



Providing a Branding Model for National Athletes in Iran

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Original article

Article history:
Received: 16 March 2025
Received in revised form: 10 June 2025
Accepted: 13 June 2025
Published online: 21 August 2025

Keywords:
Athletes
Branding
Finance
Technology
Culture
Society

ABSTRACT

Branding national athletes in Iran is a strategic and multifaceted domain, facing unique challenges and opportunities. While Iranian athletes have achieved remarkable success on the international stages, their branding system domestically often lacks a comprehensive and professional framework. Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive branding framework for national athletes in Iran. This research adopts a qualitative approach based on the grounded theory methodology of Strauss and Corbin. The participants consisted of 23 experts related to the subject, selected through purposive sampling. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and the analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2020 software. After coding the interview data, 212 initial codes were identified through open coding, and 16 secondary codes were derived through axial coding. These were then categorized into five main themes during the selective coding phase: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening factors, strategies, and outcomes of national athlete branding for national athletes in Iran requires overcoming structural, cultural, and political challenges. This model should be based on strengthening legal institutions, developing digital infrastructure, and integrating sports with national values. Educating athletes in financial, media, and cultural domains, along with attracting private and international sector participation, will elevate their status as economic and cultural agents. As a result, athlete branding contributes to economic growth and improves Iran's international image, while fostering role models for younger generations, thereby promoting societal progress and cohesion.

Introduction

In today's world, where public perception and digital presence play a pivotal role in personal and professional success, *personal branding* has emerged as a strategic tool for gaining visibility and recognition (Zhou et al., 2020). Personal branding is defined as the deliberate process of creating, positioning, and managing an individual's public image by leveraging distinctive attributes and narratives to deliver a consistent and enduring value proposition (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Originally rooted in commercial marketing, the concept has evolved into a critical component of leadership and career advancement across various sectors, including sports (Christiansen, 2022; Sprong et al.,

How to Cite: Nobakht Sareban, F., Zare Abandansari, M., & Kheirollahi Meidani, H., Naghizadeh Baghi, A. (2026). Providing a Branding Model for National Athletes in Iran. *Journal of New Studies in Sport Management*, 7(2), 85-99.
DOI: 10.22103/jnssm.2025.24990.1372



2021). With the rise of social media, particularly Instagram, athletes have increasingly embraced personal branding to expand their influence and monetize their identity (sadeghi et al., 2023).

This strategic endeavor enables individuals to differentiate themselves and build emotional connections with audiences, much like corporate brands (Arora & Stoner, 2009; Hasanzadeh et al., 2022). Regardless of their status or sponsorship capacity, many athletes proactively craft their public personas to stand out in competitive environments (Woods et al., 2023). As Karaduman (2013) notes, personal branding involves managing one's professional reputation and public perception, while Rampersad (2009) underscores the importance of consistency in the expectations and imagery associated with one's name. Today's athletes are not merely competitors they are influential figures capable of shaping broader social narratives (Karaduman, 2013; Rampersad, 2009). As Zarei et al. (2023) point out, personal branding serves both managerial and marketing purposes by shaping public understanding of athletes through their social and professional identities. This is particularly relevant in the contemporary media landscape, where the strategic use of social media platforms significantly enhances branding outcomes (Ghasemi & Saemiyani, 2018; Poursaeed et al., 2024).

In many developed countries, athletes are recognized not only for their sporting achievements but also as influential personal brands that contribute to national development. These athlete brands can significantly support the economic, social, and cultural advancement of their countries (Aali et al., 2025). However, in Iran despite the remarkable international successes of its athletes the domestic branding system often lacks a comprehensive and professional framework. This deficiency means that the vast potential of national athletes to serve as social role models, cultural ambassadors, and economic catalysts remains largely unrealized. The absence of a coherent branding model results in sporting achievements being celebrated only momentarily, without translating into sustained public engagement or long-term commercial traction. This fragmented approach underscores the urgent need for a more thorough and contextually grounded articulation of the importance and necessity of branding national athletes in Iranian society.

Numerous studies have examined the unique challenges associated with athlete branding in Iran and similar contexts. In the realm of cultural and social barriers, (Hasaan et al., 2024) identified personal, societal, and sport-related obstacles facing Muslim female athletes, including a lack of awareness about branding, societal pressures, and limited representation. Similarly, Karimzadeh et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of cultural intelligence, social visibility, and personal ethics as key determinants in the branding process of elite Iranian female athletes. Zakerian et al. (2021) highlighted traits such as trustworthiness, lifestyle, and international image as central to shaping an athlete's brand factors that can be leveraged for domestic marketing and national identity-building.

From an institutional and legal perspective, Christiansen (2022) explored how personal branding via social media empowers amateur athletes in NCAA environments to gain greater control over their name, image, and likeness (NIL), underscoring the need for evolving legal frameworks that support athlete autonomy an issue particularly relevant for Iran. Shahhosseini et al. (2023) also emphasized the role of external infrastructure including budget allocation, legal backing, and media planning in shaping the outcomes of personal branding initiatives.

