

The Structural-Interpretive Framework of Athletes' Professionalism for the Sports Career Path (Study of Group Sports in the Kurdistan Region- Iraq)

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Abstract

Purpose: The study aimed to formulate a multi-level conceptual framework of the professionalism of group sports athletes in the path of basic to competitive sports for the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Method: The research method was qualitative and quantitative. The statistical population includes people who have scientific and executive opinions in the field of research, and a sample of 17 people selected based on reaching theoretical saturation. Due to the nature of the interpretive structural method, quantitative part estimated by asking the opinions of people who mastered the perception of the relationships between variables from joint academic and executive experts (15 people).

Results: The research tool included an interview a questionnaire consisting of 11 variables determined as a pairwise comparison. Data analysis was done using interpretive structural modeling and MICMAC analysis. The results showed the factors of the consequences of professionalism for the sports system and athletes; competence and professional development of athletes and professionalism in the stages of progress; professionalization in the learning society, professional self-improvement of athletes and professionalization of field and job; The efficiency of the human resources system and the professionalization of sports talent management and the drivers and inhibitors of athletes' professionalism were identified.

Conclusion: According to the ISM method, the identified relationships were sequence effects between the fifth level and the first level. So, the professionalism of the athletes of the Iraqi Kurdistan region in the path from basic to competitive sports requires the integration of various approaches of professionalism in a multi-level process.

Keywords: professionalization, professional development, professional society, sports profession, Iraqi athletes.

Introduction

Various experiences and evidence in today's competitive sports show that the success of athletes in sports and their career depends more on their ability and professional path than any other factor (Nikander et al., 2022, 3). The professionalization of jobs and human resources in sports organizations is one of the most important consequences of the commercialization and competitiveness of sports (Melnick, 2023, 29). The set of concepts and approaches of professionalization has achieved a lot of growth both at the theoretical and practical levels and is passing from one-dimensional to multi-dimensional and multi-level approaches. Summarizing the approaches identified in various research shows that professionalization is generally formed in several axes: professionalization by the organization, professionalization through membership in a professional society, professional self-improvement by individuals, professional development in the job and professionalism in the path of progress (Aljassar et al., 2023) is the goal of all approaches to achieve professional development in human resources and the professional system in the organization. Meanwhile, professionalism is considered to be of special importance for professions due to its long-term and multidimensional nature and function. Professionalism is usually defined as people's adherence to an advanced and international set of standards, principles, rules and behavioral norms in the path of progress in a profession or field of activity. (Summary of sources; Boahen & Wiles, 2018; and others). Some criteria of professionalism include the following: competence and ability, knowledge and literacy, conscientiousness and responsibility, dress and grooming, etc. (Rodd, 2018, 4).

On the career path, professionalism mainly includes the process of training and employing professionals in jobs through the design and

implementation of professional human resource management systems to realize professional development (Cury and colleagues, 2022). Human resource professionalization programs are to upgrade the knowledge, insight and skills of employees to an advanced and standard level to achieve organizational development (Gonçalves et al., 2022). Professionalism is explained with terms such as continuous professional growth, professional learning, professional attitudes and actions, professional learning network, professional experiences, professional consultation and interaction, and coaching focused on skills, innovation and action research (Melnick, 2023). With professionalism, people are prepared in terms of abilities and career path to dream with the changing environment of the organization in terms of conditions and responsibilities (Rodd, 2018). However, for professionalization, organizations need to simultaneously use different approaches with the support of upstream institutions because professionalization is a multidimensional, multilevel, and trans-organizational process (Boahen & Wiles, 2018, 4).

Among all kinds of jobs and professional societies, sportsmanship is a unique path. Therefore, the sports process and the career path of athletes also require specialized investigation (Bonafant et al., 2020). A sports career is defined for all kinds of sports fields with an official organization and a job framework. At present, in more than 100 fields of activity and sports, there are a variety of sports roles (poster) and complementary occupational specialties. The sports route generally involves three stages before the championship (training and talent search period), during the championship (athletic period) and after the championship (employment after the championship) (Ramazani-nejad et al., 2019). In general, the sports path includes career transition stages from specialized entry into sports to retirement from sports, and it specifically includes the

period of finding sports talent, the period of a sports championship, the period of a sports career after the championship and retirement from sports (Ramzani-nejad and et al., 2019). Due to this diversity and the diverse and complex conditions of competitive sports, the sports profession has many challenges for federations and clubs. In fact, along with the developments and professional developments of sports at the international level, it is necessary to provide the necessary ground for the professionalism of athletes (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2021). For developing countries, due to the lack of occupational and professional guilds and the low efficiency of federations, most of the athletes are confused about their job dimensions (Rostami et al., 2020, 3).

One of the developing countries whose sport is at the beginning of becoming professional is Iraq. Despite the constant crises in championship sports, it has relatively good case records in Asian sports (Saeed and Musa, 2022). Due to the existence of sports talents and people's interest, especially in the current crisis, investing in professional sports can have good results for this country (Jassem, 2022). In particular, the experiences of neighboring Arab countries such as Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia and the progress of neighboring countries such as Iran and Turkey in the last decade can provide the Middle East sports ecosystem to support the professionalization of Iraqi sports. In the country of Iraq, the federal region of Kurdistan region has the most suitable environmental conditions for professional sports, especially in terms of the number of events. In the new programs of the sports organizations of this state, the professionalization of sports has been emphasized (Mahmoud Aziz and Majed Mohammad Saleh, 2019). Although Iraq is one of the developing countries in West Asia in terms of human capital in some sports fields, there is still no clear and efficient system to guide athletes in the path of sports to transfer to jobs such as coaching (Al-Sadeh et al., 2022).

