

The Relationship between Internal Marketing and Attracting Customers with Regard to the Mediating Role of Service Quality in I.R.I. Police Sport Clubs

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to investigate the relationship between internal marketing and attracting customers, considering the mediating role of the service quality of I.R.I. Police sport clubs.

Methods: This study is of a descriptive-correlational research type and the statistical population includes the managers of I.R.I. Police sport clubs in Tehran province. The statistical sample was randomly selected using a stratified random sampling method ($n = 131$). The measurement tools included Internal Marketing questionnaires (Mooney & Forman, 1995), with a reliability of 0.79, Service Quality (Parasurmon et al., 1985) with a reliability of 0.81, and Customer Acquisition and Retention (Gibb, 2005) with a reliability of 0.77. Using the inferential statistical method and structural equation modeling, the effects of the observed variables on the underlying variables were investigated.

Results: The results showed that internal marketing has an effect on attracting sport clubs' customers ($\beta = 0.96$; $P\text{-Value} = 32.46$). Internal marketing has an effect on attracting customers ($\beta = 0.75$; $P\text{-Value} = 32.46$). Also, service quality has an effect on attracting customers ($\beta = 0.81$; $P\text{-Value} = 21.12$).

Conclusion: The current research has tried to examine the relationship between internal marketing and attracting customers, considering the mediating role of service quality. Although a lot of research has been done on the relationship between internal marketing and attracting customers, the mediating role of service quality in sport clubs covered by I.R.I. Police has not been done so far. Sport clubs' officials are the primary beneficiaries of this research. Managers of clubs and sport venues can also use the basics of internal marketing to increase the quality of club services, the willingness of customers to return and make customers loyal, and take advantage of the benefits of a loyal customer for their collection.

Keywords: Internal marketing, Sport clubs, Service quality, Customer attraction

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Introduction

Today, organizations operate in a dynamic, confusing and changing environment. One of the most obvious features of the current era is the tremendous and continuous changes and transformations that occur in social, cultural (such as changes in the way of thinking, ideology, and social values), political, economic, technological, and transnational conditions. Environmental dynamics and increasing competition have prompted organizations to become more competitive in their activities and to gain the satisfaction of their customers and, on the other hand, to acquire new customers (Deepak & Jeyakumar, 2019). The most important factor to maintain and acquire new customers is the quality of service. In fact, in service organizations, the sources of competitive advantage are the quality of service and the human resources providing that service. One of the important factors that can improve service quality is internal marketing, which is an important activity in the development of a customer-oriented organization (Zhang, 2019).

Numerous studies show that high levels of customer satisfaction and customer retention are strongly interdependent and these two factors are effective in the profitability of the organization (Khadka & Maharjan, 2017; Almohaimmed 2019; Khan, Salamzadeh et al., 2022). As the needs of customer retention and creating grounds for their return is a very sensitive and vital task of the company, it will be necessary for the organization.

The concept of customer loyalty and the creation of loyal customers in the context of business in the form of creating a commitment in the customer to make a transaction with a specific organization in purchasing goods and services repeatedly and continuously is a future challenge for organizations that are concerned about maintaining and developing their competitive position in the market (Khairawati & Science, 2020). Also, maintaining and strengthening customer loyalty is considered strategic (Juwaini, Chidir et al., 2022). Therefore, companies should develop their

activities by keeping consumers satisfied; until they can gain advantages for themselves in strong business environments. The reason for this issue is that the main output of customer satisfaction is loyalty, and companies that have more loyal customers will experience increased sales, greater purchasing power, increased desired prices, better treatment of customers, and less desire for them to reduce prices and change their purchase path and profit more.

Over time, customers become more diverse, competition becomes fiercer, and reaching a high level of customer satisfaction for survival requires special tricks and tools. The most important marketing tool for sport marketers is constant communication with people, providing appropriate services, and knowing the competitive market (Smith & Stewart, 2014). The researchers stated that providing the right service quality is one of the basic strategies for the organization's survival. Kotler stated that services require three types of external and internal marketing, including preparation, pricing, distribution and promotion of services to mutual (internal) customers. Marketing is external (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Reciprocal marketing describes the skills of employees in serving customers and deals more with the behavior of employees with customers. Internal marketing considers the training and motivation of employees in providing services (Kaplan & Norton 2004). Kotler states that internal marketing must surpass external marketing and that developing an internal marketing approach leads to the creation of a culture that most efficiently and effectively creates behaviors that will lead to the provision of superior customer service. Therefore, service marketing is the most important component of internal marketing. When the organization's internal resources and human capital are appropriate to the strategy, it will be effective when the internal and external environment of the organization are coordinated towards this strategy (Deepak & Jeyakumar, 2019).