In terms of media and technological challenges, Khosravi et al. (2024) stressed that visibility in media is essential for branding national athletes, but it must be preceded by strategic socialization and identity formation. Rezaeiniya et al. (2025) underscored the significance of transparency, communication, and Instagram-based engagement in building strong athlete brands, noting that branding effectiveness depends heavily on strategies tailored to each athlete's personal traits, lifestyle, and values. Poursaeed et al. (2024) further found that Instagram metrics such as content type, tags, and posting time significantly affect branding success. Zarei et al. (2023) identified both internal and external factors such as leadership style, digital literacy, and content focus as essential to branding effectiveness.

Finally, in the economic and political domains, Faraji et al. (2024) examined how athlete branding influences migration decisions and broader sociopolitical and cultural dynamics. Additionally, Sotiriadou et al. (2025) introduced the concept of athlete brand congruence, highlighting the importance of alignment between an athlete's intended brand identity and consumer perceptions as a key metric for evaluating branding effectiveness.

Collectively, these studies highlight that while athlete branding has gained strategic relevance in Iran, many athletes remain constrained by a lack of institutional infrastructure, cultural alignment, and technological advancement necessary to unlock their full branding potential. The disproportionate emphasis on high profile sports such as football, the marginalization of athletes in less-publicized disciplines, political restrictions, and the impact of international sanctions have further compounded these barriers. As a result, athlete branding in Iran cannot rely solely on conventional marketing approaches. It must be reimagined as a multidimensional strategy serving not only commercial objectives but also functioning as a catalyst for economic development, a platform for cultural diplomacy, and a vehicle for promoting social leadership. Despite Iranian athletes' notable achievements on the international stage, the domestic branding ecosystem remains disjointed, lacking coherence with national identity, integration with digital innovation, and meaningful access to global markets. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to fill a critical research gap by exploring the following core question: How can a comprehensive branding model for national athletes in Iran be developed, one that accounts for the country's structural limitations, respects cultural sensitivities, and leverages emerging technological capabilities?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using grounded theory to explore the development of a branding model for national athletes in Iran. Following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) framework, the analysis proceeded through three phases of coding: open, axial, and selective. In total, 23 participants were selected through purposive sampling, including sports federation executives, university faculty in sport management, coaches, professional and retired athletes, and media professionals. Inclusion criteria required a minimum of five years' experience in sports-related fields, direct involvement or familiarity with athlete development and branding, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews.

Semi-structured interviews, each lasting 35 to 50 minutes, were conducted in quiet, distraction-free environments, either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing, depending on participants' preferences. All participants provided informed consent, and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA 2020, with coding results organized into five major categories: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening factors, strategies, and outcomes. To ensure trustworthiness, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, including credibility (via expert validation and participant feedback), transferability (through detailed contextual descriptions), dependability (via a documented audit trail), and confirmability (through independent peer review). Inter-coder reliability was assessed by two independent researchers coding selected transcripts, achieving an agreement rate of 83%. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage. The results of the inter-coder agreement are shown in Table 1.

$$\text{Reliability Percentage} = \left(\frac{\text{Number of Agreements} \times 2}{\text{Total Number of Code}} \right) \times 100$$

Table 1. Inter-Coder Reliability Assessment Results

Interview Number	Total Codes	Agreements	Disagreements	Reliability Percent
3	18	8	3	88.88
6	13	5	3	76.92
12	19	8	4	84.21
Total	50	21	10	83.33

Results

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants involved in the study.

Table 2. Demographic Information of the Study Participants

Experts	Position	Participant Breakdown	
Group 1	Senior managers of sports federations,	2 Male	1 Female
Group 2	University faculty members in sports management	3 Male	1 Female
Group 3	Sports coaches	3 Male	2 Female
Group 4	Retired athletes	2 Male	1 Female
Group 5	Professional athletes	4 Male	2 Female
Group 6	Media professionals	1 Male	1 Female

For data analysis, after coding the text of all interviews, 212 initial codes were identified through open coding, and 16 secondary codes were identified through axial coding. These were then categorized into five main themes during the selective coding phase: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening factors, strategies, and outcomes of national athlete branding in Iran. The following sections describe each of the sub-themes, main themes, and overall categories.

Causal Conditions of National Athlete Branding in Iran

Causal conditions refer to the factors that create the need for and drive the development of the core phenomenon. In this context, 52 sub-themes were identified as causal conditions for national athlete branding in Iran. These codes were grouped into four main themes: institutional structures, identity discourses, financial challenges, and media landscape. The sub-themes and main themes of the causal conditions for national athlete branding in Iran are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Causal conditions for branding national athletes in Iran

General Category	Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Causal Conditions	Institutional Structures	1. Weak legal framework for the intellectual property rights of athletes' images.
		2. Overemphasis on team sports and neglect of individual sports.
		3. Lack of an independent performance evaluation system for athlete branding.
		4. Conflict of interest between sports organizations and the private sector in brand management.
		5. Absence of a comprehensive database to track athletes' achievements.
		6. Lack of professional standards for sponsorship contracts.
		7. Absence of intermediary institutions to resolve disputes between athletes and sponsors.
		8. No strategic plan to transform athletes into global brands.
		9. Lack of transparency in the distribution of advertising revenues.
		10. No monitoring and evaluation system for the social impact of athletes.
		11. Absence of a specialized research center for sports branding.
		12. Lack of professional training systems for sports branding coaches.
		13. No support mechanisms for retired athletes.
		14. Lack of coordination between sports organizations and media for branding.
	Identity Discourses	15. Conflict between traditional and modern expectations of female athletes.
		16. Lack of a localized athlete branding model aligned with Islamic values.
		17. Young athletes imitate foreign sports figures.
		18. Instrumental view of athletes as promoters of governmental institutions.
		19. Neglect of local and traditional sports in media coverage.
		20. Absence of cultural programs to strengthen national identity in athletes.
		21. Lack of an appropriate model for integrating sports with Iran's cultural heritage.
		22. No educational programs to enhance cultural literacy among athletes.