Since the existing traditional one-sided education no longer meets the needs of the sports profession and coaching from the level of recreational sports to professional sports, Iraqi sports federations and their provincial representatives should be useful and sustainable learning environments. Professionalism leads to profound changes in the organizational and social context and causes the improvement of mechanisms and productivity. Research has shown that if the environmental culture and the system of training athletes do not move towards professionalism, the introduction of new sports approaches not only created a transformation, but also led to the strengthening of conservative educational traditions (collecting sources; Melnick, 2023; and others). Such complications cause the existence of background differences between countries and regions for the professionalization of sports, and as a result, exploratory and local studies are important for this field. In fact, this ambiguity is the focus of this research as a grounding of professionalism in state areas in the developing countries of the Middle East.

In this regard, a better explanation of the research problem requires a review of the background and records of the research subject. Many sports management studies have limited professionalization to the perspective of jobs, organizations, and events, and other cases such as the sports route have been considered fewer examples (Al-Jassar et al., 2023). Also, the international literature about professionalization in sports has focused more on organizational and environmental analysis and its challenges (Krahn, 2022). Recent research has emphasized the need to pay attention to more aspects of professionalism and the need of a wider range of factors and their nature. In foreign research, Stoszkowski & Collins (2014) in the study of experimental communities and social learning based on networks for sports careers, considers their role to be effective in exploiting the social aspect of the career and professional development of these people. Woodland &

Mazur (2015) stated that the professional and career development of educators requires the platform of professional learning communities. Lang et al. (2018) showed that organizational professionalization in Swiss sports has different types and models. Ruoranen et al. (2018) reported the causes of professionalization in sports federations including branding, finance, participation and process. Kjær (2019) believes that professionalization in sports coaching depends on the content of the coaching training program. Williams & Bush (2019) have reported the importance of the space of the professional learning community of experts for sharing a variety of theoretical and practical knowledge. Beddoes et al. (2020) confirmed the effective relationship between coaching dimensions and the professional learning community in sports schools. Palamarchuk et al. (2020) have reported that the professional self-development of physical education and sports specialists requires a platform of technology and innovation. Lang et al. (2022). In examining the problems of professionalization in sports clubs, they showed that organizational problems have the greatest impact. Nikander et al. (2022) investigated the growth of Finnish sports talents in the path of competitive sports and transition to career development and showed that the capacity of the sports environment has the greatest impact. Griffiths et al. (2022) reported professional development through an online platform and open education to meet the needs and expectations of effective sports coaches. Zimmer & Matthews (2022) consider the effect of using a virtual platform for coaching training and the professional development of coaches to be dependent on professional competencies and digital learning. Long et al. (2022) have revealed the relationship between the ability to solve organizational problems in sports clubs and the level of professionalization. Thorpe et al. (2022) consider professionalization in different types of sports to have contextual differences. Al-Jassar et al. (2023) reported in a

systematic review of studies of professionalism in the field of sports that the success of professionalism in sports requires effective and efficient interaction between sports management and the professional paradigm. Melnick (2023) has determined the professionalization of Canadian amateur sports organizations as a process at multiple levels of the sports system and has implications for sports management and development.

In the research into Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, Mahmoud Aziz and Majed Mohammad Saleh (2019) investigated the professionalization of sports clubs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and reported that football, basketball, volleyball, and handball have the most progress, respectively. Saeed and Musa (2022), in their analysis of the professional values of Iraqi athletics coaches, reported that the new, dominant and shared values in the community of coaches are multi-level. Jassim (2022) reported that there is a significant difference between the dimensions of professional ethics. Al-Sadegh et al. (2022) shows a multidimensional relationship between the levels of professional competence and the performance of Iraqi futsal club coaches. In Iran's research as well, Ramzaninejad et al. (2019) have determined the factors affecting the sports-career path of athletes, including individual background and job background, talent management, career transition structure, and the desirability of career transition. Rostami et al. (2020) identified and modeled the causes, obstacles and consequences of professionalization of sports federations in Iran. The conceptual model of professional development has been presented by Rashidi et al. (2022) for sports managers of the country and Gohari et al. (2022) for football coaches. Safarpour et al. (2023) have identified two generals, internal (management, cultural, structural, financial, facilities, etc.) and external (economic, legal, political, social and cultural) barriers to the professionalization of the country's sports federations.

