

The Online Trolling of Football Fans on Social Media Based on Habermas's Public Sphere Theory

(Case Study: Fan Pages of Esteghlal and Persepolis Teams on Instagram)

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Abstract

Purpose: This study was conducted to investigate the concept of online trolling among Iranian football fans (Esteghlal and Persepolis) on Instagram. Using the thematic analysis method and purposeful sampling method, we sought to examine two fan pages (PersepolisFC.fans and fctaj) belonging to these two, relying on Habermas' views on the public sphere. We tried to answer whether online trolling by fans on social media (Instagram) and conversations based on it has created a new public sphere in cyberspace or continues the sphere of public life in society (sports).

Methods: This paper used thematic analysis by Clark's instructions, six themes were extracted, including obscenity, sexual slur, political, unfair judgment, teasing, and accusation. As a result, a network of related themes on online trolling was designed.

Results: Findings show that what has emerged in fandom culture on social media as a public sphere is a place to spread hatred and trash-talk, not Habermas's rational arguments. Blaming, the accusation of nonidentity and illogical, humiliation, and sexual slurs toward other users has prevented the formation of a sphere by Habermas criteria.

Conclusion: The lack of rational arguments, the emotionality of opinions instead of their rationality due to substantial prejudice against the favorite team, incorrect and unreliable and stereotypical judgments about the rival team, and superficial confrontation with the content and facts of football. Theatricality and hostility (antagonistic) of opinions are among the most critical factors that lead to the formation of online trolling in the Iranian sports life world and weaken the public sphere.

Keywords: Internet troll, public sphere, thematic analysis, rival teams, antagonist discussion

Introduction

Social media today shapes the way society thinks and reacts to issues and is an integral part of daily lives, efficiently facilitating communication and exchanging points of view. On the one hand, it allows individuals to share information, provides a framework for support during a crisis (Olteanu, Vieweg, and Castillo, 2014), aids law enforcement agencies (Crump, 2011), and, more generally, facilitates insight into society at large. On the other hand, it has also extended the doors to the proliferation of anti-social behavior, including online harassment, stalking, trolling, cyber-bullying, and hate speech. In a Pew Research Center study¹, 60% of Internet users said they had witnessed offensive name-calling, 25% had seen someone physically threatened and 24% witnessed someone being harassed for a sustained period (ElSherief et al., 2018). Frustration with trolling is evident in Google's Calico Labs Twitter vote poll that found that banning trolls was the most usual response, 43%, to tame abuse in online communities (Case & King, 2017:2). Internet trolling is increasingly challenging, given both the volume and development of social media users and accounts.

In this case one of the areas that have been influenced by social media is sports, the culture of support, support for sports teams and stars, Etc. With these descriptions, it must be acknowledged that the relationship and growth between Football and Social Media have increased intensely in around a decade. In contemporary times, the use of social media in football cycles is now on a steady increase. It is used by clubs, football players, football federations, and associations to drive fan engagement. However, with the emergence of social media, fans can connect with them in new ways than before. (Gadhia, 2015) Social media have become a crucial feature of sports fandom. (Kuper, 2014) For example, in April 2022, Real Madrid, a football club based in

Madrid, Spain, has 122 million followers on Instagram's social media. The club also has another 14.7 million followers on the social media site Twitter. Italy-based Cristiano Ronaldo, who plays for Juventus FC, has 469 million followers on Instagram and another 102.2 million followers on Twitter. These few examples show how millions of football fans worldwide follow their idols club sides and engage in discussions on social media.

In the same way, Esteghlal and Persepolis football teams have made Iran one of the nations where social networks and football have a huge following and provide a platform for engagement and participation among football fans. A vital pre-requisite in today's technologically advanced world is a thorough investigation of the substrate and understanding how best to utilize what has been discovered. In the field of previous research, several articles have dealt with the fields of media, sports, hatred, and online trolling Palacio and Kniffin (2018), in an article entitled "Trash-Talking and Trolling," examined the notion of Trash-Talking. To contribute a practical basis for examining the nature of "trash talk," they demonstrate the outcomes of a study of 291 varsity athletes who contest in the top section among US universities. They furthermore examined whether the anonymity given by face-masked helmets in "combat sports" was associated with more trash talk than connection sports played without a helmet (e.g., wrestling) and found no compatible association with face masks. Results emphasize how competitors in physical sporting contests endeavor to use language—often in ways that concentrate on players' kin or reproductive interests—to pursue victory while setting a baseline for future study into trash-talking.

Another study called "Sports, Instagram, and conflict talk in Englishes," Lee (2019) examines conflict talk and 'othering discourse' on Instagram involving the 2018 Winter Olympics hosted in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

Drawing upon linguistic strategies of encoding 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomies reported in earlier research, this study shows that explicit disparagement, disapproving representation of the other, stereotyping, and overgeneralization are readily utilized by both parties, who also occasionally engage in verbal reconciliation through lexical and syntactic mirroring.

