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# A Narrative Review of the Role of Fan and Media Pressure in the Selection of Professional Football Head Coaches

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine how fan and media pressure influence the selection and dismissal of head coaches in professional football, comparing dynamics across Iranian and European leagues. This article adopts a scientific narrative review approach using a descriptive analysis method. Relevant literature from 2018 to 2025 was collected from peer-reviewed journals, sports management publications, media case reports, and official club communications. The study focuses on five thematic areas: theoretical frameworks of decision-making, mechanisms of fan influence, media framing and its consequences, historical case patterns in coaching changes, and a comparative analysis of Iranian and European contexts. Both qualitative and quantitative sources were synthesized to reveal underlying trends and contextual differences. The review highlights that fan pressure operates through channels such as stadium protests, social media campaigns, and supporter associations, often compelling clubs to act despite stable technical performance. Media pressure, driven by framing tactics and pundit narratives, shapes public and executive perceptions of coaching effectiveness. In both Iranian and European contexts, coaches increasingly face shortened tenures due to these external forces. However, institutional autonomy, media freedom, and the professionalism of club governance significantly mediate these pressures. In Europe, clubs manage external narratives through strategic frameworks, while Iranian clubs, embedded in politicized and less autonomous structures, respond more reactively to public and media sentiment. Fan and media pressure have become integral to football governance, transforming coaching decisions into public performances subject to emotional and symbolic scrutiny. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for clubs aiming to balance stakeholder expectations with long-term strategic planning. Comparative insights underline the need for culturally and institutionally sensitive approaches to managing external influence on coaching stability.

**Keywords:** Fan pressure, media influence, coaching decisions, football management, Iran Pro League, European football, narrative review.

## 1. Introduction

In the world of professional football, the selection and retention of head coaches constitute a pivotal element in shaping both the short-term and long-term fortunes of clubs. Football is a sport where managerial leadership is often viewed not merely as a background function but as a dynamic, high-stakes role that can directly influence team performance, player morale, tactical consistency, and overall organizational culture. The modern head coach occupies a hybrid role—part strategist, part motivator, and part public figure—tasked with navigating the complex intersection of athletic objectives, institutional expectations, and



increasingly, public sentiment. This complexity is intensified by the volatile nature of contemporary football environments, where success is measured in rapid intervals and patience for underperformance is often fleeting.

In many high-profile leagues, such as the English Premier League, La Liga, or Serie A, managerial turnover has become a regular occurrence, and studies have demonstrated a correlation between coaching stability and team cohesion and performance. The head coach acts as the tactical architect and emotional center of the team, influencing not only match-day decisions but also player development, media interaction, and long-term strategic planning (Jones et al., 2022). Coaching changes can disrupt or invigorate a team depending on timing, context, and reason. However, what remains less formally examined is the degree to which coaching decisions—particularly hiring and firing—are influenced by forces external to the club's technical or administrative hierarchy, notably fans and the media.

In recent years, the influence of external stakeholders, primarily fans and media entities, has grown significantly in determining the trajectory of coaching careers. While historically, decisions around coaching appointments were typically confined to club executives and boards, the rise of social media platforms and 24/7 sports coverage has amplified the voice of fans and journalists alike. Fan forums, influencer-driven commentary, and trending hashtags can place considerable pressure on club leadership, especially when combined with poor team performance or perceived managerial incompetence (Gong & Huang, 2022). A coach who once may have enjoyed the luxury of a full season to implement his philosophy now operates under the looming threat of digital outrage and media criticism after a string of unfavorable results.

The media's role is especially crucial in this equation. Sports journalism, talk shows, and analytical platforms do more than simply report on events; they frame them, assign meaning, and create narratives that often sway public opinion. Coaches are subject to intense scrutiny, and headlines can shift the tone of club discourse overnight. In many European leagues, the media's portrayal of a coach—as innovative, outdated, authoritarian, or disconnected—can shape fan expectations and, consequently, club decisions (Vollero et al., 2024). The growing symbiosis between media logic and football operations reveals that the traditional boundaries of club autonomy are being redrawn, sometimes subtly and other times dramatically, in response to mediated fan discourse.

The Iranian football system also reflects this dynamic, though often in a more context-specific manner. With a passionate fan base and a politically and socially nuanced media environment, decisions around head coaching in the Iran Pro League are frequently influenced by a complex mix of public opinion, political considerations, and press rhetoric (Rahmani et al., 2024). In some cases, local or national media may serve as an unofficial mouthpiece for institutional stakeholders, further blurring the lines between technical assessments and political or public imperatives. Similarly, fan groups in Iran, often affiliated with cultural or regional identities, use collective mobilization—both physically in stadiums and virtually on social networks—to advocate for or against certain managerial decisions (Kiani et al., 2021).

Despite the visible presence of fan and media influence, there remains a lack of systematic scholarly synthesis addressing how these external pressures specifically affect coaching appointments and dismissals across various professional football contexts. While scattered studies have explored aspects of fan engagement, coach performance metrics, or media framing individually, few have integrated these themes within a cohesive analytical framework centered on decision-making regarding head coaches. This gap becomes even more apparent when trying to understand cross-cultural variations in this dynamic—how, for instance, European professional leagues handle such pressures compared to leagues in the Middle East, such as Iran.

Some recent works have begun to explore adjacent issues. For example, the economic performance of clubs in relation to fan engagement has received empirical attention, suggesting a link between organizational outcomes and external stakeholder satisfaction (Zhang, 2024). Likewise, technological advances have enabled real-time fan sentiment tracking and predictive modeling of fan reactions, which clubs may increasingly rely upon, either formally or informally, in evaluating coach performance (Balasubramanian, 2023). This further embeds fan feedback into strategic decision-making, often outside formal performance reviews or technical criteria.

The influence of social media is particularly transformative. Platforms such as Twitter (now X), Instagram, and Telegram have become arenas of spontaneous fan commentary, coordinated campaigns, and viral critique. These digital spaces create pressure points that can compel club officials to act swiftly, not necessarily in the service of long-term planning but in appeasement of the club's emotional ecosystem. As one study notes, the perception of legitimacy in coaching decisions can be



largely dictated by how decisions are received and echoed across fan-centric digital environments (Peng, 2025). Even in cases where the technical staff supports a coach, the symbolic costs of retaining someone heavily criticized online can be deemed too high.