The main objective of internal marketing is to develop awareness of internal and external

customers and remove task barriers in the way of valuing service quality and organizational effectiveness (Kumar & Meenakshi, 2011), and views employees as internal customers and businesses as internal products (Kumar & Meenakshi, 2011).), also focuses on appropriate internal relationships between people at all levels in organizations, thus creating a service-oriented and customer-oriented approach between employees in contact with customers (Park, 2020). The organization has an internal supply chain that includes suppliers and internal customers, the management of the organization should see the organization as a market. It expresses the idea that by satisfying the needs of internal customers, the organization is in a better position to provide quality services to external customers. Therefore, internal marketing is an important activity in the development of a customer-oriented organization, the main purpose of which is to develop awareness of internal and external customers and remove obstacles in the way of organizational effectiveness. Developing an internal marketing approach leads to the creation of a culture that will most efficiently and effectively create behaviors that will lead to the provision of superior customer service (Qiu, Boukis et al., 2022).

In this regard, Kadik et al., in a research, concluded that internal marketing is one of the most important factors of customer satisfaction. De Bruin et al.'s research findings showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between internal marketing, service quality and perceived customer satisfaction (De Bruin, Roberts-Lombard et al., 2021). Awan et al. confirmed that internal marketing has a significant positive relationship on job satisfaction, emotional commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (Awan, Siddiquei et al., 2015). Also, Barzoki found in his research that internal marketing has a positive effect on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (Barzoki, Ghujali et al., 2013). Abazari et al. also found that internal marketing directly affects organizational

commitment and indirectly affects market performance (Abzari, Ghorbani et al., 2011). According to Huang, at the core of customer orientation, internal marketing should consider attracting, retaining, and motivating employees (Huang, 2020).

For the managers of sport clubs, it is necessary to identify the types of factors that can be effective in attracting target customers and meet their expectations. Research in the field of service marketing has shown that customer satisfaction is strongly related to their future attendance and loyalty. According to Sudari et al., customer satisfaction, the feeling or attitude towards the product or service, after using it and customer satisfaction is the main goal of marketing activities, and considers it a connecting factor between the different stages of consumer purchase behavior (Sudari, Tarofder et al., 2019).

From the findings of the above research, it can be concluded that one of the factors that can overshadow the quality of services is internal marketing. Internal marketing has a special place in the marketing literature, especially service marketing, and it is vital for the organization to create value for customers, both internal and external, and it is extremely important to address this issue. On the other hand, due to the fact that ensuring the satisfaction of athletes, maintaining them and attracting customers for sport organizations such as clubs is of great importance and athletes are the ultimate goal of sport organizations' services. Therefore, his satisfaction and non-satisfaction is very important in the design of this system. It should also be noted that a satisfied athlete is a good source for advertising sport organizations.

It is worth mentioning that in sport departments and organizations, internal marketing has received less attention and more emphasis has been placed on service quality. Therefore, according to what was said, the necessity of conducting a research with this title is felt. Therefore, the main question of the current research is: what is the relationship between internal marketing, service quality, and

customer attraction of sport clubs in Hamadan province?

Materials and Methods

In terms of its objectives, this study was of a descriptive research, in terms of type it is considered as an applied research that was conducted using a survey method based on structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population of the present study included all managers, trainers and employees of I.R.I. Police sport clubs in Tehran province in 1401. Due to the limited nature of the research population, sampling was done in a stratified and simple random manner from among 145 sport clubs in Tehran province. Because structural equations were used to test research hypotheses, the minimum number of samples for each question was between 5 and 10 samples. Since in structural equations the minimum sample size is determined based on latent variables and not observable variables, here 20 samples were required for each factor (latent variable), generally at least 200 samples are recommended (Habibi & Adanvar, 2017).