The summary and review of the studies reported above shows that in many studies, various approaches to professionalism, including organizational professionalization, professional society, professional self-improvement, and professional development have been addressed. But so far, the integration of these approaches in a systemic and ecosystem perspective of sports has not been considered. Also, in the studies of the Middle East and Iraq, attention to qualitative and exploratory studies has been limited, and they have been more focused on one of the mentioned approaches. Also, in terms of identified and investigated factors and components, most of the studies have been oriented towards classical approaches and literature, and less attention has been paid to the conceptual framework with new concepts and dynamic structure. In addition, despite the existence of scientific reports, the dimensions of the professionalization process of athletes in the successive periods of talent search, championship and post-championship (talent search to retirement) with the approach of using the principles of sports-career management and in a comprehensive and research manner has not been. Although thematic and methodological diversity is more in foreign and international researches, but due to the background differences between the conditions of countries like Iraq and other countries and as suggested by many researchers, there is a need for local studies in these regions. In fact, a comprehensive and specialized understanding of the adaptation of professional approaches to the sports system of the Kurdistan climate, especially in the sports-professional path, has not yet been achieved. On the other hand, due to the growth of multi-level and network governance systems in sports today, the Iraqi Kurdistan Federal Region can be a special study target in the Middle East. Also, it has not been presented in a comprehensive, process-oriented and specialized conceptual framework for this category. Moreover, the integration and

implementation of professional approaches for the Kurdistan state of Iraq requires conceptual guidelines and analytical frameworks.

On the other hand, the current research is based on the premise that the process (stages) of managing sports and career paths can be generalized and modeled in all kinds of sports fields. In fact, every sport's field needs a specialized professionalization system on the sports-occupational path, and this research is focused on the general study of climate sports and the case study of men's group sports. In general, the management of human capital in sports in this situation faces many problems and ambiguities in the various stages of for the talent search for a championship. Despite some academic (scientific) and organizational (executive) efforts in this field, they have not yet gained a correct understanding of professionalism in the country's sports, and it is necessary to carry out specialized research in this field. Based on the summary of the mentioned materials, it can be said that the research problem is the result of the adaptation between the challenges in the competitive sports of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of the professionalism of the athletes, with the gap in the knowledge and research of sports management (human resources and career path). There are several scientific and practical necessities of conducting research on the professionalization of athletes:

1. Understanding the impact of professionalization on athlete performance
2. Identifying factors that contribute to successful professionalization
3. Supporting evidence-based policies and regulations
4. Improving athlete health and well-being
5. Enhancing the sport industry.

Overall, research on the professionalization of athletes is crucial for advancing our understanding of sports performance, athlete well-being, and the sport industry in Iraq and region Kurdistan. Most of the previous researchers' efforts were focused on one or two axes, and currently their alignment and integration are known as a

problem and ambiguity. Therefore, specifically, the problem of the research is how to combine the approaches of professionalism (organizational professionalization, professional society and professional self-development) for athletes in the path of basic sports (talent and training) to competitiveness and then the transfer to the coaching job for team sports in the Kurdistan region of Iraq can be applicable and lead to favorable results. In this research, athletes mean: The male athletes of group sports (football, basketball, volleyball, handball, futsal) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq spend three stages of education, sportsmanship and coaching employment in a sports field at a professional level.

Materials and methods

The research method was a combination of qualitative (thematic analysis) and quantitative (structural-interpretive analysis). The statistical population included all people with scientific and executive opinions in the field of research. In the qualitative part, a sample of 17 university professors of sports management, managers of sports organizations and coaches and professional athletes was selected based on theoretical saturation and selected by judgment method. In the quantitative part, due to the nature of the interpretive structural method, it was estimated by asking the opinions of people who have mastered the perception of the relationships between variables from joint academic and executive experts (professors, managers and trainers with doctoral education) (15 people) and by a targeted sample method. It was taken. The research tool was a questionnaire consisting of 11 variables determined as a pairwise comparison. The basis of sample selection was based on the sufficient number for the ISM method (between 10 and 30 experts). The statistical sample consisted of 15 people in the following two sections: 1- expert academic lecturers and researchers in the subject field (7 people) and 2- managers and expert coaches in sports organizations (8 people

from federations, associations), provincial clubs, clubs). The statistical sample was conducted in a targeted way (based on executive experience and scientific education). The sample included 12 men and 3 women, all with doctoral education (graduates or students) and more than 10 years of experience. The research tool was a questionnaire consisting of 11 main variables (factors) in the framework of the pairwise comparison matrix specific to the ISM method. The variables are extracted from a systematic qualitative study with a semi-structured interview method (16 people) and the study of specialized sources (articles, documents, etc.). Interpretive structural modeling was implemented in five stages. First, the structural self-interaction matrix obtained by aggregating all responses of pairwise comparison questionnaires based on mode is obtained. Each response is considered according to Table No. 1. In the second step, the primary achievement matrix is obtained by substituting the numbers zero and one.

