# Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development in a Developing Country: The Mediating Role of Team Identity and Team Brand image

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| **Article type:**<br>Research Article<br><br>**Article History:**<br>Received 11 December 2024<br>Revised 21 March 2025<br>Accepted 07 April 2025<br>Published Online 04 September 2025<br><br>**Keywords:**<br>CSR,<br>Team identity,<br>Sustainable development,<br>Brand image,<br>Triple Bottom Line theory. | This paper examines the mediating role of team identity and team brand image in the relationship between corporate social responsibility and sustainable development. Using convenience sampling, 372 usable questionnaires were completed from fans of four Iranian football teams. The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Positive and significant impacts were evident in the relationships between a) social responsibility and sustainable development; b) the team's social responsibility and team identity; c) the team's social responsibility and brand image; d) team identity and sustainable development; e) team brand image and sustainable development; as well as e) the mediating roles of team identity and brand image in the relationship between social responsibility and the sustainable development. Social responsibility can help to strengthen the team identity and brand image of the club in the minds of fans, as well as contribute to sustainable development. This research provides valuable insights into the link between social responsibility, team identity, team brand image, and sustainable development of football clubs in developing countries. |

## Introduction

Scholarly interest in sustainability issues in Iran is steadily growing (Sameni Malayeri et al., 2025; Selcu et al., 2021). Sustainable development is an approach to growth that seeks to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987) Sustainable development is a ubiquitous goal for corporate, national, and global actors alike (Li et al., 2022). Sustainable development is relevant to the sports industry. The sport industry has the potential to be a powerful force for sustainability by adopting environmentally responsible practices, raising awareness, and inspiring positive action among fans, athletes, and stakeholders.

In sports industry, sustainable development involves working with local stakeholders to address regional problems and create sports products that help to address these issues (Tajima et al., 2022). The sustainable development in sports industry is able to address the complex problems in society and create a modern, well-functioning society (Johnson et al., 2020). According to Filizöz and Fişne (2011), sports clubs need to align their values with their stakeholders. Hence, exploration on sustainable development for sports clubs is important for the economy and society (Schulenkorf, 2017).

Social responsibility is of interest to professional football clubs and is recognized as a critical dimension of corporate sustainability (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008). Increasing attention to the role of team social responsibility (TSR), team identity (TI), and team brand image (TBI) can play a significant role in the sustainable development of sports clubs (Li et al., 2022; Mansouri et al., 2024; Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2023). Additionally, the social responsibility of the team and the positive image of the team brand can enhance the loyalty of fans and attract new fans, as well as attract more support and financial investment for the club (Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2023). Professional team sports organizations are the ideal environment and platform for investigating social responsibility (Hamil & Morrow, 2011). The survey of professional team activities at the global level also indicates that social actions are becoming a joint activity between sports organizations and related social foundations (Rowe et al., 2019).

Therefore, the commitment of teams to implement social responsibilities, strengthen team identity and values, and promote the positive image of the team brand can be the basis for sustainable development and long-term success in the football environment. Enhancing social responsibilities also improves public relations and contributes to sustainable development in the club.

This research addresses the concern that if fans perceive the  social responsibility of their clubs negatively, then they may be a commensurate decrease in team identity.  Accordingly, the relationship between the social responsibility of football clubs and team identity is one of the key factors in the formation of a positive brand image and strengthening the fan base. This study can provide valuable insights into the impact of CSR on team identity and suggest effective solutions to create a stronger and more sustainable identity.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development
### Triple Bottom Line Theory and Sustainable Development

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory posits that an organization must achieve success across three dimensions to achieve sustainability (Isil & Hernke, 2017): *Economic* (or profit) dimension relates to the production of profit and economic productivity of the company or the organization. The *social* (or people) dimension emphasizes the company's relationship with society and other people. In doing so, organization's make a positive contribution to society and promote social welfare. The *environment* (or planet) reflects an organization's effort to maintain or mitigate negative environmental effects and promote environmental sustainability. TBL theory emphasizes that companies should pursue their economic, social, and environmental objectives in an integrated manner (Gimenez et al., 2012; Henriquez et al., 2023; Isil & Hernke, 2017).

Though widely used, critics claim that TBL lacks originality and practical application and may even be used by companies to avoid real, social, and environmental responsibility (Sridhar, 2011). There are also concerns about the ability to fully integrate all three dimensions and the likelihood of insufficient attention to social and environmental dimensions (Loviscek, 2020). Despite its limitations, the TBL is a cornerstone of sustainability discourse and sustainability operations (Loviscek, 2020).