Moreover, the commodification of football and its alignment with commercial sponsors and media contracts introduces new layers of complexity. Clubs must consider not just athletic success, but brand perception, audience engagement, and sponsor satisfaction. In this environment, a head coach is not just a tactical agent but a brand representative, and negative publicity—often stoked by media narratives—can affect commercial revenues and partnerships (Khalfaoui et al., 2024). Thus, decisions around coaching are increasingly situated within a larger communication ecosystem, shaped by both internal metrics and external narratives.

Given this backdrop, there is an urgent need to critically examine and consolidate existing literature and case examples to better understand how fan and media pressure concretely impact the selection, appointment, and dismissal of professional football head coaches. This article aims to provide a comprehensive narrative review of scholarly research, media case studies, and contextual observations from the past seven years (2018–2025), focusing specifically on the comparative dynamics between Iranian and European football leagues. The review seeks to answer several guiding questions: How do fan and media pressures manifest in decisions regarding head coaches? Are there consistent mechanisms or conditions under which external pressure overrides technical evaluation? How do these dynamics differ across cultural and institutional contexts?

The objective of this review is to describe, analyze, and compare the role of fan and media influence in coaching decisions within professional football, shedding light on both the direct and indirect pathways through which these pressures operate. Through an integrative, cross-cultural lens, the review aims to highlight not only the mechanisms of influence but also their consequences for club governance, coaching careers, and the broader football ecosystem. In doing so, it contributes to an emerging body of literature at the intersection of sports management, communication studies, and stakeholder theory (Cleland et al., 2020; Nyman et al., 2025; Rogers et al., 2025).

Ultimately, this review endeavors to move beyond anecdotal observations and into a more structured understanding of the shifting power dynamics in football leadership. As clubs become increasingly entangled in the politics of perception, understanding these dynamics is essential for scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers interested in the future of professional football governance.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a narrative review approach with a descriptive analytical method to examine the role of fan and media pressure in the selection and dismissal of head coaches in professional football. The narrative review format was chosen due to the complexity and contextual variability of the subject matter, allowing for a flexible and in-depth analysis of diverse sources without the rigid constraints of systematic reviews. Unlike meta-analyses that rely on numerical data from experimental studies, this narrative review focused on synthesizing qualitative and conceptual insights from scholarly publications, case reports, media analyses, and organizational documentation relevant to the field of football management and sports communication.

The data collection process involved a comprehensive search of academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, covering the period from 2018 to 2025. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, book chapters, and high-quality industry reports were included in the academic portion of the review. In addition, media archives—including digital newspaper databases (e.g., The Guardian, Kicker, Marca, and Varzesh3)—were consulted to extract concrete examples of fan and media influence in both Iranian and European football contexts. To ensure thematic relevance, keywords such as “coach dismissal,” “fan pressure,” “media framing,” “football management,” “sports journalism,” and “coach selection criteria” were used in combination with league-specific terms such as “Iran Pro League,” “Premier League,” “La Liga,” and “Serie A.”

The inclusion criteria for academic sources were as follows: publications between 2018 and 2025, written in English or Persian, with a clear focus on decision-making in professional football, particularly related to coach selection or dismissal under external pressure. Articles that provided empirical, theoretical, or review-based insights into the influence of fans and media on sports organizations were prioritized. Media reports were included if they featured verifiable case events or direct



quotes from club officials, players, or coaches discussing the rationale behind coaching decisions. Sources with speculative content, opinion pieces without factual grounding, or lacking sufficient contextual detail were excluded.

The descriptive analysis method was employed to identify patterns, themes, and recurring concepts across the reviewed materials. Through thematic categorization, the data were grouped into several key dimensions: historical patterns of coach changes, specific mechanisms of fan and media pressure, differences across leagues and cultures, and implications for club governance. Each theme was discussed using illustrative examples drawn from real-world events, particularly focusing on moments where external pressure led to a change in leadership or impacted the selection process. This approach facilitated a contextual understanding of how informal forces—distinct from formal performance metrics—affect managerial decisions in professional football.

To enhance the rigor and transparency of the narrative synthesis, a conceptual mapping technique was used to trace the interaction between different variables—such as media intensity, fan dissatisfaction, club hierarchy flexibility, and coach job security. Whenever available, triangulation was applied by comparing academic findings with real-time media accounts and post-event interviews with club officials, coaches, or players. Although no primary data collection was performed in the form of interviews or surveys, the review adopted a quasi-qualitative logic by interpreting media content and drawing from ethnographic accounts published in academic sports sociology literature.

Given the geographical scope of the study, special attention was given to comparative analysis between the Iranian football system and major European leagues. Iranian sources were primarily drawn from Persian-language publications and national sports reporting platforms, while European examples relied on English-language academic journals and internationally recognized media coverage. This comparative lens allowed the study to contextualize cultural and institutional differences in how fan and media pressure is perceived and operationalized in the coach selection process.

Finally, while this review did not employ quantitative tools such as citation metrics or content analysis software, its reliability was strengthened by consulting a broad spectrum of sources and critically evaluating their credibility, methodological soundness, and contextual relevance. Limitations of this method include the potential for selection bias and the absence of experimental control; however, these are intrinsic to narrative reviews and mitigated through comprehensive source triangulation and theoretical grounding.

### 3. Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Decision-making in sports management, particularly within the domain of professional football, has traditionally been grounded in models of rational assessment, technical performance, and institutional planning. However, in recent decades, this approach has evolved under the influence of behavioral, organizational, and stakeholder-centered perspectives. The classical rational model—which posits that decisions are made by evaluating all available options based on objective performance metrics—is increasingly challenged by the unpredictable and emotionally charged environment of modern football. Decision-makers often operate under bounded rationality, where emotional, social, and external pressures shape outcomes just as much as data or logic. This is particularly relevant in the context of coaching appointments and dismissals, where performance metrics are filtered through subjective perceptions shaped by a wide array of stakeholders.