Then, in the third step, the initial matrix should be brought to a stable state. The steady state is achieved when $M_k = M_{k+1}$ (Mirfakhardini et al., 2012). It is worth mentioning that this operation is done according to the Boolean rule, according to which 1×1 and $1+1$ are both equal to 1 (Azer et al., 2009), then the power of penetration and the degree of dependence of each component are determined and based on the microanalysis and the level of each component is determined, and then the final research pattern is drawn in the fifth step. Also, the ISM technique is implemented in five steps as follows. The questionnaire for the paired comparison of factors was distributed among X experts purposefully and a matrix was obtained for each questionnaire according to Table 1-3, which, by combining all the questionnaires based on the mode (view), the structural self-interaction matrix, which is the first step, of the method Interpretive structural modeling was created. After forming the structural self-interaction matrix, the numbers 0 and 1 are

replaced by the symbols V, A, X, and O based on the following relationships, and the initial access matrix is obtained: 1. If the house (i and j) in the self-interaction matrix takes the symbol V, the house. Correspondingly, in the achievement matrix, the number 1 and its relative house (j and i) take the number zero. 2. If the house (i and j) gets the symbol A in the self-interaction matrix, the corresponding house in the access matrix gets the number zero and its relative house (j and i) gets the number 1. 3. If the house (i and j) gets the symbol X in the self-interaction matrix, the corresponding house and its relative house (j and i) get the number 1 in the access matrix. 4. If the house (i and j) gets the symbol O in the self-interaction matrix, the corresponding house and its relative house (j and i) get zero in the access matrix. After obtaining the primary achievement matrix, the secondary relationships between factors should be controlled. For this purpose, the initial acquisition matrix is brought to the power of $K+1$ by executing the command in MATLAB software, to establish a stable state: $*M_k=M_{k+1}$. By establishing a stable state, in the final achievement matrix, some 0 elements

become 1, which are displayed as (*1) in the final achievement matrix. The final achievement matrix displays the column of influence power obtained from the sum of rows of each factor and the row of the degree of dependence obtained from the sum of columns of each factor. The factor in which the common set is the same as the attainable set occupies the first level, which is determined by removing this factor and repeating this step for other factors. At the end, after determining the mutual effects and levels of each of the factors, the interpretative structural model of the research is drawn in the form of a diagram.

Results

The findings of the research include two parts: qualitative (identification of factors) and quantitative (modeling of factors).

Results of the qualitative section: The framework of factors identified from the qualitative section includes 11 main factors as described in the table below. The definition and concepts of each factor are also reported in the table.

Table 1. The main factors identified from the qualitative section

variables (factors)	Definition and components (Extracted from the qualitative section)
Drivers of athletes' professionalism	including sub-themes; The drivers of the international sports environment are the drivers of the domestic environment of Iraqi sports and the regional requirements of Kurdistan sports.
Inhibitors of athletes' professionalism	including sub-themes; The economic challenges of sports are the structural and organizational obstacles of sports, the weaknesses of knowledge and technology of sports, group and interpersonal challenges, the obstacles of the activity and sports environment, and individual challenges in the path of sports.
Improving the efficiency of the sports human resources system	Including sub-themes; It was the support and participation of related organizations and program and process alignment
Professionalization of the talent management process	including sub-themes; Professional training and empowerment, professional support of the sports path and professional evaluation of athletes' performance were selected.
Professionalization of athletes in the field	including sub-themes; Professionalization in the sports field, professionalization in the academic field, and professionalization in the occupational field were determined.
Participation of professional learning communities	The participation of athletes in the learning community is the organizational foundation of the learning community and the virtual and multimedia platform of the learning community.
Professional self-improvement of athletes	including sub-themes; Recognizing one's own capabilities in adapting to the sports environment, goal setting and planning, professionalism and suitability for the profession and other aspects of

	life.
Competence and professional development of athletes	including sub-themes; The attitude and thinking of a professional athlete, the knowledge and literacy of a professional athlete, the behavior and communication of a professional athlete, and the skill of professional performance of an athlete were determined.
Professionalism of athletes in the stages of development	including sub-themes; Professionalism was the training period before sportsmanship, professionalism was the sportsmen's and competitive period, professionalism was the employment period after sportsmanship.
The results of professionalism for athletes	including sub-themes; Sports and professional success of athletes and well-being and quality of life of athletes were selected.
Implications of professionalism for the sports system	including sub-themes; There are consequences for sports organizations and consequences for the sports field.

The results of the structural-interpretive modeling section: The results include the stages of matrix analysis to the presentation of a multilevel model. Structural self-interaction matrix: At first, a separate matrix was created for each questionnaire based on the information

obtained from the questionnaire and according to the method of Table No. 1. Then, by aggregating the questionnaires based on mode (view), a structural self-interaction matrix was formed. Table 2 shows the structural self-interaction matrix.

Table 2. Structural self-interaction matrix (SSIM)

variables (factors)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Drivers of athletes' professionalism	X	X	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
2 Inhibitors of athletes' professionalism		X	O	V	V	O	O	V	V	V	V
3 Improving the efficiency of the sports human resources system			X	X	O	V	V	V	V	V	V
4 Professionalization of the talent management process				X	A	V	V	V	V	V	V
5 Professionalization of athletes in the field					X	O	V	V	V	V	V
6 Participation of professional learning communities						X	O	V	V	V	V
7 Professional self-improvement of athletes							X	A	V	V	V
8 Competence and professional development of athletes								X	X	V	V
9 Professionalism of athletes in the stages of development									X	O	V
10 The results of professionalism for athletes										X	X
11 Implications of professionalism for the sports system											X

Then, with the use of the following relationships and putting the numbers 0 and 1 in the structural self-interaction matrix, we obtain the initial reachability matrix, which is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Initial reachability matrix

variables (factors)		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Drivers of athletes' professionalism	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	Inhibitors of athletes' professionalism	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
3	Improving the efficiency of the sports human resources system	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
4	Professionalization of the talent management process	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
5	Professionalization of athletes in the field	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
6	Participation of professional learning communities	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
7	Professional self-improvement of athletes	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
8	Competence and professional development of athletes	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1
9	Professionalism of athletes in the stages of development	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
10	The results of professionalism for athletes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
11	Implications of professionalism for the sports system	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

The final reachability matrix: After obtaining the initial reachability matrix, secondary relations are controlled among the factors. For this purpose, initial matrix to the power $K + 1$ arrives in the MATLAB 2014 software so that

it stays stable: $M_k = M_{k+1}$ is to be achieved (18). So, in the final reachability matrix, some elements of 0 are also converted to 1, which is represented as (*1) in Table 4.