An increasing number of companies around the world have voluntarily accepted and implemented a wide range of sustainability measures. Sustainable development is of utmost importance for the ongoing and future progress of societies and the global economy. This entails effectively transitioning to a more sustainable energy model by integrating renewable energy production systems and innovative technologies to enhance efficiency (García-Lillo et al., 2023). Corporate sustainable development has become an essential global concern in today's world. Companies interact with and have an impact on their physical, biological, and social surroundings, while also being influenced by them. Hence, it is only natural that businesses play a significant role in preserving the well-being of regions and countries (Antolín-López et al., 2016). Vaquero-García et al. (2017) argued that sustainable development is commonly associated with three fundamental concepts, namely economic, social, and environmental. It is defined as meeting the present needs of both the company and stakeholders, without compromising the ability to meet the future needs of stakeholders. In fact, the sustainability of businesses on the path of sustainable development leads to a win-win game for entrepreneurs on the one hand and society and the environment on the other hand (Parrish & Foxon, 2006). Sustainable management is achieved when companies commit to both their communities and environment (Dixon & Clifford, 2007; Elkington, 1998), as well as to their profits in a balanced relationship (Shim et al., 2021).

In the sports industry, sustainable practices can promote public commitment to environmental protection (Trendafilova et al., 2014). Sports organizations participate in sustainability initiatives for economic and social motivations, as well as due to institutional pressures (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Blankenbuehler & Kunz, 2014). Therefore, the development of a sustainable sports industry provides a platform for wider environmental participation and commitment to society (Cayolla et al., 2023).

From an economic standpoint, sports can play a fundamental role in society, both financially and in terms of human development. For example, hosting sports events is considered a contributing factor to the stability and growth of societies from a financial perspective (Schulenkorf, 2012). From a social perspective, engaging in physical activity can boost self-confidence. In fact, the advancement of sports can lead to the progress of society and promote social cohesion (Vail, 2007). Furthermore, sustainable development, which focuses on meeting integrated needs to improve human well-being while reducing environmental degradation, is also crucial in this context (Parrish & Foxon, 2006). In the realm of sports, sustainable development refers to the continuity of sports development programs. These programs also aim to foster participation for the sake of environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Therefore, efforts have been made to simultaneously highlight and address both aspects (Houlihan & Green, 2011).

## Corporate Social Responsibility

CSR is a self-regulating business model for socially responsible companies that helps them be accountable to themselves, the public, and other stakeholders (Chen, 2019). CSR is used by companies to pursue their triple bottom line: (1) economic, (2) social, and (3) environmental. When a company incorporates CSR into its regular business activities, it demonstrates its contribution to society and the environment. Despite the distinctiveness of CSR, the social, environmental and economic components are not unique (Pan et al., 2021). These three dimensions must be integrated to achieve sustainability (Bansal, 2005). Therefore, true CSR should include social, economic, and environmental initiatives and should be part of the innovation strategy. Consequently, managers who intend to contribute to society in the long term must plan, monitor, and manage all aspects of CSR (Mendes et al., 2023).

There is a growing interest in corporate social responsibility, including in sports industry (Paramio-Salcines et al., 2013; Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2023). Studies indicate that the role of social responsibility activities in sports industry differs from other industries' (Babiak, 2010; Babiak et al., 2012; Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2023). For example, sports organizations often have a direct and visible impact on local communities through their events, facilities, and fan base. CSR initiatives in the sports industry frequently focus on community development, including youth programs, education initiatives, and support for disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, athletes and sports teams are often seen as role models and influencers, especially among the youth. Therefore, CSR initiatives in the sports industry leverage this influence to promote social and environmental causes, raise awareness about important issues, and inspire positive change. CSR activities allow the teams to connect with the

fans and, subsequently, influence the fans to attend the team's games (Mansouri et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2020).

Improving CSR can be considered as an essential team strategy (Babiak et al., 2012). The team's CSR indicates the fans' willingness to participate in the social goals supported by the club (Jang et al., 2015). Research has shown that certain aspects of CSR, such as public orientation and attention to the health of communities, significantly affect the competitive advantage of organizations, including sports club (Darweesh & Abuareish, 2023). Many researchers pointed out that sports clubs can enhance their brand image and identity through CSR activities (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Jung, 2012; Mansouri et al., 2022; Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2023). The effect of social support in sports on the social identity of football players is significant (Akgül & Karafil, 2022). CSR campaigns that are perceived as benevolent causes can increase important outcome variables. This relationship is moderated by factors such as the geographic focus of CSR and the division in which teams play (Kulczycki & Koenigstorfer, 2016). This indicates that strong social ties between football clubs and local communities show that the CSR approach has great potential for football clubs (Wysoczański-Minkowicz, 2021).