Within sports management literature, contemporary decision-making models account for institutional complexity and dynamic feedback loops. The concept of “performance ambiguity,” where a coach's true effectiveness is difficult to isolate due to multiple contributing factors such as injuries, scheduling, or morale, complicates the decision-making process (Teng & Wang, 2020). This ambiguity opens the door to non-performance-related considerations, including fan expectations, media narratives, and financial interests. In such scenarios, decisions are not purely reactive to results but are shaped by how those results are interpreted and framed by influential observers outside the technical hierarchy.

Stakeholder theory offers a particularly useful lens to analyze this complexity. Originally developed in the field of corporate governance, stakeholder theory argues that organizational decisions must take into account the interests and influences of all parties with a stake in the outcome—not just shareholders or executives, but also employees, customers, communities, and, in the case of football, fans and media actors (Oosten et al., 2019). In professional sports, stakeholders extend to a broad and sometimes contradictory array of entities: loyal supporters, digital fan communities, sponsors, television networks, regulatory



bodies, and the press. These actors often hold divergent priorities, and club management must navigate this terrain carefully when making visible and symbolically important decisions, such as hiring or firing a head coach.

One of the core assumptions of stakeholder theory is that legitimacy is derived from a balanced consideration of multiple interests, not merely from internal consistency or technical correctness. In this framework, a club's decision to remove a coach might be less about on-field results and more about restoring stakeholder confidence or safeguarding brand reputation (Khalifaoui et al., 2024). When fans publicly express discontent or when media voices intensify criticism, these signals are interpreted by club boards as potential risks to legitimacy and stability. Thus, the coach becomes a symbolic figure whose presence or removal communicates responsiveness to stakeholders—a key function in preserving organizational trust and identity.

Public opinion plays an especially central role in these decisions, functioning as both a source of accountability and a catalyst for change. In professional football, where clubs serve as emotional anchors for large communities, public perception often operates as an informal referendum on management choices. Social media platforms have further amplified this dynamic by transforming individual fan reactions into collective digital movements. These reactions can be quantified through engagement metrics, trending hashtags, and online polls, allowing club executives to gauge the mood of their supporters in near real time (Prathap & Raizada, 2020). When discontent becomes widespread and sustained, it creates an environment in which maintaining the current coach becomes politically or commercially untenable, regardless of objective performance indicators.

Media institutions, as key intermediaries in the formation of public opinion, play a complex dual role as both observers and influencers. While the traditional role of sports journalism was to report on events, modern media now participate in shaping the interpretive frame through which these events are understood. Commentary, editorials, and sports analysis programs often construct narratives that attribute team success or failure to coaching competence, often simplifying or sensationalizing complex issues (Cleland et al., 2020). These narratives can resonate deeply with fans and become internalized within the discourse of the club itself. For example, sustained negative coverage in high-visibility outlets can legitimize public dissent and pressure club leadership into action.

It is essential to define the specific types of media and fan pressures that operate in this environment. Media pressure can be categorized into direct and indirect forms. Direct media pressure includes explicit calls for a coach's dismissal, investigative reports questioning leadership decisions, or coverage that gives platform to dissenting voices within the club. Indirect media pressure involves the framing of match results, choice of language (e.g., "under fire," "lost the dressing room"), and the repetition of criticism across platforms. These rhetorical devices accumulate influence over time, often coalescing into a dominant narrative that becomes difficult for club executives to ignore (Loughnane et al., 2025).

Fan pressure similarly operates on multiple levels. Physical demonstrations, such as in-stadium booing, protest banners, or chants demanding change, represent traditional and highly visible expressions of discontent. These are often mirrored or preempted by virtual expressions—posts on fan forums, social media campaigns, and influencer-led critiques. In some cases, coordinated digital mobilization can lead to global trending topics, effectively broadcasting local discontent on an international stage (Peng, 2025). Additionally, modern fan behavior is influenced by real-time data consumption and emotional volatility, creating reactive feedback loops where club management is pressed to act before fan dissatisfaction morphs into brand damage (Zhang, 2024).

Several models of coach evaluation and recruitment have been proposed in the sports management literature, ranging from data-driven analytics to competency-based assessments and stakeholder-sensitive models. The traditional model emphasizes win-loss records, tactical innovation, and player development as core metrics. While still relevant, these metrics now coexist with media performance, public relatability, and perceived leadership qualities as evaluative dimensions. As such, the "ideal coach" is no longer solely the tactician with a proven record but also the figure capable of withstanding scrutiny, managing public relations, and aligning with the club's media strategy (Jones et al., 2022).

Recent models have attempted to formalize these broader criteria. Some clubs employ psychometric assessments, media training evaluations, and social sentiment analyses during the recruitment process (Kırkoğlu, 2023). Others rely on digital tracking tools to assess how a coach is discussed in fan communities and whether their public image aligns with the club's





values and fan culture (Kröckel et al., 2022). These models reflect a growing awareness that the coach's effectiveness is not determined solely on the training pitch but also in how they navigate the discursive spaces of modern football.

Moreover, the introduction of technological systems into the coach evaluation process adds another layer of complexity. With advanced AI-based data analytics and real-time monitoring, clubs can now track not only performance statistics but also sentiment trends and engagement patterns (Balasubramanian, 2023; Kunanets & Zhmurkevych, 2024). These innovations allow decision-makers to integrate fan and media data as predictive variables in assessing the risk or stability of a coaching appointment. While such tools promise objectivity, they may also entrench the tendency to prioritize perception management over substantive developmental goals.

Altogether, this theoretical and conceptual background underscores the need to understand coaching decisions as embedded within a broader stakeholder ecosystem. The simplistic binary of performance success versus failure is insufficient to capture the full range of pressures that influence hiring and firing in professional football. Instead, club decision-makers must navigate a multilayered environment where stakeholder legitimacy, media narrative, and fan engagement intersect in complex and often unpredictable ways. Through this lens, the head coach emerges not only as a sports professional but also as a symbolic and communicative figure whose tenure is negotiated continuously in the public sphere.

#### 4. Historical Overview of Coaching Decisions Under Pressure

Throughout the history of professional football, coaching decisions have reflected a complex interplay between internal club logic and external pressures. While early football management practices prioritized long-term development, tactical consistency, and internal assessments, modern football has increasingly been shaped by external voices, particularly those of the fans and media. The Premier League, La Liga, and Serie A offer fertile ground to examine this transformation, revealing consistent patterns of managerial instability in response to non-performance-based criticism. These leagues represent football systems where marketization, global media visibility, and intense fan cultures converge to amplify the visibility—and vulnerability—of head coaches.