Table 4. The final reachability matrix

variables (factors)		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	power
1	Drivers of athletes' professionalism	1	1	\	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
2	Inhibitors of athletes' professionalism	1	1	*1	1	1	*1	*1	1	1	1	1	11
3	Improving the efficiency of the sports human resources system	.	.	1	1	.	\	1	1	1	1	1	8
4	Professionalization of the talent management process	.	.	1	1	.	\	1	1	1	1	1	8
5	Professionalization of athletes in the field	.	.	*1	1	1	*1	1	1	1	1	1	9
6	Participation of professional learning communities	.	.	.	.	.	1	*1	\	1	1	1	6
7	Professional self-improvement of athletes	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	*1	1	1	1	5
8	Competence and professional development of athletes	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	1	1	1	1	5
9	Professionalism of athletes in the stages of development	.	.	.	.	.	.	*1	1	1	*1	1	5
10	The results of professionalism for athletes	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	1	2
11	Implications of professionalism for the sports system	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	1	2
Dependency		2	2	5	5	3	6	9	9	9	11	11	

Determining the power of influence and the degree of dependence: According to the column on the power of influence and the degree of

dependence in the final achievement matrix, the Micmac analysis of the factors within a system can be done. Figure 1 shows the influence and

degree of dependence of each factor.

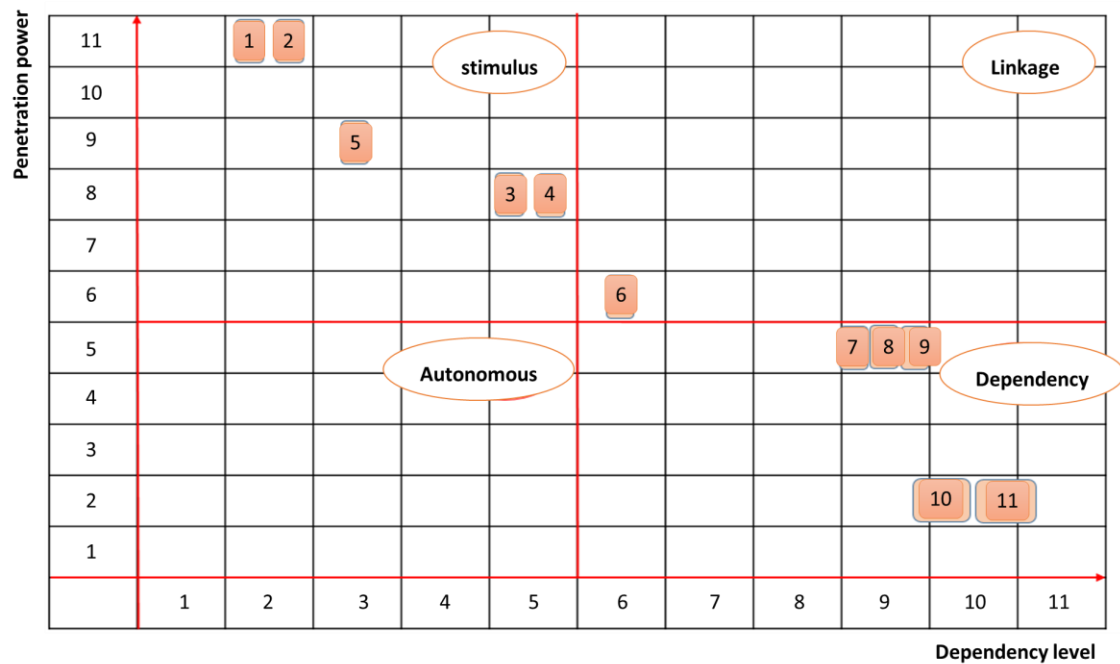


Figure 1. Determining the power of influence and the degree of dependence

Leveling of factors: After obtaining the final reachability matrix, to determine the leveling of the variables, the reachability set, the antecedent set, and the intersection set are specified for each. In the reachability set, rows of the final reachability matrix appear as one in the antecedent set columns. Which intersection they obtained the Intersection set the

variable for which the reachability and the intersection sets are the same is assigned as the first level variable. By discarding this factor and repeating this step for other elements, the next levels of effective factors on the system can be specified. It is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Reachability set, antecedent set, intersection set, and the levels of each factors

