



Structural Challenges of Attracting and Retaining Sponsorship in Professional Sports

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The current research aimed to identify and prioritize the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports in Iran.

Methodology: The research employed a mixed methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques through thematic analysis. The statistical population comprised experts in the sports sector, including presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, marketing managers of federations, and managers and deputy ministers. A purposeful sampling method was utilized, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 participants until theoretical saturation was reached. The coding technique and NVIVO software were used for data analysis. Following the identification and ranking of challenges, an AHP questionnaire was designed and distributed to 16 experts in the sports and marketing industry.

Findings: The results indicated that structural challenges to attracting sponsors in professional sports were identified across six themes: the marketing literacy of managers and human resources, strategic thinking, inefficiencies in the financial system and legal issues, the need for quick adaptation to changes, university positioning and research, as well as the role of politics and government. Additionally, structural challenges in maintaining sponsors in professional sports were identified across seven themes: the lack of marketing focus in organizational structure, branding and performance of notable teams and players, public relations and infrastructure, appointments and strategic thinking, inefficiencies in the financial system and legal issues, monitoring and evaluation systems, and again the role of politics and government. These challenges were prioritized using the AHP method. The findings of this research can help managers recognize their shortcomings and inappropriate actions regarding attracting and retaining financial sponsors in professional sports, allowing them to implement practical solutions and strategies to tackle these challenges.

Originality: This study is the first to explicitly identify the structural challenges of attracting and retaining financial sponsors in professional sports in Iran. Additionally, it examines and assesses the significance of each identified structural challenge.

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1. Introduction

Sports is one of the most popular social phenomena of the present era, and it attracts the attention of different sections of society. This broad and diverse audience has caused commercial and industrial organizations to become interested in using competitions and sports organizations to introduce their goods and services. This interest provides a platform for a win-win relationship between commercial and industrial companies, clubs, and organized activities that are graded and targeted to earn money to develop economic and social values" (Ehsani et al., 2013). Thus, common characteristics among professional sports include large fan bases, widespread appeal, and extensive media coverage (Greenhalgh et al., 2011). On the other hand, sponsorship has been described as the financial backbone of many sports properties and can be the central element in the image of an event. In North America, an unsponsored sporting event is often viewed as a secondary event of minor importance (Lamont & Dowell, 2008). Therefore, obtaining financial support is one of the most essential tasks of every sports manager.

Due to the attractiveness of sports as well as the many financial problems in sports, a process has emerged that sports and other fields create a win-win relationship for mutual benefit, one of these fields being the economy; So that sports and economy interact with each other and governments and private companies can benefit from many resources by investing in sports (Reghbati et al., 2019). The importance of professional sports is such that in some research, it has been proven that success in professional sports has direct effects on people's tendency towards leisure sports (Reghbati et al., 2019).

A professional sport is a sport that is governed and managed by its private trustees, i.e., sports clubs. Professional sports organizations can undertake the development and promotion of team or individual sports or both along with their professional goals. In professional sports, athletes receive money in exchange for participating in training programs and sports competitions; it is used as living expenses and other things. Professional sports mean sports activities that financially support the people involved (Reghbati et al., 2019).

Since, according to the definition, professional sports are "sporting and organized activities that are performed in a ranked and targeted manner, to earn money for the development of economic and social values" (Ehsani et al., 2013) on the other hand, standard features among professional sports include large fan bases, wide demand, and extensive media coverage (Greenhalgh et al., 2011), so sponsorship as the financial backbone of many features Sport is described and can be the central element in the image of an event. In North America, an unsponsored sporting event is often viewed as a secondary event of minor importance (Lamont & Dowell, 2008). Therefore, obtaining financial support is one of the most essential tasks of every sports manager.

Sports sponsorships effectively generate significant income for sports clubs and leagues (Koronios et al., 2020). According to information from the Global Advertising Research Center (Handley, 2018), companies paid \$65.8 billion internationally in sponsorship deals in 2018, with the most significant portion of assets spent on sports. In addition, according to the forecasts of the International Sports Marketing Agency, the global sports sponsorship market is expected to reach 86.60 billion dollars (Matthew,

2020). Therefore, companies follow specific reasons and goals to support the sports or other sectors. If the sports managers prepare the ground for this work, the sports sector will experience extraordinary growth with the support of these companies. Undoubtedly, developing and promoting sports disciplines in a general way, as well as championships, requires investment and financial resources other than allocated government credits. For this purpose, financial sponsors play a key role, and finding structural challenges to attract and maintain financial sponsors to invest in professional sports is one of the main goals of the country's sports organizations. Studies show that investing in sports and implementing planned strategies has not had a favorable trend in physical education and sports in the country (Emami et al., 2020); For example, governments and officials have started sports projects at different times, the basis of which may not be correct, and every official introduces the existence of such projects as the legacy of his previous government. The lack of investment in sports and sports facilities in Iran is undeniable (Askarzadeh & Heydarinezhad, 2012). The available evidence confirms the alarming situation in the country. One of the most fundamental ways to overcome stagnation and growth in this situation is to attract financial resources. However, achieving the desired results in this field requires extensive planning based on scientific research and adapting the programs to the basic needs of the studied society (Sadeghipour et al., 2015).

