


Roadmap for Sports Startup Development in Iran: Identifying Key Indicators

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the critical factors influencing the development of sports startups in Iran, aiming to provide a strategic framework for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and investors.

Methods: This study employs a qualitative methodology centered on thematic analysis and uses semi-structured interviews with 15 experts. The sampling method involved purposive and snowball sampling.

Results: The findings on factors influencing sports startups in Iran reveal a complex landscape crucial for their growth and sustainability. Key areas identified include founder characteristics, facilities and amenities, networking and technology innovation, management practices, and economic factors. Founder traits such as psychological resilience and decision-making skills are pivotal, alongside the need for supportive networks and community interaction. Adequate facilities and government support, including legal clarity and infrastructure, are critical for creating a conducive environment. Effective networking and technological integration, leveraging AI and IoT, enhance operational efficiency and customer engagement, highlighting the importance of staying technologically current.

Conclusion: The study concludes with implications for practice and policy, advocating for tailored interventions to enhance the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This research contributes to the understanding of sports entrepreneurship in emerging markets, providing a foundation for future studies on startup sustainability and growth.

Keywords: Sports Startups, Entrepreneurship, Technological Innovation, Founder Characteristics, Support Systems, Iran.

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Introduction

The sports industry, valued at approximately \$600 billion globally, plays a pivotal role in economic development, social integration, and public health (Shahbazi et al., 2019; Ratten, 2020). Across various countries, fostering entrepreneurship and creating employment opportunities within this sector has been a primary challenge (Tagvi Rafsanjani et al., 2019). In emerging economies like Iran, sports startups hold immense potential to drive economic growth and societal benefits (Aminifar et al., 2022; Farahani, 2018). However, achieving success in the Iranian sports startup ecosystem requires a nuanced strategy tailored to its specific socio-economic, cultural, and regulatory contexts (Rezaei & Salehipour, 2019).

The convergence of sports, technology, business innovation, and socio-economic development underscores the rise of sports startups as dynamic components within entrepreneurial ecosystems (Parvaz et al., 2023; Salehian et al., 2022). Unlike traditional startups, sports startups emphasize performance, community engagement, and sponsorship dynamics, necessitating careful alignment of financial infrastructure, policy frameworks, human capital, and market access (Isenberg, 2010; Ratten, 2016). Despite its nascent stage, the Iranian sports market presents unique opportunities driven by a youthful population with a burgeoning interest in diverse sports activities (Reghbati et al., 2019).

Globally, sports startups have garnered attention for their transformative potential in traditional sports industries through digital technologies and innovative business models (Mondalizadeh et al., 2022; Salimi & Rihani, 2018). The developmental stages of startups—formation, validation, and growth—highlight the need for strategic adaptation and resource allocation at each phase (Tripathi et al., 2019). Classifying startups based on field of activity, business model, and operational criteria further underscores the diversity and specialized needs within the sports startup landscape (Shaw,

2009; Canu, 2019).

In recent years, the startup ecosystem in Iran has shown promising growth, supported by increasing investments and governmental initiatives to foster entrepreneurial ventures (World Bank, 2021; Mwaura et al., 2022). Concurrently, the intersection of sports and technology has emerged as a focal point for innovation worldwide, with startups playing a pivotal role in advancing areas such as fan engagement, athlete performance analytics, and sports infrastructure (Ratten, 2021; Basu, 2023). Past studies have highlighted the absence of a standardized framework for categorizing startups, with classifications often based on industry focus or business model, influenced by factors such as age, financial resources, educational affiliations, and geographical location (Shaw, 2009; Canu, 2019).

Previous research underscores the critical influence of individual founder attributes, educational environments, and technological advancements on the trajectory of sports science startups specifically within Iran (Mirzazadeh et al., 2022). Moreover, historical analyses reveal that creativity and digital innovation were pivotal for sports businesses during the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the adaptive capacity essential for sustained growth (Gonzalez et al., 2023). Studies also indicate that organizational entrepreneurship in sports startups can be significantly enhanced by factors like human capital, facilitative conditions, behavioral dynamics, and environmental factors (Sargolzaei et al., 2022). Similarly, previous investigations emphasize the role of agile methodologies in enabling logistics startups to navigate market uncertainties effectively, highlighting the strategic advantage of flexibility in dynamic economic environments (Zielske & Held, 2020). The structural dynamics between large corporations and startups have also been examined, emphasizing the importance of foundational relationships, strategic alignment, and collaborative knowledge-sharing mechanisms (Souza, 2019).