Financial Challenges	23. Lack of a proper framework for representing athletes in international media.
	24. Absence of support mechanisms for ethnic minority athletes.
	25. One-dimensional perception of athletes as medalists rather than social role models.
	26. Lack of cultural programs to enhance national pride through sports.
	27. Negative perception of athlete migration to foreign countries.
	28. Heavy reliance on government funding and absence of sustainable revenue sources.
	29. Lack of strong sponsorship for non-football sports.
	30. No financial literacy training for young athletes.
	31. Weak financial collaboration with international brands due to sanctions.
	32. Lack of transparency in the distribution of advertising revenues.
	33. No proper model for attracting small-scale investments.
	34. Absence of support programs for low-income athletes.
	35. Lack of a structured approach for exporting sports-related products under athletes' brands.
	36. No support mechanisms for retired athletes.
37. Lack of a proper model for private sector involvement in sports branding.	
Media Landscape	38. No educational programs for the financial management of athletes.
	39. The absence of a proper model for utilizing new technologies for revenue generation.
	40. No support mechanisms for athletes from underprivileged regions.
	41. Lack of financial support programs for female athletes.
	42. Lack of engaging programs to introduce athletes in the media.
	43. Overemphasis on specific sports, such as football, in media coverage.
	44. Absence of a proper framework for representing female athletes in the media.
	45. No educational programs for media literacy among athletes.
	46. Lack of compelling documentaries on athletes' lives.
	47. Absence of a proper framework for using digital media in athlete branding.
	48. No support mechanisms for athletes to counter media rumors.
	49. Lack of structured approaches for athlete participation in content production.
	50. No educational programs for crisis management in media.
	51. Absence of transparency in managing negative news about athletes.
52. No proper model for leveraging social media in athlete branding.	

Contextual Conditions of National Athlete Branding in Iran

Contextual conditions refer to a set of variables and specific categories that influence the core phenomenon and its strategies. In this context, 41 sub-themes were identified as contextual conditions for national athlete branding in Iran. These codes were grouped into three main themes: cultural and social conditions, technological infrastructure, and media transformations. The sub-themes and main themes of the contextual conditions for national athlete branding in Iran are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Contextual Conditions for Branding National Athletes in Iran

General Category	Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Contextual Conditions	Cultural and Social Factors	1. Conflict between traditional and modern values in accepting athletes as social role models.
		2. The role of athletes in strengthening national identity within Iran's multicultural society.
		3. Social pressures on female athletes to balance cultural norms.
		4. The role of athletes in bridging generational gaps through social engagement.
		5. The influence of athletes on changing gender perceptions in Iranian society.
		6. The role of athletes in promoting a culture of peace and friendship in conflict-prone areas.

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7. Social pressures on athletes to maintain a clean and controversy-free image.
 8. The role of athletes in promoting a healthy lifestyle among youth.
 9. The impact of athletes on increasing social participation in underprivileged areas.
 10. The role of athletes in fostering resilience and perseverance within society.
 11. Social pressures on athletes to participate in national and religious ceremonies.
 12. The role of athletes in promoting environmental awareness in society.
 13. The impact of athletes on reducing social violence through sports.
 14. The role of athletes in strengthening national solidarity during crises.
 15. Social pressures on athletes to balance personal and professional life
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- Technological Infrastructure**
16. Unequal access to digital platforms for athletes due to technical limitations.
 17. The role of social media in shaping athletes' public image.
 18. Lack of necessary infrastructure for athletes to produce professional content.
 19. The impact of internet filtering on restricting athletes' access to a global audience.
 20. The role of emerging technologies in redefining athlete branding.
 21. Lack of training for athletes on how to effectively use digital tools.
 22. The impact of artificial intelligence on fan behavior analysis and brand enhancement.
 23. The role of digital platforms in generating sustainable income for athletes.
 24. Lack of cybersecurity infrastructure to protect athletes' personal data.
 25. The impact of video games on attracting young fans to athletes.
 26. The role of virtual reality in creating immersive experiences for fans.
 27. The impact of blockchain on enhancing transparency in athlete revenues.
 28. The role of augmented reality in sports advertising and sponsor engagement.
 29. Lack of necessary infrastructure for integrating artificial intelligence in content creation.
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- Media Transformations**
30. The impact of mass media on shaping championship role models in society.
 31. The role of media in establishing new discourses around athletes as cultural ambassadors.
 32. Lack of long-term media programs to introduce athletes as social role models.
 33. The influence of media on changing gender perceptions of female athletes.
 34. The role of media in promoting sports as a tool for bridging generational gaps.
 35. Lack of media programs showcasing athletes from underprivileged regions as success icons.
 36. The impact of media on increasing athletes' social participation in national projects.
 37. The role of media in promoting sports as a tool for strengthening national unity.
 38. The role of media in advocating sports as a means to reduce social violence.
 39. Lack of media programs highlighting athletes as entrepreneurial role models.
 40. The influence of media on boosting national pride through the representation of sports achievements.
 41. The role of media in promoting sports as a tool for strengthening cultural diplomacy.
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Intervening Factors of National Athlete Branding in Iran