Therefore, considering the key role of financial sponsors, identifying structural challenges to attract and retain these sponsors for investment in professional sports is one of the primary goals for sports organizations in the country. The continuous growth of global sponsorship spending in recent years highlights the increasing importance of sponsorship as a communication tool within corporate marketing. Given its rising economic significance, sports sponsorship is viewed as a strategic marketing decision that necessitates careful planning (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). Since sponsorship is an undeniable aspect of organizations' marketing strategies, its potential as a sustainable competitive advantage is often examined (Hino & Takeda, 2020). Conversely, sponsorship is a vital component of marketing strategy and constitutes a significant portion of the marketing budgets for organizations that engage in large-scale sponsorship. Thus, sponsoring organizations expect a return on their investments. Due to managerial pressure to justify these costs, modern financial sponsors increasingly require effective functional and strategic planning, implementation, and assessment (Choi, 2006; Stotlar, 2012). Developing effective sponsorship strategies is a critical task closely related to broader marketing strategies, and managers must creatively integrate the sponsor brand with marketing plans (Bowdin et al., 2011). Additionally, the environmental factors organizations face have compelled managers to systematically analyze their surroundings and evaluate the strategic direction the organization should pursue. As a result, organizations adhere to a strategic approach across all their economic sectors. However, to compare the relative success of the strategies employed by different organizations, it's essential to establish a framework that captures significant changes in their operating environments (Berrett & Slack, 2001). Therefore, managers must evaluate their organization's strategic path to ensure alignment with the overall goals prior to any action (Dolphin, 2003).

One of the problems related to attracting financial sponsors in our country's sports, Iran, is the desire of big companies and capitalists to support events with more spectators and higher turnover. In this regard, financial sponsors are one of the sources of income in the country's professional sports, which brings the most income for the country's sports organizations and clubs. Financial support of sports, especially professional sports, is a debate that has been of interest for many years, and its importance is increasing daily. It is evident that the cycle of capital, sponsors, and sports, if they come together with positive and principled interaction, will cause the growth and expansion of each other, and its consequences will involve different parts of the society. Most importantly, it will cause the development of the country's sports, ultimately leading to job creation (Besharati et al., 2023).

Based on the material, the significance of financial support for sports teams and organizations is evident. The primary characteristic of professional sports today revolves around generating revenue, yet sports clubs have limited means to earn income. Many sports clubs cite the lack of funding and financial resources for their teams' failures. It is essential to examine the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports, as addressing these issues could enable relevant institutions within the sports industry to create an environment conducive to investment. However, despite the importance and role of financial sponsors in the sports sector and considering a long-term approach to this aspect in professional sports, it appears that the influence of financial sponsors on achieving sports objectives has not been sufficiently leveraged in Iran. Therefore, establishing a healthy and suitable environment for attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports is necessary. Companies tend to view sports properties as unique ventures that can fulfill specific goals, and they assess sponsorship opportunities individually. Professional sports can benefit from understanding how potential sponsors evaluate these opportunities. Furthermore, professional sports may offer unique prospects that are not available in other sports contexts (Greenhalgh et al., 2011). Thus, the current research aims to identify and prioritize the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports in Iran.

2. Methodology

This research was conducted with an exploratory nature to expand the existing knowledge and understanding about the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports. Therefore, the current research is qualitative in terms of applied purpose and is based on data search, and it was carried out with interpretive theme analysis. Among the types of qualitative research methods, thematic analysis was found suitable for achieving the research objectives because Braun et al. (2016) believe that this method clarifies the individual processes of a particular phenomenon. Thematic analysis is one of the most efficient methods in qualitative analysis. This method is used to identify, analyze, and report the patterns (themes) in the data (several interviews with a text) (Braun et al., 2016). The quantitative part used the Analytical Hierarchy (AHP) method to weigh the structural challenges in attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports.