In light of these findings, sports startups in Iran are not only pivotal for economic growth and employment but also play a crucial role in promoting public health and social well-being. Therefore, developing a comprehensive roadmap for sports startup development in Iran necessitates a nuanced understanding of these multifaceted influences and their implications for sustainable entrepreneurial success (Ratten, 2021; Salihian et al., 2022). Despite their promise, Iranian sports startups face significant challenges such as limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and regulatory complexities (Pirjamadi et al., 2022). Overcoming these hurdles demands a thorough understanding of key indicators that can guide strategic development within the sector. Critical factors include fostering a supportive policy environment, expanding mentorship opportunities, and building robust stakeholder networks (Autio & Thomas, 2014; Parker, 2018). Moreover, embracing technological advancements like artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, and data analytics presents avenues for innovation and competitiveness in the Iranian sports startup landscape (Basu, 2023).

Despite these advancements, there remains a gap in comprehensive frameworks specifically tailored to guide sports startup development in Iran. This paper aims to address this gap by identifying key indicators essential for the successful establishment and growth of sports startups in the Iranian context. By synthesizing existing literature and empirical insights, this study seeks to provide a roadmap that not only outlines strategic pathways for entrepreneurs but also contributes to the broader discourse on sports innovation in emerging markets.

Materials and Methods

The purpose of this research is to investigate the critical factors influencing the development of sports startups in Iran. The study aims to provide a strategic framework for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and investors by

identifying key indicators that contribute to the success and sustainability of sports startups in the Iranian context. This research employed a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis and utilized semi-structured interviews as its primary methodological tool. This qualitative method allowed for an in-depth examination of the subject matter, facilitating a deep understanding of the complexities involved in sports startup development.

The population for this study consists of experts in the field of sports startups in Iran, including entrepreneurs, policymakers, and academics. From this population, we selected a purposive sample of 15 experts based on their extensive experience and contributions to the field. This sample was chosen to ensure diverse and comprehensive insights into the key factors influencing the development of sports startups in Iran. The selection of these 15 experts was based on their recognized expertise and significant contributions to the sports startup ecosystem in Iran. The sample includes a mix of seasoned entrepreneurs, experienced policymakers, and distinguished academics to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. We conducted semi-structured interviews with these experts, including several university professors with extensive research and practical experience in sports entrepreneurship and innovation.

To develop a comprehensive framework, a series of questions were formulated drawing from prior studies, with the objective of enhancing understanding of roadmap for sports startup development in Iran. Questions such as "What do you perceive as the most significant challenges and opportunities for sports startups in Iran?", "In your experience, what are the critical factors that determine the success of a sports startup in Iran?", and "Based on your observations and involvement in the sports industry, what strategic steps should a new sports startup in Iran take to ensure sustainable growth and development?" were posed to

participants. These inquiries were designed to elicit varied perspectives and insights into the complex dynamics of sports startup development. Subsequent to the initial interviews, additional probing questions were introduced to ensure the depth and richness of the discussions. Examples include prompts such as "Could you elaborate on your statement regarding ...?" or "Given previous discussions on ..., what are your thoughts?" These follow-up inquiries aimed to delve deeper into specific aspects raised during the interviews, fostering a more thorough exploration of the research topic.

Experts and scholars in sports startup development from various cities in Iran were selected for the study. Before each interview, a brief introduction to the study was provided to all participants. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time and that all collected information would remain confidential and anonymous. Additionally, participants were notified that the interviewers were independent academic

researchers, and their responses would be collected without identification for analytical purposes only. Interviews were conducted in Persian, lasting 30-70 minutes, using platforms like WhatsApp, email and face to face. These procedures were continued until a new idea was obtained, meaning that theoretical sufficiency or theoretical saturation had occurred. It should be noted that repetition of codes was observed from the ninth interview onward; however, the data collection process continued until the last interview was conducted to ensure complete theoretical saturation.