Intervening factors refer to a set of variables and specific categories that influence the core phenomenon and its strategies. In this context, 34 sub-themes were identified as intervening factors for national athlete branding in Iran. These codes were grouped into three main themes: political conditions, economic instability, and social challenges. The sub-themes and main themes of the intervening factors for national athlete branding in Iran are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Intervening Factors in Branding National Athletes in Iran

General Category	Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Intervening Factors	Political Conditions	1. Athlete brand deterioration due to political statements.
		2. Security agencies' interference in sports branding projects.
		3. Damage to the reputation and brand image of migrant athletes.
		4. Lack of legal protection for athletes against political rumors.
		5. The absence of a proper framework for athlete participation in sports diplomacy.
		6. Lack of transparency in managing political news related to athletes.
		7. Absence of educational programs for athletes to handle political crises.
		8. Negative perception of athletes active on social media.
		9. Lack of educational programs to enhance athletes' political literacy.
	Economic Instability	10. Impact of severe currency fluctuations on reducing the value of athletes' sponsorship contracts.
		11. The declining interest of domestic companies in investing in sports due to economic recession.
		12. Effect of banking sanctions on restricting athletes' access to international earnings.
		13. The decline in fans' purchasing power and its impact on sales of athlete-related products.
		14. Devaluation of athlete brands due to economic crises and decreased public trust.
		15. Impact of currency depreciation on athletes' limited access to professional equipment.
		16. Reduced willingness of foreign brands to collaborate with Iranian athletes.
		17. Effect of economic crises on reduced athlete participation in social projects.
		18. Impact of economic downturns on decreased investment in sports-related industries.
		19. The declining interest of athletes in advertising is due to economic risks.
		20. Effect of economic crises on reducing athletes' quality of life.
		21. The exploitation of athletes by domestic companies for advertising purposes.
		22. Decreased interest of athletes in investing in personal businesses.
		23. Impact of economic crises on reduced athlete participation in international events.
	Social Challenges	24. The impact of widespread rumors on social media in damaging athletes' public image.
		25. Social pressure on athletes to participate in political and social movements.
		26. The effect of sudden changes in social trends on athletes' popularity.
		27. Social pressure on athletes to engage in charitable and community activities.
		28. The impact of sudden changes in media consumption patterns on athletes' audience reach.
		29. The effect of social crises on reducing athlete participation in public events.
		30. The impact of sudden shifts in social values on athletes' status as role models.
		31. Social pressure on athletes to participate in national and religious ceremonies.
		32. The effect of social crises on reduced fan support for athletes.
		33. Social pressure on athletes to balance personal identity with collective expectations.
		34. The impact of sudden shifts in gender perceptions on the status of female athletes.

Strategies for National Athlete Branding in Iran

Strategies are actions taken in response to the core phenomenon and are influenced by intervening factors and contextual conditions. In this context, 40 sub-themes were identified as strategies for national athlete branding in Iran. These codes were grouped into three main themes: educational strategies, financial strategies, and cultural strategies. The sub-themes and main themes of the strategies for national athlete branding in Iran are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Branding Strategies for National Athletes in Iran

General Category	Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Strategies	Educational Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Providing legal training for athletes regarding sponsorship contracts. 2. Media literacy training for athletes to manage their personal brand image. 3. Financial education for athletes on income management. 4. Communication skills training for athletes to engage with fans. 5. Training athletes on the use of emerging technologies. 6. Digital skills training for athletes to create content. 7. Personal brand management training for athletes. 8. Negotiation skills training for athletes in contract discussions. 9. Crisis management training for athletes regarding political issues. 10. Leadership skills training for athletes to engage in social projects. 11. Entrepreneurship training for athletes. 12. Financial crisis management training for athletes. 13. Diplomacy skills training for athletes in international interactions.
	Financial Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Attracting Domestic Sponsors for Less-Publicized Sports. 15. Establishing an online store for athlete-signed merchandise. 16. Utilizing athletes in advertising high-quality Iranian products. 17. Creating a support fund for retired athletes. 18. Engaging athletes in tourism advertising campaigns. 19. Launching advertising campaigns in collaboration with athletes. 20. Establishing a support fund for athletes from underprivileged regions. 21. Utilizing athletes in advertising cultural products. 22. Launching advertising campaigns with the participation of female athletes. 23. Creating a support fund for low-income athletes. 24. Utilizing athletes in advertising sports-related products.
	Cultural Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 25. Engaging athletes in life skills education for teenagers. 26. Utilizing athletes in advertising cultural products. 27. Integrating sports with art and literature in advertisements. 28. Producing engaging documentaries on the lives of athletes from underprivileged regions. 29. Featuring athletes in advertisements for artistic products. 30. Establishing a virtual sports museum showcasing the lives and achievements of national athletes. 31. Organizing art exhibitions with athlete participation. 32. Launching cultural campaigns featuring athletes to promote Iran's cultural heritage. 33. Developing a digital platform to narrate sports stories using literature and performing arts. 34. Featuring athletes in advertisements for historical films and series to strengthen national identity. 35. Producing cultural podcasts with athletes discussing the role of sports in Iran's history and culture. 36. Providing cultural and sports tours with athlete participation to introduce historical attractions. 37. Creating illustrated books for children featuring athletes as role models for success. 38. Engaging athletes in advertisements for museums and historical sites to attract tourists. 39. Promoting traditional Iranian sports, such as Zurkhaneh (ancient Persian sport) or Chogan (polo), with athlete participation. 40. Developing video games featuring athletes, incorporating elements of Iranian culture.

