

Structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsorship in professional sports

Short Title: Structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsorship

ABSTRACT

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

methodology: The research method was qualitative and quantitative (mixed) and in the form of thematic analysis, and the statistical population included experts in the field of sports (presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries and marketing managers of federations and managers and deputy ministers). The sampling method was purposeful and in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 participants until theoretical saturation. In order to analyze the data, coding technique and NVIVO software were used. After identifying the challenges, with the aim of ranking them, an AHP questionnaire was designed and provided to 16 experts in the sports and marketing industry.

Findings: The findings showed that structural challenges to attract sponsors in professional sports in 6 themes (Marketing literacy of managers and human resources, Strategic thinking, Inefficiency of the financial system and the law, The need to develop and quickly deal with changes, University position and university research, Politics and the role of the government) and structural challenges to maintain sponsors in professional sports were identified in 7 themes (Lack of attention to marketing in the structure, Branding and performance of famous teams and players, Public relations and infrastructure, Appointments and strategic thinking, Inefficiency of the financial system and the law, Monitoring and evaluation system, Politics and the role of the government) and prioritized by AHP method. The results of this research can help managers to understand their inappropriate actions and weaknesses in the field of how to attract and retain financial sponsors in professional sports and put effective solutions and strategies to minimize the number and amount of these challenges in their agenda.

Originality: For the first time, this study specifically identifies the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining financial sponsors in professional sports in Iran; It also examines and determines the importance of each of the identified structural challenges.

Keywords: AHP, professional sports, sponsorship, structural challenge, professional sports

Paper type: Research

چالش‌های ساختاری جذب و حفظ حامی مالی در ورزش‌های حرفه‌ای

عنوان کوتاه مقاله: چالش‌های ساختاری جذب و حفظ حامی مالی

چکیده

هدف: هدف از پژوهش حاضر شناسایی و اولویت بندی چالش‌های ساختاری جذب و حفظ حامی مالی در ورزش‌های حرفه‌ای ایران بود.

روش: روش تحقیق از نوع (آمیخته) کیفی و کمی و به صورت تحلیل مضمون بوده و جامعه آماری شامل صاحبان حوزه ورزش (رؤسا، نواب رئیس، دبیران و مدیران بازاریابی فدراسیون‌ها و مدیران و معاونین وزارت) بودند. روش نمونه‌گیری به صورت هدفمند بود و مصاحبه عمیق با ۲۴ شرکت‌کننده تا اشباع نظری صورت گرفت. به منظور تجزیه و تحلیل داده‌ها از تکنیک کدگذاری و نرم‌افزار ان ویوو استفاده شد. پس از شناسایی چالش‌ها، با هدف رتبه بندی آن‌ها پرسشنامه AHP طراحی و در اختیار ۱۶ نفر از خبرگان صنعت ورزش و بازاریابی قرار گرفت.

یافته‌ها: یافته‌ها نشان داد چالش‌های ساختاری جهت جذب حامی مالی در ورزش‌های حرفه‌ای 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 چالش‌های ساختاری جهت حفظ حامی مالی در ورزش‌های حرفه‌ای در ۷ مضمون (عدم توجه به بازاریابی در ساختار، برندسازی و عملکرد تیم‌ها 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 به روش AHP اولویت بندی شدند. نتایج این پژوهش می‌تواند به مدیران کمک کند تا به اقدامات نامناسب و نقاط ضعف خود در زمینه نحوه جذب و حفظ حامیان مالی در ورزش‌های حرفه‌ای پی ببرند و راهکارها و راهبردهای مؤثری جهت به حداقل رساندن تعداد و میزان این چالش‌ها در دستور کار خود قرار دهند.

اصالت و ابتکار مقاله: این مطالعه برای اولین بار و به طور ویژه چالش‌های ساختاری جذب و حفظ حامیان مالی در ورزش‌های حرفه‌ای ایران را شناسایی می‌کند؛ همچنین میزان اهمیت هر یک از چالش‌های ساختاری شناسایی شده را بررسی و تعیین می‌کند.