Finally, 15 academics were interviewed, each with more than 5 years of experience and sufficient knowledge about sports startup (see Table 1). These individuals possessed expertise highly relevant to the research topic, contributing deep academic insights. It should be noted that repetition of codes was observed from the twelfth interview onward; however, the data collection process continued until the last interview was conducted to ensure complete theoretical saturation.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees

Row	Gender	Age	Education	Job/post
1	Female	40	PhD	Sports Management Professors
2	Female	39	PhD	Sports Management Professors
3	Female	45	PhD	Sports Business Specialists
4	Female	45	PhD	Business Management Professors
5	Female	46	PhD	Marketing Management Professors
6	Female	38	PhD	Sports Business Specialists
7	Male	47	MA	Sports Management Professors
8	Male	39	PhD	Business Management Professors
9	Male	44	PhD	Sports Business Specialists
10	Male	45	PhD	Sports Management Professors
11	Male	49	PhD	Entrepreneurship Professors
12	Male	50	PhD	Entrepreneurship Professors
13	Male	53	PhD	Entrepreneurship Professors
14	Male	33	PhD	Marketing Management Professors
15	Male	44	PhD	Sports Business Specialists

Analysis was undertaken concurrently with the data collection process. Data were analyzed using a three-stage coding process: open coding, axial coding (concepts), and thematic analysis network. The first stage, open coding, refers to the initial line-by-line analysis of data, where qualitative data are coded into meaning units (themes) closely resembling the participants' words. Similar and analytical concepts were grouped together. Highly

related concepts were combined at a more abstract theoretical level, thereby identifying themes or categories. The second stage, axial coding or concepts, involved determining the relationships between categories derived from open coding. In other words, axial coding re-categorizes based on the nature of these relationships. Finally, thematic analysis network was used to develop the conceptual model

Results

Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the key factors influencing the success of sports startups, as identified through qualitative thematic analysis. The table is divided into several columns, each representing a specific category of factors. These categories include Founder Characteristics, Technological Innovation, and Support Systems. Under Founder Characteristics, factors such as emotional intelligence, risk-taking tendency, and entrepreneurial experience are listed, emphasizing the personal traits and experiences necessary for leading a successful startup. The Technological Innovation category highlights

the importance of adopting new technologies and engaging in continuous learning to stay competitive. The Support Systems category includes financial support, governmental policies, and networking opportunities, showcasing the external resources and infrastructure that facilitate startup growth. Each factor is further detailed with specific examples and descriptions, providing a comprehensive overview of the essential elements that contribute to the development and sustainability of sports startups in Iran. This table succinctly synthesizes the qualitative data, offering clear insights into the multifaceted nature of startup success in the sports industry.

Table 2. Classification of indicators affecting sports startup development in IranBased on Interview Coding

Theme	Concepts	Open code	Code frequency
Founder's personal characteristics	Psychological characteristics	– Sense of belonging	4
		– Building customer trust	7
		– Excitement and innovation	5
		– Work-life balance	2
		– Risk-taking tendency	6
		– High emotional and social intelligence	3
		– Interest and enthusiasm	9
		– Positive attitude	8
	Personality traits	– Personal motivation	6
		– Personal achievements	3
		– Having potential knowledge with customers	6
		– Family and friends support	10
		– Interaction with the sports community and industry	8
		– Independence and perseverance	5
Decision-making skills	– Collaboration and interaction with others	7	
	– Commitment and strong will	6	
	– Knowledge and experience	6	
	– Customer risk tolerance	3	
	– Effective communication skills	9	
	– Time management	7	
Facilities and Amenities	Creation and improvement of equipment and regulations	– Analysis and evaluation	5
		– Decision-making abilities	4
		– Availability of space and environment for development	5
		– Provision of equipment	6
		– Access to necessary facilities and equipment	7
		– Government support for sports business development	10
		– Addressing legal ownership gaps	5
– Support from sports education institutes	7		
– Existence of supportive laws and guidelines	7		

