sampling method, involving 126 individuals. The sample size was estimated based on the adequacy requirement for modeling in PLS software, calculated as 10 to 20 times the number of questions related to the variable with the highest number of questions in the model (Davari and Rezazadeh, 2016). Accordingly, 12 times the number of questions for the variable with the most questions (13 questions for the "Media Roles in Sports Press Competitiveness" variable) was used, estimating a sample size of 130 participants. To ensure receiving an adequate number of responses, 135 questionnaires were distributed. Among the 130 returned questionnaires, 126 were fully completed and included in the analysis. The criteria for selecting respondents were based on their knowledge of the research topic, work-sports experiences, educational background, and other characteristics relevant to the research subject. These criteria were identified by reviewing the respondents' records in the media field.

The research instrument was a questionnaire developed from the qualitative phase (qualitative codes extracted from interviews were transformed into a questionnaire). The questionnaire included variables and determining factors and was designed on a 5-point Likert scale. It was distributed via email and social media platforms. To assess content or face validity, the drafted questionnaire was reviewed by six experts, including academic professors, experienced researchers, and veteran journalists specializing in media and social networks. After confirming content validity, the tool was initially tested in a pilot study with 30 participants from the statistical population. Subsequently, its reliability or internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha method with SPSS20 software ($\alpha=0.76$ \alpha = 0.76 $\alpha=0.76$), and it was deemed reliable.

The validity of this section was determined based on the individual competence of the interview sample, the content validity of the framework (assessed by three sports management researchers), and the level of agreement among expert coders (two experienced sports management researchers) in extracting concepts. The interviews were conducted according to a pre-designed analytical framework. During the interviews, feedback was provided to the interviewees and they were guided within the research context in a manner that did not influence their responses, aiming to enhance internal validity. Additionally, after each interview, the pattern derived up to that stage was presented to the interviewee, and if they had comments on the pattern, it was discussed. This process occurred after the interview to ensure that the interview was conducted without any preconceived notions or biases. Since the reliability component refers to the reproducibility of research findings, and qualitative studies involve the researcher interpreting the subject under investigation, data collection continued until the researcher was confident that no new insights were being added. After conducting 15 interviews over a four-month period, data analysis indicated that no new information was being added to the existing data, as a high percentage of the extracted data from the final interviews was repetitive. Thus, the interviews were concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation. Qualitative researchers often use terms such as credibility, transferability, and confirmability instead of validity and reliability. The validity of the library study transcription and the interview tool was first assessed using expert opinions. Then, it was evaluated through coding validity and coder agreement methods.

In the quantitative section, a questionnaire derived from the qualitative phase (transforming the qualitative framework into a questionnaire) was used. The questionnaire included variables and determining factors and was designed on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from Very Low = 1 to Very High = 5). Table 3-3 reports the main research variables, their dimensions (sub-variables), and the number of questions for each.

Table 1: Main Research Variables and Their Dimensions (Sub-variables) Along with the Number of Questions

Variables	Dimensions	Number of questions
Drivers of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	The Transformation of the Sports Media Environment	3
	The Transformation of the Sports Media System	3
Challenges of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	Interventions in the virtual media competitions of sports	3
	Modifying the challenges of sports competitiveness	3
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press	Informational and awareness-raising role	3
	Role of education and cultural development	3
	Role of communication and social participation	2
	Role of marketing and commercialization	3
	Role of innovation and transformation	2
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	Virtual media orientation in the sports community	3
	Virtual promotion in the sports community	3
	Behavior shaping in the social space of sports	2
	Participation recruitment for virtual media	3
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	Value chain and supply of sports media	3
	Competition of information and communication in sports media	3
	News capability and media coverage of sporting events	3
	Services and usage of sports media	3
Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	Human capital development in sports media	3
	Financial support and marketing of sports media	3
	Facilities and technology of sports media	4

Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	Commercialization of sports media	3
	Adaptability and media innovation in sports	3
	Professionalism in sports media management	3
Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	Competitiveness functions for sports media	3
	Competitiveness functions for the audience community	3
	Competitiveness functions for sports	3