کلید واژه: AHP، حامی مالی، چالش ساختاری، ورزش‌های حرفه‌ای

1. Introduction

Sports is one of the most popular social phenomena of the present era, which attracts the attention of different sections of the society. This wide and diverse audience has caused commercial and industrial organizations to be very interested in using competitions and sports organizations to introduce their goods and services. This interest provides a platform on the basis of which a win-win relationship can be formed between commercial and industrial companies on the one hand and clubs and organized activities that are graded and targeted in order to earn money for the development of economic and social values" (Ehsani et al., 2012). Thus, common characteristics among professional sports include large fan bases, widespread appeal, and extensive media coverage (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, & Greenwell, 2011). On the other hand, sponsorship has been described as the financial backbone of many sports properties and can be the main element in the image of an event. In North America, an unsponsored sporting event is often viewed as a secondary event and of little importance (Lamont and Dowell, 2007). Therefore, obtaining financial support is one of the most important 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 (Raghbati et al., 2018). The importance of professional sports is such that in some researches, it has been proven that success in professional sports has direct effects on people's tendency towards leisure sports (Raghbati et al., 2018).

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 receives that it is used as living expenses and other things. When talking about professional sports, they mean sports activities that bring financial support to the people involved in them (Raghbati et al., 2018).

Since, according to the definition, professional sports are "sporting and organized activities that are performed in a ranked and targeted manner, in order to earn money for the development of economic and social values" (Ehsani et al. , 2012) on the other hand, common features among professional sports include large fan bases, wide demand, and extensive media coverage (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, & Greenwell, 2011), so sponsorship as the financial backbone of many features Sport is described and can be the main element in the image of an event. In North America, an unsponsored sporting event is often viewed as a secondary event and of little importance (Lamont and Dowell, 2007). Therefore, obtaining financial support is one of the most important tasks of every sports manager.

Basically, sports sponsorships are effective in generating significant income for sports clubs and leagues (Koronios et al., 2020). According to information provided by the Global Advertising Research Center (Handley, 2018), companies paid \$65.8 billion internationally in sponsorship deals in 2018, with the largest 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 (Mathew, 2020). Therefore, companies follow specific reasons and goals to support the sports sector or any other sector. If the sports managers prepare the ground for this work, the sports sector will have a special growth with the support of these companies. Undoubtedly, the process of development and promotion of sports disciplines in a general way, as well as championships, requires investment and having 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 the lack of sports facilities in Iran is an undeniable fact (Askarzadeh and Heydarinejad, 2009). The available evidence confirms the bad situation in the country, and in this situation, one of the most important and fundamental ways to overcome stagnation and growth in this situation is to attract financial resources. But 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, finding structural challenges to attract and maintain financial sponsors to invest in professional sports is one of the main goals of sports organizations in the country. The continuous growth of global sponsorship spending over the past few years indicates the increasing relevance of sponsorship as a communication tool in the light of corporate marketing. Due to its growing economic relevance, sports sponsorship is considered a strategic marketing decision that requires strategic planning (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019). Since sponsorship captures an undeniable aspect of the marketing strategy of organizations, its potential as a sustainable competitive advantage is usually scrutinized (Hino & Takeda, 2019); On the other hand, sponsorship is an important component of the marketing strategy and a significant part of the marketing budgets of organizations that invest in sponsorship on a large scale; Therefore, there is a demand from sponsoring organizations to return a certain part of their capital. As a result of managerial pressure to account (responsibility) for this cost, the modern financial sponsor increasingly needs useful and strategic planning, implementation and evaluation (Stotlar, 2005; Choi, 2006). The development of sponsorship strategies is an important task and closely related to marketing strategies, and managers must be creative about how to integrate the sponsor brand and marketing plans (Bodin et al., 2011). Also, the environmental

variables that organizations face have forced managers to develop the systematic use of analyzing the surrounding environment and evaluating the direction of the strategies that the organization should follow; Therefore, organizations follow a kind of strategic direction in all their economic sectors. However, in order to compare the relative success of strategies employed by different organizations, it is necessary to develop a framework that reports major changes in their operating environments (Burt and Slack, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary for managers to analyze the strategic path of their organization to ensure compliance with the overall goals of the organization before any interaction (Delfin, 2003).