		– Support from sports and governmental organizations	9
		– Utilizing modern and suitable technical infrastructure	8
		– Utilizing modern and suitable technical infrastructure	9
		– Upgrading equipment and facilities of sports venues	10
	Infrastructure improvement	– Improving sports resources	5
		– Existence of technological infrastructures	6
		– Improving technological infrastructures	8
		– Development program for supporting industries in sports	4
		– Establishing and developing communication networks	
		– Collaborating with other institutions and companies	
		– Sharing knowledge and resources	
		– Organizing seminars and specialized workshops	
		– Utilizing technical skills	
		– Establishing research centers	
Networking and Technology		– Utilizing innovative communication technologies	10
		– Improving technologies and methods of production and service delivery	8
	Online access to sports services	– Quick adaptation of technologies to consumer changes and needs	9
		– Online customer support	7
		– Updating sports services	6
		– Utilizing artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things	9
		– Presenting new and innovative ideas	12
		– Presenting practical and commercially viable ideas	9
		– Presence of innovative systems	8
		– Presenting unique and attractive ideas	11
		– Having an innovative and creative spirit	10
		– Acceptance of learning and innovation	9
		– Providing quality services according to customer needs	7
Innovative nature of ideas		– Research and development of ideas	8
		– Values and achievements	6
		– Utilizing the expertise of sports scholars and elites in the country	12
		– Establishing supportive laws for idea owners in universities	11
	Positive foresight	– Flexible structure in the innovative implementation of ideas	4
		– Accelerating the process of transforming ideas into innovation in sports	5
		– Supporting creative ideas for sports startups	7
		– Utilizing specialized teams	7
		– Selecting and retaining specialized and committed individuals	7
Management factors	Human resource management	– Creating new jobs	10
		– Skills enhancement	8
			6

		– Empowering employees	
		– Creating a positive work environment	5
		– Utilizing knowledgeable and aware sports managers	6
		– Utilizing the management capacities of organizations and institutions	4
	Process planning and management	– Planning and managing activities	5
		– Solving operational problems to ensure activities are carried out	3
		– Public relations management	9
		– Maintaining and strengthening the organization's brand image	6
		– Developing evaluation programs for sports businesses	7
		– Quality control and supervision of sports businesses	8
	Market understanding	– Studying and understanding the target market thoroughly	10
		– Understanding customer needs	9
		– Understanding competitors	7
		– Understanding market trends	
		– Using appropriate marketing strategies	8
		– Examining the possibility of entering domestic and foreign markets	9
		– Paying attention to currency fluctuations in the market	5
			6
Economic factors		– Optimal use of financial resources	9
		– Attracting sponsors and financial supporters	11
		– Controlling organizational costs	6
		– Financial support from the government and financial backers	8
		– Appropriate financial support for theses, dissertations, and university projects	10
		– Existence of financial funds	4
		– Investing in marketing research and development	4
		– Advertising and introducing startups in the media	7
		– Providing loans with low interest rates	8
		– Support from financial institutions and banks	7
		– Technical supports	6
		– Providing financial consulting services	5
			7

The results showed that sum of internal factors matrix scores is 2.13 and is less than 2.5. This means that

Pentathlon association, regard to internal factors, and contain weakness.

Table 3. External Factors Evaluation Matrix of Iran Pentathlon Association

Internal Factors	Abbreviation	Factors	Significant Coefficient	Rating	Point
Opportunities	O1	Political (alignment of Pentathlon with passive defense affecting national security)	0.03	4	0.12
	O2	Environmental (weather diversity and climate variety in Iran)	0.04	4	0.16
	O3	Social (Pentathlon included in Olympics)	0.04	4	0.16

		program)			
	O4	Political (serious attention to Pentathlon by IOC as Traditional sport in Olympic Games)	0.04	4	0.16
	O5	Social (possibility of utilizing professors and graduated people in physical education curriculum)	0.03	3	0.09
	O6	Social (existence of inherent talents in Iran)	0.07	4	0.28
	O7	Social (agreement between Education ministry and Sport & Youth Ministry of Iran)	0.04	3	0.12
	O8	Cultural & Social (supports by sport organization of Tehran Municipality)	0.04	3	0.12
Threats	T1	Social (poor priority for Pentathlon by Sport & Youth Ministry and NOC of Iran)	0.06	1	0.06
	T2	Political (destruction of national image by global exploitation toward debilitating of global participation of Iranians)	0.03	2	0.06
	T3	External opponents (increasing technical and scientific levels of national Pentathlon association in the Asia and world)	0.07	1	0.07
	T4	Internal opponents (increasing the number of more interesting and cheaper sports)	0.05	1	0.05
	T5	Social (lack of capacities and interests equilibrium among provinces)	0.05	1	0.05
	T6	Social (over-assignment of pool working times to leisure)	0.07	1	0.07
	T7	Social (poor performance of Iranian swimming generally)	0.06	1	0.06
	T8	Economical (weak interest and collaboration by sponsors and commercial NGOs)	0.05	2	0.10
	T9	Economical (increased dollar rate and decreased the number of dispatched teams to international events)	0.06	1	0.06
	T10	Technological (restriction for utilizing new technologies)	0.04	2	0.08
	T11	Technological (utilizing modern technologies by other nations for preparing the elite athletes)	0.04	2	0.08
	T12	Cultural (restriction for women sport uniform in swimming)	0.04	1	0.04
	T13	Environmental (destruction of lakes and promenades appropriating for Pentathlon)	0.04	2	0.08
	Total		1	-	2.07