The data collection method included field-study methods to collect data and library method to review the literature and theoretical foundations of the research. In order to collect data, three questionnaires were employed:

The "Internal Marketing Questionnaire",

Results

In the descriptive statistics section, the

designed by Mooney and Forman (1995), consisting of 3 components (perspective, development, and reward) and 15 items on a five-point Likert scale (very low, low, moderate, high, and very high);

"Service Quality Questionnaire", which was designed by Parasurmon et al. (1985), consisting of 4 components (physical factors, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and 11 items on a five-point Likert scale (very low, low, moderate, high, and very high);

"Customer attraction and retention questionnaire" designed by Gibb (2005), consisting of three components (expansion of customer relations, infrastructural and customer orientation) and 14 items on a five-point Likert scale (very low, low, medium, high, and very high).

In order to determine the reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were obtained for these questionnaires as 0.79, 0.81, and 0.77 respectively.

Also, the validity of all these questionnaires has already been approved by professors and experts. After collecting the questionnaires, the necessary pre-processing was done to check incomplete questionnaires, missing data, outliers and normality of data distribution. Finally, the collected questionnaires were analyzed using Amos-22 software.

collected data were analyzed from the perspective of gender, age, and education:

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Indicators	Gender		Age			Education			
	Male	Female	Younger than 35	36-45 Years Old	Over 46 Years old	Diploma	Association of Art	Bachelor	MA
No.	89	42	18	44	69	—	8	51	72

According to Table 1, out of a total of 131 individuals who participated in this research, 89 were men and 42 were women. 18 individuals were younger than 35 years old, 44 individuals were between 36 and 45 years old, and 69 individuals were older than 46 years old. Also, regarding the subjects' education, 8 individuals

had postgraduate degrees, 51 individuals had bachelor's degrees, and 72 individuals had master's degrees and above.

The results of the first-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of obvious variables, internal marketing, service quality, and

customer attraction were analyzed by Amos-22 software. Also, the model fit criteria for all three questionnaires were examined. The validity of all the questions of all three variables was confirmed because their factor load was more than 0.5 and their significance level was more than 2.58. It should be noted that in the confirmatory factor analysis, the

factor load should be above 0.5 and the significance level should not be between 1 ± 1.96 . After analyzing the validity and reliability of the structures in the research, the related structural model was drawn and the overall fit of the model was checked using Amos-22 software.