According to the findings of Gau et al. (2019) and Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al. (2023), CSR has a positive effect on the identity of sports teams. Therefore, the audience's understanding of corporate social responsibility positively affects their team identification. Additionally, it is important for team identification, athletes' well-being, sports enjoyment, and fan participation (Fransen et al., 2022). According to the findings of Li et al. (2022), social responsibility also plays a positive and significant role in the sustainable development of clubs. The findings by Jung (2012) found that CSR positively affected the brand image of American basketball teams. Therefore, it can be said that incorporating CSR in the strategies of sports organizations can improve their brand image and positively affect the understandings and attitudes of consumers (Antanaitytė, 2022). The findings of Lee and Lee (2018) indicated that compliance with CSR improves their brand image. These results imply that if a brand has a superior image compared to its competitors, the brand value will increase (Dada, 2021). Therefore, the following hypotheses were formed:

**H1:** team corporate social responsibility (CSR) affects the sustainable development of football clubs (SDC).

**H2:** team corporate social responsibility (CSR) affects the team identity of football clubs.

**H3:** team corporate social responsibility (CSR) affects the brand image of football clubs.

**Team Brand Image**
TBI is formed by the collective brand associations that exist in the minds of sports consumers (Ross et al., 2006). Brand image is crucial for competitiveness and building stronger brand loyalty (Kim et al., 2017). As a result, a team's brand image can greatly influence loyal fan behaviors (Biscaia et al., 2016).

The brand image of the team implies the fans' general perception of the supporting team. Team image derives from fans' perceptions of what they know about the team and how they feel about it (Alvesson, 1990). The brand strength of a sports club depends on its image, which is critical to economic success and sporting achievements (Drynda, 2014). In other words, team brand image results from desirability, power, uniqueness, and types of associations held by sports fans (Kaynak et al., 2008). Brand image and business value significantly impact business success, and creating a positive brand image is important for sports organizations to create fan interest in the market. Therefore, a well-designed brand image that meets the community's spiritual needs can help sports clubs gain more market share and help their sustainable development (Li-rui, 2015). CSR initiatives can contribute to a brand's reputation or image and attract sponsors, thereby improving financial results and increasing the organization's attractiveness (Molokanoviene et al., 2022). Furthermore, consumers' perception of CSR activities is influenced by corporate image, with a positive image that leads to favorable attitudes and perceived motivations towards the organization (Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, CSR activities, in addition to creating more awareness of the company's brand and supporting it, can create a link between the company and its stakeholders and, on the other hand,

improve the brand's image in their perceptions (Liu et al., 2014). Therefore, the following hypotheses were formed:

**H4:** Team brand image affects the sustainable development of football clubs.

**H5:** Team brand image mediates the relationship between social responsibility and sustainable development of football clubs.

**Team Identity**

TI is based on social identity theory. This theory states that people want to describe and place themselves in a certain social group and tend to classify and attribute themselves to different social categories (Gençay & Akkoyunlu, 2001). Social identity, along with the concept of team identity, has become the main framework for explaining consumer behavior in sports. Team identity is primarily a cognitive structure based on the individual. When a person identifies with a group, the team's success and failure become a part of their personality, and they consider themselves as a part of it (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

Team identification affects the purchase and use behavior of sports products and related brands (Funk et al., 2022). Moreover, it is a key factor in forecasting the sustainable development of sports clubs (Li et al., 2022). Research has shown that fans with different levels of team identification develop different emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to their favorite teams (Lee, 2021). Effectively, highly identified fans who experience strong emotions indicate strong positive reactions to games that their team wins, and negative reactions to games that their team loses (Prayag et al., 2020). In this regard, Yim and Byon (2018), found that highly recognized fans, regardless of the outcome of the game, presented a more consistent pattern of consumption intentions compared to low-identity fans. Generally, highly identified fans provide consistent consumption intentions regardless of game or service satisfaction (Lee, 2021). According to the results found by Funk et al. (2022) and Li et al. (2022), team identity significantly affects the sustainable development of sports teams. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

**H6:** Team identity affects the sustainable development of football clubs.

**H7:** Team identity mediates the relationship between corporate social responsibility and the sustainable development of football clubs.