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

According to the above material, based on the importance of financial support for sports teams and organizations, and from the fact that the main feature of professional sports in today's world is money making, while sports clubs have limited ways to earn money and Many sports clubs always point to factors such as the lack of credits and financial budgets in justifying the reasons for the failures and failures of their teams. Examining the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports is important from the point of view that the relevant institutions The sports industry can better provide the environment to attract investment; However, considering the importance and position of financial sponsors in the sports sector and considering the long-term and permanent approach to it in professional sports, it seems that the role of financial sponsors in advancing the goals of sports has not been sufficiently exploited in Iran. In this regard, it is necessary and necessary to create a healthy and suitable environment for attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports. Recognizing that companies view sports properties as unique ventures capable of achieving distinct goals and that companies evaluate sponsorship opportunities separately from each other, professional sports It is well used to understand how they are evaluated by potential sponsors. In addition, professional sports may be able to provide unique opportunities not provided by other sports characteristics (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). For this purpose, the current research was conducted with the aim of identifying and prioritizing the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports in Iran.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted with an exploratory nature and with the aim of expanding the existing knowledge and understanding about the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports. Therefore, the current research has a qualitative nature in terms of applied purpose and based on data search, and it was carried out with the method of interpretive theme analysis. Among the types of qualitative research methods, thematic analysis method was found suitable for achieving the research objectives, because Brown et al. (2016) believe that this method is useful for understanding 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 (a number of interviews with a text) (Brown et al., 2016). In the quantitative part, Analytical Hierarchy (AHP) method was used to weigh the structural challenges in attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports .

The statistical population of the research included experts in the field of sports, including presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries and marketing managers of federations, and managers and deputies of 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 .Therefore, in the present study, the purposeful sampling method was used to identify the samples. Sampling was done up to the theoretical saturation stage and interviews were conducted with three more samples to saturate the data .The demographic characteristics of the interviewed people by gender, age, etc. are presented in Table 1.

Table1: Demographic characteristics of the research participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Federation/Ministry	years of experiences	Position
P1	Female	45	P.H.D	Ministry	15	Deputy
P2	Male	54	P.H.D	Federation	22	Presidency
P3	Male	42	P.H.D	Federation	10	Secretary
P4	Male	47	P.H.D	Federation	22	Presidency
P5	Female	46	P.H.D	Federation	21	Vice President
P6	Female	51	P.H.D	Federation	24	Vice President
P7	Male	43	P.H.D	Federation	18	Presidency
P8	Male	42	P.H.D	Federation	14	Secretary
P9	Female	51	P.H.D	Federation	25	Presidency
P10	Female	39	P.H.D	Ministry	16	Manager
P11	Male	41	P.H.D	Ministry	13	Manager

P12	Male	58	MA	Federation	29	Presidency
P13	Male	47	P.H.D	Federation	29	Secretary
P14	Male	54	MA	Federation	27	Secretary
P15	Male	40	P.H.D	Federation	15	Presidency
P16	Male	42	P.H.D	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	P.H.D	Federation	28	Presidency
P22	Male	44	P.H.D	Federation	12	Manager
P23	Male	48	P.H.D	Federation	29	Manager
P24	Male	40	P.H.D	Federation	10	Manager

In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 people. The interview was conducted in person at the workplace of each participant, 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-month period, 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 made from the first qualitative part to prioritize the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports was given to 16 experts in the sports and marketing industry .

For data analysis, coding technique and NVIVO version 10 software were used to categorize data. First, the data were coded manually, and then the codes were recorded in NVIVO qualitative data analysis software for organizational purposes. To ensure reliability and transferability (validity), conditions were first provided for the research to be collaborative, that is, at the same time, some participants were helped in analyzing and interpreting the data. Then, three basic actions were taken to be implemented by the members .

Re-coding by the researcher, after a week of coding each interview, the researcher re-coded the data. The retest reliability of this research was 81%. Considering that the reliability was more than 60%, therefore the reliability of the codings is confirmed.

NVIVO software was used for data analysis. Creswell (2014) considers the use of qualitative data analysis software as one of the ways to achieve reliability in qualitative research.

Finally, to get more confidence to determine reliability, William Scutt's formula (Scutt, 2005) was used. For this purpose, 10% of interviews along with operational definitions were given to another researcher for coding. Coding of categories and subcategories as well as indicators was done according to the guidelines (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The percentage of agreement between two coders was calculated through 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.

4. Results

First, the researcher read the interviews several times to fully understand the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors. 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 categorized based on themes that are directly related to the research questions. Then the obtained categories were re-linked to codes that were more abstract than the codes of the previous step. At this stage, the codes clearly represent the content of the category, which helps to remember the reference of the category. In order to prepare titles and names for the codes, it has been tried to select titles that are representative and suitable for their categories in every way. Since the qualitative research process has a non-linear nature, 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 the form of 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	Strategic thinking	
Failure to adopt new processes to attract supporters		
Determine the vision	Inefficiency of the financial system and the law	External organizational challenges
Absence of legal requirements to correct and address the problems encountered in the recruitment process		
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		
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
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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	Public relations and infrastructure	
Update and strengthen 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		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		
Monitoring and evaluation system		
Dependence of the country's professional sports on the government sector	Politics and the role of the government	
Mixing politics with professional sports		
Preference of relationships over rules		