The statistical population of the research comprised experts in the field of sports, including presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, and marketing managers of federations, as well as managers and deputies from the Ministry of Sports and Youth, the deputy of the Center for Partnerships, Investment, and Sports Economy of the Ministry, and the relevant working group. In this study, a purposeful sampling method was employed to identify the samples. Sampling continued until the theoretical saturation stage was reached, and interviews were conducted with three additional samples to ensure data saturation. The demographic characteristics of the interviewees, categorized by gender, age, and other factors, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the research participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	/Federation Ministry	Years of experiences	Position
P1	Female	45	PhD	Ministry	15	Deputy
P2	Male	54	PhD	Federation	22	Presidency
P3	Male	42	PhD	Federation	10	Secretary
P4	Male	47	PhD	Federation	22	Presidency
P5	Female	46	PhD	Federation	21	Vice President
P6	Female	51	PhD	Federation	24	Vice President
P7	Male	43	PhD	Federation	18	Presidency
P8	Male	42	PhD	Federation	14	Secretary
P9	Female	51	PhD	Federation	25	Presidency
P10	Female	39	PhD	Ministry	16	Manager
P11	Male	41	PhD	Ministry	13	Manager
P12	Male	58	MA	Federation	29	Presidency
P13	Male	47	PhD	Federation	29	Secretary
P14	Male	54	MA	Federation	27	Secretary
P15	Male	40	PhD	Federation	15	Presidency
P16	Male	42	PhD	Federation	11	Secretary
P17	Female	46	MA	Federation	12	Vice President
P18	Male	45	MA	Federation	16	Secretary
P19	Male	46	MA	Ministry	14	Deputy
P20	Male	45	MA	Ministry	10	The responsible expert
P21	Male	48	PhD	Federation	28	Presidency
P22	Male	44	PhD	Federation	12	Manager
P23	Male	48	PhD	Federation	29	Manager
P24	Male	40	PhD	Federation	10	Manager

In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 people. The interview was conducted in person at each participant's workplace, some at the venue of the election meeting of the heads of the committees, and some by phone. The interviews were conducted during 10 months at the end of 1401 (February and early March) and the first 8 months of 1402 (April, May, June, July, August, September, October, and November).

In the first part of the research, after conducting the interviews during the 10 months, the data analysis indicated that no new data was added to the previous data because a high percentage of the data extracted from the last interviews was repeated. Therefore, after conducting these interviews and reaching theoretical saturation, the interviews were

ended. Also, in the quantitative part of the research, the AHP researcher's questionnaire, from the first qualitative part, was used to prioritize the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports, and it was given to 16 experts in the sports and marketing industry.

Data analysis, using coding techniques and NVIVO version 10 software, categorizes data. First, the data are coded manually, and then the codes are recorded in NVIVO qualitative data analysis software for organizational purposes. To ensure reliability and transferability (validity), conditions are first provided for the research to be collaborative. At the same time, some participants are helped in analyzing and interpreting the data. Then, the members implement three basic actions.

Re-coding by the researcher: After coding each interview for a week, the researcher re-coded the data. This research's retest reliability was 81%, which is more than 60%. Thus, the reliability of the codings is confirmed.

NVIVO software was used for data analysis. Creswell (2014) considers using qualitative data analysis software one way to achieve reliability in qualitative research.

Finally, William Scutt's formula was used to gain more confidence and determine reliability (Pandit, 1996). For this purpose, 10% of interviews along with operational definitions were given to another researcher for coding. Coding categories, subcategories, and indicators was done according to the guidelines (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The percentage of agreement between two coders was calculated using Scott's reliability coefficient. Since the Scott reliability coefficient was 81%, this number shows the high reliability of the research because if the agreement coefficient between them is more than 70%, it can be said that there is an agreement between the coders.

3. Results

First, the researcher read the interviews several times to understand the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors fully. This stage of analysis can be considered inductive (Creswell, 2014), because the researcher is first interested in understanding the statements of the participants and then, based on the research questions, extract codes that can be used. They have more fruitful results in the research process (Delia, 2019) and further, phrases (single words or small collections of several words) were categorized based on semantic units to attach the concepts of codes to them. In the next step, these codes are classified based on themes directly related to the research questions. Then, the obtained categories were re-linked to more abstract codes than the previous step's codes. At this stage, the codes represent the category's content, which helps to remember the reference of the category. To prepare titles and names for the codes, titles that are representative and suitable for their categories in every way. Since the qualitative research process is non-linear, the coding process was repeated many times until, finally, after multi-step coding, extracted codes were obtained in the form of concepts, sub-themes, and main themes. In other words, the initial coding was repeated many times by considering the emphasis and the frequency of their mentions in sub-themes and finally the main themes using a back-and-forth approach until the main and

sub-themes were obtained as described in the following tables. Finally, after multi-step coding, the researcher has listed the extracted codes based on each question as follows:

Table 2. Open, selective, and theoretical coding of structural challenges of attracting sponsorship in professional sports.