**Methodology**

Data were collected using a non-random sampling method, from the fans who came to the stadium on the day of the matches. One of the reasons for choosing this sampling method was the availability of people, its speed, and its low cost. Specifically, participants were recruited from spectators at two football matches held at Azadi Stadium on 9 December 2023 (Persepolis vs. Havadar Tehran), and on 19 December 2023 (Esteghlal Tehran vs. Nasaji Mazandaran). Due to the non-random sampling method (convenience sampling), questionnaires were distributed only to spectators who came to the stadium.

Based on the variables in the research model and considering a statistical power of 0.9, an effect size of 0.05, and an error level of 0.05 in SPSS software, the minimum required sample size was estimated to be 274 individuals.

A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, 250 of which were given to spectators on the day of the Persepolis-Havadar Tehran match, while the other 250 questionnaires were given to spectators on the day of the Esteghlal-Nasaji Mazandaran match. A total of 191 Persepolis football team fans and 181 Esteghlal fans participated in this study. Ultimately, 372 questionnaires were completed and returned, which is equivalent to a response rate of 74%.

The questionnaires consisted of two sections. The first section measured the relationship between the constructs, while the second section consisted of demographic questions of the respondents. The questionnaires were adapted from various validated instruments. Items for CSR were adapted from Liu et al. (2019). Items for team identity and team brand image were adapted from Li et al. (2022) and Bauer et al. (2008), while items measuring club sustainable development were adapted from Li et al. (2022). All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from completely agree to completely disagree.

SPSS version 26 and smartPLS version 4.0 were employed to analyze the data. Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability were used to check the reliability of the data. Convergence validity was examined using the average variance extracted, while discriminant validity was validated using the HTMT index (Hair et al., 2019). The VIF index and Harman's one-factor test were used to check the collinearity and bias. Additionally, the measurement and structural model were examined using path coefficient, t-value, as well as SRMR and NFI indices. Furthermore, the Q2 index was used to measure the strength of the predictive relationship between the independent variables.

## Sample Characteristics

Out of 372 respondents, a total 50 belonged to the female, while 322 of them belonged to the male. One of the reasons for the scarce number of women in this study is the legal and social restrictions placed on their presence in football stadiums in Iran. Although some changes have been made in recent years and women have been allowed to attend some matches, there are still numerous cultural and legal barriers to women's wider presence in these spaces. In terms of education, 107 were diploma and sub-diploma holders, 54 had an associate, 140 had a bachelor's degree, 65 had a master's degree, while 6 had a PhD. The majority of the participants aged under 35, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Subjects**

| Gender | N | Education | N | Age | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Female** | 50 (13%) | Diploma & sub-diploma | 107 (29%) | Under 20 | 85 (23%) |
| **Male** | 322 (87%) | Associate | 54 (14%) | 21-25 | 111 (30%) |
| | | BS | 140 (38%) | 26-30 | 106 (28%) |
| | | Master | 65 (17%) | 31-35 | 48 (13%) |
| | | PhD | 6 (2%) | 35 up | 22 (6%) |

## Findings

To determine the validity of the four constructs in the model, PLS-SEM 4 was utilized. Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability, and average variance extracted were all evaluated. Cronbach's alpha estimates the reliability of a set of observed variables by assessing their internal correlation. Composite reliability evaluates how well the model fits internally and reflects the consistency of the items linked to each factor. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) indicates the extent to which a construct correlates with its indicators. A higher correlation signifies a better fit. A Cronbach's alpha value and Composite reliability of .70 or higher is considered acceptable for internal consistency criteria. The Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for the four criteria ranged from .87 to .91. Similarly, the AVE for the four constructs ranged from .48 to .56, indicating convergent validity. Table 2 presents the construct's reliability and validity.

Discriminant validity is one of the analytical measurements in which the components should not be correlated. The HTMT criterion was used to assess the validity of differentiation. The results presented in the table below, based on the HTMT matrix and the optimal cutoff points of less than .85 or .9 (Hair et al., 2019), for each feature in each block in the section related to the evaluation of discriminant validity, indicate that all structures demonstrate sufficient satisfaction with low cross-loading between them. The discriminant validity is presented in Table 3. Additionally, the mean, standard deviation, and correlation between the research components are presented in Table 4.