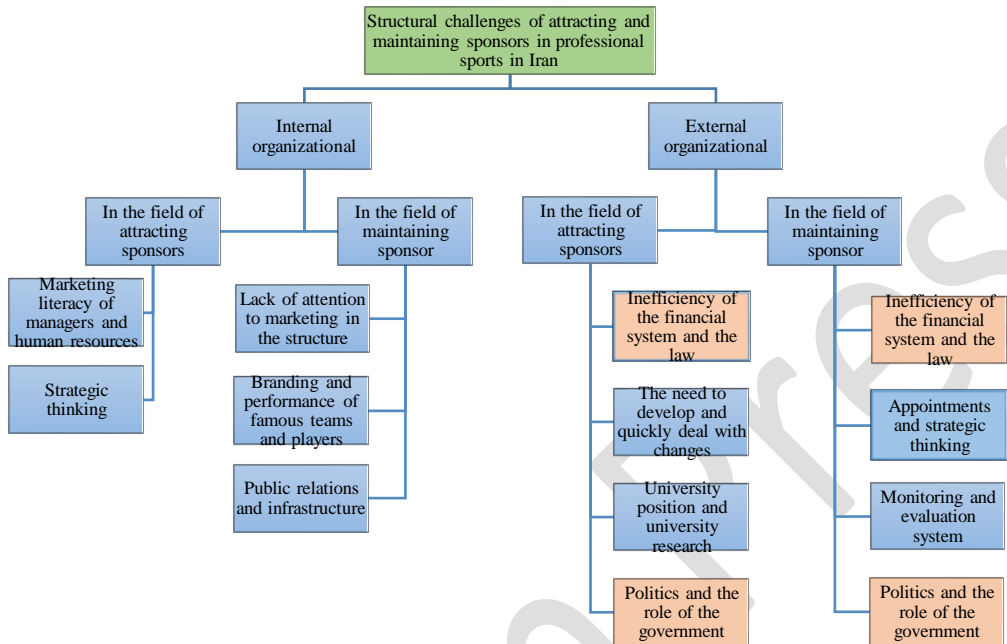


Figure 1. An extractive model of the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports in Iran

Finally, after identifying the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports, they were prioritized separately using the hierarchical analysis method. In the first step of using this method, a hierarchical tree was drawn according to the challenges determined on two levels of the goal and the challenges. Based on this, the goal, which was the structural challenges of attracting and retaining sponsors in professional sports, was given the highest priority. In the second category, the relevant challenges derived from the qualitative research process were placed. In the next step, in order to determine the weight and priority of each challenge, the experts were asked to determine their importance relative to each other by making pairwise comparisons between the challenges. To do this, a table in the form of a questionnaire was prepared and provided to the experts and they were asked by making pairwise comparisons and assigning a number between 1 and 9, determine the importance of each of the challenges relative to each other. In fact, these comparisons show the weight of each challenge compared to competing options evaluated in the decision. In the next step, the completed tables were collected and their inconsistency rate was checked. Calculating the inconsistency rate is done with this goal to determine whether there is consistency between paired comparisons or not. And based on that, if the inconsistency rate is smaller or equal to $(0/1)$, it can be said that there is acceptable compatibility in pairwise comparisons. Finally, people's opinions were combined with each other.

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 human resources	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 (CR) = 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	Moni doctoring and evaluation system	Politics and the role of 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
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 (<i>CR</i>) = 0/01									

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the current research was 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 important 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. Analyzes 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:

In the field of structural challenges of attracting sponsors in professional sports, "strategic thinking" with a weight of 0/201 has the first priority. "Politicization and the role of the government", "Marketing literacy of managers and human resources", "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. assigned in this prioritization .

Strategic thinking is a type of thinking that is used to plan and perform effective and targeted actions to achieve long-term goals. This type of thinking is used to analyze and review the current situation, identify possible solutions, choose the best solution and implement it in order to achieve the desired results, which if used correctly will definitely have effective effects in attracting sponsors in professional sports. Strategic thinking is usually used at large organizational levels, large businesses, and long-term planning. This type of thinking focuses on the analysis of complex issues, attention to details and connections between different factors. Therefore, this finding is in line with the research of Cornwell and Kwon (2019), who stated that due to the growing economic relevance of sports, sports sponsorship is considered as a strategic marketing decision that requires strategic planning, and this researcher does not except by having strategic thinking in the management structure of sports organizations that are at the top. A similar result has been mentioned in Koronius's (2021) research.