Concept	Sub-Category	Main Category
The use of non-sports managers at top management levels	Marketing literacy of managers and human resources	Internal organizational challenges
Failure to use efficient human resources and experts in physical education, especially sports marketing		
Lack of definition of sports marketing specialist in the organizational chart		
Failure to form a marketing committee		
Improper distribution of authority among knowledgeable people in the field of recruitment		
Empowering employees		
Empowering employees		
Failure to adopt new processes to attract supporters	Strategic thinking	
Determine the vision		
Absence of legal requirements to correct and address the problems encountered in the recruitment process	Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	
Lack of transparency in the financial information of clubs, league organization and related federations		
Using general rules in advertising for sports sponsors		
Absence of mandatory rules to attract sponsors		
The ineffectiveness of the rules		
Non-compliance with intellectual property law		
Monopoly in maintaining patronage	The need to develop and quickly deal with changes	External organizational challenges
Use of information technology		
Inadequate conditions of stadiums and stadiums to provide advertisements for supporters		
Lack of development of sports infrastructure in order to hold better competitions		
Increasing organizational identity		
Club brand and reputation		
The challenge of the need to review organizational structures		
The challenge of the need for appropriate mechanisms to deal with rapid changes in the environment of organizations	University position and university research	
Challenges caused by not modifying study methods in the process of selecting a financial sponsor		
Failure to use academic research to develop sponsor attraction		
The need to invest more in marketing research	Politics and the role of the government	
Improper selection and appointment based on relations of managers at high levels		
The financial dependence of the country's professional sports on the public sector		
Challenges caused by the influence of government decisions on professional sports		
The politicization of professional sports		
The country's sports clubs are owned by the government		
Preference of relationships over rules		
Lack of coordination at decision-making levels		

Table 3. Open, selective, and theoretical coding of structural challenges of retaining sponsorship in professional sports.

Concept	Sub-Category	Main Category
Lack of spending for marketing in sports federations	Lack of attention to marketing in the structure	Internal organizational challenges
Absence of marketing specialists in the structure of professional sports		
Failure to form a marketing committee		
Ambush marketing	Branding and performance of famous teams and players	
Invalidity of sponsored sports brand or mark		
Poor performance of teams or famous players		
Update and strengthen infrastructure	Public relations and infrastructure	
Weakness of public relations, website and information and technology centers		
Failure to pay attention to the needs of supporters		
The need for continuous innovation	Appointments and strategic thinking	
Improper selection and appointment of managers at high levels		
Failure to adopt new processes to maintain patrons		
Lack of a suitable and practical strategic plan to maintain the sponsor	Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	
Low percentage of financial exemption in case of financial support		
Lack of flexibility in the financial and economic management structure of the sports field		
The issue of security in intellectual property rights	Monitoring and evaluation system	External organizational challenges
Absence of proper evaluation and control system in two areas of support and sports		
Absence of specific regulations and instructions regarding how to monitor the sponsor's performance		
Failure to establish special administrative organizations in federations in order to monitor the performance of supporters	Politics and the role of the government	
Dependence of the country's professional sports on the government sector		
Mixing politics with professional sports		
Preference of relationships over rules		

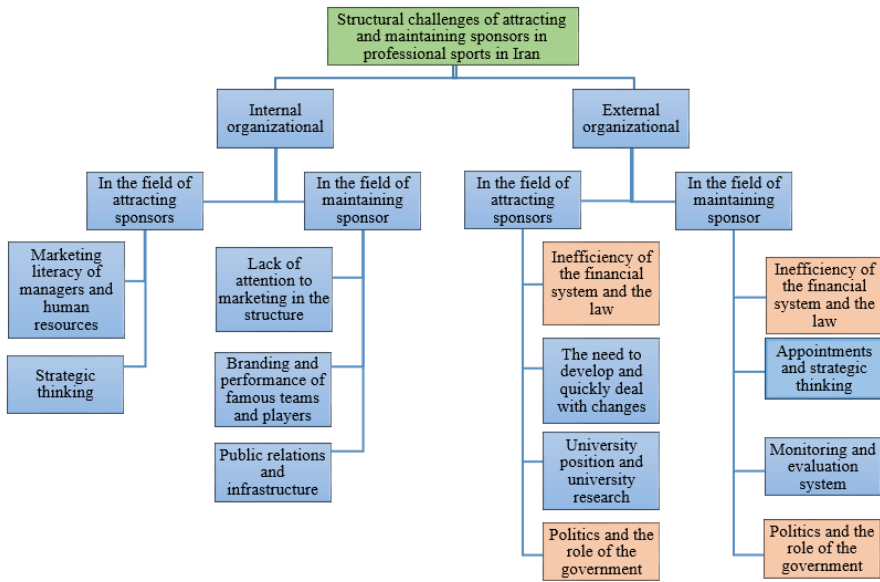


Figure 1. An extractive model of the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports in Iran.