4-Research Findings

In this section, the demographic variables of the study are first examined, and the descriptive statistics related to them are extracted. Three stages of coding were used to categorize the identified components. The coding process was based on previous studies and expert opinions. The research model was then outlined as a conceptual system framework based on the identified relationships. Alongside data collection, the analysis process also began with three stages of coding. After extracting the codes, they were classified, and through continuous comparison, differences and similarities between these codes were revealed. Categories were either separated or merged, so that theory could emerge during this process. Existing resources and texts were also used to complete the theory.

For this purpose, statistical methods were applied. In this type of analysis, the textual responses from interviewees are coded and counted, then registered in a frequency distribution table. The data in the table are then analyzed using descriptive statistics, in line with the type of variables, research method, and research objectives. The researcher can calculate statistical indicators such as distribution percentages, frequency, and cumulative percentage. Alternatively, the numbers and figures obtained can be examined for inferential statistical calculations, such as determining statistical correlations. Quantitative analysis is used to examine the data from structured interviews in survey research. In these interviews, questions can be either closed-ended or open-ended. When the questions are closed-ended, the interview guide resembles a questionnaire.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Table

Variable	Sub-dimension	Frequency (number)
Gender	female	29
	male	97
Education	Bachelor's degree	66
	Master's degree	41
	PhD	19
Age	less than 20 years	12
	20 to 30 years	59
	31 to 40 years	42
	"40 years and above	15
Occupation in the field of sports media and journalism	admins and bloggers in the field of online media	44

	active in the field of media and sports journalism	41
	sports journalist and sports writer	24
	in Persian translates to "media and sports press managers	18
Work experience	less than 5 years	13
	5 to 10 years	21
	11 to 15 years	53
	more than 15 years	39

4-1- Examination of Data Distribution Status

For data analysis, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used. Due to the non-normal distribution of most research variables (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test less than 0.05), the Smart PLS software was utilized. The small sample size was the primary reason for using PLS. First-generation SEM methods require a large sample size, whereas PLS (Partial Least Squares) can execute models with a very small sample size. This method (PLS) allowed us to obtain our research model from measurement models with a single question.

Table 3: Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Results for Determining Data Normality

variables	K-S	Sig	exam result
Drivers of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	1.07	0.196	normal
Challenges of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	1.29	0.071	normal
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press	2.60	0.011	abnormal
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	1.15	0.140	normal
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.804	0.538	normal
Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.973	0.300	normal
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	1.04	0.226	normal
Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	1.05	221	normal

As shown in Table 2, based on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the normality of the research data, the significance values for all variables, except for "media roles in the competition of sports press," are greater than 0.05. Therefore, the distribution of the data is non-normal. According to Chapter 3, to test the related statistical hypotheses, it is recommended to use Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the PLS software.

4-2- Validity and Reliability of the Research

Convergent validity is another criterion used to fit measurement models in structural equation modeling. Fornell and Larcker (1981) proposed the use of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) as a criterion for convergent validity. The criterion for AVE to be considered acceptable is equal to or greater than 0.5. In Table (4-7), the output results for AVE from the model are shown. As can be seen, the results indicate the adequacy of the convergent validity criterion (AVE).

Table 4. Examination of the model fit criteria for the measured model

variables	AVE	dimensions	AVE
Drivers of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.66	The Transformation of the Sports Media Environment	0.62
		The Transformation of the Sports Media System	0.58
Challenges of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.60	Interventions in the virtual media competitions of sports	0.58
		Modifying the challenges of sports competitiveness	0.64
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press	0.61	Informational and awareness-raising role	0.55
		Role of education and cultural development	0.65
		Role of communication and social participation	0.63
		Role of marketing and commercialization	0.61
		Role of innovation and transformation	0.70
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.67	Virtual media orientation in the sports community	0.65
		Virtual promotion in the sports community	0.60
		Behavior shaping in the social space of sports	0.71
		Participation recruitment for virtual media	0.62
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.66	Value chain and supply of sports media	0.70
		Competition of information and communication in sports media	0.69
		News capability and media coverage of sporting events	0.68