variables (factors)	Reachability set	Antecedent set	Intersection set	Level
1 Drivers of athletes' professionalism	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11	1,2	1,2	5
2 Inhibitors of athletes' professionalism	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11	1,2	1,2	5
3 Improving the efficiency of the sports human resources system	3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11	1,2,5	5	4
4 Professionalization of the talent management process	3,4,6,7,8,9,10,11	1,2,3,4,5	3,4	4
5 Professionalization of athletes in the field	3,4, 6,7,8,9,10,11	1,2,3,4,5	3,4	3
6 Participation of professional learning	6,7,8,9,10,11	1,2,3,4,5,6	6	3

communities					
7	Professional self-improvement of athletes	7,8,9,10,11	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9	7,8,9	3
8	Competence and professional development of athletes	7,8,9,10,11	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9	7,8,9	2
9	Professionalism of athletes in the stages of development	7,8,9,10,11	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9	7,8,9	2
10	The results of professionalism for athletes	10,11	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11	10,11	1
11	Implications of professionalism for the sports system	10,11	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11	10,11	1

The results showed that the variables were placed at five levels as follows:

- The first level includes two factors: the consequences of professionalism for the sports system and the results of professionalism for athletes.
- The second level includes two factors; competence and professional development of athletes and professionalism in the stages of progress.
- The third level includes three factors; Professionalization in the learning society, professional self-improvement of athletes and professionalization of field and job
- The fourth level includes the two factors of making the strategic management system of sports more efficient and professionalizing the management of talent and human resources.

The fifth level includes two factors that drive and inhibit athletes' professionalism.

Drawing the interpretive structural model: Therefore, after determining the relationships and levels of the factors, in the final stage, the interpretive structural model is drawn and displayed. Figure 2 shows the interpretive structural model. According to Table 5, then, a model is mapped for the 5 levels in accordance with Figure 2. According to the principles of the ISM method, the identified relationships were in the form of sequential effects between the sixth level and the first level.

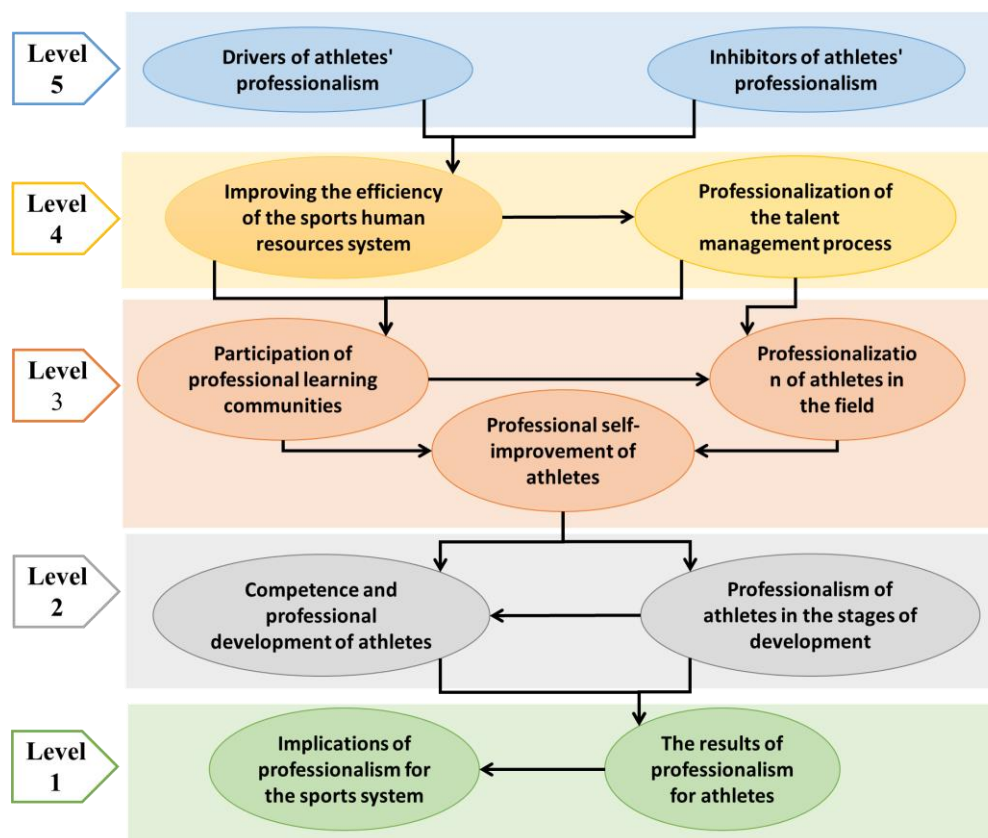


Figure1. ISM's; Athletes' professionalism for the sports-career path (group sports in the Kurdistan region- Iraq)

Discussion

In the interpretation and application of the research findings, case-by-case explanations of general themes and general explanations of the network of themes has been discussed. In explaining the general themes and their sub-categories, it is possible to point out the nature of the factors and their contextual functions, and then compare them with theoretical foundations, research background and environmental evidence. The findings of the research included the multi-level framing of 11 main factors at 5 levels.