Also, in a study, "Online abuse in sport: why athletes are targeted and how they can end up winning," Ahmed and Meggs (2022) examined the triggers for this kind of abuse and how to deal with it. They examined messages received on Twitter by the likes of Roger Federer and Cristiano Ronaldo and other big names from various sports. This study found that two events appeared to spark a peak in online abuse related to sporting performance. The first was a poor performance, and the second was a good performance – from supporters of a defeated rival team or play in the field of internal research, there has been no independent research on online trolling, and this is the first work in this field; only a few studies have briefly discussed verbal and virtual violence in sports. As well as that, Khaghani and Shanvaz (2016), in a study entitled "Study of verbal and virtual violence of football spectators in Iran," the need to emphasize the root causes of verbal and virtual violence of spectators in Iranian football was discussed as strategies to prevent it. The results show a decrease in physical violence in football and an increase in virtual violence. The results also emphasize the precise impact of the media, especially football sports programs, on increasing the violent behavior of spectators with provocative programs.

Online trolling: following these bases, the widespread use of the terms "troll" and "trolling" to describe a range of anti-social behaviors, including high-profile media topics of cyber-bullying (Alvarez, 2013) and suicide (O'Brien and Ralston 2014), the term "trolling" has become a catch-all term for all types of negative online behaviors (Hardaker, 2010;

Manivannan, 2014; Shachaf & Hara, 2010). For investigators, it is essential to comprehend the differences and interrelations between trolling and other online anti-social behaviors such as cyber-bullying, hacking, and flaming.

Online trolling can be defined as "a repetitious, disruptive online mischievous conduct by an individual toward other individuals or groups" (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016). This perpetrator, the Internet troll, can be characterized as a member of an online social community who purposely attempts to disrupt, aggression, offend, or commonly provoke trouble within the society by posting explicit comments, photos, videos, or other forms of online content (Moreau, 2017). In addition, trolls have been categorized as insult trolls, constant debate trolls, profanity trolls, all-caps trolls, show-off trolls, Etc. One of the most recent and more troubling aspects of trolling is the emergence of vengeance porn. In 2016, for instance, a Data & Society Research Institute examination discovered that one in 25 Americans were harassed via revenge porn (Della Cava, 2017).

With the disruptive and deceptive elements of trolling behavior becoming more prevalent than past, the concept of trolling has largely shifted from a discrete form of online behavior to an archetypical anti-social individual in online communities – the troll (Golder and Donath 2004; Welser et al., 2007). Here trolls have been linked with negative personality traits, including sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – a personality syndrome involving cunningness and duplicity in general conduct (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus, 2014). Accordingly, Hardaker (2010) concluded that trolling is an action that aims at being disruptive within a particular community while maintaining a pretense of innocence or sincerity. This notion is supported by Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014), who describe trolling as deceptive, destructive, or disruptive behavior with no instrumental purpose. On the

other hand, Binns (2012) focuses on the actor, defining trolls as individuals who aim to annoy and disrupt others. This latter definition reflects the previously noted shift in the understanding of trolling away from specific behaviors and toward the characteristics of particular individuals. The trolls have been associated with negative behaviors (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014). Briefly, all these factors are an obstacle in the formation of a public domain that Habermas (1991) expected.

Formation of football fandom: Fiske (2001), on forming a fan community in football, believes that the culture of support is considered a form of respect for the "other" culture. Fandom is a feature of popular culture in industrial societies. In the form of this culture, from the mass-produced and distributed hobbies, actors, narratives, and specific genres are selected and taken into the culture of a group of people who have consciously distinguished themselves.

On the other hand, the general public engages in varying degrees of semiotic production and produces meanings and pleasures that belong to their particular social status apart from the products of the cultural industry. Most proponents of semiotic production refer to some turn it into a form of text production that can be disseminated to a crowd of fans and thus helps define and define this group. He considers discrimination and differentiation, production and participation, and accumulation of capital as the main features of the emergence of supporters.

Likewise, Millward (2008) cites social media as a factor in shaping a new type of football fan base. In an interview with experts, the official website of football fans in Iran discusses the formation of this culture of support between the two teams. The two-party of the social and political system is the root of the football derby support, especially when we look at their history. The model of the political system has spread to other parts of human life, such as

culture and sports. As a result, we now have bipolar football teams in all countries, from Everton and Liverpool in England to Milan and Inter in Italy and even the two most popular teams, Barcelona and Real that are Spanish.

To clarify, Dehghan and Hassani (2012) discussed that the two blue and red teams were formed in football based on the same way of thinking. For example, in Iran, against a royal team called Taj, a team called Shahin, which is among the masses, is faced. These dipoles are present in all derbies of the world. Football-related activities are enjoyed by Iranians of all ages, genders, nationalities, languages, cultures, and local football clubs with ardent fans whose existence is not limited to the city and location of the club. Despite the symbolic disparities between these two groupings, being blue or red is one of the most important aspects of forming collective identity and establishing similarities and contrasts in Iran. Advocates have many fundamental similarities due to their cultural environment, with the primary distinction being the hue of the members of these two groups. Football fans express their disappointment when they lose games to particular players, especially on obsenitysocial media (Elgujja & Arimoro, 2019: 6). The internet is fast becoming the most famous place for football fans to display their self and social identity and allegiance to their team (Graney, 2019). Furthermore, the internet has allowed users a new platform to spread hate, trolling, and insults. Hate groups no longer have to communicate in isolation, hunt for recruits, or spread leaflets on foot. The internet supplies them instant access to new and existing followers, making it easier to mobilize and spread malicious messages (Brown, 2009).