In the English Premier League, a marked shift occurred in the early 2000s when club ownership structures began aligning more closely with corporate interests and international stakeholders. This transition paralleled the rise of 24-hour sports news cycles and social media platforms, which magnified public scrutiny. The cases of managers like José Mourinho during his second stint at Chelsea and Ole Gunnar Solskjær at Manchester United illustrate this pressure dynamic. Despite periods of relative success, both faced prolonged media criticism and fan discontent which culminated in their dismissals. Solskjær's tenure, in particular, highlighted how emotional connection and club legend status can delay but not prevent termination when sustained criticism from pundits and fans overshadows tactical evaluations (Cleland et al., 2020). Similarly, Mourinho's clash with the media narrative surrounding his tactical rigidity accelerated internal decisions to remove him despite earlier trophies.

In Spain's La Liga, coaches operate within a football culture that heavily emphasizes stylistic identity and club ethos. FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, as cultural institutions as much as sporting entities, have witnessed numerous managerial changes driven by external opinion rather than objective decline. The dismissal of Ernesto Valverde from Barcelona in 2020 is emblematic of such pressures. Despite leading the league and qualifying comfortably in the UEFA Champions League, Valverde was removed due to escalating fan dissatisfaction and persistent negative media portrayal of his playing style. Reports and televised commentary repeatedly framed his leadership as uninspiring and tactically outdated, creating an atmosphere of inevitability around his departure. Public discourse became more influential than performance, showing how the coach's symbolic alignment with fan expectations can matter more than match outcomes (Loughnane et al., 2025).

Serie A, with its deeply rooted football traditions and club-press interdependence, offers a different yet comparable context. Clubs such as Inter Milan, Roma, and AC Milan have historically displayed high turnover rates in coaching staff, often in response to volatile media campaigns and fluctuating fan sentiments. For instance, Eusebio Di Francesco was dismissed from AS Roma in 2019 shortly after a Champions League exit and a dip in league form. However, what stands out is that club directors admitted that media-fueled fan discontent played a substantial role in prompting the decision, despite Di Francesco having previously led the team to a historic semifinal run. This reflects how past accomplishments do not inoculate a coach against present criticism when that criticism is widely echoed across public discourse (Zhang, 2024).



Across these leagues, a clear trend has emerged in recent years: coach tenures have become increasingly short, with decision timelines aligning more closely with media cycles and online sentiment. According to longitudinal reviews, the average tenure of managers in the Premier League has dropped considerably, from over two years in the early 2000s to less than 18 months by the early 2020s (Teng & Wang, 2020). This shortening of tenure reflects not just performance volatility, but also the institutionalization of reactive governance. Clubs often feel compelled to act swiftly to appease vocal fan bases or reestablish control over their brand narrative, even if internal evaluations suggest the coach is still executing an effective long-term plan.

One particularly striking pattern is the emergence of what might be termed “reactionary appointments.” These refer to coaching decisions made not based on strategic vision but as responses to media or fan agitation. This is observed in clubs appointing high-profile names immediately after dismissals to neutralize backlash or redirect attention. The case of Andrea Pirlo's appointment at Juventus in 2020, following the removal of Maurizio Sarri, fits this mold. Despite Pirlo's inexperience, the club emphasized his charisma and alignment with Juventus's identity to recapture public support. However, his tenure was short-lived, and his removal the following season demonstrated the instability that can arise from such perception-driven decisions (Khalfaoui et al., 2024).

Reactionary firings also reveal how clubs use coaching changes as a reputational strategy. When team performance begins to decline, and fan frustration becomes publicly visible, dismissing the coach serves as a symbolic reset, even if deeper structural issues persist. This managerial scapegoating functions as a signal to fans and sponsors that the club is responsive and proactive. Yet such decisions often lack alignment with long-term planning and may undermine team cohesion or development pathways, especially in clubs that frequently recycle managerial staff without sustained organizational learning (Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022).

Digital platforms have only accelerated this trend. The real-time dissemination of fan reactions—especially on Twitter (now X), Instagram, and YouTube—enables the public to shape narratives almost instantaneously. Coaches now operate in a media ecology where every press conference, tactical decision, and gesture is dissected by influencers and fans with significant reach. Some clubs now employ media analysts to monitor sentiment shifts and recommend reputational strategies, including timing of dismissals, messaging, and even potential replacements (Balasubramanian, 2023). This integration of media management into coaching strategy further blurs the line between football logic and public relations.

The increasing entanglement of perception with executive action illustrates a shift from meritocratic to populist logic in football governance. Whereas historical examples like Sir Alex Ferguson or Arsène Wenger represent an era of institutional patience and long-term trust, contemporary management is increasingly subject to episodic evaluation shaped by emotional intensity and narrative framing. The institutional memory of clubs appears to shorten with each new media cycle, and patience has become a liability rather than a virtue in the face of public scrutiny (Singh & Sarangi, 2024).

Collectively, these historical examples underscore the transformation of coach selection from a private, technically driven process into a public, performative act influenced heavily by media and fan ecosystems. The trends observed across Europe reflect a structural redefinition of authority in professional football, where decision-making increasingly mirrors the volatility of its audience. As football clubs continue to navigate this high-pressure environment, understanding the historical trajectory of such shifts becomes essential in contextualizing present and future coaching strategies.

## 5. Fan Pressure and Its Mechanisms

Fan pressure in professional football has become one of the most potent and influential forces shaping managerial decisions, particularly concerning head coaches. Fans no longer function merely as passive spectators but as active stakeholders whose reactions, mobilizations, and digital expressions can significantly impact the direction of a football club. Their influence manifests across multiple channels—each with its own mechanisms of pressure—including in-stadium behavior, online platforms, organized supporter associations, and even informal grassroots movements. As the visibility and economic value of football has grown globally, so too has the power of the collective fan voice in shaping executive decisions and coaching trajectories.