Outcomes of National Athlete Branding in Iran

Outcomes refer to the results of implementing strategies for national athlete branding in Iran. In this context, 45 sub-themes were identified as outcomes of national athlete branding in Iran. These codes were grouped into three main themes: economic transformations, social changes, and identity reconstruction. The sub-themes and main themes of the outcomes of national athlete branding in Iran are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Outcomes of Branding National Athletes in Iran

General Category	Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Outcomes	Economic Transformations	1. Growth of sports-related industries such as video games, films, and cultural products.
		2. Increase in the export of sports products branded by athletes to global markets.
		3. Attraction of foreign investment into Iran's sports industry through athlete branding.
		4. Creation of sustainable employment opportunities in sports brand management for young professionals.
		5. Expansion of the digital economy through sports content production by athletes.
		6. Increased athlete income through participation in cultural and artistic projects.
		7. Development of sports tourism with athletes as cultural attractions.
		8. Greater private sector participation in sports due to the appeal of athlete brands.
		9. Growth of the sports fashion and apparel industry inspired by athlete branding.
		10. Establishment of new markets for athlete-related products.
		11. The increased economic value of less-publicized sports.
		12. Expansion of the sports advertising industry through athlete branding.
		13. Enhanced athlete participation in sports and technology startups.
		14. Development of the sports media industry with a focus on professional content production.
		15. Growth of the circular economy through the recycling of sports equipment.
	Social Changes	16. Strengthening resilience and perseverance in society by modeling athletes' success.
		17. Bridging generational gaps through athlete participation in social and cultural projects.
		18. Increasing women's participation in sports by following the example of successful female athletes.
		19. Enhancing national unity through sports achievements and athlete branding.
		20. Reducing social violence by promoting sports as a tool for peace and friendship.
		21. Encouraging youth engagement in social activities by using athletes as role models.
		22. Strengthening national identity by positioning athletes as cultural ambassadors of Iran.
		23. Reducing social inequalities by supporting athletes from underprivileged regions.
		24. Increasing athlete participation in environmental initiatives and promoting a healthy lifestyle.
		25. Fostering an entrepreneurial spirit in society by modeling successful athletes.
		26. Minimizing political controversies surrounding athletes by strengthening their personal brands.
		27. Increasing athlete involvement in charitable and humanitarian activities.
		28. Improving public perceptions of female athletes as role models for success.
		29. Enhancing athlete participation in national projects to boost national pride.
		30. Mitigating the impact of rumors and negative news on athletes' public image through professional brand management.
		Identity

Reconstruction	<p>resilience and success.</p> <p>32. Creating an appealing image of athletes as multidimensional role models in sports, culture, and society.</p> <p>33. Reinforcing cultural identity by integrating sports with Iran's cultural heritage.</p> <p>34. Establishing a positive image of female athletes as symbols of success.</p> <p>35. Enhancing athletes' social identity by portraying them as influential societal figures.</p> <p>36. Positioning Iranian athletes globally as ambassadors of Iran's culture and arts.</p> <p>37. Strengthening athletes' personal identity by maintaining a balance between personal and professional life.</p> <p>38. Promoting a positive image of athletes from underprivileged regions as symbols of resilience.</p> <p>39. Enhancing athletes' artistic identity through participation in cultural and artistic projects.</p> <p>40. Creating a positive image of retired athletes.</p> <p>41. Strengthening athletes' digital identity through professional content creation in online spaces.</p> <p>42. Portraying athletes from ethnic minorities as symbols of national unity.</p> <p>43. Enhancing athletes' personal brand through involvement in environmental sustainability projects.</p> <p>44. Establishing a positive image of young athletes as future role models.</p> <p>45. Strengthening athletes' international identity by engaging in global events.</p>
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Figure 1 presents the final research model.