In the main professional sports, the challenges related to politics and the role of the government and its impact on the sports system are also an interesting topic. This issue is raised in different ways in the field of sports. In order to solve these challenges related to politicization, various measures are needed, including reforming the sports

management system, developing sports infrastructure, and increasing transparency in the financial performance of sports managers. Therefore, avoiding politics and the role of the government can be considered as one of the most basic steps to attract supporters in professional sports. Therefore, this finding of the present research is in line with parts of the research of Ali Yari et al (2021).

Marketing literacy in managers and human resources is also very important because marketing plays a vital role in the success of an organization and business development. Marketing literacy refers to a set of 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 an effective step towards increasing the attraction of sponsors in professional sports. A similar result has been pointed out in the researches of Kuronius (2021) and Morgan et al (2020).

It is also very necessary for organizations to develop and deal with changes quickly. In today's world, rapid and successive changes occur in the business environment, and these changes can significantly have a direct impact on the performance and competitiveness of organizations. Markets today are highly competitive, and rapid changes in technology, consumers, market trends, and laws and regulations can intensify competition. If organizations are not able to develop and deal with changes quickly, competitors may gain a better position in the market and the organization falls behind. The needs and desires of supporters are also changing. Supporters today expect organizations to respond quickly to their needs and changes. If organizations are not able to develop and change their products and services quickly, supporters may migrate to other competitors. Changes in the market can bring new opportunities for organizations. But opportunities exist for a limited time and organizations that are not able to develop and deal with changes quickly may miss these opportunities. In the research of Salimi and Tagvi (2023), similar results have been mentioned;

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 acquire the necessary skills to enter the labor market using available resources and facilities. Also, universities provide an environment for scientific research and innovation. These researches can help the development of science and technology and be effective for solving social and industrial problems; This belief was echoed by Kuronius 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 and Dehghan Qahfarkhi (2018) in a part of their research emphasized the need to employ marketing specialists in the Iranian sports scene.

The financial system and law in any country play a vital role in regulating the economy and society. But in some cases, we can see deficiencies and inefficiencies in these systems. One of the major problems in the financial and law system is corruption. Corruption can take many forms, including financial corruption, political corruption, and judicial corruption. 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 also be an obstacle in the way of correct and fair decisions. In some cases, financial and legal rules are very complex and burdensome. This issue can create ambiguity about the rights and duties of individuals and also increase costs and delays in legal processes. In general, inefficiency in the financial system and law can lead to injustice, inequality and corruption. To improve the financial system and the law, there is a need for sociological and political reforms and efforts. These reforms can include increasing transparency, strengthening supervision and enforcement, simplifying laws and eliminating discrimination in the distribution of wealth and power. Also, promoting the culture of justice, transparency and trustworthiness in the society can also bring improvement in the financial system and the law. The results of this section are in line with some of the findings of Sharifi and Dehghan Ghafarakhi (2018) and Morgan et al (2020).

In the field of structural challenges of maintaining sponsors in professional sports, "public relations and infrastructure" with a relative weight of 0/173 took the first place in the process of hierarchical analysis, and 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.

In the field of professional sports, public relations and infrastructure play an important role 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, revenue from advertising in matches, revenue from broadcasting sports matches, and marketing and introduction of services and products. Also, public communication can facilitate the retention of sponsors by promoting sports events and competitions and create a positive image of sports organizations and their athletes. Therefore, in this context, the support of the media and appropriate advertisements can be important, because the lack of awareness of the effects of sports can be one of the obstacles to the development of sports (Seyd Ameri and Bardi Mohammad Alaq, 2018). Firoozi et al. (2013) also consider the media's support for the challenges of Iran's medal-winning disciplines of athletics, rowing and swimming, which is in line with the results of this research. Adequate infrastructure for holding competitions and organizing events also plays an important role 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 the field of sports.

Monitoring and evaluation also play an important role in maintaining financial sponsors in the field of sports. Monitoring the performance of sports organizations and sports projects helps to 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 of great importance. 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 the needs and expectations of sponsors helps to interact effectively with them. This information can be effective in retaining supporters and attracting new supporters. Also, statistical analysis using financial ratios and past data can be effective in maintaining financial sponsors in the field of sports. Therefore, this finding of the current research is in line with parts of the research of Morgan et al (2020).