In-stadium behavior has traditionally served as the most visible and immediate expression of fan sentiment. Fans use chants, banners, choreographed displays, and collective silence to communicate approval or disapproval. Prolonged booing,



particularly during home matches, has often functioned as a tipping point in decisions to dismiss head coaches. In the context of clubs with highly engaged fan cultures—such as Galatasaray in Turkey, West Ham United in England, or Persepolis in Iran—physical protest inside the stadiums is often interpreted by club leadership as a signal that the coach has “lost the crowd.” This symbolic loss of support can override internal metrics that might otherwise support continued managerial tenure. The visual spectacle of stadium dissent is also captured by broadcast media and circulated widely, further amplifying its impact (Cleland et al., 2020).

Social media has emerged as an even more powerful and dynamic platform for fan expression. Platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and Telegram allow supporters to articulate their views in real-time, coordinate digital campaigns, and engage in viral critique or praise of head coaches. Hashtags like “#SackCoachX” or “#WeTrustCoachY” often trend during or immediately after key matches, serving as informal referendums on coaching performance. These expressions create pressure points for club decision-makers, particularly when accompanied by influencer engagement or widespread retweets by well-followed supporter accounts (Peng, 2025). Clubs monitor these platforms to gauge sentiment, and in some cases, executives admit to adjusting their communication strategies or even their personnel decisions based on fan reactions online (Balasubramanian, 2023).

Organized fan associations also wield significant influence, particularly in European and South American football. These groups, often officially recognized by clubs or operating with tacit endorsement, serve as intermediaries between the supporter base and club management. Fan associations may request meetings with club executives, issue formal statements, or stage coordinated actions such as boycotts or protest marches. In some cases, these associations operate as political actors, pushing agendas that extend beyond tactical concerns to issues of club ownership, transparency, and cultural identity (Zhang, 2024). When coaching performance becomes a symbol of deeper institutional dissatisfaction, these groups can mobilize collective pressure that extends into the media and corporate sponsor networks.

There are numerous documented cases where fan pressure has directly impacted coaching decisions. One striking example occurred at Paris Saint-Germain, where former manager Unai Emery was dismissed despite winning multiple domestic titles. His perceived failure to inspire confidence during crucial Champions League fixtures and the general skepticism among fans regarding his strategic leadership led to his eventual replacement. Although internal performance reviews acknowledged his tactical acumen, the board could not ignore the prevailing fan sentiment that he lacked the charisma and authority needed for European success. A similar situation arose with Rafael Benítez during his short-lived tenure at Real Madrid. Despite being a seasoned manager, he was never fully accepted by a large portion of the Madrid fanbase, who associated him with defensive football incompatible with the club’s attacking identity. His removal was influenced as much by these cultural and emotional expectations as by tactical concerns (Khalfaoui et al., 2024).

In Iran, the case of Yahya Golmohammadi’s tenure at Persepolis offers a compelling parallel. Despite securing notable domestic successes, including league championships, his position has come under repeated pressure due to fluctuations in form and increasing vocal discontent from fan communities. Digital platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (X) have been instrumental in mobilizing these critiques, often framing short-term tactical failures as indicative of broader incompetence. Hashtags demanding his dismissal have trended nationally, compelling club officials to make public statements or hold emergency meetings. This illustrates how fan behavior in the digital domain increasingly mirrors, and in some cases surpasses, the symbolic potency of stadium protests (Kiani et al., 2021).

Empirical studies have also begun to quantify the effects of fan sentiment on coaching stability. Research utilizing sentiment analysis and fan engagement metrics has shown that negative online discourse correlates strongly with shorter coach tenures, particularly in clubs with high media exposure and global fanbases. One study found that clubs in top-five European leagues are 28% more likely to dismiss their coach within 10 weeks following a spike in online negative sentiment, independent of match outcomes (Kröckel et al., 2022). These findings confirm that digital fan expression functions not only as a reflection of dissatisfaction but also as a causal agent influencing club action.

Qualitative research complements these findings by exploring the emotional and identity-based dimensions of fan engagement. Interviews with fan groups and club officials suggest that coaches are increasingly evaluated not just on win-loss records but on their alignment with fan values, communication style, and perceived passion for the club. A coach who appears indifferent, fails to connect with supporters, or is seen as misaligned with the club’s history is more likely to face resistance,





regardless of technical performance. Emotional rapport, symbolic gestures (such as referencing club legends or using local dialect), and media savvy are emerging as secondary metrics in coaching evaluations, especially in emotionally charged football environments like Iran, Argentina, or Italy (Mahajan et al., 2023).

A key tension in this dynamic is the disconnect between public perception and actual performance metrics. Coaches may be meeting technical objectives—such as maintaining expected points per match, adhering to budget constraints, or fostering player development—yet still be portrayed as ineffective or out of touch by fans. This discrepancy arises from the interpretive nature of football as a cultural spectacle, where meaning is co-constructed through media narratives, historical memory, and symbolic performance. Fans do not merely consume results; they interpret them through the lens of club identity, emotional investment, and perceived authenticity (Gong & Huang, 2022). Therefore, a coach's technical success may be insufficient to guarantee job security if it does not align with the subjective narratives embraced by the fanbase.

Moreover, this divergence has consequences for club governance and long-term planning. Frequent coach changes in response to fan pressure often undermine institutional stability and disrupt strategic continuity. Clubs that yield too readily to external sentiment may signal managerial weakness, affecting internal morale and external reputation. At the same time, completely ignoring fan concerns risks alienating the club's emotional core and diminishing engagement metrics that are crucial for media rights and sponsorships (Vollero et al., 2024). The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing responsiveness with resilience—managing fan relationships without becoming beholden to volatile emotional cycles.

The evolving dynamics of fan influence indicate a fundamental shift in the power structure of football organizations. Whereas decisions were once shaped in boardrooms, they are now increasingly negotiated in the public domain, through hashtags, viral videos, and televised rants. Fans have become data points, media co-producers, and stakeholder watchdogs, collectively capable of pressuring club leadership in unprecedented ways. Understanding the multifaceted channels of fan pressure and its underlying mechanisms is essential not only for scholars and sports managers but also for coaches themselves, who must now navigate not only tactics and player management but also a volatile and participatory public discourse that defines the contours of their success or failure.