The fifth level of the model includes two main factors: The drivers of athletes' professionalism and the inhibitors of athletes' professionalism were determined. In line with that; drivers of athletes' professionalism, including sub-themes; the drivers of the international sports environment, the drivers of the domestic environment of Iraqi sports and the regional requirements of Kurdistan sports were

determined. In contrast to the barriers of athletes' professionalism, in secondary themes, economic challenges of sports, structural and organizational obstacles of sports, knowledge and technological weaknesses of sports, group and interpersonal challenges, obstacles to activity and sports environment and individual challenges in sports were determined. Based on the nature of the themes, it can be said that the general environmental background of athletes' professionalism is the result of promoting and inhibiting factors. A review of the basics of this field confirms these subcategory concepts. For example, some researchers have reported that the process of professionalization both pays attention to the internal environment of organizations and is dependent on the flow of the external environment (Ramzani-nejad et al., 2019). In fact, based on the professional expectations that exist in the external environment of sports organizations and the amount of demand that is perceived inside the organization, the degree of acceptance of

professionalism and the tendency towards it is predicted. The environmental evidence of sports in the Kurdistan region and Iraq has shown that competitive and championship sports in this country, despite the diverse and abundant local capacities, are facing serious challenges, the logic of which is based on two main themes in this section (Mahmoud Aziz and Majed Mohammad Saleh, 2019). In general, it can be concluded that supporting and de-challenging the environment by increasing the adaptation and fit between the aspects of life with the sports dimension in the athlete's career path will lead to better use of opportunities and reduction of pressures. (Safarpour et al., 2023). Also, various experiences and evidence of the talent management system in the field of sports has shown that the actions of the main custodian organizations alone are not enough (Gohri et al., 2022) and complementary environmental roles such as families, schools, etc. should also be considered. Play the role well. The result of the effect of these environmental factors determines the results of the integration of professional approaches.

The fourth level of the model includes two main themes; the efficiency of the strategic sports management system and the professionalization of talent and human resource management. Making the strategic management system of sports more efficient, including sub-themes; It was the support and participation of related organizations and program and process alignment. Professionalization of talent management and human resources, including sub-themes; professional training and empowerment, professional support of the sports path and professional evaluation of athletes' performance were selected. In organizational and systemic professionalization, there is a transition from an amateur and basic level to a specialized and advanced level, which has been examined from a technical, occupational, behavioral and functional point of view (Melnick, 2023).

Managing the professionalization process of human resources in sports can promote sports professions from the level of an internship and volunteer activity to a commercialized specialty. (Saeed and Musa, 2022). Also, some researchers define the professionalization of sports organizations as an organizational process that moves towards organizational rationality, efficiency and job management (Al-Jassar et al., 2023). In this regard, the training of professionals definitely has a significant impact on the efficiency of the structure and performance of human resources of sports organizations (Long et al., 2018). There is even a possibility that the growth of professionals and norms of professionalism will affect decision-making mechanisms and programs or policies (Rodd, 2018). It can be said because the management system is like a container of activities and actions in which all processes flow and affect people. In this regard, sports management is responsible for positive and constructive intervention in the common patterns of sports-career paths of athletes in the sports system (Ramzani-nejad et al., 2019). Therefore, management can affect all dimensions of a system. Actually, the focus of combining and combining the approaches of professionalization of athletes is this theme (strengthening the capacity of the sports system for professionalization).

The third level of the model includes three main factors; Professionalization of field and job, professionalization in the learning society and professional self-improvement of athletes. Field and career professionalization including sub-themes; Professionalization in the sports field, professionalization in the academic field, and professionalization in the occupational field were determined. In explaining the nature of themes and their composition, it can be said that the alignment of professional approaches should lead to the compliance of people (athletes) with their accepted principles in the sports and career path (Rashidi et al., 2022). The alignment of professional approaches

requires professional communication between activists in a dynamic, interactive and knowledge-based environment based on information and communication technology. It can also be said that the professional learning community is a systematic effort to identify the environmental context that influences the professionalism of athletes. In professional self-improvement, there is also the change of jobs to professions and the necessity of specialization. Therefore, the process of professionalization in sports management should transform sports from a voluntary activity to a phenomenon that is too similar to business (Melnick, 2023). Most of the researchers in this field believe that professionalism should be multidimensional, process and stable in order to meet the needs of the market and society. Therefore, aligning the approaches of professionalism in athletes has theoretical and operational importance (Rostami et al., 2020). A review of the basics and background shows that organizational professionalization can be considered as a transition from an amateur state to advanced activities. Professionalization in the learning community includes sub-themes: The participation of athletes in the learning community is the organizational foundation of the learning community and the virtual and multimedia platform of the learning community. Professional self-improvement of athlete's abilities including sub-themes; Recognizing one's own capabilities in adapting to the sports environment, goal abilities and planning, professionalism and suitability for the profession and other aspects of life.

The second level of the model includes the competence of professional development of athletes and professionalism in the stages of development. Professionalism in the stages of progress includes sub-themes; The attitude and thinking of a professional athlete, the knowledge and literacy of a professional athlete, the behavior and communication of a professional athlete, and the skill of professional performance of an athlete were

determined. Matching its main themes with previous research findings and the background evidence of the target community shows that professionalism in the sports-career path includes several parts of continuous professional growth and development that requires learning (Boahen & Wiles, 2018), And professional competence (Al-Sadegh et al., 2022). In fact, the dimensions of professionalism should be defined and capacity-building in sports and career transition. Although the stages of the sports path and job transition are different among different countries or different sports (Thorpe et al., 2022), but in Iraqi team sports, because the competitive environment in this field, especially with the approach of employment and income generation, has moved towards relationalism and exclusivity, and many athletes seek employment outside the sports system. It requires a fundamental review. Professional development competence of athletes including sub-themes; Professionalism was the training period before sportsmanship, professionalism was the athletes and competitive period, professionalism was the employment period after sportsmanship. The set of sub-themes of this theme actually represent the realization of the integration of professional approaches for athletes in sports and for their career.