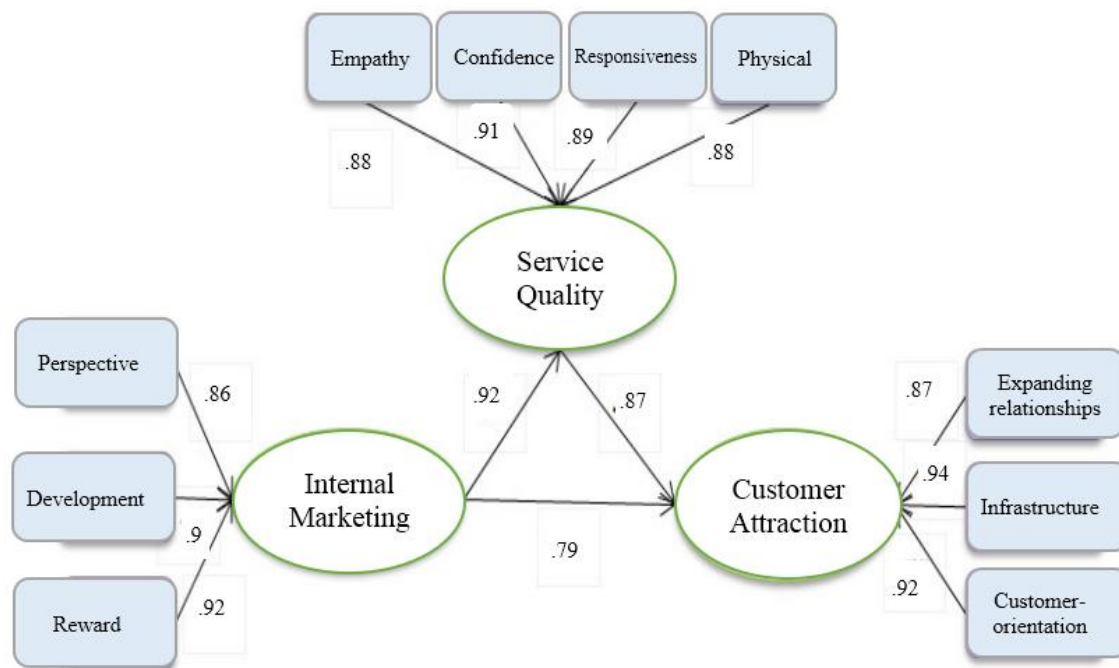


Figure 1. Structural model in standard mode

Table 2. The results of the structural model findings

Overall fit index of the model		P	C.R.	S.E.	Standard error	Research variables	
2.44	CMIN/DF	***	32.46	.025	.96	Internal marketing	→ Quality of service
.078	RMSEA						
.93	GFI						
.93	AGFI	***	15.96	.058	.75	Internal marketing	→ Attracting customers
.92	CFI						
.96	IFI						
.94	NFI	***	21.12	.043	.81	Quality of service	→ Attracting customers
.95	NNFI						
.005	P-Value						

The interpretation of the overall fit indicators in the structural model is the same as stated for the measurement models. In accordance with Table 2 and Figure 1, internal marketing affects the attraction of sport clubs ($\beta = .96$, p -value = 32.46). Internal marketing has an impact on attracting customers ($\beta = 0.75$, p -value = 32.46). Also, the quality of service affects customer attraction ($\beta = .81$, p -value =

21.12).

Regarding the role of service quality between internal marketing and customer attraction, it can be said that the direct path of internal marketing on customers and indirect paths, namely the effects of internal marketing on service quality and service quality, are significant, so the service quality can be

considered a minor mediator variable. The amount of determination coefficient (R^2) also showed that internal marketing variables and service quality are about $R^2 = 0.89$ of customer

Discussion

In financial and service firms, one of the essential ways that can be a distinction between competitors is the quality of service. The quality of the services offered depends on several factors such as the place of service, the process of service, how to provide, and so on. One of the most important factors that affect the quality of service is the employees of the organization. Employees who are directly in contact with the customer in the service process play a key role in creating value service and understanding the quality of service by the customer, so paying attention to the employees of the organization is very important; employees who today have a competitive advantage for all organizations. Organizations can distinguish themselves from competitors by attracting and maintaining employees who are customer-oriented and service-oriented. Internal marketing can play an important role in this regard (Huang, 2020). The internal marketing of employees as customers is considered as important as the external customers. Internal marketing focuses on the appropriate internal relationships between individuals at all levels in organizations. Therefore, a service-centered and customer-driven approach between employees in contact with customers is established. On the other hand, the market-oriented organization is able to better identify the needs and demands of the target market, and thus achieve customer satisfaction with more efficiency and effectiveness than competitors. Thus, a market-oriented organization is more capable of achieving organizational goals such as market share and greater profit than organizations that are less market-oriented (TSIOTSOU, 2010). On the other hand, an organization that operates with the market can keep current customers

recruitment changes. The internal marketing variables predict $R^2 = 0.96$ of the quality of service quality.

satisfied and loyal, attract new customers, reach an acceptable level of market growth and market share, and thus achieve an acceptable level of organizational performance (Faryabi, Rahimiaghdam et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between internal marketing and customer attraction due to the mediating role of I.R.I. Police sport club services. In terms of its objectives, this study is of an applied research type and in terms of methodology, a descriptive-correlational study which was conducted using a questionnaire and field study.

The findings of the present study showed that internal marketing affects the attraction of sport clubs.

The result of the present study is in line with the results of Abbasi and Gholvassi research (2018), Ahmadi et al. (2016), Pashahi and Norouzi (2016), Yaghobi and Nazari (2015), Kazemi, Rahmani et al. (2015).