		Services and usage of sports media	0.59
Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.72	Human capital development in sports media	0.65
		Financial support and marketing of sports media	0.66
		Facilities and technology of sports media	0.58
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.62	Commercialization of sports media	0.74
		Adaptability and media innovation in sports	0.58
		Professionalism in sports media management	0.61
Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.59	Competitiveness functions for sports media	0.55
		Competitiveness functions for the audience community	0.54
		Competitiveness functions for sports	0.64

Based on the results obtained from the correlations and the square root of AVE, which are provided on the diagonal of Table (4), the discriminant validity of the model at the construct level can be confirmed according to the Fornell and Larcker criterion.

Table 5. Reliability coefficients of the questionnaire

variable s	Cron bach' s Alph a	com posi te relia bilit y	dimension s	Cron bach' s Alph a	com posi te relia bilit y
Drivers of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.83	0.87	The Transformation of the Sports Media Environm ent	0.73	0.83
			The Transform ation of the Sports	0.71	0.80

			Media System		
Challenges of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.82	0.87	Interventions in the virtual media competitions of sports	0.76	0.85
			Modifying the challenges of sports competitiveness	0.72	0.84
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press	0.86	0.89	Informational and awareness-raising role	0.72	0.78
			Role of education and cultural development	0.73	0.84
			Role of communication and social participation	0.81	0.87
			Role of marketing and commercialization	0.79	0.86
			Role of innovation and transformation	0.79	0.88
The Scope of the Role of Sports	0.84	0.88	Virtual media orientation in the	0.73	0.85

Media in the Online Social Space			sports community		
			Virtual promotion in the sports community	0.78	0.86
			Behavior shaping in the social space of sports	0.80	0.88
			Participation recruitment for virtual media	0.74	0.82
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.89	0.91	Value chain and supply of sports media	0.78	0.87
			Competition of information and communication in sports media	0.88	0.92
			News capability and media coverage of sporting events	0.86	0.91
			Services and usage of sports media	0.75	0.86
Mechanisms of Competi	0.80	0.85	Human capital developme	0.76	0.86

Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space			Competitiveness in sports media		
			Financial support and marketing of sports media	0.77	0.85
			Facilities and technology of sports media	0.73	0.85
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.79	0.86	Commercialization of sports media	0.83	0.89
			Adaptability and media innovation in sports	0.75	0.84
			Professionalism in sports media management	0.82	0.89
Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.82	0.87	Competitiveness functions for sports media	0.70	0.80
			Competitiveness functions for the audience community	0.76	0.85
			Competitiveness functions for sports	0.72	0.81

Considering the Cronbach's alpha values and the composite reliability reported in Table (4), as can be seen, all latent variables have Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values greater than 0.7, which indicates that the model has acceptable reliability (both in terms of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability)

According to Table (6), it is determined that initially:

1- In the section on the drivers of sports media competitiveness in the online space, both dimensions, the transformation of the sports media environment (0.87) and the transformation of the sports media system (0.86), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the drivers of competitiveness of sports media in the online space.

2- In the section on the challenges of sports media competitiveness in the online space, both dimensions, the adjustment of sports competitiveness challenges (0.90) and the interventions of virtual sports media competitions (0.86), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the challenges of competitiveness of sports media in the online space.

3- In the section on media roles for the competitiveness of sports media, all five dimensions, the transformation of marketing and commercial roles (0.82), the role of communication and social participation (0.78), the role of informational and awareness-building (0.77), the role of education and cultural development (0.77), and the role of innovation and transformation (0.69), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the media roles for the competitiveness of sports media.

4- In the section on the scope of sports media roles in the online space, all four dimensions, virtual promotion in the sports community (0.89), virtual media orientation (0.83), behavior shaping in the sports social space (0.80), and participation for virtual media (0.75), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the scope of sports media roles in the online space.

