



Designing a Football Business Development Model in Iran and Iraq with a Focus on Sports Startups

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Abstract

This study aims to design a business development model for football in Iran and Iraq, with a particular focus on sports startups. This study was conducted using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis to identify the key factors influencing the development of football sports startups in Iran and Iraq. The participants included 19 individuals, comprising startup managers, football industry experts, and investors, who were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed in accordance with the credibility criteria of qualitative research. Furthermore, all stages of the research were carried out in compliance with ethical principles. The findings indicate that antecedents, processes, and outcomes affect football business development in Iran and Iraq, particularly in the context of sports startups. According to experts and managers, economic factors such as access to financial resources and investor support, as well as managerial factors including leadership skills, executive experience, and strategic planning, have a substantial impact on startup success. From a technological perspective, the use of digital platforms, online marketing, and information technology infrastructure plays a vital role in business growth and development. Cultural factors, including innovation acceptance, entrepreneurial spirit, and social interactions among stakeholders, are also important in both countries, although differences exist in their intensity and mode of influence. The findings further suggest that coordination among investors, managers, and experts, along with the establishment of appropriate technological and cultural infrastructure, enhances the success and sustainable development of sports startups.

Introduction

The global football industry has evolved into a complex and multi-layered economic ecosystem, wherein professional clubs function not merely as sporting entities but as strategic business organizations with extensive social, cultural, and financial impacts (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021). In recent years, the emergence of sports startups has demonstrated that innovation and entrepreneurial activities can create significant opportunities for generating new revenue streams, fostering digital fan engagement, and enhancing the audience experience (Buck & Ifland, 2023). However, Iran and Iraq face a set of structural, economic, and cultural challenges that constrain the growth of sports entrepreneurship and the development of innovative businesses within

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football. Previous research indicates that sports startups predominantly encounter obstacles such as limited financial resources, restricted managerial capacity, and insufficient access to technology and markets (Parvaz & Eydi, 2023; Shirali et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the strategic convergence of digital platform utilization, financial investment, and the implementation of innovative business models is recognized as a critical factor for maintaining competitive advantage in football markets (Shokri et al., 2024). Consequently, designing a comprehensive and localized model for football business development, with a specific focus on sports startups, is essential to facilitate sustainable growth and innovation within this sector, tailored to the unique conditions of Iran and Iraq. Furthermore, the high youth unemployment rate, the brain drain of football talent, and the heavy reliance of clubs on government funding have heightened the economic and social risks within the football industry, posing significant challenges to its sustainability.

These circumstances indicate that a sole focus on the traditional management of leagues and clubs is not an effective strategy for football business development. Instead, it is imperative to design a localized and comparative model that holistically integrates economic, managerial, technological, and cultural factors. By accounting for the institutional and social disparities between the two countries, such a model should offer operational solutions to enhance startup performance, generate employment, attract investment, and elevate the status of football at the regional level. Ultimately, this model can pave the way for the sustainable development of the football industry, serving as a foundation for creating economic value, fostering social interactions, and strengthening sports and cultural identity in Iran and Iraq.

Methods and Materials

This qualitative study employed thematic analysis to explore the experiences and perceptions of 19 experts in digital marketing, data analysis, and technology management within sports organizations. Participants were selected via purposive sampling based on professional experience and digital proficiency. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, lasting 45 to 70 minutes, and subsequently transcribed. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. To ensure validity, strategies such as member checking, researcher triangulation, and comprehensive documentation were utilized. The study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines, including informed consent and confidentiality. This methodological design facilitated the extraction of deep, reliable insights regarding the management and development of digital technology in sports organizations.

Results and Discussion

The demographic analysis of the 19 interviewees, selected from startup managers, football industry experts, and investors, reveals a predominantly male sample (14 men and 5 women). The participants are nearly evenly distributed between Iran and Iraq, facilitating a balanced comparative analysis. With an age range of 40 to 60 years and professional experience spanning 10 to 25 years, the sample represents seasoned experts possessing deep insights into management, investment, and sports startup development in both nations.

The identified key factors are categorized into three main dimensions. First, antecedents—encompassing investment and financial resources, modern technologies, cultural acceptance, and laws and policies—provide the essential infrastructure and foundation for the development of sports startups. Second, processes, including strategic planning, product development, marketing and customer acquisition, and collaborative mechanisms, define the operational activities and management strategies of these ventures. Finally, outcomes, comprising economic growth, brand strengthening, the expansion of social interaction, and service quality enhancement, represent the outcomes and achievements resulting from startup activities. Based on these variables, the research model for the development of the football business in Iran and Iraq, with a focus on sports startups, is delineated.

Conclusion

This study aimed to design a football business development model in Iran and Iraq, focusing on sports startups. The findings identify antecedents—such as financial resources, modern technology, cultural acceptance, and supportive policies—as the essential foundation for growth. These elements align with studies by Shokri et al. (2024) and Hammerschmidt et al. (2021), highlighting that adequate investment and digital infrastructure are critical for overcoming operational barriers. Furthermore, processes including strategic planning, product development, digital marketing, and collaborative networking shape the operational management of these startups. Finally, the outcomes demonstrate that successfully implementing these factors leads to economic growth, brand strengthening, expanded social interaction, and enhanced service quality. Ultimately, this research suggests that integrating financial, technological, and cultural drivers with robust operational processes is vital for sustainable development. Practical recommendations include establishing tax incentives, launching specialized football accelerators, and leveraging technologies like artificial intelligence to ensure the success of sports startups in the region.

Keywords: financial investment, managerial skills, technological innovation, business development, networking.