Abbasi and Qalawisi concluded in a study that internal marketing has a significant impact on customer satisfaction (Abbasi & Gholveysi, 2018). The results of Ahmadi et al.'s research showed that internal marketing has a significant impact on customer satisfaction (Ahmadi, Sakhae et al., 2016). In their research, Pashahi and Nowruzi concluded that internal marketing has a significant impact on customer orientation (Pashahi & Norouzi 2016). The findings of Yaghoubi and Nazari's research showed that internal marketing and customer perception of the quality of service have a significant impact on customer satisfaction (Yaghobi & Nazari 2015). In their research, Kazemi et al. concluded that there was a significant relationship between internal marketing and service quality and customer satisfaction

(Kazemi, Rahmani et al., 2015).

Studies show that the essential mechanism of controlling and increasing productivity in manufacturing organizations and companies is a commitment to organizational and organizational values (Salimi, Bashekoh et al., 2013). The domestic market includes the employees of a company that must be involved with the business and part of a business. They are important to marketing, since employees with high levels of satisfaction and those who have long-term relationships with the business and are familiar with the business have a high degree of knowledge and experience, the potential needed to provide customer satisfaction and build trust and relationships. Internal marketing activities have also increased employee satisfaction, which will play a more positive role in the performance of organizational tasks. Research has shown that internal marketing has a positive impact on the internal aspects of organizational performance, such as employee satisfaction, employee conservation, and employee commitment. The internal marketing of employees as customers is considered as important as the external customers. Internal marketing focuses on the right internal relationships between individuals at all levels in organizations, so a customer-centric approach and customer-centric approach between employees in contact with customers is established. On the other hand, the market-oriented organization is able to better identify the needs and demands of the target market, and thus achieve customer satisfaction with more efficiency and effectiveness than competitors. Thus, a market-oriented organization is more capable of achieving organizational goals such as market share and greater profit than organizations that are less market-oriented (Hassangholipour, Ansari et al., 2011).

Internal marketing enhances the ability of sport club managers to identify the environment, identify market and understand the needs of the

clubs. Internal marketing gives club managers the opportunity to access a superior level of customer behavior knowledge by understanding the principles and basis of decision-making mechanisms and to concentrate on the unconscious thoughts, emotions and feelings of their people. It can be noted that the decisions that customers make when choosing sports clubs are more emotional, so marketing managers and experts can use good memories when choosing customers, variety of services, build confidence by providing high quality services, using simple and well-pronounced brand names to improve customer association, use the right color for the club environment, create a relaxing environment for customers, stimulate their emotions, one of the most effective elements for accepting or rejecting their services. As a result, by doing so, customers will feel satisfied and increase their level of confidence and will attract more customers to the clubs.

The findings of the present study showed that internal marketing affects the quality of sports club services. The result of the present study is in line with the results of Kalate Sifari et al. (2019), Ahmadian and Saebnia (2019), and Safari and Radi (2014).

Kalateh Searfari et al. (2019), in a study, concluded that internal marketing affects the quality of services in the Golestan Province General Directorate of Sport and Youth. The findings of Ahmadian and Saebnia's research showed that internal marketing has a significant impact on SAIPA automobile quality (Ahmadian & Saebnia, 2019). Safari and Radi concluded in a study that internal marketing has an impact on the quality of service, taking into account the role of citizenship behaviors and organizational commitment (Safari & Radi, 2014).

It can be argued that sport club managers should consider achieving excellence in the quality of service as the most important determinant in micro and macro decisions. In

other words, the long-term benefits of customer satisfaction and customer conservation are much more important for clubs than short-term profitability. On the other hand, customer relationship management is also one of the most important marketing issues that is closely related to quality management and internal marketing. From the discussions and analysis of the present article, it can be deduced that internal marketing programs that are aimed at improving the quality of service in sport clubs can also act as a good tool for upgrading customer relationship management. In this regard, the bilateral interactions and communications of employees and customers are of great importance. In other words, the efficient service in clubs alone cannot create strong and sustainable relationships with customers, but it requires effective human interactions between the staff and customers of the clubs, and domestic marketing can greatly provide the necessary platforms.

The findings of the present study showed that the quality of service affects the attraction of sport clubs.