Finally, after identifying the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports, they prioritized them separately using the hierarchical analysis method. In the first step of this method, a hierarchical tree was created based on the challenges determined at two levels: the goal and the challenges. Accordingly, the goal—structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports—was prioritized. The second category included the relevant challenges derived from the qualitative research process. In the next step, to determine the weight and priority of each challenge, experts were asked to assess their importance relative to each other through pairwise comparisons. To facilitate this, a questionnaire table was prepared and distributed to the experts, who were asked to make pairwise comparisons and assign a number between 1 and 9 to indicate the importance of each challenge relative to one another. These comparisons reveal the weight of each challenge compared to competing options evaluated in the decision-making process. The completed tables were then collected, and their inconsistency rate was checked. Calculating the inconsistency rate aims to determine whether there is consistency among the paired comparisons. If the inconsistency rate is less than or equal to 0.1, one can say there is acceptable consistency in the pairwise comparisons. Finally, the opinions of the participants were aggregated together.

Table 4. Prioritization of the structural challenges of attracting sponsors in professional sports in Iran.

Structural challenges of attracting financial sponsors in professional sports in Iran	Strategic thinking	Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	The need to develop and quickly deal with changes	Marketing literacy of managers and resources human	University position and university research	Politics and the role of the government	Priorities	final weight
Strategic thinking	1	1/67	3/00	1/29	0/63	0/60	0/201	1
Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	0/60	1	0/75	0/78	0/89	0/78	0/124	6
The need to develop and quickly deal with changes	0/33	1/33	1	0/67	1/40	1/60	0/164	4
Marketing literacy of managers and human resources	0/78	1/14	1/50	1	1/40	0/71	0/165	3
University position and university research	1/60	1/13	0/71	0/71	1	0/78	0/154	5
Politics and the role of the government	1/67	1/29	0/63	1/40	1/29	1	0/191	2
Consistency Ratio (RC) = 0/06								

Table 5. Prioritizing the structural challenges of maintaining sponsorship in professional sports in Iran.

Structural challenges of maintaining financial sponsors in professional sports in Iran	Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	Appointments and strategic thinking	Lack of attention to marketing in the structure	Monitoring and evaluation system	Role of the politics and the government	Branding and performance of famous teams and players	Public relations and infrastructure	Priorities	Final weight
Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	1	0/63	0/50	0/67	0/83	0/67	0/44	0/091	7
Appointments and strategic thinking	1/60	1	0/75	0/56	1/14	0/78	0/67	0/121	5
Lack of attention to marketing in the structure	2/00	1/33	1	0/67	1/29	1/60	0/75	0/163	4
Monitoring and evaluation system	1/50	1/60	1/50	1	1/40	0/86	0/88	0/168	2
Politics and the role of the government	1/20	0/88	0/78	0/71	1	0/78	0/71	0/117	6

Structural challenges of maintaining financial sponsors in professional sports in Iran	Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	Appointments and strategic thinking	Lack of attention to marketing in the structure	Monitoring and evaluation system	Role of the politics and the government	Branding and performance of famous teams and players	Public relations and infrastructure	Priorities	Final weight
Branding and performance of famous teams and players	1/50	1/29	0/63	1/17	1/29	1	1/67	0/167	3
Public relations and infrastructure	2/25	1/50	1/33	1/14	1/40	0/60	1	0/173	1
Consistency Ratio (RC) = 0/01									

4. Discussion and conclusion

The current research aimed to identify and prioritize the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports in Iran. After conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with experts in the field of professional sports, the most essential structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports were identified in the form of two main themes, internal and external. After identification, the challenges were prioritized through a hierarchical analysis process. Analyses related to prioritization were performed on the sub-components of each challenge, and the most important ones in each category of challenges are as follows: The structural challenges of attracting sponsors in professional sports are prioritized by "strategic thinking," with a weight of 0/201. Politicization and the role of the government, "Marketing literacy of managers and human resources," the Necessity of development and rapid coping with changes, "University position and university research, and "Inefficiency of the financial system and law" are ranked second to sixth, respectively, and assigned in this prioritization .

Strategic thinking is a thought process that involves planning and executing effective, targeted actions to achieve long-term goals. This approach consists in analyzing and assessing the current situation, identifying potential solutions, selecting the best option, and implementing it to achieve the desired outcomes, which can significantly attract sponsors in professional sports when applied correctly. Typically, strategic thinking is employed at critical organizational levels, in large businesses, and throughout long-term planning processes. This mindset emphasizes analyzing complex issues, attention to detail, and connecting various factors. As a result, this conclusion aligns with the research conducted by [Cornwell & Kwon \(2020\)](#), who asserted that sports sponsorship is viewed as a strategic marketing decision requiring careful strategic planning due to the growing economic importance of sports. This researcher argues that strategic thinking is often lacking in the management structures of leading sports organizations. [Koronios et al. \(2021\)](#), research has also identified a similar finding.