According to Graney (2019), The use of trolling by football fans towards players, officials, opposing fans, owners, media figures, and even their own team's fans is on the rise and replacing the violence we used to see on terraces. Trolls will now make online death

threats. They will threaten violence. They will bully. They will discriminate, and generally be abusive. Interestingly, they will attempt to hijack a discussion through harassment or inflammatory content, hoping to provoke an emotional response.

Cleland moreover notes that creating several platforms on the Internet has allowed more enthusiastic football fans to engage in everyday asynchronous discussions on footballing and non-footballing matters. He states further that social media, in this case, online message boards, allows racism to be broadcast in new social settings. Thus, it is glaring that the advent of social media allows individuals to express hate and trolling, such as racist, Islamophobic, or homophobic views, on message boards or other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Noteworthy is that the social media sites would take down such posts (Cleland, 2014). As Vivi Theodoropoulou (2007) notes, fandom can easily lead to anti-fandom when dislike (whether severe or playful) is directed at a perceived rival of one's beloved fan object. Theodoropoulou offers a clear example of sporting rivalries. Certain fandoms practically require dislike of other teams: Boston Red Sox fans are expected to hate the New York Yankees, and Liverpool fans "should" revile Manchester United, and so forth. However, we might apply Theodoropoulou's observation more broadly to fandoms.

According to Etienne Fermie (2022) in the atmosphere of fandom between teams in football, there are many cases of trolling, both at the national and club level. For example, Switzerland fans brutally troll Italy after World Cup qualifying KO with a Google-themed banner in England's loss at Wembley because they are losing 1-0 at home to North Macedonia. At the club level, trolling is also very common between rival teams; In Spain, between Real Madrid and Barcelona; In England, between Manchester United and

Liverpool and in Italy, between Lazio and Rome. In Iran, there is trolling between the teams of Esteghlal and Persepolis fans; In a way, the fans of the teams in cyberspace address each other with insults and ugly titles and condemn the rival team for corrupt events.

Overall, trolling emerges in every corner of the World Wide Web; anywhere from a forum, chat, or comments section is susceptible to trolling in one shape or another. These forums and comment sections live with the best choices—to allow people (usual consumers) to supply feedback or comments on content to share opinions and offer complaints. The opinions are, An essential component of household norms articulated through notions like the marketplace of ideas that offer the public demands access to a wide variety of opinions on a topic in the making and announced, reasonable decisions about their future. News media traditionally have served a critical role in disseminating these opinions, including avenues for the public to share via forums like letters to the editor. This function of trolling facilitating contact among citizens embodies the views of the public sphere (Habermas, 1999[1962]), which represents a democratic utopia in which all citizens can partake in discussing social and political matters important toward making decisions for the common good. (McCluskey & Hemilowski, 2011: 304).

Therefore, the theoretical framework of this research is based on Habermas's public sphere theory to answer the central question of the research. Habermas ([1989] 1991:27) defines the public sphere as a place where "private people come together as a public" to use reason to further critical knowledge, which, in turn, leads to political shift. The public sphere demands unlimited access to knowledge, similar and covered participation, and the lack of institutional impact, particularly concerning the economy. Habermas ([1989] 1991) debates that the public sphere does not exist in

modernity primarily due to money's influence via corporate interests within mass media. However, Habermas (2006, 1985) argues that the public sphere can be renewed in modernity through discourse communities.

The public space in theories involving participation is characterized by the equal acceptance of the factors that discuss, from the reciprocal connection of communication and through a structure that offers possibilities to be involved in the discourse and does not exclude structurally specific thoughts or certain complex themes. (Habermas, 1991, p. 31).

Actually, Habermas (1989) saw the bourgeois culture of the late 17th and 18th centuries as delivering a model for the outstanding public sphere where issues connecting to the state and public policies could be discussed following Kantian ideals of procedural rationality. Ideological viewpoints view the internet as having a potential for the enhanced condition of such a space, where people can assemble their identity independently of their demographic profile, providing the prospect for discussion irrespective of the social situations of the individuals entangled (Benkler, 2006; Negroponte, 1995; Turkle, 1996).

According to Habermas, the public sphere is a multi-minded arena and the meeting place of various ideas and subjectivities and the free space of public issues and forms of reasoning and reasoning about them and, ultimately, the public will (Bostani and Pooladi, 2017: 24). The public sphere is the bright sphere instead of the dark spheres of power and private interests. The more the public sphere expands and the more the sphere of power is absorbed, the more the field of government rationalization and politics expands (Nozari, 2002: 431).

To conclude this point, it must be acknowledged that what drew Habermas to the public sphere was the importance of this concept as the basis for criticizing society based on democratic principles. In this way, the

public sphere is an arena where few people come together to participate in free and open dialogue. In its true sense, the public sphere is an arena in which no limits have been set on its activity. It is the rational, truth-seeking, and truth-making sphere of society. This is the realm of thought, dialogue, reasoning, and language.