The final coding of the interviews conducted in the present study showed that the factors influencing the development of sports startups consist of 95 sub-themes. As shown in Table 2, founder characteristics such as emotional intelligence and risk-taking tendency are critical.

Validity and reliability of data

To enhance data analysis, both detailed and

holistic approaches were employed. In the detailed approach, interview texts were read line by line, and if one or more paragraphs seemed meaningful, that section was chosen as the unit of analysis. The meaning unit was then condensed into one or more concise sentences. This analysis method was applied throughout the interview text. In the holistic approach, the interview text was considered as a single meaning unit. After multiple readings and

coding of the entire text, sub-themes were extracted (see Table 3). These sub-themes were then semantically grouped into main themes.

Table 3 shows two examples of interviews from the research along with the initial coding of the thematic analysis.

Table 4. Initial Coding of Thematic Analysis with Interviews

Interview text	Initial Coding
<p>Interview 1:</p> <p>Startups or nascent businesses are referred to as a company, participation, or temporary organization that is launched in pursuit of a scalable and repeatable business solution. Sports startups that address meaningful and significant issues in the field of sports can engage individuals more deeply and create a sense of success and personal satisfaction. Individuals working in sports startups may be inspired by a personal enthusiasm for sports and physical activities. This personal motivation can act as a driver for pursuing goals and achieving success in their professional endeavors. Membership in a sports startup can connect individuals to a community of people with common goals and values. This sense of belonging can encourage individuals to pursue common achievements and increase job satisfaction and personal value. Working in a dynamic and innovative startup environment encourages individuals to new challenges and facing uncertain situations, which can develop skills and personal and professional growth. Some sports startups are known as a platform for balancing healthy work-life relationships and physical activity. These facilities can help individuals achieve a better balance between their personal and professional lives and contribute to maintaining health and life satisfaction. Sports startups, as environments where individuals can present their ideas and encourage the innovation process, are recognized. These facilities can lead to personal and professional growth and enhance feelings of success and happiness. Conducting market research to understand the needs and expectations of customers is essential for launching a sports startup. Also, the product or services should be designed in a way that directly addresses these needs and enhances user experience. The main challenges in the development and growth of a sports startup include intense competition in the market, financial resource management, gaining customer trust, and providing quality services with innovative thinking. Innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things can be used to improve decision-making skills in a sports organization.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Temporary organization - Startup - Products and services - Customer value - Sense of belonging - Personal motivation - Individuals' interest and enthusiasm - Values and achievements - Excitement and transformation - Work-life balance - Acceptance of learning and innovation - Practical ideas - Innovative and creative spirit - Need for success and perseverance - Willingness to take risks - Enhancing customer experience - Market research - Financial resource management - Gaining customer trust - New technologies - Artificial intelligence - Internet of Things - Decision-making skills
<p>Interview 2:</p> <p>Startups or nascent businesses are a set of distinct but related behaviors that indicate an organization's interest in maintaining and sustaining its competitive advantage in the market. Startups can be divided into two main and separate sections for research and examination. In the first part, the creation of startups is addressed, focusing on the factors influencing the emergence and appearance of startups until the market entry stage. The second part, managing startups, deals with factors affecting sustainable revenue generation and market presence. Startups are recognized as centers of innovation and transformation in the sports industry. They have the ability to introduce new and innovative ideas to the market, which contributes to improving performance, sports experience, and increasing people's participation in sports activities. The entry of startups into the sports industry increases competition and improves the quality of services and products. This competition is aimed at providing better services and attracting higher quality customers. The sports industry, as a vibrant and profitable market, attracts large investments. Startups, as an attractive option for investors, offer more opportunities for growth and development. Startups usually use innovative technologies and advanced technologies in the development of their sports products and services. These technological improvements can contribute to improved performance and sports experience. Additionally, understanding market trends, knowing the needs and preferences of the target market, and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Startups - Interest and enthusiasm - Sustainable competitive advantage - Innovation and transformation - New and innovative ideas - Providing higher quality services to customers - Performance improvement - Sports experience - New technologies - Advanced technologies - Market trends understanding - Recognizing needs - Target market preferences - Customer behavior changes