In major professional sports, the challenges related to politics, the role of government, and its impact on the sports system are intriguing topics. This issue is raised in various ways within the sports field. To address these politicization challenges, several measures are necessary, such as reforming the sports management system, developing sports infrastructure, and enhancing transparency in the financial practices of sports managers. Thus, avoiding politics and the government's role can be considered one of the most critical steps to attract supporters in professional sports. Consequently, this finding from the present research aligns with aspects of the study by (Aliyari et al., 2023).

Marketing literacy in managers and human resources is also critical because marketing plays a vital role in the success of an organization and business development. Marketing literacy refers to skills and knowledge necessary to know customers, market analysis, marketing strategies, marketing communications, and implementation of marketing actions. Therefore, holding marketing literacy training classes for the existing staff is a practical step towards increasing the attraction of sponsors in professional sports. A similar result has been pointed out in the research of Koronios et al. (2021) and Morgan et al. (2020).

Organizations must swiftly adapt and respond to changes. Rapid and frequent shifts occur in the business environment today, significantly impacting organizations' performance and competitiveness. Markets are highly competitive, and fast technological advancements, evolving consumer behavior, market trends, and regulations can intensify this competition. If organizations do not effectively adapt and respond, competitors may strengthen their market positions, leaving the organization behind. The needs and expectations of supporters are also changing. Today's supporters expect organizations to react promptly to their needs and demands. If organizations cannot develop and modify their products and services quickly, supporters may seek out competitors. Market fluctuations can create new opportunities for organizations; however, these opportunities are often fleeting. Organizations that fail to adapt and respond risk missing out on them swiftly. Salimi & Taghavy (2023) have noted similar findings in their research.

Universities also play a key role in providing specialized and experienced human resources in various fields. They provide an environment where students acquire specialized learning and the necessary skills to enter the labor market using available resources and facilities. Also, universities provide an environment for scientific research and innovation. This research can help the development of science and technology and be effective for solving social and industrial problems. This belief was echoed by Koronios et al. (2016), who stated that in addition to the growing interest in sports sponsorship, there is a lack of academic research on the evaluation of sports sponsorships. Also, Sharifi & Dehghan Ghahfarrokhi (2021), in a part of their research, emphasized the need to employ marketing specialists in the Iranian sports scene.

Any country's financial system and law are vital in regulating the economy and society. However, in some cases, we can see deficiencies and inefficiencies in these systems. One of the significant problems in the financial and law system is corruption. Corruption can take many forms, including economic, political, and judicial. These

corruptions can destroy public trust, weaken the legal system, waste public resources, and unjustly change the distribution of wealth and power. In some financial and law systems, lack of transparency and lack of dissemination of sufficient information can lead to problems. This problem can create an environment for corruption and fraud and hinder correct and fair decisions.

Financial and legal regulations can sometimes be quite complex and burdensome. This can create ambiguity regarding individuals' rights and responsibilities, increase costs, and delay legal proceedings. Generally, inefficiencies within the financial and legal framework can result in injustice, inequality, and corruption. There is a pressing need for sociological and political reforms and efforts to improve the economic system and legal structure. These reforms may include enhancing transparency, strengthening supervision and enforcement, simplifying laws, and eliminating discrimination in distributing wealth and power. Moreover, promoting a culture of justice, transparency, and trustworthiness within society can strengthen the financial and legal systems. The findings in this section correspond with some conclusions from [Sharifi & Dehghan Ghahfarokhi \(2021\)](#) and [Morgan et al. \(2020\)](#).

In the structural challenges of maintaining sponsors in professional sports, "public relations and infrastructure" with a relative weight of 0/173 took the first place in hierarchical analysis. The challenges of "monitoring and evaluation system", "branding and performance of famous teams and players", "Not paying attention to marketing in the structure", "Appointments and strategic thinking", "Politicization and the role of the government" and finally, the "inefficiency of the financial system and the law" were ranked second to seventh, respectively.