5- In the section on the competitiveness of sports media in the online space, all four dimensions, media information and communication competition (0.90), value chain and supply of sports media (0.88), news capabilities and media coverage of sports events (0.87), and sports media services and usage (0.71), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the competitiveness of sports media in the online space.

6- In the section on the mechanisms of sports media competitiveness in the online space, all three dimensions, the growth of human capital in sports media (0.89), financing and marketing of sports media (0.87), and facilities and technology of sports media (0.86), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the mechanisms of sports media competitiveness in the online space.

7- In the section on competitiveness strategies of sports media in the online space, all three dimensions, media transformation and innovation in sports (0.88), commercialization of sports media (0.87), and professionalism in sports media management (0.82), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the competitiveness strategies of sports media in the online space.

8- In the section on the functions of sports media competitiveness in the online space, all three dimensions, competitiveness functions for the target audience (0.89), competitiveness functions for sports (0.84), and competitiveness functions of sports media (0.82), respectively, had a significant role in explaining the functions of competitiveness strategies of sports media in the online space.

Based on path analysis, it was determined that:

- 1- The driver of competitiveness in sports media has a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.40 on the competitiveness strategy of sports media.
- 2- The challenges of competitiveness in sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.27 on the competitiveness strategy of sports media.
- 3- The competitiveness strategies of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.43 on the scope of sports media roles.
- 4- The competitiveness strategies of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.58 on the mechanisms of competitiveness in sports media.

- 5- Media roles for the competitiveness of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.73 on the scope of sports media roles.
- 6- Media roles for the competitiveness of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.79 on the mechanisms of competitiveness in sports media.
- 7- The scope of sports media roles has a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.47 on the mechanisms of competitiveness in sports media.
- 8- The mechanisms of competitiveness in sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.75 on the competitiveness of sports media.
- 9- The mechanisms of competitiveness in sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.59 on the functions of competitiveness in sports media.
- 10- The competitiveness of sports media has a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.18 on the functions of competitiveness in sports media.

Table 6: Results of path coefficients and the significance level of the main hypotheses of the research model

significance level of each factor in relation to each other and to the sub-factors	path coefficient	T-values	P Values
Drivers of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → The Transformation of the Sports Media Environment	0.87	86.69	0.001
Drivers of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → The Transformation of the Sports Media System	0.86	79.21	0.001
Challenges of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Interventions in the virtual media competitions of sports	0.86	79.03	0.001
Challenges of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Modifying the challenges of sports competitiveness	0.90	122.30	0.001
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press → Informational and awareness-raising role	0.77	45.25	0.001
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press → Role of education and cultural development	0.76	41.69	0.001
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press → Role of communication and social participation	0.78	47.92	0.001

The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press → Role of marketing and commercialization	0.82	63.65	0.001
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press → Role of innovation and transformation	0.69	28.31	0.001
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Virtual media orientation in the sports community	0.83	64.03	0.001
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Virtual promotion in the sports community	0.89	126.14	0.001
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Behavior shaping in the social space of sports	0.80	49.87	0.001
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Participation recruitment for virtual media	0.75	37.35	0.001
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Value chain and supply of sports media	0.88	70.60	0.001
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Competition of information and communication in sports media	0.90	124.44	0.001
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → News capability and media coverage of sporting events	0.87	66.65	0.001
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Services and usage of sports media	0.71	33.85	0.001
Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Human capital development in sports media	0.89	117.75	0.001
Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Financial support and marketing of sports media	0.87	82.00	0.001

Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Facilities and technology of sports media	0.86	80.88	0.001
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Commercialization of sports media	0.87	91.17	0.001
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Adaptability and media innovation in sports	0.88	99.65	0.001
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Professionalism in sports media management	0.82	49.79	0.001
Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Competitiveness functions for sports media	0.82	57.18	0.001
Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Competitiveness functions for the audience community	0.89	104.05	0.001
Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Competitiveness functions for sports	0.84	72.94	0.001
Drivers of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.40	12.05	0.001
Challenges of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.27	7.78	0.001
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.43	15.11	0.001
Strategies for Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Mechanisms of	0.58	20.11	0.001

Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space			
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press → The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.73	36.91	0.001
The Roles of Media in the Competitiveness of Sports Press → Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.79	38.85	0.001
The Scope of the Role of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.47	11.35	0.001
Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.75	44.88	0.001
Mechanisms of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.59	16.84	0.001
Competitiveness of Sports Media in the Online Social Space → Functions of Competitiveness for Sports Media in the Online Social Space	0.18	4.82	0.001

Discussion and Conclusion

This study determined that the driver of competitiveness in sports media has a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.40 on the competitiveness strategy of sports media. To implement competitiveness strategies, it is necessary for sports media to incorporate the drivers affecting competitiveness into their actions. Social networks empower consumers to follow diverse resources. Today, social networks create valuable experiences for consumers in a technologically mediated environment, which was not possible before the emergence of social networks (Doyudi et al., 2018). In this regard, for effective performance in social networks and online, the drivers of competitiveness in sports media must be considered. In the quantitative section, the results of factor analysis of the constructs of each of the 8 main variables showed that all components significantly play an explanatory role. Path analysis also indicated that the relationships between the 8 main variables follow five sequential levels (background factors of sports media competitiveness in the online space, factors related to the role of online space for sports media, systemic factors of sports media competitiveness in the online space, and consequential factors of sports media competitiveness in the online space), from independent variables to dependent variables, which are positive and significant, and the conceptual model has a good fit.

Transformations have occurred in the media and digital space, showing that many users are active in online social networks and sports media, technology in sports media has advanced, and regulations for this field have been established. The growth of the media space in commerce, as well as the commercial transformation of media and sports at the international level, has also increased the competitiveness potential of sports media. To attract the attention of the numerous audiences in social networks, a competitive advantage must be created so that sports media can survive in this virtual space they are inevitably part of. The results of this study are consistent with the works of Taghinejad et al. (2022), Afshar-Safavi et al. (2021), Razavi et al. (2020), Imanian et al. (2015), Lal et al. (2021), Bramuller (2020), and Lavis & Rablard (2018). The challenges of competitiveness in sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.27 on the competitiveness strategy of sports media. Although mass media play a role in the development of sports, these media themselves also require development to be more successful in furthering the growth of sports. The survival or development of media, given the changing environmental conditions, technological complexities, resource shortages, service diversity, and the rapid speed of information exchange and communication, is an inevitable necessity for attracting audiences and achieving goals (Alavi Vafa et al., 2018). However, to develop mass media, the challenges of their development, particularly for traditional media, must first be identified. The extensive capacity of sports media has led to continuous efforts to form new types of media and strengthen existing ones. This has led to the creation of new forms of sports media, which continue to increase in both number and quality every day (Darwin et al., 2017).

Sports media must recognize and address the challenges they face in order to compete with other media in the online space and social networks. Harmful and deviant virtual media in sports must be identified, and competition or collaboration in information exchange with them should be avoided. Necessary rules and regulations should be established to prevent media conflicts of interest, allowing media outlets to enter a healthy competition. State-run sports media should not dominate or operate as the main platforms in virtual media, such as television and radio, and opportunities should be given to other media outlets to showcase themselves. In the media space and social networks, lawful behavior, ethics, and transparency of information must be maintained. Weaknesses in the communication and information systems of sports organizations in the country should be addressed so that sports media can have direct communication with sports organizations, cover sports news, and sports organizations can establish agreements with specific media outlets among the competing press. The results of this study are consistent with the works of Gharazi et al. (2022), Afshar-Safavi et al. (2021), Imani and Salehi Amiri (2016), and Chan et al. (2021). The competitiveness strategies of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.43 on the scope of sports media's role. To expand the role of sports media and enable them to compete effectively, it is necessary to implement the competitiveness strategies of sports media in virtual space and social networks. In this regard, competition should be created among sports media in terms of information exchange speed, news coverage, and credibility, so that the leading media outlets are identified.