The first level also includes two main factors; The results of professionalism for athletes and the consequences of professionalism for the sports system. The results of professionalism for athletes, including sub-themes; sports and professional success of athletes and the well-being and quality of life of athletes were selected. The consequences of professionalism for the sports system, including sub-themes. There are consequences for sports organizations and consequences for the sports field. Examining many examples shows that the sports career plays an important role in the success of a coaching career. Some studies have shown that the continuation of

professionalism in athletes leads to professional and long-term growth and ultimately improves the maturity level of human capital abilities (Long et al., 2022). A review of studies shows that at the levels of competitive sports (Amatoi, championship, professional and elite), having a professional approach from the organization, society and individuals plays an important role in the success and performance of athletes (Nikander et al., 2022). From these consequences and results of professionalism in the above dimensions, it can cause the all-round growth of athletes in sports.

The order of effectiveness between variables was from level 5 to level 1. Based on the findings, it can be said that the professionalism of athletes requires the establishment of the internal and external environment of the sports system and the use of individual (professional self-improvement), group (professional community) and organizational (professionalization program) approaches, in the courses of talent development, sports and re-employment.

Conclusion

In general, the results of this research were consistent with similar studies in each of the stages of the sports process. In explaining the application of the research findings, it can be said that since the human resources management of sports in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region has quantitative and qualitative standards for occupational, functional and professional assessment of the sports route and requires an acceptable method to identify the risks that occur there is the professionalism of athletes. Professional sports organizations have few acceptable methods to correctly measure the degree of conformity between the athletes' professionalism and their use and evaluation towards the organization (Mahmoud Aziz and Majeed Mohammad Saleh, 2019). In this research, it was tried to identify and frame the elements and relationships of professional development of sports coaches in a coordinated

way. Knowing different aspects of professionalism can help sports federations and clubs to achieve a system of training athletes. As it is known, most of the competitive sports centers in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have several problems in human resource management, including the lack of expert staff, lack of long-term plans, and weak job support. Professionalization can accelerate the improvement process of these sports organizations. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and implement training programs for professional athletes and the professional development of current athletes to become one of the main foundations of professionalization in the country's sports. From a methodological and scientific point of view, it can be said that since an organization is made up of various components and various relationships between them, and they are acting and reacting with each other, therefore, management in such a system is very complex and incomprehensible. Will be. Conceptual frameworks help us to gain a better understanding of the whole system by simplifying the whole system. Also, the findings help the sports managers to better classify the issues of the athletes and the sports route and increase the chances of finding the correct answers. Therefore, it is suggested that the multidimensional and multi-stage professionalization of the athletes' professionalization approaches should be considered as a requirement and strategy for the managers and analysts of the competitive sports system of Iraq and the Kurdistan region.

In the practical interpretation of the conceptual model of the research (professionalism in sports) with the field of study (athletes' sports-career path) it can be said that Professionalism for sportsmen is interpreted as the ability to conduct oneself in a manner that reflects positively on the sport, team, and oneself. This includes: 1. Dedication and commitment to training and improving skills, 2. Respect for teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, and fans, 3. Adherence to rules and regulations of

the sport and the team, 4. Maintaining physical fitness and health, 5. Avoiding behaviors that could bring discredit to oneself or the team, such as substance abuse or criminal activity, 6. Being accountable for one's actions on and off the field, 7. Representing oneself and the team with integrity and honesty, 8. Demonstrating good sportsmanship, even in defeat, 9. Continuously learning and adapting to changes in the sport and the industry. Professionalism is essential for sportsmen as it helps them build a positive image, gain respect from fans and peers, and enhance their career prospects.

This research, like other research, had some limitations which were tried to be controlled by other methods: 1- Non-cooperation of some eminent academic, market and organizational experts (using additional scientific resources to adjust this limitation) 2- lack of documented environmental information about the research subject (use of examples and event evidence to adjust this limitation) 3- taste, critical orientation and differences in the views of different people regarding some aspects of the research subject (use of at least two people in any specialty related to the subject to adjust this limit).

Finally, based on the framework obtained from the findings of the research, in order to promote the professional approaches of athletes in sports and career paths in Iraq's team sports, it is suggested that the network of identified themes be turned into a political and executive framework. It is also suggested to revise the human resource management system of sports organizations based on the framework of the components identified in the approach of professionalization, in order to avoid parallelism and inconsistency between departments and wastage of capacities. It is also suggested that the management of talent and athletes should not be limited to only some case measures and should pay attention to all age groups and all provinces, and for this, the process described in this research should be at

the center of decision-making. In addition, the categories obtained for the dimensions and processes should be based on the actions of the sports human resources management system and pay attention to the leveling of general or partial concepts in practice.

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