Public relations and infrastructure play an essential role in professional sports in retaining sponsors. The proper implementation of these two factors can also help attract financial resources. Briefly, media communication and advertising can positively and meaningfully predict the attraction of government resources, private sector sponsors, advertising in matches, broadcasting sports matches, and marketing and introducing services and products. Also, public communication can facilitate the retention of sponsors by promoting sports events and competitions and creating a positive image of sports organizations and their athletes. Therefore, in this context, the support of the media and appropriate advertisements can be significant because the lack of awareness of the effects of sports can be one of the obstacles to the development of sports ([Seyyed Ameri & Mohammad Alegh, 2013](#)). [Firoozi et al. \(2012\)](#) also consider the media's support for the challenges of Iran's medal-winning disciplines of athletics, rowing, and swimming, which aligns with this research's results. Adequate infrastructure for holding competitions and organizing events is essential in maintaining financial sponsors. Infrastructure can provide funding, including government support and private sponsors. In general, coordination between public relations and infrastructure can help attract and retain sponsors in sports.

Monitoring and evaluation also play an essential role in maintaining financial sponsors in sports. Monitoring the performance of sports organizations and projects helps identify strengths and weaknesses. This information can be effective in improving performance and attracting sponsors. Monitoring taxes, managing budgets and

expenses, and securing financial resources are very important. This can ensure the retention of sponsors.

On the other hand, evaluating the quality and impact of sports projects and programs helps to make decisions about financial support. Assessing sponsors' needs and expectations helps to interact effectively with them. This information can be effective in retaining supporters and attracting new ones. Also, statistical analysis using financial ratios and past data can effectively maintain financial sponsors in sports. Therefore, this current research finding aligns with parts of (Morgan et al., 2020).

Branding and performance of well-known teams and players refer to actions undertaken to create and enhance the recognition and value of the team's and players' brand in the minds of the audience and fans. These actions aim to portray the famous team or player as a strong and reliable brand in the sports and entertainment market under the banner of a recognized name. Renowned players can significantly bolster sports tourism. Generally, there is a positive correlation between celebrity player branding and sponsor retention in sports. Promoting personal brands and the ability to attract and retain sponsors can foster the development of the sport and increase sponsorship opportunities. Thus, this finding of the present research aligns with certain studies by (Dehghanpouri et al., 2020).

Suppose there is a lack of attention to marketing and branding in the structure of a team or organization. In that case, it may reduce the recognition and reputation of the team and famous players. Sports marketing is a key factor in the development and commercial success of teams and famous players. Marketing helps fans and audiences draw attention to the renowned team or players. If not, enough marketing is done, and the team or players may face less attention in competition with other competitors and attract fewer fans. The proper marketing can create business opportunities for the team or famous players. For example, cooperation with commercial brands, advertising contracts, and sponsorships can lead to more revenue generation and business growth. Without proper marketing, these business opportunities will not be fully exploited. Without attention to marketing, the brand of the team or players may be less known in the minds of the audience and the market, and as a result, the commercial value will decrease. Famous teams and players usually have high commercial potential. Proper marketing can help them exploit this potential and generate more revenue. But if you ignore marketing, this business potential will not be fully exploited. As a result, it is crucial to pay attention to marketing and branding in the structure of teams and organizations.

Marketing resources and techniques should be carefully considered so the team or famous players can compete strongly and increase their commercial productivity. Marketing plays a crucial role in building and maintaining sponsors. As a strategic process, marketing defines and implements approaches and techniques that help attract and retain sponsors. In general, marketing as a strategic tool can help develop sports and retain sponsors. Similar results have been mentioned in the research of Ferrand & Pagès (1996), Jensen & Cobbs (2014), and Dehghanpouri et al. (2020). So Ferrand & Pagès (1996) have pointed to the low credibility of the sponsored sports sign, and Jensen &

Cobbs (2014) have pointed to the poor performance of teams or well-known players in not expanding the attraction of financial support.

Appointments and strategic thinking within organizations and teams play a critical role in determining the direction and execution of strategies. These factors significantly influence the performance and success of organizations and teams and sponsor retention in professional sports. Strategic appointments of leaders and managers are based on effective planning and strategic insight. Selecting the right managers with the necessary skills to implement strategies can significantly impact the success of organizations and teams. Leaders who demonstrate strategic thinking can communicate innovative visions and new techniques to organizations and teams, promoting sponsor retention in professional sports. A similar finding has been noted in Koronios et al. (2021) research. To navigate structural challenges in the intra-organizational sector, managers must engage in detailed planning and employ appropriate strategies to turn these challenges into opportunities.

Furthermore, managers must address external organizational structural challenges; the organization should maintain enough flexibility to adapt to changes in the needs and expectations of supporters. The organization must respond quickly and make necessary structural adjustments. Decision-making processes within the organization must be transparent and efficient, aiding in timely and effective responses to the needs and expectations of supporters. The organization should be capable of evaluating its performance and identifying necessary improvements for attracting and retaining supporters. Gathering feedback from supporters and establishing constant communication mechanisms can assist in this process.