As the result of the present study, Saeed et al., in their research, concluded that there is a positive and significant relationship between the quality of service and customer satisfaction and loyalty of the female clubs' customers in Mazandaran Province (Saeid, Hosseini et al., 2015). Shafiei and Ghayor, in a study entitled "the impact of customer-oriented on customer attraction, taking into account the role of service quality in the banking system, concluded that the quality of service affects bank loyalty (Shafiei & Ghayor, 2021). The results of Beigi and Sekihan's research showed that the quality of service has a significant impact on customer attraction (Beigi & Sheehan, 2013).

Perhaps one of the most important factors that draw people to clubs and sports and influence their satisfaction and loyalty is the quality of club services. Since the goal of these clubs is to

attract the maximum customer and thus make a profit, satisfaction and loyalty can be provided by improving services, including appropriate equipment, customer response, providing favourable services and understanding customer needs, and trying to meet their demands. The results of factor analysis in the study of different items of service quality components show that it has the most effect on attracting customers, being reliable and accountable, and in the loyalty of empathy and then tangible physical factors and reliability. Therefore, the services provided to customers in sport centres should be close to customer expectations and the goal of sport club managers should be to improve the quality of service and to zero the gap between customer expectations and perceptions. The closer the quality of the service provided to customer expectations and demands, the greater the level of customer satisfaction and loyalty. The research confirms that prominent services should be identified through customer demands and expectations. If the service is very interesting to the supplier, but fails to satisfy customers, these services are not considered prominent. The quality of service is directly related to the amount of customer satisfaction and customer conservation and more profit production for the club. In addition, providing desirable services to the customer requires a system that holds the customer's pulse.

Based on the findings of the present study and other research, it should be noted that the importance of promoting internal marketing in marketing programs is significant but less attention is given to the issue in Iranian sport organizations; and many sport organizations are trying to attract customers by increasing their programs and improving services.

Managers of sport organizations should keep in mind that internal marketing is an important factor in the emergence of customer-oriented behaviors in employees, and this can indirectly have a significant impact on attracting

customers by enhancing the quality of services provided in sport clubs by employees, which is the ultimate goal of service organizations. What is important is that customer satisfaction should be high and maintained in sport clubs. Therefore, it is recommended that the managers of the sport clubs make employees customer-orientated by applying internal marketing in these organizations, thereby attracting customer satisfaction and ultimately attracting customers.

Sport clubs also need to put internal marketing into their strategic programs in order to be more successful in satisfying their customers' needs and achieving the most effective and efficient ways to increase the quality of the club's services and subsequently enhance the quality of club services and make customer satisfaction and attraction.

Based on the available results, it is recommended that the I.R.I. Police officials take the necessary steps, with specialized training on how to deal with the customer and how to provide desirable services, especially in the executive staff who are directly dealing with the customer, as well as holding practical workshops and conferences to educate staff to be customer-oriented and encourage them to attend these seminars and courses. Managers of sport organizations should create mechanism for employee participation in the planning process and provide employees with functional information through meetings, newsletters or other internal organizational media. Therefore, it is suggested that the managers of the sports organizations are more flexible in delegating the authority to the executive units, as well as the work teams in the organization instead of hierarchies, as well as looking at the performance of the work teams, not the individual performance.

By relying on research data, sport club managers should try to put internal marketing tactics in their strategies so that the human resources organization will turn its human resources into human capital to provide

desirable customer service and formulate short-term and mid-term programs and take the necessary steps to move the programs to employees correctly and determine the exact role of each employee in the internal marketing path. Therefore, it is suggested that sport clubs, in particular job marketing activities, especially job security, training, information sharing, employee empowerment, and internal marketing strategy to become customer-oriented, and by implementing these activities to institutionalize internal marketing in the organization so that the organization and customer organizations are more satisfied.

Interested researchers are also advised to examine the impact of internal marketing on the quality of service with the mediating role of sport club staff. And it is also recommended that the relationship between internal marketing with other components, such as customer's willingness, loyalty and satisfaction in various sport clubs be examined, and compare the views of the club's male and female customers.

Conclusion

Since there has been a model for the connection of these three components, namely internal marketing, customer attraction and the quality of services offered at I.R.I. Police sport clubs, this model can be a good guide to examining this relationship and comparing the results of similar research. In this study, the impact of internal marketing on attracting club customers with the mediation of service quality from the perspective of club managers was one of the limitations of this study, along with the restriction of access to all the managers of the active clubs throughout Tehran province.

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