With these descriptions, the primary purpose of this research is to fully understand online trolling in cyberspace and the culture of Iranian football fans and to get acquainted with the types of trolling and its themes in order to understand that cyberspace has been able to create an arena for equality and realization of the public sphere or not. Since the spread of new media and its various forms, including social networks, can indicate a change in the public sphere, and according to some experts, the consequences in the real world do not represent the creation of an online public sphere (Khaniki et al, 2017: 105). this study seeks to Use the concept of online trolling in the sports space (between Esteghlal and Persepolis) and use Habermas's public sphere theory to answer whether fans' hatred and trolling of fans against each other still causes the emergence of the public sphere or not? Other research questions include: 1) has cyberspace's public sphere been realized? 2) What fans towards the rival team have said themes of trolling, and 3) has the culture of fandom on social media changed, or is it a continuation of public life?

Materials and Methods

This research has been done using by thematic analysis method, which is considered a qualitative approach to the research method. The thematic analysis identifies themes that emerge from and describe a given episode (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). The identification of themes comes through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). According to Boyatzis (1998: 4), thematic analysis is a process of encoding qualitative information that can be

used as a way of seeing, a way of making sense of seemingly unrelated material, a way of analyzing qualitative information'.

Emden (1998) explains several steps for performing a thematic analysis. Briefly, in the beginning, the data must be read and scanned several times. In the second step, the irrelevant parts should be deleted from the texts, and in the third step, the remaining texts must be read and reviewed for sense. These two stages must be repeated several times to obtain a concentrated final version of the texts. The final step of this suggested process is to identify the key themes by reading the texts several times and describing every theme. Every theme 'captures something important about the data concerning the research question and represents some patterned reaction or meaning within the data set' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 10). Braun and Clarke (2006) noted: Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, indicating and the validity of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines how events, realities, meaning, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourse operating within society. In this research, we extracted themes based on Clark's model; Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield (2015) methodology was followed using these steps:

1. Data familiarization requires constant reading of the text

2. Generating an initial set of codes across the data set

3. Searching for themes and sub-themes from the codes

4. Reviewing themes, including merging them for accuracy

5. Final theme naming and definitions

6. Producing the Report

In this research, we applied the "purposive sampling method." "In purposive sampling, the researcher selects sampling units based on his or her judgment of what units will facilitate an investigation." (Adler & Clark, 2008: 121). We chose two Instagram fan pages of Esteghlal and Persepolis. The reason for choosing these two fan pages is that they were created by the fans themselves and not by the football club, so their comments are closer to the fan culture seen in the stadium and trolling is more perceptible on these pages.. Then we examined comments on Derby Day postings (the final Derby of the century took place on 17 March 2022) and all post-derby posts relating to the rival team to acquire data. 24881 thousand comments were reviewed, themes were extracted, and comments on the posts about the rival team were selected as the statistical population. The specifications of the research samples are as follows:

Table 1. selected samples

team page	Page	Followers	Posts
Persepolis fan page	PersepolisFC.fans	1.4 m	21.7 k
Esteghlal Club fan page	Fctaj	451 k	23.5 k

Furthermore, Patton (2001) states that validity and reliability are two factors that any qualitative researcher should consider while designing a study. Doing step-by-step research

by researchers based on Clark's instructions, repeatedly defining concepts based on categories, and verifying data consistency by examining items as raw data and possessing

notes made the results reliable and valid.

then its boundaries are outlined, and finally, comments pertinent to each theme are entered into a separate column.

Results

The findings are presented in several different tables. The first step is to establish each theme,

Table 2. Themes of fan pages' comments

Theme	Definition	Comments
Obscenity	An obscenity is any utterance or act that strongly offends the prevalent morality of the time. In this style of comments, the user has used vulgar words in response to the post caption or other users' comments. These comments are sometimes accompanied by insulting the person's personal opinion, sometimes without personal comment and only insult.	Comments contain obscene and offensive content.
Sexual slurs	A sexual slur is a term of disparagement used to refer to members of a given gender, sex, or sexual orientation in a derogatory or pejorative manner	Comments contain obscene and offensive content.
Teasing	Comments meaning to laugh at them or make jokes about them to embarrass, annoy, or upset them. questioning rival team identities	Perspolise fans: It is no longer an honor to be a Persepolis fan/ Make us happy with a goodbye broker/ Someone say is it possible to use 4 foreign players at the same time?/ blue federation/ Only Majidi prostration after the game draw/ Women are very angry, do not take them seriously (point to Farhad Majidi) / He (Farnaz) knows how to flirt / powder Farhad talks a lot / Ms. Farhad has made many of these promises/ A team that has not roots cannot win even one cup / They have not been able to win at least one cup in the last ten years/ After billions of budgets they still could not win the cup Esteghlal fans: Dad where are you, your (Longi) children left orphaned?/ Snap champion/ Orphaning is a bad pain/ How dare you call the name of the championship of previous years a pure championship?/ Seyed Balal is just falling in every

photo I saw/ Doping Jala / Jackal Alizadeh / The oppressed bench of Persepolis / Piroozi is annoyed by their honorable staff / We are witnessing the real school of Persepolis, that is why we call you unoriginal, you certainly do not understand what I am saying, we do not expect anything from you

Unfair**Judgment**

Users accuse the referee of not judging correctly. users believe that the referee is under the influence of the rival team federation.