## Common Method Bias (CMB)

Common method variance (CMB) should be examined when data are collected through self-administered questionnaires, and all variables are measured simultaneously by the same source (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Common method bias occurs when an underlying factor accounts for most of the variance explained (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The CMB was examined via two different methods. Harman's single-factor test was employed to examine the amount of false variance (Vatcheva et al., 2016). A single factor of less than 50% indicates the absence of CMB. Therefore, a single factor of 36.75% in this study implied that CMB is not present. In addition, multicollinearity was analysed using variance inflation factor (VIF). The results indicated that the VIF is between 1 and 2.33, proving that multicollinearity is not an issue (Hair et al., 2019).

**Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity**

| Item | λ | α | CR | AVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *CSR | | | | |
| My favorite team tries to manage financial and economic resources effectively | .82 | | | |
| My favorite team is trying to improve the working conditions of colleagues | .78 | | | |
| My favorite team strives to help improve the communities in which it works | .64 | | | |
| My favorite team strives to contribute to social causes | .62 | | | |
| My favorite team is trying to promote environmental sustainability | .64 | .80 | .85 | .50 |
| My favorite team tries to be ethically responsible | .70 | | | |
| *** Team brand image | | | | |
| My favorite team retains outstanding athletes. | .48 | | | |
| My favorite team always plays well. | .55 | | | |
| My favorite team is highly reliable. | .67 | | | |
| My favorite team plays the game fair. | .65 | | | |
| I can feel friendly for this team. | .77 | .89 | .91 | .48 |
| My favorite team has many fans. | .77 | | | |
| My favorite team is always trying to please the fans. | .79 | | | |
| My favorite team is very well managed. | .61 | | | |
| My favorite team invests well in the development of the team. | .76 | | | |
| My favorite team is active in social services. | .80 | | | |
| My favorite team helps our community. | .73 | | | |
| ***Team Identity: In response to my favorite team's CSR efforts: | | | | |
| I will devote more to that team. | .76 | | | |
| I am happy to be a fan of this team. | .76 | | | |
| I will show my pride and respect for my beloved team to my friends. | .68 | | | |
| The team will give me a warm feeling for a better welcome from the stadium and so on. | .63 | | | |
| I consider the team more like a big family where I feel a sense of belonging. | .70 | .83 | .87 | .50 |
| The image of the team in the community will reflect my values well. | .72 | | | |
| I better recognize the identity manifestations of the team such as logo, team color, team superstar name, etc. | .63 | | | |
| ** Sustainable Development Club: In response to my favorite team's CSR efforts: | | | | |
| I will be purchasing more accessories related to this team. | .70 | | | |
| I will search for information about this team from different media. | .77 | | | |
| I will be more interested in the latest news of this team. | .74 | | | |
| I will be more relaxed when losing games. | .78 | | | |
| I will continue to support the team even if it is not performing very well. | .76 | .85 | .89 | .56 |
| I will continue to support this team even during long difficult periods, such as rebuilding, departure of top players, financial problems, etc. | .74 | | | |

*CSR; **SDC; ***TBI; ****TI

**Table 3. Discriminant Validity (HTMT)**

| LV | TI | CSR | TBI | SDC |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| TI | 1 | | | |
| CSR | .63 | 1 | | |
| TBI | .72 | .79 | 1 | |
| SDC | .66 | .70 | .80 | 1 |

**Table 4. Mean, SD and Correlation**

| LV | Mean | SD | CSR | SDC | TBI | TI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CSR | 2.27 | .78 | .71 | | | |
| SDC | 2.28 | .83 | .59** | .75 | | |
| TBI | 2.11 | .72 | .67** | .68** | .69 | |
| TI | 1.81 | .60 | .52** | .55** | .62** | .70 |

Note: Bold numbers are the mean root of the AVEs.

## Structural Model Assessment

The coefficient of determination ($R^2$) is an important criterion for measuring the structural model's agreement between independent and dependent variables. The $R^2$ values of .25, .05, and .75 indicate that the model is strong, moderate, and weak, respectively, while the $R^2$ values over .90 usually imply overfitting (Hair et al., 2019). The Stone-Geisser $Q^2$ value was also examined to ensure the predictive relevance of the structural model. Hensler et al. (2009) reported that if the $Q^2$ value for an endogenous construct reaches the thresholds of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, it indicates weak, moderate, and strong

predictive power of the related exogenous construct or constructs, respectively. Table 5 presents the results of R2 and Q2 for this study.