Competition in the business system, marketing, and quality of services in sports media, along with the use of open innovation methods and creativity in media activities, can serve as fundamental strategies for sports media to compete in virtual networks. By employing these strategies, they can create a competitive advantage among their audiences and attract a large number of people. Creating innovative and creative content that is aligned with current events in sports media can make them stand out among different audiences and help them gain the satisfaction of their followers. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that for media managers, competitiveness is a measure of professionalism and an indication of the media outlet's commitment to professionalizing its press system. These factors can effectively demonstrate the efficiency of the media and help them establish a high level of credibility with their audiences. The results of this study align with the studies of Taghinejad et al. (2022), Afshar-

Safavi et al. (2021), and Lavez and Rablard (2018). The competitiveness strategies of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.58 on the mechanisms of competitiveness in sports media. Effective competitiveness strategies for sports media involve mechanisms such as attracting human capital (specialists) and utilizing expert individuals in sports media. These skilled professionals can deliver optimal performance. Additionally, training and empowering the workforce, educating appropriate behaviors and responses to various issues, and expert training for media professionals in sports and social media networks are some of the key mechanisms in this field.

Sports media that succeed in virtual competition will be those that can effectively utilize management and organizational technologies (computers, audiovisual, internet, etc.), software and digital capabilities (websites, apps, etc.), social media (Instagram, etc.), information service networks, and intelligent networks such as satellite and mobile communications. They must also leverage networks related to telephones and mobile devices (SMS, etc.) in their operations. By doing so, they can outpace their competitors and introduce themselves as leading sports media outlets, using up-to-date technology and real-time, advanced news coverage in the virtual space and social media platforms. The roles of the media in sports competition have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.73 on the scope of sports media roles. To expand the role of sports media in competition with other media outlets in virtual networks and perform well, the role of media must not be ignored. The real-time dissemination of sports events, highlighting issues in the sports domain, and providing up-to-date and diverse sports information through online sports media and social networks should take place continuously. Furthermore, sports media should also focus on other media roles, such as promoting sports culture, offering general educational content through social media, increasing public knowledge and literacy about sports and related matters, facilitating communication within the community, encouraging public participation in sports and sports environments, and enabling effective communication for competition. Sports media should also engage in online marketing and media, focusing on advertising and marketing activities. Through these efforts, they can support and sponsor sports teams and events, foster creative content and media innovation, and help reshape the sports community's attitudes. This will enable sports media to distinguish themselves from competitors, create a competitive advantage, and attract large audiences in social networks and the virtual space. The findings of this study are consistent with the research of Taghinejad et al. (2022), Afshar-Safavi et al. (2021), Bilali et al. (2014), Lal et al. (2021), and Lavez and Rablard (2018).

Taghinejad et al. (2022) demonstrated that social innovation plays a mediating role in the relationship between information technology capabilities and the competitiveness of sports stores. Therefore, the use of information technology and social innovation by sports store vendors is essential for achieving a better position compared to competitors. The roles of media for sports media competition have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.79 on the competitiveness mechanisms of sports media. The use of media and digital technologies by sports media can expand their activities and, in today's digital world, enable them to provide real-time, up-to-date sports news coverage. Additionally, media will help sports media perform more effectively in branding and advertising, allowing them to operate more advanced and successfully in the areas of social networks, media communication capabilities, software, and digital technologies. By doing so, they can outpace their competitors, satisfy their audience, and retain their loyal users. The current study is consistent with the research of Taghinejad et al. (2022), Nazari (2022), Razavi et al. (2020), Bilali et al. (2014), Lal et al. (2021), and He et al. (2014). Lavez and Rablard (2018) stated that sports coverage in the digital culture provides more opportunities for journalists to move beyond the usual constraints of sports journalism and news production methods. The scope of the sports media role has a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.47 on the competitiveness mechanisms of sports media. To effectively enhance the competitiveness mechanisms of sports media, they should avoid bias and partiality in reporting and news coverage on social networks,

and refrain from responding in ways that indicate favoritism or bias. They should interpret news based on their observations and documented information to avoid criticism from users.