changes in customer behavior can help startups implement suitable strategies for their growth and development.

In this study, to assess the validity of the findings, the research findings were presented to the participants and Table 4 was used.

Table 4. Test reliability results

Row	Interview Title	Total Number of Codes	Number of Agreements	Number of Disagreements	Intra-subject Agreement Percentage
1	P _A	18	14	4	%78
2	P _B	15	11	4	%73
3	P _C	12	9	3	%75
	Total	45	34	11	%76

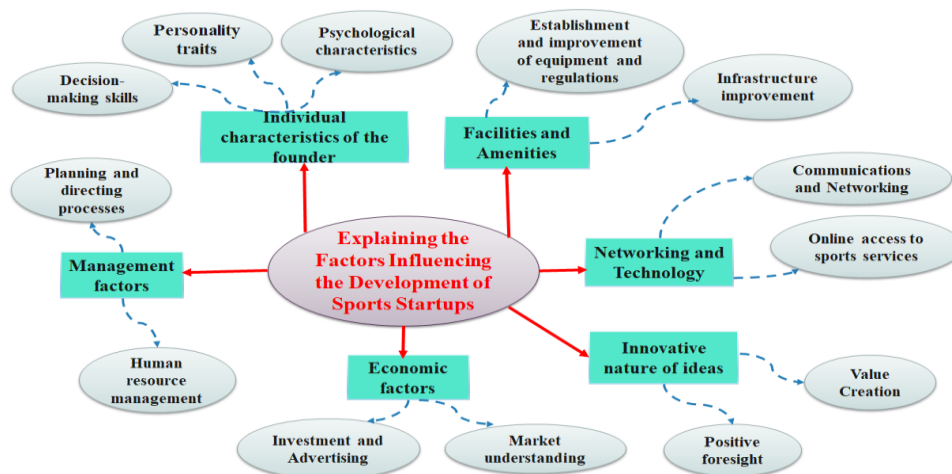


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Network of Key Factors Influencing Sports Startups in Iran

Figure 1 illustrates the thematic network analysis of factors influencing the development of sports startups in Iran. The diagram centralizes the core theme, which is the "Development of Sports Startups," and branches out into three main organizing themes: Founder Characteristics, Technological Innovation, and Support Systems. Each organizing theme is further subdivided into several basic themes. For instance, Founder Characteristics include emotional intelligence, risk-taking tendency, and entrepreneurial experience. Technological Innovation encompasses aspects such as the adoption of new technologies and continuous learning. Support Systems are broken down into financial support, governmental policies, and

networking opportunities. This hierarchical structure visually represents how these interconnected themes and sub-themes contribute to the overall development of sports startups, providing a clear and comprehensive overview of the critical success factors identified through qualitative analysis. This figure effectively encapsulates the complex interplay of various elements necessary for nurturing a thriving sports startup ecosystem in Iran.

Discussion

The evidence indicated that the identification of factors influencing the development of sports startups in Iran highlights several key areas: founder's personal characteristics, facilities and

amenities, networking and technology, innovative nature of ideas, management factors, and economic factors. Each category encompasses various concepts that collectively contribute to the growth and sustainability of sports startups. This discussion will analyze these findings in light of existing literature, noting areas of consistency and divergence.