**Table 5. R Square and Q2 Stone-Geisser's**

| LV | R-square | threshold | LV | Q2 | threshold | Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SDC | .55 | | SDC | .30 | | (Hair et al., 2019) |
| TBI | .48 | .25, .5, .75 | TBI | .23 | .02, .15, .35 | |
| TI | .30 | | TI | .14 | | |

Hypotheses were tested to examine the relationships proposed. A cut-off point of 1.96, with a confidence interval of .95 was set as a benchmark. This study found that CSR influence SDC and TBI, while TI significantly influences CSR. TBI and TI were also found to have a significant influence on SDC. The results of indirect effects based on bootstrapping indicated the confirmation of the partial mediation of TBI and TI as a mediator that mediates the relationship between CSR and SDC. Finally, the overall effect of CSR on SDC was estimated to be .39 simultaneously through both TBI and TI, indicating the importance of these variables as mediators. Table 6 presents the hypotheses testing results, while Figure 1 illustrates the model.

**Table 6. Evaluation of Research Hypotheses**

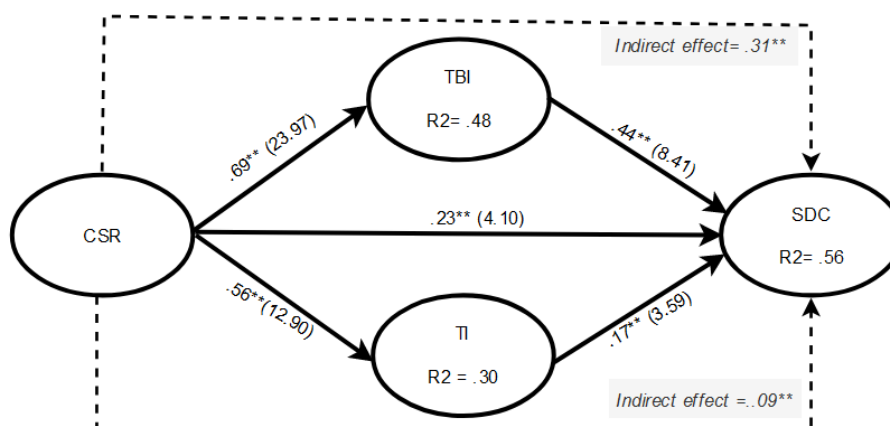| | Hypotheses | B | SD | T | Confidence Intervals | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | 2.5% | 97.5% |
| H1 | CSR -> SDC | .23** | .06 | 4.10 | .12 | .34 |
| H2 | CSR -> TI | .56** | .04 | 12.90 | .47 | .64 |
| H3 | CSR -> TBI | .69** | .03 | 23.97 | .63 | .75 |
| H4 | TBI -> SDC | .44** | .06 | 8.41 | .34 | .55 |
| H5 | TI -> SDC | .17** | .05 | 3.59 | .08 | .26 |
| Indirect Effects | | | | | | |
| H6 | CSR -> TI -> SDC | .09** | .03 | 3.28 | .04 | .15 |
| H7 | CSR -> TBI -> SDC | .31** | .04 | 7.60 | .23 | .39 |
| | SRMR | .09 | | | | |
| | NFI | .60 | | | | |

NOTE: **P<0.05



**Fig. 1. Results of PLS-SEM for H1 to H7**

## Discussion

This study investigates the role of football team's corporate social responsibility in its identity and brand image as well as its role in the sustainable development of football clubs in Iran. The results indicated that team social responsibility positively and significantly affects team identity and brand image. However, the effects of social responsibility on team brand image were greater than team identity. Additionally, it was found that brand image had a greater impact than team identity in the sustainable development of football clubs.

The findings from the first hypothesis implied that social responsibility has a positive and significant effect on the sustainable development of football clubs. This aligns with the finding by Li et al. (2022) which found that team social responsibility plays a vital role in the sustainable development of sports clubs. In addition, social responsibility is vital for organizations, as it gives them a competitive advantage over others in their sector (Nguyen Phan Thu Hang, 2022). Managing a football team goes beyond winning games or achieving sporting excellence; it also encompasses the broader impact that these clubs can have on society. When sports clubs embrace social responsibility, they demonstrate their impact and recognize their ability to change their communities positively. These include taking proactive steps to address social issues, charitable associations or volunteer efforts, promoting inclusiveness and contributing to the overall well-being of individuals and society. Additionally, team social responsibility encompasses the sustainability of clubs, which can include the implementation of energy-efficient technologies in stadiums, the use of club products, support for club media, and loyalty to the club even during periods of loss and underperformance throughout the competition season.