## 6. Media Pressure and Its Influence

In the contemporary landscape of professional football, media pressure stands as a dominant and often decisive force in shaping the trajectory of coaching careers. As football has evolved into a media-saturated spectacle, the influence of traditional sports journalism, digital media, and television punditry has expanded beyond the boundaries of reporting to active agenda-setting and narrative construction. Media framing—the strategic selection, emphasis, and repetition of certain aspects of events—plays a significant role in influencing how both the public and decision-makers perceive head coaches, their effectiveness, and their compatibility with a club's values. These mediated narratives often operate independently of technical performance, constructing realities that become difficult for clubs and managers to ignore.

Media framing does not merely report outcomes; it interprets and contextualizes them. In the case of head coaches, the media often frames managerial decisions, tactical approaches, and interpersonal dynamics in ways that either legitimize or delegitimize the coach's role. For instance, phrases such as “under fire,” “losing the dressing room,” or “out of depth” are commonly used across headlines and television segments to create a sense of crisis. Once this narrative gains momentum, it establishes a lens through which all subsequent actions by the coach are judged, frequently distorting nuanced evaluations. In effect, media framing transforms football coaching from a technical endeavor into a symbolic act, one that is performed in front of cameras and evaluated based on public image as much as win-loss records (Cleland et al., 2020).

Sports journalism and punditry occupy a critical space in this environment, acting both as cultural commentators and as informal advisors to the public and, indirectly, to club leadership. Pundits, often former players or coaches themselves, possess a dual authority: their professional background lends them credibility, while their media presence grants them influence. Their assessments are frequently consumed by millions of fans and club stakeholders, forming a powerful consensus around coaching competence or failure. In some instances, their critiques generate sustained media pressure that compels clubs to react, even in the absence of catastrophic performance metrics (Rogers et al., 2025). For example, when pundits repeatedly highlight a coach's lack of adaptability, inability to inspire players, or poor in-game management, these criticisms often become self-reinforcing, picked up by other outlets and echoed across social media platforms.



Television coverage, especially in post-match analysis, plays a strategic role in forming public judgment. Major broadcasters such as Sky Sports, beIN Sports, and ESPN deploy graphics, expert commentary, and slow-motion breakdowns to dissect a coach's decisions, often simplifying complex tactical realities into digestible critiques. When this analysis aligns with fan frustrations, it creates a media echo chamber that elevates dissatisfaction into public campaigns. Clubs, conscious of their media portrayal and the potential commercial consequences of negative coverage, are often pressured into action not necessarily because of internal dissatisfaction but due to the external optics of inaction (Shankar, 2024).

There are numerous high-profile examples of media-driven coaching changes that illustrate this phenomenon. One such instance occurred with Niko Kovač at Bayern Munich. Although Kovač secured a domestic double, his perceived tactical rigidity and poor media handling became the focal points of media critique. German sports outlets continually framed him as misaligned with the club's historical attacking philosophy, and this narrative eventually overshadowed his on-field results. Kovač's strained relationship with the press, coupled with the persistent framing of his tactics as "uninspiring," played a substantial role in his early dismissal (Khalfaoui et al., 2024). Similarly, in the Premier League, Marco Silva's tenure at Everton was marked by media skepticism from the outset, and despite moderate performance, persistent framing of him as tactically uncertain and psychologically fragile led to a steady erosion of support within both the board and fanbase.

In Iran, the dynamic between media and club decision-making is also heavily pronounced, though it manifests within a more centralized and politically sensitive media environment. Iranian sports programs, such as "Navad" and others on national television, have historically shaped public opinion about coaches through editorialized match analysis, interviews, and sensationalist headlines. In cases where state-affiliated media outlets portray a coach as ineffective or disconnected from fan expectations, the narrative tends to dominate discourse due to the media's reach and authority. This was evident during the controversial exit of former Esteghlal coach Winfried Schäfer, whose departure followed weeks of negative commentary from sports commentators and national outlets focusing less on his results and more on his "failure to understand the Iranian football culture"—a subjective framing that undermined his legitimacy (Kiani et al., 2021).

Empirical studies have increasingly highlighted the measurable impact of media narratives on sports decision-making. Research examining coaching changes across top-tier European leagues reveals a strong correlation between negative media sentiment and managerial turnover, especially when combined with neutral or slightly underwhelming performance data. In one longitudinal study, coaches with consistently negative media ratings had a 40% shorter average tenure compared to those with neutral or positive media portrayals, regardless of their actual league position (Kröckel et al., 2022). Another study analyzing online content showed that media articles with emotionally charged language and speculative narratives—such as discussions of locker room unrest or coaching conspiracies—tended to trigger spikes in social media discussions, further escalating club-level concern about public perception (Peng, 2025).

The use of algorithmic tools in media content production further exacerbates this influence. Many sports outlets now rely on real-time data to prioritize stories that generate higher engagement, often leading to a disproportionate focus on controversies or negative sentiment. As a result, even minor incidents or decisions by coaches can become magnified through digital amplification, producing what researchers describe as "narrative inflation" (Balasubramanian, 2023). This process not only distorts the coach's image in the public eye but also triggers institutional reactions aimed at restoring narrative control, sometimes at the cost of dismissing the head coach.

The media's influence is also embedded in sponsorship and commercial considerations. Clubs are acutely aware that prolonged negative media coverage can affect their marketability, sponsor relations, and brand value. A coach who is repeatedly framed as "divisive" or "controversial" can become a liability not only in sporting terms but also as a brand ambassador. In this context, media narratives intersect with financial interests, making it even more difficult for clubs to retain coaches under prolonged media scrutiny (Vollero et al., 2024). As football becomes increasingly entangled with global entertainment markets, managing public perception becomes an integral component of club strategy, and media pressure becomes an institutional factor rather than just a journalistic byproduct.

Additionally, media dynamics have changed with the proliferation of influencer-led content and fan-operated media platforms. YouTube channels, football podcasts, and Twitter accounts run by fans now command audiences rivaling traditional media, and their influence on coaching discourse is substantial. These content creators often mix analytical commentary with emotionally driven narratives, contributing to the construction of public consensus. Clubs are beginning to monitor these spaces



not only for engagement data but also for risk assessment regarding potential coaching controversies (Mahajan et al., 2023). In some instances, viral fan videos criticizing a coach's performance have triggered official statements from clubs or prompted journalists to follow up with questions in press conferences, illustrating the recursive loop between fan media and institutional response.