The study emphasizes that psychological attributes, personality traits, and decision-making abilities are vital for the success of sports startups in Iran, and these conclusions are well-supported by existing literature. For example, the focus on resilience, motivation, and stress management aligns with Bandura's (1978) self-efficacy theory and Locke and Baum's (2014) research on entrepreneurial motivation. It also corroborates Zhao and Seibert's (2006) findings regarding the significance of traits such as openness and conscientiousness. The study highlights the importance of strategic decision-making, which echoes Mintzberg and Waters' (1985) theories on organizational success. Elements like risk-taking, emotional intelligence, and social support align with research on psychological resilience and adaptability (Mirzazadeh et al., 2022; Ratten et al., 2021; Pellegrini et al., 2020; Ratten, 2016). These findings suggest that founders with high psychological resilience and motivation are better equipped to manage the challenges and uncertainties of startup life. Traits such as risk-taking and emotional intelligence are crucial for making effective strategic decisions, which help in seizing opportunities and implementing successful strategies. Furthermore, maintaining a work-life balance and a positive mindset is especially important in the Iranian cultural context, where personal well-being is closely linked to professional success. Ultimately, integrating these psychological and personality factors into the startup development process can greatly improve entrepreneurial success. Support and development programs aimed at cultivating these attributes can strengthen the foundation

for sports startups. These insights enhance the broader understanding of entrepreneurship and provide actionable strategies for developing startups in similar environments.

This study emphasizes the critical role of adequate facilities and strong government support in the success of sports startups. It highlights that having sufficient resources like training grounds and specialized equipment is essential for operational effectiveness, as supported by previous research (Brush et al., 2001; Misener & Misener, 2017). Government backing through policies, funding, and incentives mitigates risks and promotes growth, aligning with Lerner's (2010) findings on the positive impact of government interventions. The study suggests that targeted investments in sports infrastructure and support programs are crucial for innovation and growth (Doherty, 2013) and supports Audretsch and Thurik's (2008) view on the importance of government policies in shaping entrepreneurial success. Overall, it underscores the necessity of a supportive infrastructure and proactive policies to foster a thriving sports startup ecosystem and drive sustainable growth.

The research highlights the essential roles that networking and technology play in the advancement of sports startups, demonstrating how these factors are vital for driving innovation, improving operational efficiency, and promoting growth. This conclusion is reinforced by a substantial body of literature, which underscores the importance of networking and technology in the entrepreneurial landscape, particularly within the sports sector (McElheran et al., 2024; Sargolzaei et al., 2022; Zielske & Held, 2020; Ratten, 2020; Teece, 2010; Stuart & Sorenson, 2007; Zimmer, 1986). For sports startups, effective networking can facilitate partnerships with sponsors, sports organizations, and industry leaders, thereby boosting market visibility and credibility. Given the value of relationships with athletes, coaches, and

experts, networking becomes even more crucial for obtaining endorsements, extending market reach, and establishing a strong support network. Additionally, technology enables sports startups to utilize data analytics, digital marketing, and cutting-edge sports equipment to stand out and enhance their operations (Ratten, 2011). These findings align with Spigel's (2017) research, which highlights the benefits of integrating network resources and technological capabilities in entrepreneurial ecosystems. For both practitioners and policymakers, the results suggest that creating environments that promote networking and support technological innovation is vital. Targeted assistance in adopting new technologies can also help startups leverage these advancements for a competitive advantage. In summary, the combination of networking and technology creates a synergistic effect that significantly influences the success and growth of sports startups.

Innovation is a recurring theme, with the study emphasizing the need for presenting new, practical, and commercially viable ideas. Utilizing innovative and creative approaches in designing sports products and services enhances the experience of athletes and spectators, increases customer satisfaction, and attracts investors. Moreover, proper management in sports startups, including financial management, human resources, marketing, and development strategies, fosters stability and sustainable growth in startups. Therefore, attention to innovation and effective management, as two fundamental pillars, can strengthen the sports startup industry in Iran and improve the conditions of businesses related to this field. This aligns with the entrepreneurial theory which posits that innovation is a cornerstone of startup success (Mendelizadeh, 2024; Ratten, 2023; Salihian et al., 2022; Sargolzaei et al., 2022; Taghavi Rafsanjani et al., 2021; Schumpeter, 2008). The specific mention of quality services tailored to customer needs and the acceptance of learning

and innovation further supports the dynamic capabilities framework, which advocates for continuous adaptation and evolution in business practices (Teece, 2007).