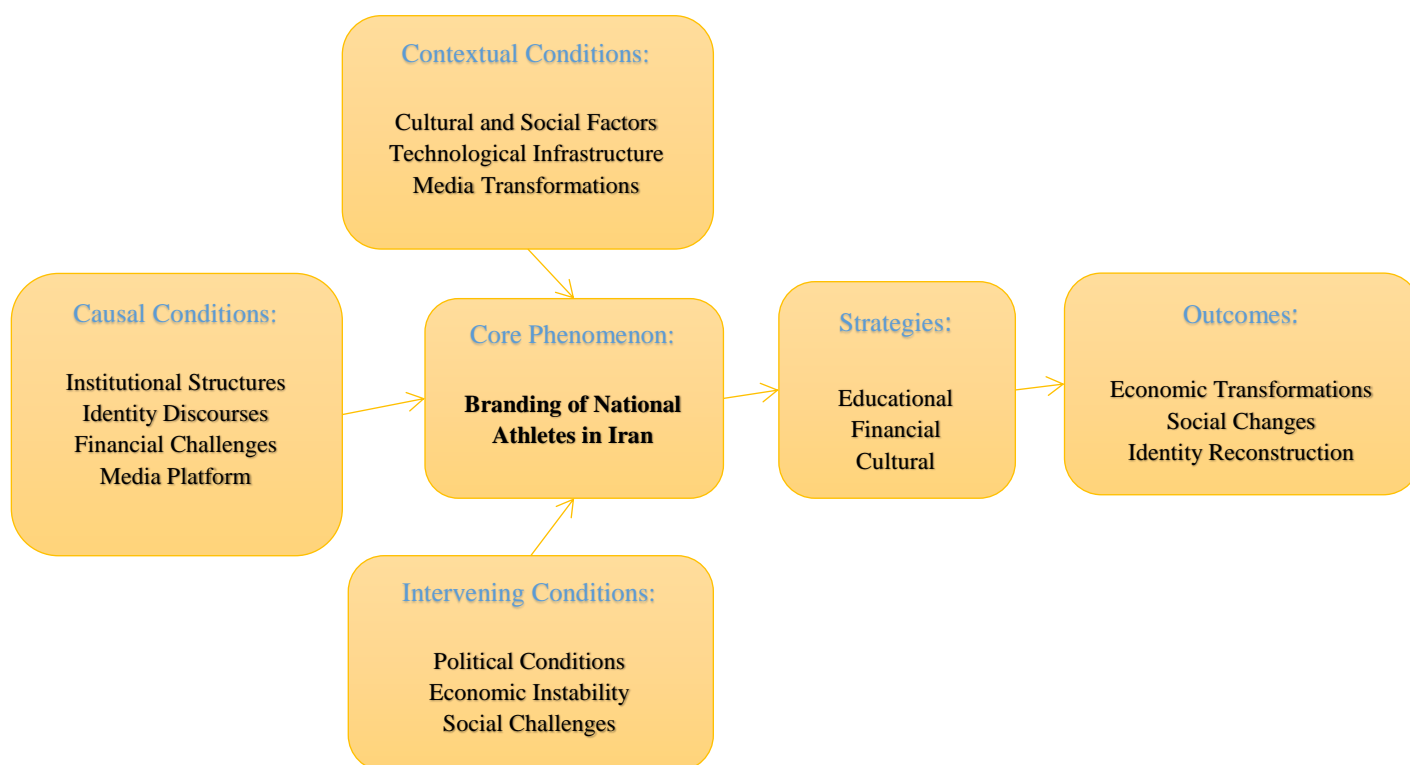


Figure 1. Providing a Branding Model for National Athletes in Iran

Discussion and Conclusion

The discussion and conclusion of this study are organized around five principal analytical dimensions derived from the grounded theory approach: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening factors, strategies, and outcomes. Each category reflects a critical layer in understanding the branding of national athletes in Iran. The causal conditions uncover foundational limitations rooted in institutional inefficiencies, cultural conflicts, financial instability, and a fragmented media

landscape all of which hinder the emergence of a consistent branding model. The contextual conditions highlight broader socio cultural, technological, and media-based environments that influence branding practices, often simultaneously offering possibilities and posing barriers. Intervening factors encompass external and often uncontrollable elements most notably political, economic, and social forces that complicate or obstruct the branding process. In reaction to these challenges, a series of strategies including educational, financial, and cultural approaches are proposed to empower athletes and cultivate a resilient, localized branding infrastructure. Lastly, the outcomes demonstrate the broad potential of athlete branding to drive positive transformation across economic development, social cohesion, and national identity. Collectively, these five interconnected components form a holistic framework for analyzing and advancing athlete branding within the Iranian context.