Perspolis fans: The referee took a minute less/ The referee took the wrong penalty/ The referee took that ridiculous penalty/ The referee deliberately took a penalty/ There was no penalty at all / Are you kidding? There was no penalty at all / All over the world, when a player is injured, the referee allows a substitute to enter the game / Shame on you referee / Damn your father, Mr. Referee / Send the referee's ID page / The goal was offside /The derby referee has limited his Instagram messages. Does anyone have his address?/ Record Ali's refereeing in Guinness/ their defense hit Torabi's mouth and his mouth was full of blood, then the referee did not even give him a card/ The referee disturbed the players

Esteghlal fans:

The referee caught the goalkeeper's fool while there was no collision/ The fool was quite obvious/ The referee was their fan / The referee should have fired Yahya / Why did the referee treat him with kindness? / Incidentally, the referee was on your side / The goal was one hundred percent unacceptable/ It is hard to believe that the Iranian referee could have declared this a goal / They did not take two penalties for us / The opponent's players are comfortable to do anything on football. The referee has their back / Why did the Persepolis team push two of our players, but the refereeing experts said it was true?

Political**Factors**

Users in these comments refer to the support of the rival team by the ministries and government agencies. Corruption and

Perspolis fans:

Regardless of the technical problems of the Persepolis team, Esteghlal fans (Kisehkesh), if you

immorality are considered to be the cause of football's decline.

become a champion, do not mention the name of a pure champion. The whole world laughs at you / You could not have become a hero without the support of the Rouhani government./ They made them (Kiseh) champions this year with the ordered referees / The technical staff has colluded with the minister/ The technical staff is betraying the team with the support of the minister/ Persepolis Club does not have an owner / The result of the game was an order / The federation, the jury and even Sada-e Sima are supporters of the Esteghlal team, to whom can we complain?/ Livelihood assistance, support from Baba Hamid and the jury/ The derby referee is a municipal employee

Esteghlal fans:

You do not talk about a pure champion apparently you have forgotten the time of "Baba Masoud"/ They have no support in the ministry now, they are rude / If Majidi had done what Yahya did, he would have been deprived / If it was Esteghlal, he would have been fired / These are Yahya's behaviors from Baba's time in the ministry / The immoralities of Persepolis are not punished but encouraged / Goal was absolutely right, but there is no justice in Iran, so there is no justice in football / Government teamprivate

Accusation

Blaming the players and the coach and the technical staff of their own team.

Perspolis fans:

Only foreigner technical staff is accepted/ What did you do with the team that Branco built? Slogan masters/ Yahya is such a stubborn/ Fire Yahya now/ The team you created does not deserve the name of Persepolis/ enough stop it/ They just make a statement/ Yahya and his staff have expired/ Our team does not have good players/ Players are stressed/ The team is weak, but will the situation improve only with Yahya leaving?/ Mr Golmohammadi now it is time to go/ We were awful for the last few games/ It is time for the team

to leave/ Only a esteghlal fan can speak of Yahya's dismissal/ Our team has neither defense nor attack / Branco, we hope you come back one day, father

Esteghlal fans:

The team is not integrated / Everyone wants to score a goal by ownself/ Majidi, Hosseinzadeh are the main problem/ Hosseinzadeh does not use his mind/ they do not have one tenth of the Ghaedi's performance/ Majidi took our lives this year/ Why has the technical staff of the team reduced the performance of foreign players? / The famous foreign coach is the cure for the team / How awful this Majidi team was / If it were not for Yamga's selfishness, we would have won / The team is full of individual fools of the players / The training style of the players has caused them to decline / Amanov's shots fell in our yard / Yamga is out of mind / Stupid Majidi has put good players on the bench / Majidi does not have the discipline of being a coach at all

Table 3. Teasing themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Basic theme
Teasing	Trash talking, Ridicule, Humiliation, Embarrassment	Fans' arrogance in understanding the situation / Questioning the rules of the federation / Mocking the behavior of team members / Use feminine adjectives to humiliate people /An allusion to the history of individuals / Proud to be a fan of a team / babyish behavior / Use of disrespectful titles / Devaluing the championship of rival team

According to table 3, in a group of comments that were accompanied by sub-themes like trash talking, ridicule, humiliation, and embarrassment, the common theme of the teasing is extracted. In this category of comments, the fans of each team try to devalue them by using derogatory titles and mocking them. In this context, supporting a team is like the identity of individuals, so they try to question their identity by enumerating the

weaknesses of the opposing team. The use of feminine attributes for the opposing team causes them to be in a higher position than the opposing team because the nature of football in Iran and Iranian cultural and traditional concepts gives men authority, and as a result, a team with a masculine identity has an advantageous position among It has people. Another group of users, by questioning their independence, try to show that they are

dependent on the opposing team, which is powerless without the support of influential people like children.