In summary, media pressure in professional football is not merely a backdrop but an active force that shapes managerial stability, club decision-making, and public perception. Through strategic framing, repetitive commentary, and emotion-laden narratives, the media creates interpretive lenses that often override objective performance data. The coach, as both a technical leader and a symbolic figure, becomes the subject of continuous evaluation not only by club officials but also by an expansive media apparatus that influences stakeholders across the football ecosystem. Understanding this media environment is essential for comprehending why coaching decisions, in many cases, are not made solely on the pitch but in the arena of public discourse.

## 7. Comparative Insights: Iran vs. European Leagues

The role of fan and media pressure in coaching decisions is deeply shaped by the cultural, institutional, and political environments in which professional football operates. A comparative perspective between Iran and European leagues reveals significant contrasts in how such pressures are articulated, mediated, and responded to by club leadership. While European leagues are generally characterized by commercialized professionalism, high degrees of media autonomy, and institutionally empowered fan engagement, the Iranian football context presents a more localized and politically infused ecosystem where media freedom is restricted, fan influence is often fragmented, and institutional autonomy is constrained by broader sociopolitical structures.

One of the most prominent differences lies in fan culture and the modes through which supporters exert influence. In European football, particularly in leagues like the English Premier League, Bundesliga, and La Liga, fan behavior is structured and institutionalized through formal supporter groups, season ticket programs, and regulated protest mechanisms. These fans often have established channels to voice concerns, including direct access to club executives, organized forums, and influence over policy through structured associations. Their collective voice, while emotionally charged, is often perceived as a legitimate stakeholder contribution in club governance. In contrast, fan engagement in Iran tends to be more spontaneous, emotional, and less institutionally integrated. Although clubs like Persepolis and Esteghlal enjoy massive and passionate support, the absence of formalized structures for fan representation results in irregular and often reactionary demonstrations of dissatisfaction, typically expressed through social media campaigns or stadium protests (Kiani et al., 2021).

Media freedom further differentiates these contexts. European sports journalism operates in a relatively autonomous environment, where journalists and pundits can criticize, investigate, and even challenge club decisions without fear of institutional repercussions. This environment fosters a diverse media landscape with competitive narratives and critical inquiry. In countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain, media scrutiny of coaching decisions is frequent and often sets the agenda for public discourse. The case of José Mourinho's dismissals at both Chelsea and Manchester United exemplifies this dynamic, where sustained critical coverage contributed to creating an atmosphere that rendered his position untenable despite moderate performance outcomes (Cleland et al., 2020). In Iran, however, media institutions are more closely aligned with political and governmental oversight. National broadcasters and many newspapers often avoid sharp criticism of organizational decision-makers, especially in clubs affiliated with state-owned entities or political actors. This leads to an asymmetry in how coaching narratives are shaped, with media sometimes functioning more as instruments of power preservation than independent observers (Rahmani et al., 2024).

Institutional autonomy is another key point of divergence. European clubs, particularly at the top level, are governed by relatively independent boards, sporting directors, and corporate investors who generally operate based on strategic planning and technical evaluations, even though they remain susceptible to public and media pressures. Clubs like Bayern Munich, Real Madrid, and Manchester City integrate fan sentiment and media narratives into their broader management strategies, but they also maintain organizational structures that buffer reactionary decision-making. By contrast, most Iranian football clubs lack such insulation. Many clubs are owned or heavily influenced by government ministries, military-affiliated organizations, or politically connected individuals. As a result, coaching decisions are not always made solely based on footballing logic but



may be driven by political considerations, institutional rivalries, or broader efforts to manage public opinion during sensitive times (Poshtiban et al., 2024).

A notable case study illustrating this contrast is the coaching trajectory of Branko Ivanković at Persepolis. Despite achieving significant success, including multiple league titles and strong performances in the AFC Champions League, Ivanković's position was continuously challenged due to external pressures unrelated to his technical capabilities. Media narratives, subtle political interventions, and shifting alliances within club management created an unstable environment that eventually led to his departure. The inability to shield coaching decisions from such forces demonstrates how deeply intertwined football governance in Iran can be with extrinsic sociopolitical currents. Meanwhile, in Europe, coaches such as Jürgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola are given strategic autonomy even amid fluctuations in performance, underscoring the professionalism and long-term planning ethos prevalent in those systems (Loughnane et al., 2025).

Localized pressures in Iran often reflect specific social and cultural sensibilities, which differ from the market-oriented professionalism of European football. For instance, in Iran, religious values, regional affiliations, and nationalistic rhetoric can influence fan expectations and the acceptability of certain coaching figures. Foreign coaches may be judged not only by their tactical acumen but also by their ability to culturally assimilate or publicly demonstrate alignment with local values. This was evident in the treatment of foreign coaches who failed to engage with local customs or language, often portrayed by national media as disconnected or disrespectful, regardless of their on-field performance (Gong & Huang, 2022). In Europe, by contrast, coaching is treated more as a transnational profession, where cultural background is often secondary to tactical innovation, leadership, and alignment with commercial goals (Zhang, 2024).

Another dimension is the structure of media consumption. European fans are exposed to a wide variety of sources—digital platforms, international outlets, fan blogs, podcasts, and analytics-driven websites—each contributing to a pluralistic and competitive media ecosystem. This diversity allows for counter-narratives, balanced critique, and transparency, helping clubs calibrate decisions based on a broad range of stakeholder perspectives. In Iran, where media plurality is more limited, dominant narratives often emerge from a narrow set of sources, which can disproportionately shape public opinion and limit the space for critical discourse (Peng, 2025).

Despite these structural differences, one striking similarity is the emotional intensity with which fans in both contexts engage with the game and its leadership figures. Coaching decisions in both Iran and Europe are emotionally charged, culturally significant, and deeply symbolic. The key difference lies not in the passion itself but in how that passion is institutionalized, mediated, and translated into executive action. In European leagues, clubs have developed managerial frameworks to mediate between passion and performance, whereas in Iran, this mediation is often absent or underdeveloped, making coaching decisions more susceptible to volatility and inconsistency (Kröckel et al., 2022).

Sociopolitical factors in Iran also add a unique layer to the discussion. Clubs are often seen as extensions of broader ideological or political currents, and coaches may find themselves navigating not just tactical or fan-related issues but also questions of loyalty, political acceptability, and institutional alignment. In such contexts, coaching tenures can be disrupted by shifts in political priorities or administrative realignments, a phenomenon largely absent in Western European leagues where clubs enjoy legal and operational autonomy from political structures (Teng & Wang, 2020).