This study highlights the critical importance of effective human resource management (HRM) and meticulous process planning as pivotal factors in the advancement of startups. These elements are essential for fostering operational efficiency, driving innovation, and ensuring sustainable growth. This argument is substantiated by a substantial body of literature that underscores the significance of HRM and process planning in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Mirzazadeh et al., 2022; Sargolzaei et al., 2022; Ratten, 2020; Souza, 2019; Barney, 2000). For practitioners and policymakers, the findings suggest that startups should prioritize the development of robust HRM practices and detailed process planning to enhance their chances of success. HRM practices contribute to building a capable and motivated workforce, while process planning ensures operational efficiency and scalability. The integration of these elements creates a powerful synergy that can significantly influence startup success. By emphasizing the importance of HRM and process planning, this research provides valuable insights into the structural and strategic factors that drive startup performance and growth.

The research highlights that a deep understanding of the market, proficient financial management, and the ability to attract sponsors are crucial economic factors for the success of sports startups. This perspective is well-supported by existing literature, which demonstrates how these elements together foster financial stability, market positioning, and overall success in the sports industry (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Ratten, 2021; Taghavi Rafsanjani et al., 2021; Ko et al., 2019; Shahrabi et al., 2019; Souza, 2019; Spigel, 2017; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). For those involved in sports startups, including

practitioners and policymakers, the findings suggest that focusing on market research, implementing effective financial management, and securing sponsorships should be prioritized. Investments in these areas—market research, financial planning, and sponsorship strategies—can provide the necessary resources and support for startups to excel in a competitive field. Furthermore, targeted support and resources in these areas can improve the growth prospects of sports startups. Understanding the market aids in strategic decision-making, financial management ensures operational stability, and sponsorships provide essential funding and visibility. Combining these factors creates a strong foundation for startup success, emphasizing the importance for sports startups to concentrate on these economic elements for sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

The identified factors have a profound impact on the development of sports startups in Iran. By understanding these key areas, entrepreneurs can better prepare and strategize for the unique challenges they face. For instance, emphasizing founder resilience can lead to better crisis management, while leveraging supportive networks can facilitate resource sharing and collaboration. Furthermore, integrating advanced technologies can streamline operations and enhance the customer experience, ultimately driving growth and competitiveness in the market.

Conclusion

The study on factors influencing sports startups in Iran reveals a complex landscape crucial for their growth and sustainability. Key areas identified include founder characteristics, facilities and amenities, networking and technology, innovation, management practices, and economic factors. Founder traits such as psychological resilience and decision-making skills are pivotal, alongside the need for supportive networks and community interaction. Adequate facilities and government

support, including legal clarity and infrastructure, are critical for creating a conducive environment. Effective networking and technological integration, leveraging AI and IoT, enhance operational efficiency and customer engagement, highlighting the importance of staying technologically current.

Innovation emerges as fundamental, emphasizing the need for new, commercially viable ideas and a culture of continuous improvement. Effective management practices, including human resource strategies and robust operational frameworks, are essential for achieving organizational goals. Economic factors such as market understanding and financial management, particularly amidst challenges like currency fluctuations, underscore the importance of tailored financial strategies and consulting services. While the findings are specific to Iran and qualitative in nature, they suggest practical steps like training programs, mentorship networks, and government initiatives to enhance founder capabilities, infrastructure, technological adoption, innovation support, management skills, and economic stability within the sports startup sector. Addressing these findings through further research and broader samples will bolster their relevance and application across diverse contexts.

To enhance the success of sports startups in Iran, the following recommendations are proposed: 1) Provide training programs to develop founders' psychological resilience and decision-making skills, crucial for navigating the startup environment. 2) Advocate for better government support, legal clarity, and infrastructure improvements to create a favorable regulatory environment. 3) Foster networking opportunities to facilitate valuable connections among startups, investors, and industry experts. 4) Invest in modern technologies like AI and IoT to improve operational efficiency and market competitiveness. 5) Strengthen management

practices with a focus on optimizing operations and customer experience through mentorship.

6) Improve access to financial resources and market opportunities to support scalability and sustainability. Implementing these strategies can build a supportive ecosystem for sports startups, driving entrepreneurial success and contributing to regional economic and social growth.

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