Media outlets should identify volunteer and media participation opportunities for competitiveness and use these opportunities in the media space and social networks to attract audiences. Some issues and events in the sports field are quite complex, and not everyone has the ability to grasp the depth of the issue. Therefore, for sports media to compete effectively with their rivals, they need to employ expert analysts and sports specialists, expand the sports knowledge of their audience, and use expert studies to predict future issues and sports events. This will encourage their audience to follow them with greater interest. Aligning virtual sports media competitions, such as supporting national and club teams in various sports, especially popular ones, should be incorporated into their programs to attract fans of these sports. The results of the present study align with the research of Afshar-Safavi et al. (2021), Farahani et al. (2021), Naghi-Lou et al. (2020), Razavi et al. (2020), Mortezaei and Moradi (2010), Lal et al. (2021), Yan and Lou (2020), and Lavez and Rablard (2018). The competitiveness mechanisms of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.75 on the competitiveness of sports media. The mechanisms employed by the media that affect competitiveness are that if sports media are competitive on social networks, as media content providers in the sports sector, they will help develop the sector by growing content, news, and sports media activities in the country. This will lead to competition between news providers and the development of the circulation of sports events in the online social space. Furthermore, with the competitiveness of media in the virtual space, the delivery of official and unofficial data from sports media, the use of modern capabilities in news reporting and the media coverage of sports events through television, online broadcasting, and at provincial, national, and international levels, as well as providing various formats of sports media content (textual, visual, audio, etc.), will be implemented. The results of the present study are in line with the research of Ghorezi et al. (2021), Taghinejad et al. (2022), Razavi et al. (2020), and Bilali et al. (2014).

Lavez and Rablard (2018) in an analytical study on the competition of sports media stated that sports journalists, while competing with content producers of sports news for the audience, become producers and operators of social media content. The competitiveness mechanisms of sports media have a positive and significant effect with a coefficient of 0.59 on the functions of sports media competitiveness. The competitiveness of sports media can have functions in the fields of media, society, and sports. In this regard, it can lead to functions such as improving the performance and sustainability of active sports media, enhancing the capability of collective problem-solving, preventing media challenges in sports, aligning with trust-building in the sports audience, and attracting audiences from all social groups and orientations. Additionally, the competitiveness of sports media in society can lead to functions such as improving the diversity and accessibility of media content for sports audiences, improving the virtual efficiency of the media consumption regime for sports audiences and participants, and enhancing collective insight and understanding of the issues in the sports audience community. Furthermore, competition among media in the sports field also has its specific functions, such as enhancing social capital and community support for sports organizations (federations, clubs, etc.), improving audience and stakeholder satisfaction with sports and its media environment, and reducing the harmful effects of media-related controversies for individuals and sports organizations. The results of this study align with the findings of Taghinejad et al. (2022), Farahani et al. (2021), Razavi et al. (2020), and Chan et al. (2021). Various social media platforms will develop and update their media and digital capabilities, utilizing the latest technologies. These factors will contribute to the diverse activities of sports media in the fields of news, advertising, marketing, and media networking. Furthermore, competitiveness will affect the functions of sports media, causing media outlets to influence their audience and even the general public, as well as encouraging competition among their media rivals. All of these factors will have significant impacts on sports, one of which is attracting and satisfying audiences, and this attraction

will lead to satisfaction with the media and create a competitive advantage for the relevant media outlets. These findings align with the results of Ghorezi et al. (2022), Afshar-Safavi et al. (2021), Naghi-Lou et al. (2020), Jafari and Aslipoor (2012), Secuning et al. (2020), and Bramuller (2020).

Research Suggestions

To complement the findings of the current study, it is suggested that:

- A comparative study between domestic and international media be conducted.
- A study be carried out with sports audiences to determine the most common methods through which they follow sports news.

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