In conclusion, while both Iranian and European football environments are deeply influenced by fan and media pressures, the mechanisms, structures, and cultural logics that mediate these pressures differ significantly. European clubs operate within systems characterized by professional autonomy, media plurality, and strategic stakeholder engagement, enabling them to navigate external pressure with greater institutional coherence. Iranian football, by contrast, remains embedded in a socio-politically dynamic landscape where media narratives and fan reactions are often influenced or constrained by broader political and cultural currents. Recognizing these differences is essential for developing a nuanced understanding of how coaching decisions are made—and what they symbolize—within distinct footballing and societal contexts.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

The dynamics surrounding the selection and dismissal of head coaches in professional football have grown increasingly complex in the modern era, shaped by a multifaceted interaction between internal club mechanisms and external forces such



as fan sentiment and media narratives. What was once a relatively insular and performance-based decision-making process has now evolved into a highly public, emotionally charged, and politically sensitive domain. This narrative review has explored the historical patterns, theoretical underpinnings, and contextual specificities of how fan and media pressure influence coaching decisions, with a particular focus on the contrasts and commonalities between Iran and European football leagues.

At the heart of this issue lies the transformation of football itself—from a sport governed by athletic merit and club strategy to a global cultural product entangled with mass media, social influence, and corporate interest. In this environment, the head coach is no longer evaluated solely on his technical expertise or tactical success, but also on his capacity to navigate public perception, manage media scrutiny, and resonate with the emotional and symbolic expectations of diverse stakeholders. Coaching, therefore, is not merely a sporting role; it is a symbolic one that embodies a club's identity, values, and aspirations in the public eye.

Fan pressure has emerged as one of the most significant non-institutional influences on coaching decisions. Through stadium behavior, organized associations, and especially social media, fans are increasingly able to articulate collective preferences, demand accountability, and exert influence over managerial decisions. Their influence is not only direct but also cumulative—sustained discontent can erode a coach's credibility and ultimately lead to their dismissal even in the absence of clear performance failures. In digital spaces, the immediacy and virality of fan reactions amplify these effects, turning moments of tactical misjudgment or interpersonal tension into crises of legitimacy. Coaches must now perform not only on the training ground and the pitch but also in a hyper-connected discursive arena where every action is subject to interpretation and judgment.

Media institutions, both traditional and digital, have paralleled this rise in fan influence with an expanded role in framing the narrative around coaching efficacy. Media framing establishes interpretive templates through which fans and stakeholders assess coaching success or failure. By selecting specific focal points—be it personality traits, tactical approaches, or interpersonal conflicts—the media constructs coherent stories that can shape public opinion and, in turn, organizational action. Sports journalists and pundits, operating as both analysts and entertainers, contribute to an echo chamber that reinforces particular views and escalates pressure on club leadership to respond.

The historical analysis of major leagues reveals that such pressures have led to increasingly reactionary coaching decisions. Clubs, under the dual gaze of fans and media, often choose to dismiss coaches not as a result of technical assessment but to reassert control over public discourse or signal responsiveness. This trend has resulted in the shortening of average coaching tenures, the emergence of symbolic appointments, and the adoption of reputational crisis-management strategies within club management structures. Head coaches have become both strategists and scapegoats in a cycle of escalating expectations and diminishing patience.

A comparative lens further illuminates how context-specific factors shape the intensity and form of these pressures. In European leagues, fan and media influence operates within relatively stable institutional frameworks characterized by media independence, professional governance, and commercial accountability. Here, pressures are channeled through structured mechanisms and mitigated by long-term planning and stakeholder consultation. Coaches may still be dismissed under pressure, but such decisions are usually couched in broader strategic considerations.

In contrast, the Iranian football landscape presents a more volatile and politically inflected context. Clubs often lack the institutional autonomy to insulate coaching decisions from political interference or media manipulation. Fan expressions, while emotionally powerful, lack formalized pathways for influence, making them sporadic and reactionary. Media in Iran functions within constrained parameters, often reflecting institutional agendas rather than offering independent critique. These structural factors result in coaching decisions that are more susceptible to short-term political shifts, symbolic considerations, and non-sporting priorities. As a result, coaching tenures in Iran may reflect broader social dynamics, including national pride, cultural conformity, and political allegiance, in addition to footballing logic.

What becomes clear from this comparison is that while fan and media pressures are universally significant, their mechanisms and consequences are deeply shaped by the surrounding sociocultural and institutional context. In both cases, however, the underlying issue is the same: the transformation of coaching into a high-stakes, high-visibility role where perception often outweighs performance. Clubs, caught between the demands of sporting success and the imperative of public approval, must navigate a delicate balance in managing these pressures without undermining strategic coherence.

The implications of this transformation are profound. For clubs, it necessitates the development of robust communication strategies, stakeholder engagement frameworks, and crisis management protocols. It also underscores the importance of internal





governance structures capable of resisting impulsive decision-making and prioritizing long-term development over symbolic gestures. For coaches, it demands a new skill set—beyond tactics and training—focused on media handling, emotional intelligence, and public communication. The modern coach must be a leader not only in the locker room but also in the public sphere.

For fans and media actors, this evolution presents both opportunity and responsibility. The democratization of influence enables a broader range of voices to participate in football discourse, but it also raises questions about the ethics of critique, the volatility of collective judgment, and the consequences of sustained pressure on individuals. A more informed and reflective fan culture, alongside responsible journalism, is essential to ensure that influence is exercised constructively rather than destructively.

Looking ahead, it is clear that fan and media pressure will continue to shape the managerial landscape in professional football. The challenge for clubs, coaches, and governing bodies is to recognize the legitimacy of these external voices while maintaining the strategic autonomy necessary for effective leadership. This involves not only institutional reforms but also cultural shifts in how success is defined, how patience is valued, and how narratives are constructed. The evolving role of the coach, at the intersection of performance, perception, and politics, offers a compelling lens through which to understand the broader transformations taking place in the world of professional football. Ultimately, sustaining managerial stability in this environment requires more than winning matches; it requires winning the narrative.

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All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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