The finding from the second hypothesis indicated that compliance with the team's social responsibility has a positive and significant effect on the team identity of sports clubs. These results are consistent with findings by Gau et al. (2019) and Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al. (2023). Social responsibility play a significant role in the formation of the identity for football teams (Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2023). Sports teams characterized by high social responsibility not only benefit from the positive impact of the audience's perception on the team's identity but also the impact can be extended to athletes' well-being, enjoyment of sports, and fan participation (Morrison et al., 2020). Studies by Kim and Manoli (2022) and Ma and Kaplanidou (2020) highlighted that the perception of CSR and team identity positively affects team brand equity. It can be conclude that CSR efforts can help football teams differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace. One of the ways that social responsibility shapes the identity of football teams is by creating a strong relationship with the fans. When fans see that their favorite team is actively involved in making a difference, it strengthens their loyalty and pride.

The finding from third hypothesis indicated the positive effect of the team's social responsibility on the brand image of football teams. The result were consistent with findings by Jung (2012) and Lee and Lee (2018). In this regard, Lee and Lee (2018) found that compliance with social responsibility by companies improves their brand image. This improvement in the brand's image, leads to the enhancement of the equity value of that brand. Therefore, the inclusion of social responsibility in the strategies of sports organizations can have a significant role in their brand image (Dada, 2021). Jung (2012) also found that social responsibility significantly affects team brand image. Many believe that social responsibility efforts are the responsibility of organizations, and they demonstrate loyalty to brands that contribute to society and beyond. Consumers want companies to be ethical and promote the virtues of a good company (Johnson, 2020). In this regard, football teams actively participate in social responsibility initiatives, such as promoting health and environmental practices, supporting local charities or supporting ethical and legal responsibilities, which can enhance their brand image. Additionally, by partnering with local charities or launching community outreach programs, football teams can present themselves as active contributors to improving the lives of those around them. This partnership strengthens the sense of connection between the team and its fan base, and can simultaneously enhance the team's performance and brand image.

The result from the fourth hypothesis found that team identity has a positive and significant effect on the sustainable development of football clubs. This is consistent with findings by Funk et al. (2022) and Li et al. (2022). Team identity plays an important role in the sustainable development of sports clubs (Li et al., 2022). When fans feel a strong sense of belonging and connection with their teams, they are more motivated and committed to working towards common goals. This shared identity strengthens cooperation and effective communication among team members, which is necessary to achieve the sustainable development goals of sports teams (Funk et al., 2022). In addition to strengthening the sense of belonging among fans, team identity increases their emotional investment in the club, leading to support of and commitment to the organization's goals. This emotional connection is important as it encourages fans to actively participate in the club's activities and promote its values. Additionally, a strong team identity promotes cooperation and effective communication between team

members, staff, and supporters, which is necessary to achieve the sustainable development. Through a stronger identification with the team, fans are more willing to participate in social programs, sustainability campaigns, and provide moral support. Strengthening the team's identity affects the interaction of fans with media and advertising content, increasing the sales and financial stability of the club. This interaction not only increases fan loyalty but also is necessary for clubs to develop their identity to achieve long-term success and sustainability.

The result from the fifth hypothesis found that team brand image has a positive and effective role in the sustainable development of sports clubs. A well-defined and favorable brand image is crucial for the economic success of sports organizations, as it can directly affect fan loyalty, sponsorship opportunities, and overall marketability (Drynda, 2014). Antanaitytė (2022) proposes that by aligning the brand with socially responsible initiatives, clubs can foster a deeper emotional connection with fans, leading to increased support and engagement. In general, a strong team brand image fosters loyalty among fans by enhancing the sense of belonging and identity associated with the club. When fans perceive a team as authentic, community-oriented, and socially responsible, they are more likely to form lasting emotional bonds with the club. This loyalty is reflected in regular attendance at games, consistent purchase of merchandise and support of the club in their personal networks. As a result, the club's economic resilience is enhanced through consistent revenue streams directly linked to loyal fan support. Moreover, by investing in a strong brand image that resonates with fans and reflects positively on community, clubs not only ensure their immediate success but also promote sustainable practices within the organization.