The analysis of causal conditions in the branding of national athletes in Iran reveals that this phenomenon has emerged within institutional, cultural, financial, and media contexts that lack cohesion and effectiveness. In the realm of institutional structures, the absence of legal frameworks to protect athletes' image and intellectual property, the lack of standardized sponsorship contracts, and the unavailability of independent brand evaluation bodies have created an ambiguous and fragmented environment for brand development. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive athlete databases and support mechanisms for retired or inactive athletes disrupts the brand life cycle and hinders long-term sustainability. As a result, branding often remains an individual, sporadic, and unstructured endeavor. Regarding identity discourses, athlete brands in Iran lack coherent frameworks for representing their multifaceted social and personal identities. Conflicts between traditional expectations of female athletes and modern societal demands, the absence of culturally grounded models based on Islamic values, and the instrumental use of athletes by state institutions have all weakened brand consistency. This has not only obstructed deep audience connection but has also left athletes vulnerable to social backlash. On the financial front, the lack of stable income sources, limited financial support for non football sports, and inadequate financial literacy training have marginalized the economic potential of athlete brands. Heavy reliance on government funding and minimal private sector involvement have further destabilized the economic image of these brands. Finally, the media landscape dominated by excessive focus on football, insufficient representation of female athletes, and a lack of media literacy among athletes has failed to support brand growth and instead intensified vulnerability during media crises. Together, these causal conditions highlight the urgent need for systemic reform across four dimensions institutional structures, identity discourses, financial challenges, and media context starting from macro level policymaking and extending beyond athlete-centric support. These causal conditions align with the foundational arguments of the study and prior research (Zhou et al., 2020; Gorbatoev et al., 2018; Christiansen, 2022; Sprong et al., 2021), as both emphasize the fragmented infrastructure, cultural tension, and limited financial-media support in Iranian athlete branding. The alignment stems from the shared recognition that branding in Iran is constrained by systemic deficiencies, reinforcing the need for a comprehensive, context-sensitive model rooted in institutional reform and cultural legitimacy.

The analysis of contextual conditions reveals that the branding process of Iranian national athletes operates within a landscape rich in potential yet constrained by dysfunctional and incompatible structures across cultural, technological, and media domains. In the socio-cultural sphere, a notable duality emerges: society expects athletes to embody ethical, national, and cultural ideals, while simultaneously limiting the expression of their authentic, multidimensional identities. Tensions between traditional and modern values, societal pressure to maintain a flawless public image, and compulsory participation in national-religious ceremonies place athletes in a complex and often contradictory position when seeking to establish a stable personal brand. Despite their positive role in bridging generational divides and promoting healthy lifestyles, institutional frameworks to support such social contributions remain absent. In the technological domain, a pronounced gap

exists between global advancements and the limited digital access afforded to Iranian athletes. Barriers such as unequal access to digital platforms, lack of professional content creation tools, inadequate training in emerging technologies, and the restrictive impact of internet censorship have severely curtailed digital branding opportunities. While innovations like AI, virtual and augmented reality, and blockchain present transformative possibilities, institutional inaction and infrastructural shortcomings have left Iranian athlete brands lagging behind on the international stage. Media evolution, though full of potential, suffers from strategic paralysis. Domestic media remain fixated on clichéd portrayals and medal-centric narratives, with little investment in long-term branding or human storytelling. The underrepresentation of female athletes and marginalized communities further highlights the passive role of media as consumers rather than creators of brand meaning. These contextual conditions align with the study's core arguments and previous research (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Hasanzadeh et al., 2022; Arora & Stoner, 2009), as both emphasize the tension between societal expectations and personal identity, digital underdevelopment, and media inefficiency in athlete branding. The alignment arises from the mutual acknowledgment that cultural rigidity, technological lag, and passive media structures hinder athletes' ability to build authentic and sustainable personal brands.

The analysis of intervening factors in the branding of Iranian national athletes reveals that the process is not merely shaped by internal dynamics; rather, it is heavily influenced by uncontrollable external forces. Foremost among these are political conditions, where direct and indirect interventions such as the public defamation of athletes for political statements, lack of legal protection against rumors, and negative perceptions of athletes' online activities have created a restrictive and uncertain branding environment. In such a context, many athletes resort to cautious self presentation, foregoing the strategic use of their social capital, which in turn renders their personal brand highly vulnerable to political exploitation. Economically, chronic instability manifested in currency fluctuations, diminished fan purchasing power, limited foreign financial engagement due to sanctions, and the withdrawal of sponsors has severely curtailed the economic potential of athlete branding. Rather than cultivating long term value, athletes are compelled to focus on survival, transforming the brand development process into a reactive and transient endeavor rather than a strategic, future-oriented one. On the social front, athletes face multifaceted pressures, including waves of online rumors and public expectations to participate in charitable, political, or religious events. These intersecting demands often place athletes in conflicting roles. For female athletes in particular, shifting social values and evolving gender norms have introduced additional identity challenges, making personal branding efforts increasingly unstable. Collectively, these intervening factors operate less as overt barriers and more as persistent pressures that erode the foundations of sustainable branding. Effective brand management in this context necessitates flexible, adaptive, and resilient strategies that can withstand political, economic, and social volatility. These intervening factors align with the study's central concerns and prior literature (Christiansen, 2022; Sadeghi et al., 2023; Arora & Stoner, 2009), all of which stress the disruptive influence of political instability, economic volatility, and social pressure on personal branding. The alignment stems from their shared recognition that Iranian athletes operate under constant external tension, requiring adaptive branding strategies that prioritize resilience over idealized image construction.