Table 4. Unfair judgment theme

Theme	Sub-theme	Basic theme
Unfair judgment	Incompetence	Questioning the referee's judgment / The referee's affiliation with rival groups
	Criticize	
	Bribe	/ Referee threat / Humiliate the referee with ugly and rude words / Mocking the referee's judgment

According to table 4, comments with the theme of criticizing the performance of judges were extracted as the theme of unfair judgment. After the loss, the fans try to blame the refereeing staff and thus consider the players and the technical staff free from any responsibility. This criticism is sometimes due to the referee's inner inclination toward a

particular team and sometimes because the fans believe that the referee received a bribe from the opposing team. Prejudice and fanaticism cause the fans not to judge the game correctly and question the referee's judgment despite their sufficient knowledge of refereeing. Users in this space can cite erroneous expert opinions as fact without question.

Table 5. Political theme

Theme	Sub-theme	Basic theme
Political	Corruption	Collaboration between the federation and the ministry / Government support / Unqualified people / Lack of transparency in football / No punishment and reprimand / Injustice in the implementation of the laws of the federation
	Lawlessness	
	Lack of supervision	

Corruption, lawlessness, and lack of supervision are among the topics covered in the comments that the government of the two teams has created scandals about, according to table 5. Users complain about the violation of the rules by the federations. They describe football problems as rooted. Political commentators believe that due to injustice in the government, ministries cannot function properly, and consequently, the federation and members of

the technical staff and players are selected not based on merit but on the basis of relations. By naming people like the minister, fans of both teams consider the opposing team under that person's protection. For this reason, in the comments, the rival team's victory is considered invalid because they did not try for that cup.

Table 6. Accusation theme

Theme	Sub-theme	Basic theme
Accusation	Blame	Devaluing the Iranian technical staff / Lack of integration
	Hate Speech	/ Respect foreign team members over Iranians / Instructing the authorities / Spreading hatred towards the performance of the players

Based on table 6, the content of the accusation has been distorted with the sub-themes such as blaming and spreading hatred. According to comment analysis, one of the most common topics that Instagram users comment on is a personal judgment of players' performance and technical staff. Users consider their loss due to their weakness and lack of talent because they believe their work is straightforward and receive much money in return. Nevertheless, they do not value the fans by their lack of work and negligence. The fans think their favorite team has ignored them and does not pay attention to their wishes. Obscenity is seen in all these cases. In addition, the players and coaches are compared to their previous colleagues, and in this comparison, their performance is called shameful.

Discussion

We picked two tremendous Instagram profiles of Esteghlal and Persepolis with Esteghlal and Persepolis's names based on Clark's 5-step technique, which includes thematic analysis to become familiar with the themes and concepts employed (PersepolisFC.fans and fctaj). The reason for selecting these two pages is that they have many followers. When compared to the other fan pages for these two teams, everyday activities include the sharing of posts and stories, as well as a large number of comments and likes received by their postings. Because the researchers wanted to ensure that the study procedure was as precise as possible, they restricted the sample circle to postings whose core subject alludes to the other team's trash

talking. Reading the comments in the first stage created a basic understanding of the atmosphere of the sports fan pages. A study of the comments reveals that the contents of the comments follow a specific pattern. Based on this, we go on to the second stage of the Clark model, which is the development of fundamental principles for creating data codes. We continue to the third stage, which is creating a theme and a sub-theme, then identifying the key themes that have been repeated in the comments. The fourth and fifth stages are then revealed. The topics mentioned in the comments are grouped into six categories, each of which is further subdivided.

A comment may be broken down into two categories: comments made as a stand-alone statement and comments said in response to another user's comment. Commenters from the second type have helped build a smaller public sphere inside the broader public sphere (here, Instagram).

The first category is commented, and its primary content is obscenity. This indicates the user has either utilized their viewpoint in conjunction with obscene phrases or has chained them together with a collection of obscene words. The second category is devoted to sexual slurs, discussed in detail. The difference between this group of themes and the first category is that sexual slurs, phrases, and expressions allude to gender and gender identity, which carries a more significant load of humiliation and contempt than in the first

category of topics. The second group of themes appears to be more common than the first category of themes. The target of these obscenities is usually a football team member, a referee, the federation, or the ministry, although it can also be other users in some situations. These users may be fans of the opposing team or fans who disagree with each other on an issue. What jumps out the most about these two themes is that users do not seek to have a reasoned discourse but rather insult one another, regardless of the issues on which they differ. People are reluctant to discover ways to influence the discourse.

The third involves themes that are intended to tease. Esteghlal and Persepolis are long-standing rivals, and both fan cultures have ideas and characteristics that are used to humiliate and insult the other team, according to their histories. This category has a mixture of vulgar words and trash-talking. Some of the most common topics in such remarks include references to the history of victories and defeats of the two teams, championships awarded to them to embarrass the players, reminders of players' blunders, the inadequacy of coaches, and political backing.

The theme of unfair judging by referees is to evaluate the referee's decision-making abilities throughout a game. Those who feel the referee has favored a particular side due to collaboration between the teams behind the scenes. This category includes bringing up the officials' history from previous games and downgrading the value of the opponent's victory.