Branding and performance of famous teams and players actually refers to a set of actions that are carried out in order to create and strengthen the recognition and value of the brand of the team and players in the minds of the audience and fans. These actions aim to highlight the famous team or player as a strong and reliable brand in the sports and entertainment market under the name of recognized and recognized brand. Famous players can help to strengthen the position of sports tourism. In general, there is a positive correlation between celebrity player branding and sponsor retention in sports. Personal brand promotion and the ability to attract and retain sponsors can help develop the sport and increase sponsorship. Therefore, this finding of the present research is in line with parts of the researches of Dehghanpuri et al (2019).

If there is a lack of attention to marketing and branding in the structure of a team or organization, it may reduce the recognition and reputation of the team and famous players. In fact, marketing in sports is considered as a key factor in the development and commercial success of teams and famous players. Marketing helps fans and audiences to draw their attention to the famous team or players. If not enough marketing is done, the team or players may face less attention in competition with other competitors and attract fewer fans. The right 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 don't pay attention to marketing, this business potential will not be fully exploited. As a result, in the structure of teams and organizations, it is very important to pay attention to marketing and branding, and in terms of marketing resources and techniques, it should be carefully considered so that the team or famous players can have strong competition and increase their commercial productivity. Marketing plays a very important role in building and maintaining sponsors. Marketing, as a strategic process, deals with defining and implementing 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 researches of Frand and Pijez (1996), Genesis and Kobes (2014) and Dehghan Puri et al. (2019). So that Farand and Piages have pointed to the low credibility of the sponsored sports sign, and Genesis and Kobes have pointed to the poor performance of teams or well-known players in not expanding the attraction of financial support.

Appointments and strategic thinking in organizations and teams play an important role in determining the direction and implementation of strategies. These factors can have a significant impact on the performance and success of organizations and teams as well as sponsor retention in professional sports. Strategic appointments of managers and leaders are made according to strategic thinking and planning. Choosing the right managers with the capabilities needed to implement strategies can have a significant impact on the success of organizations and teams. Leaders with strategic thinking are able to convey innovative visions and new strategies to organizations and teams that can lead to sponsor retention in professional sports. A similar result has been mentioned in Koronius (2021) research.

In general, to manage structural challenges in the intra-organizational sector, managers must have detailed planning and use appropriate strategies to turn these challenges into opportunity-creating challenges. Also, it is better for managers to face external organizational structural challenges, the organizational structure should have enough flexibility to be able to adapt to changes in the needs and expectations of supporters. The organization must be able to react quickly and make the necessary changes in its structure. Decision-making processes in the organization must be transparent and efficient. This helps the organization to quickly and effectively make decisions related to supporters and meet their needs and expectations. The organization should be able to evaluate its performance and make necessary improvements in attracting and retaining supporters. Supporters' feedback and constant communication mechanisms with them can help in this process. Also, organizational culture should be designed in a way that includes supporters and promotes effective communication and collaboration with them. Creating a dynamic and friendly environment for supporters can help attract and retain them. To retain supporters, the organization should try to build long-term relationships with them. This includes ongoing communication, providing after-sales service, connecting with similar customers and providing partnership and collaboration opportunities for sponsors. Therefore, understanding and managing extra-organizational structural challenges can also help the organization in attracting and retaining supporters.

Since the presence of a financial sponsor is very important in the development of professional sports. In other words, the existence of a financial sponsor is one of the driving cycles of professional sports. On the other hand, nowadays, the lack of financial resources in sports clubs and organizations appears significantly. This issue has caused the financial support of sports organizations to increase. Therefore, according to the obtained results, managers are suggested to pay attention to its long-term consequences for the organization when making decisions in the field of marketing, especially the attraction and retention of sponsors. Decisions that are made consciously and carefully can bring people together to achieve common organizational

goals. It is also suggested that special training courses be held for managers and employees in order to increase marketing literacy, so that in this way it can be more interactive to attract and retain sponsors in the organization.

Finally, due to the new and important nature of the structural challenges of attracting and maintaining sponsors in professional sports, it is suggested that the present research 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 on a wider level, and the suitability of the structural equation models of the structural challenges of attracting and retaining financial sponsors in Iranian professional sports was investigated.

Research limitations

The most important limitation of this research was preventing some sample members from participating in the interview and obtaining their opinions. Although at the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were assured that their information would remain confidential, but there were considerations and escapes in answering the interview questions that were not under the researcher's control. The lack of research done in this field was another limitation of this research. Also, the current research has been conducted within the scope of a number of professional sports fields in Iran, and it is difficult to generalize it to other fields.

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