The findings of this study underscore that despite structural, cultural, and economic constraints, the branding of Iranian national athletes holds significant potential for revitalization provided that proposed strategies are not only operational and localized but also multi-level and interdisciplinary in nature. Among these, educational strategies form the foundation. Without enhancing athletes' core knowledge and skills, other aspects of branding will lack stability and depth. Legal literacy regarding sponsorship contracts, proficiency in digital and media skills, financial literacy, and competencies in negotiation, leadership, and diplomacy can transform athletes from passive content recipients into empowered brand agents. Such training extends beyond technical expertise, enabling

athletes to redefine their societal role and influence. Financial strategies represent the second layer, functioning as the economic engine for brand sustainability. In an environment where revenue opportunities are uneven and often short-lived, solutions such as launching branded digital stores, engaging in collaborative advertising with cultural and tourism sectors, and establishing support funds for underrepresented groups such as retired athletes, women, and those in underserved regions can foster a more equitable economic landscape. Moreover, participating in domestic advertising campaigns strengthens the connection between athletes' personal brands and national identity. The third strategic dimension is cultural. Here, the emphasis lies in fostering layered identity representation and expanding the meaning of athlete branding. Leveraging athletes in cultural productions such as documentaries, podcasts, digital games, and artistic projects elevates their status from mere sports figures to cultural icons. These repositioning paves the way for active engagement in cultural diplomacy and informal education, while reinforcing national identity and indigenous values. Collectively, these three strategic pillars provide an actionable roadmap for shifting from a reactive branding model to one that is sustainable, multifaceted, and aligned with the country's internal capacities. Realizing this vision requires coordinated collaboration among educational institutions, the private sector, and cultural agencies to ensure that athlete branding in Iran becomes a true reflection of national capability, identity, and vision. These strategic pathways align with the study's broader objectives and resonate with previous research (Sprong et al., 2021; Gorbatov et al., 2018; Hasanzadeh et al., 2022), which emphasize that sustainable personal branding requires a multi-dimensional approach integrating education, economics, and culture. The alignment is rooted in the shared understanding that empowering athletes through targeted skill-building, financial innovation, and cultural repositioning is essential for transforming them into active brand agents who reflect national values and drive long term impact.

The analysis of the consequences of branding national athletes in Iran reveals that, when designed and implemented strategically, this process has the potential to generate far reaching and cross-sectoral impacts transforming not only the realm of sports but also economic structures, social dynamics, and national identity. Economically, athlete branding acts as a catalyst for emerging value chains. It stimulates the growth of adjacent industries such as video games, sports fashion, advertising, and film, while facilitating the export of athlete-branded products to global markets. These dynamics directly contribute to youth employment, attract foreign investment, and advance Iran's digital economy. Moreover, athlete engagement in tourism and cultural campaigns enables new market creation and enhances the global profile of Iranian sports. On a social level, branded athletes can serve as powerful agents of social capital. When built upon transparency, identity cohesion, and public engagement, athlete brands contribute to violence reduction, youth and women's empowerment, and the promotion of civic participation. Through involvement in charitable, environmental, and cultural initiatives, athletes transcend their role as sports heroes and emerge as social actors and inspirational figures within society strengthening national solidarity and intergenerational dialogue. Perhaps the most profound impact is seen in the realm of identity reconstruction. Branding redefines athletes not merely as medalists, but as cultural ambassadors, social representatives, and bearers of national values. Participation in media, artistic, and international projects enables the formation of multi-layered identities personal, cultural, digital, and global. Underrepresented groups such as women, retired athletes, youth, and ethnic minorities gain visibility and influence, becoming symbols of unity, resilience, and pride for both domestic and international audiences. Ultimately, athlete branding is more than a marketing tool; it is a cultural and social strategy with strong economic implications. Its long-term success depends on the creation of a sustainable and goal-oriented ecosystem grounded in institutional collaboration and active social engagement. These consequences align with the study's conceptual framework and existing literature (Zhou et al., 2020; Christiansen, 2022; Hasanzadeh et al., 2022), which recognize athlete branding as a driver of economic diversification, social cohesion, and cultural representation. The alignment arises from the shared insight that strategically developed athlete

brands can transcend sport, fostering national identity, empowering marginalized groups, and contributing to broader societal transformation through multi-sectoral impact.

In conclusion, the findings of this study offer a comprehensive framework for addressing the complex landscape of athlete branding in Iran. The causal conditions emphasize the need to reform institutional structures, align identity narratives with cultural values, strengthen financial systems, and professionalize media engagement. The contextual conditions underscore the importance of leveraging socio-cultural capital, expanding digital infrastructure, and modernizing media strategies to support athlete brand growth. The intervening factors highlight the necessity of resilience in the face of political volatility, economic instability, and shifting social expectations, particularly for underrepresented groups. To navigate these challenges, the proposed strategies call for a multi-tiered approach: developing athletes' legal, financial, and digital competencies; mobilizing private sector and cross-sector support; and embedding cultural narratives in branding efforts. Ultimately, the outcomes demonstrate that effective branding can generate economic value, promote social integration, and reconstruct national identity. Therefore, policymakers, sport organizations, and media institutions must adopt an integrated and collaborative model grounded in these five dimensions to transform Iranian athletes into authentic, influential, and globally recognized brand ambassadors.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines: Ethical points have been observed.

Funding: No specific financial resources have been used.

Authors' contribution: All authors have contributed to the design and implementation of this study.

Conflict of interest: There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments: We are grateful to all individuals and organizations that helped us in this study.

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