The political theme comments that go beyond the players to the root of the problem are noteworthy. They believe that corruption and cooperation inside the country's political establishment are the root causes of both triumph and defeat. Because these two teams are associated with the government, most of the information is covered by their opinions.

Although they may support a different team than the one they accuse, the theme of the accusation includes statements that primarily attack the players, technical staff, and head coach, blaming their lack of competency and failure to perform their roles on the present state of their team. Even after winning, such comments might be seen in the comments section. The supporters who anticipated the players to perform better may be disappointed.

Another category of comments, in addition to these six topics, has elements of racism, as seen by insulting remarks directed towards the country of the players or users who expressed their opinions. Alternatively, making derogatory remarks against women who have made technical comments about the game is unacceptable. Because of the masculine nature of football, the comments made by women on the game are often met with shame and ridicule, which undermines any potential for discussion that may otherwise exist. According to the research findings, the extracted themes were articulated within a themes network, which is shown in the following diagram:

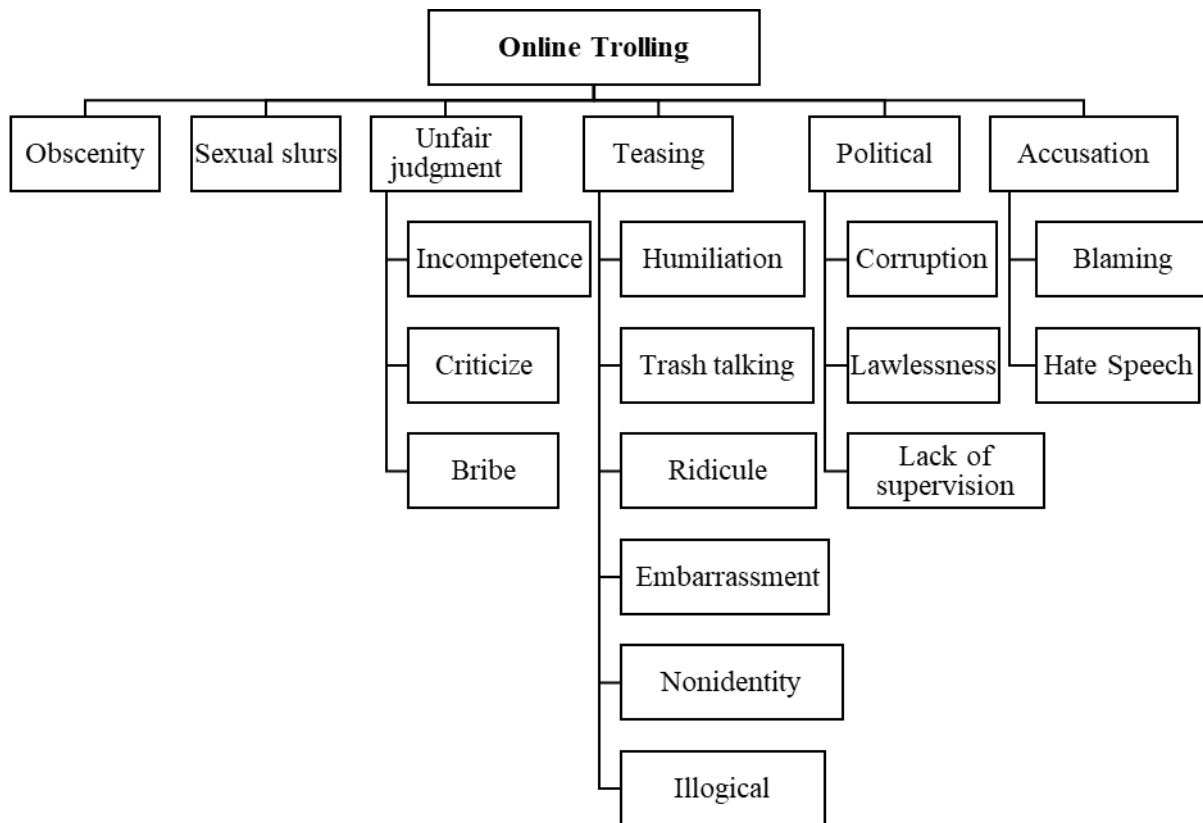


Figure 1. Themes network

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate the concept of online trolling among Iranian football fans (Esteghlal and Persepolis) on Instagram. This article examined the two fan pages belonging to Esteghlal and Perspolis teams using the thematic analysis method, relying on Habermas' views on the public sphere. We tried to answer whether online trolling by fans on social media (Instagram) and conversations based on it has created a new public sphere in cyberspace or continues the sphere of public life in society (sports).

Since in Iran, support for the two clubs of Esteghlal and Persepolis has taken on a sacred quality, with followers of both teams believing they are faultless. The support culture of these two teams is characterized by sanctification, credulity, forgetting, and the formation of bipolarity. Because of the supporters' actions and reactions, hate has become one of their

hallmarks. Each of these two clubs' victories and defeats gives a platform to their followers, who become the talk of social media until a few days following the game. Due to the sensitive nature of the matches, fan violence has occurred several times. In minor cases, fans break chairs or throw garbage at the field, but in some cases, fans have stormed the field of play, physical fights between opposing teams and fans have broken out, and public property has been destroyed. In recent seasons, the atmosphere of Iranian football fans has moved more in the direction of the currents in cyberspace, resulting from an increase in violence and hate among the fans of the teams. Iranian football has faced a phenomenon called hatred and trolling rather than becoming more professional. This problem has caused violence and hatred to spread in all parts of Iranian football, from fans to the bodies of clubs, and over time, the culture of Iranian football fans is going in the wrong direction.