Additionally, the organizational culture should be designed to include supporters and foster effective communication and collaboration with them. Creating a dynamic and welcoming environment for supporters can help attract and retain them. The organization should strive to build long-term relationships with supporters to ensure their loyalty. This includes ongoing communication, after-sales service, connecting with similar customers, and exploring partnership and collaboration opportunities for sponsors. Therefore, understanding and managing extra-organizational structural challenges can aid the organization in attracting and retaining supporters.

The presence of a financial sponsor is vital for the development of professional sports. In other words, having a financial sponsor is one of the key drivers of professional sports. However, the current shortage of economic resources in sports clubs and organizations is becoming increasingly evident. This issue has led to a growing need for financial support for sports organizations. Therefore, based on the results obtained, managers are encouraged to consider the long-term consequences for their organizations when making marketing decisions, especially regarding the attraction and retention of sponsors. Thoughtful and deliberate decisions can bring people together to achieve shared organizational goals. Additionally, specialized training courses should be offered for managers and employees to enhance marketing literacy, enabling more effective strategies for attracting and retaining sponsors.

Finally, due to the new and essential nature of the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports, the present research should be repeated

in other popular sports fields. Also, the results of the qualitative part of the current research were repeated quantitatively and through a questionnaire at a broader level, and the suitability of the structural equation models for assessing the structural challenges of attracting and retaining financial sponsors in Iranian professional sports was investigated.

5. Limitations and future research

The primary limitation of this research was that some sample members could not participate in the interviews and share their opinions. Although interviewees were assured of confidentiality at the beginning of each interview, various factors impeded their ability to respond fully to the interview questions, which were beyond the researcher's control. Additionally, the limited research conducted in this field presented another limitation. Furthermore, this study encompassed several professional sports areas in Iran, making it difficult to generalize the findings to other fields.

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چالش های ساختاری جذب و حفظ حامی مالی در ورزش های حرفه ای

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چکیده

هدف: هدف از پژوهش حاضر شناسایی و اولویت بندی چالش های ساختاری جذب و حفظ حامی مالی در ورزش های حرفه ای ایران بود.

روش: روش تحقیق از نوع (آمیخته) کیفی و کمی و به صورت تحلیل مضمون بوده و جامعه آماری شامل صاحب نظران حوزه ورزش (رؤسا، نواب رئیس، دبیران و مدیران بازاریابی فدراسیون ها و مدیران و معاونین وزارت) بودند. روش نمونه گیری به صورت هدفمند بود و مصاحبه عمیق با ۲۴ شرکت کننده تا اشباع نظری صورت گرفت. به منظور تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها از تکنیک کدگذاری و نرم افزار ان ویوو استفاده شد. پس از شناسایی چالش ها، با هدف رتبه بندی آنها پرسشنامه AHP طراحی و در اختیار ۱۶ نفر از خبرگان صنعت ورزش و بازاریابی قرار گرفت.

یافته ها: یافته ها نشان داد چالش های ساختاری جهت جذب حامی مالی در ورزش های حرفه ای در ۶ مضمون (سواد بازاریابی مدیران و نیروی انسانی، تفکر راهبردی، ناکارآمدی نظام مالی و قانون، لزوم توسعه یافتگی و مقابله سریع با تغییرات، جایگاه دانشگاه و تحقیقات دانشگاهی، سیاست زدگی و نقش دولت) و چالش های ساختاری جهت حفظ حامی مالی در ورزش های حرفه ای در ۷ مضمون (عدم توجه به بازاریابی در ساختار، برندسازی و عملکرد تیم ها و بازیکنان سرشناس، روابط عمومی و زیرساخت، انتصابات و تفکرات راهبردی، ناکارآمدی نظام مالی و قانون، سیستم نظارت و ارزیابی، سیاست زدگی و نقش دولت) شناسایی و با تکنیک AHP اولویت بندی شدند. نتایج این پژوهش می تواند به مدیران کمک کند تا به اقدامات نامناسب و نقاط ضعف خود در زمینه نحوه جذب و حفظ حامیان مالی در ورزش های حرفه ای پی ببرند و راهکارها و راهبردهای مؤثری جهت به حداقل رساندن تعداد و میزان این چالش ها در دستور کار خود قرار دهند.

اصالت و ابتکار مقاله: این مطالعه برای اولین بار و به طور ویژه چالش های ساختاری جذب و حفظ حامیان مالی در ورزش های حرفه ای ایران را شناسایی می کند؛ همچنین میزان اهمیت هر یک از چالش های ساختاری شناسایی شده را بررسی و تعیین می کند.

کلیدواژه

AHP

برندسازی

تفکر راهبردی

جنبه های حقوقی

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