The findings from the indirect effects indicated that team identity and brand image mediate the relationship between social responsibility and the sustainable development of football clubs. In today's competitive sports landscape, both team identity and brand image have emerged as critical components for success (Bauer et al., 2008; Kaynak et al., 2008; Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2023). A robust team identity not only fosters fan loyalty but also significantly contributes to the overall sustainability and success of sports clubs (Li et al., 2022). Moreover, recent research highlights that team identity and brand image are instrumental in enhancing club performance, particularly in how they mediate the effects of social responsibility on sustainable development outcomes (Funk et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022). Therefore By effectively integrating social responsibility into their brand identity, football clubs can strengthen their identity and improve their image, resulting in increased community support and enhanced long-term viability. Therefore, understanding the mediating roles of team identity and brand image is essential for football clubs aiming to leverage social responsibility initiatives for sustainable development.

## Practical Implications

Football clubs can develop a more positive brand image with fans and sponsors by engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, such as protecting the environment, helping local communities, and promoting social justice. This strategy can lead to attracting more sponsors and increasing fan loyalty.

According to the results of the first hypothesis, it can be said that football clubs that observe and adhere to social responsibility can accelerate the path of sustainable development by creating a balance between economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Yao (2023) believes that the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) regulations can increase sustainable development. Accordingly, it can be argued that clubs can reduce negative environmental impacts by using renewable energy sources in stadiums and improving waste management. In addition, participating in charitable activities, supporting educational programs, and creating local employment strengthen public trust and social development. Apart from this, social responsibility enhances the trust and loyalty of sponsors, helping to increase the club's sustainable income.

According to the results of the second hypothesis, it can be concluded that team identity is a product of the club's social activities, which strengthen the sense of belonging and co-identity among fans, players, and managers. Therefore, an emphasis on social responsibility enhances the perception of the club's team identity as an ethical and committed institution, which can further reinforce the fans' sense of belonging and foster a broader fan community. Observing social responsibility through the club can increase the fans' sense of respect and trust (Sadeghi Boroujerdi et al., 2024); for example,

supporting educational programs, charitable activities or environmental protection can help fans perceive the club as an ethical and committed organization.

According to the results of the third hypothesis, it can be argued that social responsibility improves the club's brand image, as the club's positive activities in society are reflected through the media and social networks, including Instagram. In this regard, Bokase (2023) believes that the media affects people's behavior in various ways, thereby significantly affecting their purchasing decisions and social interactions. Therefore, when clubs care about social issues, such as supporting disadvantaged children or combating climate change, the brand image in the minds of fans as a moral and responsible institution is enhanced. Accordingly, a strong brand image in the minds of individuals can encourage more sponsors to invest in the club.

According to the results of the fourth hypothesis, a strong brand image increases the club's attractiveness to audiences and investors, because it can attract more investment and social participation, enabling clubs to implement sustainable development projects in economic, social, and environmental areas. This includes showcasing their initiatives in promotional materials, using social media to share updates and success stories, and partnering with local organizations or influencers to reach a wider audience. By doing so, clubs can enhance their brand image and attract new fans who value sustainability and ethical practices. In line with the results of the fifth hypothesis, a strong team identity acts as a key factor in creating solidarity and cohesion among fans, staff, and athletes (Kural, & Özbek, 2023), leading to sustainable development in football clubs. A strong identity creates a strong organizational culture, as well as enabling fans show more support for their clubs through various ways, including buying tickets, supporting campaigns, and participating in the club's social projects.

In general, it can be said that social responsibility, brand image, and team identity directly and indirectly affect sustainable development in football clubs. Accordingly, football clubs can experience sustainable development and growth by investing in these dimensions and, simultaneously, achieve social, economic, and environmental success in the target society.

## Theoretical Implications

This study developed and tested a new framework for understanding the influence of CSR on brand identity and brand image. Additionally, this research explores the relationship between CSR and two mediating variables, i.e., team identity and brand image, demonstrating their significant impact on sustainable development in football clubs. Therefore, this conceptual model extends prior research, as it highlights both direct and indirect effects of CSR. Furthermore, by applying existing concepts into football clubs within a developing economy, we have also expanded the scope and generalizability of TBL theory.

## Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations. First, this study only focuses on football fans in Iran. Further studies can extend the research by incorporating respondents from countries with similar characteristics, such as Argentina, Turkey, and Colombia. Second, this study only considers psychological variables in the construct. Other studies can include relevant variables, such as marketing, to expand and improve the model. Due to the limitation of women's presence in football stadiums in Iran, the sample size of men was very significant compared to women in the research, which was beyond the researcher's control.

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