Allowing users to comment on the content of these networks doubles the importance of virtual social networks. For this reason, some social scientists think that virtual social networks have the capacity and ability to form a virtual public sphere, and their users can talk and interact about various issues and topics through these Internet networks and cause the formation of Public opinion. Users can also take appropriate action in opposing or agreeing with a social or political issue. In other words, users' opinions can lead to forming a virtual public sphere by creating a space for dialogue between people and ultimately shaping public opinion. In Iran, with the expansion of new media, a space was created in which sports and football fans could experience a gathering outside the stadiums, a kind of virtual community created alongside traditional communities that usually interacted in a specific space-time. One of these common causes of hatred, insults, and trolling in Iranian football has occurred between the fans of Esteghlal and Persepolis, two traditional rivals. The competition has an ancient history. With the growth of social media, the battlefield has emerged among fan pages. This event has taken the form of hostility. Obviously, in the sports and competitive atmosphere of fandom in the world and Iran, there is a kind of hatred and online trolling that has conquered social networks.

What Habermas (1991) saw in halls, literary circles, and cafes in the 20th century has been evolving with changes in social media. A place where all participants in the discussion were considered equal and everyone was allowed to participate in the discussion creates an area where it is possible to express and exchange social experiences and views. Researchers like Papacharissi (2002: 11) believed that the Internet as a new public sphere could facilitate the discussion that promotes exchanging new ideas and opinions. The exchanging of ideas

and the interaction between the individuals have reached a higher level thanks to social media. These users can communicate freely and, consequently, come together for a particular theme. Communicating online means publishing online, which on the other hand, refers to being connected online with other people (Cela 2015: 197). Social networks such as Instagram allow their users to enter a public sphere according to their interests, where it is possible to produce content and debate regardless of time and place. Football fans who used to be unilaterally informed about sports events and opinions through TV sports programs or print media talked to the sour rival team in the stadiums. An examination of the sports pages of the football fans of Esteghlal and Persepolis, which have traditionally been rivals, shows that a large number of people participate in this public sphere.

The nature of the sports atmosphere due to its competitiveness and the many chants among its fans have long been the source of numerous disputes, violence, and conflicts. In the past, when the media was one-sided, fans could not talk about football issues, but the emergence of new media as interactive media has made sports fans, especially football, more expressive. This has led researchers to believe that cyberspace has helped create a new public sphere, in other words, online. The research results are consistent with previous studies regarding the increase in verbal violence in cyberspace and the behavior of fans as "us" against "the other." In answer to the final question of the research, it should be acknowledged that the public sphere of cyberspace is a continuation of the sphere of public life, and the violence and ugly events of the football space in the real world are reproduced in this space.

The content extracted from the comments shows that the type of discussion of the users of this social network contradicts what Habermas (1999) said about the public sphere. From Habermas's point of view, the primary purpose

of the public sphere is to have rational critical discussions among citizens with the aim of the "common good." The data of this research show that this comment does not lead to the formation of a public sphere because the primary users prevent the formation of such a domain by spreading hatred and trash-talking. A group of users who express their opinion logically also face hateful reactions, blaming, and humiliation from others similar to what Khaghani & Shanvaz (2016) admitted. The apparent verbal violence in the fans' comments has led to the fact that even if the users have constructive criticism and opinion, their opinion is not seen, and the rival group spreads more hatred in response to their hatred. As a result, due to the repetition of this pattern, a chain of hatred is created, which in itself prevents the creation of a public sphere.

Even when a group of people offers their technical ideas in such an environment, they are not given much consideration, according to the data. Instagram's algorithm places at the top of the list of comments those that have gotten a greater number of likes or replies from other users. An examination of the Instagram posts of these two fan pages reveals that there are no top comments that can be used to establish a conversational network between various people. Users are more inclined to agree with comments that reflect wrath and disdain, whereas the few technical comments are placed at the bottom of the list. Another point that has prevented the formation of the public sphere is the disregard for women's comments because most men believe that women do not have enough knowledge to discuss football.

Accordingly, and identical to what Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014) pointed in their research results., the lack of rational arguments, the emotionality of opinions instead of their rationality due to substantial prejudice against the favorite team, incorrect and unreliable and stereotypical judgments about the rival team, and superficial confrontation with the content

and facts of football.

Theatricality and hostility (antagonistic) of opinions are among the most critical factors that lead to the formation of online trolling in the Iranian sports life world and weaken the public sphere. For this reason, with the mediatization of football fandom and talking about it in the interactive space of social media (and the emergence of online trolling and hatred, Etc.), instead of facing a fundamental and critical public sphere, we are facing "a Theatrical public sphere" in the context of cyberspace, which shows that the fan atmosphere in Iranian football is far from the formation of a desirable public sphere.

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