

## **The Design of a Sports Marketing Model for Iranian Women's Professional Sport**



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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study was to design and develop a model for Iranian women's professional sports. This study adopted a qualitative approach with the grounded theory for data analysis. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. 14 sports managers and sport's marketing experts in Iran, aged between 28 to 69, were interviewed. MAXQDA pro 12.3 software was used for the three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. 296 open codes and 49 general concepts were identified which were classified into 28 main categories. Finally, the findings were classified into 9 factors as the main categories in the selective coding. The research findings identified "marketing hegemony in Iranian women's professional sports" as a central phenomenon. It is necessary to note relevant causal, context, and intervening conditions when applying the proposed strategies of research, action and reaction between the mentioned factors. Additionally, the socio-cultural conditions of Iran and the existence of beliefs and ideas of the governments and religious leaders' thoughts should be taken into account when applying the proposed model.

**KEYWORDS:** Sports marketing, Women's professional sports marketing, Muslim women's sports, Paradigm pattern

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sports and physical activities play an important role in the lives of women and girls in Muslim countries. From the popularity of boating and football in Iran to track and field in Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, and basketball in Saudi Arabia. In these countries prohibitions mostly rooted in religious beliefs, and non-observance of it are considered disrespectful to Islamic teachings. Consequently, few women can participate enthusiastically in highly-competitive sports (Qureshi & Ghouri, 2011). According to Pfister (2010), Women's sports and its development depend on a high level of support from governments and authorities. However, even in countries where there are abundant resources and willing to modernize, women face many cultural barriers (Pfister, 2010). such as legal and religious prohibitions, notoriety and social stigma, restrictions on opportunities available for women to participate in sports competitions, gender discriminations, economic and social barriers, lack of proper infrastructure, and improper implementation of government policies to women's sport (Qureshi & Ghouri, 2011). Women may face more of these problems in countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and to some extent Pakistan. Recently there has been a reduction of such barriers. For example, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia in 2018, allowed women to attend events in stadiums (Dw.com, 2018). In 2018, the World Basketball Federation, FIBA, announced that Muslim women can compete with the hijab. Iranian women basketball players were allowed to participate in international competition after a 37-year absence.

Sports activities have been considered as a developmental tool for individuals and communities. Women should have the equitable right and access to physical activities and sports events as men. However female athletes are facing challenges resulted from gender inequality throughout the world. These injustices and discriminations of sports participation are much more severe in Islamic countries (Bibi, Khan, & Khan, 2016). Despite all these shortcomings and obstacles, Muslim women have set glorious records with their performance in international competitions and have won gold, silver and, bronze medals in sporting events such as the Olympics Games, World leagues, Asian Games.

In the meantime, most countries in the world use professional sports and championship as an efficient and powerful tool for their economic, social, and cultural growth. Therefore several strategies are adopted to develop and sustain the sports and marketing has been playing an important role for this purpose and critical to the success of sports marketing. Undoubtedly, sports marketing can support the survival and growth of professional sports (Salimi, Hosseini, & Nadereyan jahromi, 2015). On the other hand, the competition for resources in sporting industry has increased, and the success of sports organizations has greatly depended on how they effectively use techniques and marketing strategies (Estiri, Aghazadeh, Rayej, & Raoufi, 2010). Past research showed the most important marketing challenge in female basketball team was the inadequate motivation for attendance fans or failures to locate appropriate target audiences (Yoh, 2014). Lack of star players in the basketball games, misguided reliance on winning games to

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produce fans, distracting fans and the inability to produce a sense of belonging among fans were identified as key reasons (Yoh, 2014). According to Lee and colleagues (2017), the attendance of "female MMA fans was more likely to be affected by environmental factors such as ticket price, quality of the facility than to social-related motives such as friends and family" (Lee, Nesbitt, Brothers, & Fuller, 2017). Women's professional sports in Iran and many Islamic countries, without advertising and television coverage face challenges in attracting sponsors. As such, they need much more resources and support compared other sectors of sports such as; sport industry, sport commercial sector, Sport's Media, men's professional sport, and especially from the governments supports (Salimi et al., 2015). It seems in countries such as Iran, the reason why sponsors do not support women's sports, because sponsorship companies would not be able to increase their sales and services, create a good image of the company in public, and compete with other companies (Estiri et al., 2010). Considering the importance of sponsors' role for sports organizations, it is essential to develop strategies for attracting sponsors to female sports teams (Najafzade, Najafzadeh, Rostami, & Morsali, 2012). Every team needs a financial sponsor to develop and operate for a long-term success. Since women's sports competitions are not broadcasted in media and in-person spectators are limited because of cultural reasons financial supports are scarce (Motemani, Hemati, & Moradi, 2014).

In Iran, several obstacles were identified for the implication of sport marketing: low confidence in sports marketing among major corporations, limited interests in sport industry and its profitability, a lack of economic and tax incentives and convincing profits estimation for potential investors appropriate economic laws to encourage industrial investors (Ghasemi, Javadipoor, & Torkfar, 2015). In terms of Iranian women's professional sports, it was well-documented that women's sport programs were the first-cuts when their ownership groups faced financial problems (Pourgachi, Heidarinejad, Shetab booshehri, & Khatibi, 2017). The eliminations of Zob Ahan and Sepahan Isfahan, Bandar Abbas Municipality, and Tejaratkhaneh Joonob were an examples of this claim (Ir/news, 2019).

Research and practice in sport management have shown that sport marketing and sponsorships play pivotal roles for the survival and growth of professional sports (Salimi, et al., 2015), and the success of sport organizations has greatly affected by the effectiveness of marketing strategies (Estiri, et al., 2010). However, unlike male sport, a successful female sport marketing practice may require different approaches to not only promote the teams and league to identified target audiences (Yoh, 2014; Lee et al., 2017), but also secure committed sponsors, from both public and private sectors, for long-term collaborations (Ghasemi, et al., 2015; Pourgachi, et al., 2017). Thus, with the importance of sport marketing to female professional sport development in Iran, this study aimed to explore the current contexts and status of marketing of Iranian female sports and factors affecting the practice of marketing. A comprehensive model, which demonstrates the marketing and management process of Iranian female professional sports, is presented to provide possible practical solutions under the social culture and conditions in Iran.

As limited sport marketing variables were found in the literature, qualitative approach was adopted to explore important and relevant marketing variables in Iranian women's professional sports and to propose a comprehensive model as research findings.

Therefore, the research purposes were:

- 1- Identifying the causal conditions affecting the marketing of Iranian women's professional sports
- 2- Identifying the context condition affecting the marketing of Iranian women's professional sports
- 3- Identifying the condition of intervention affecting the marketing of Iranian women's professional sports.
- 4- Identifying approaches and strategies affecting Iranian women's professional sports
- 5- Introducing the consequences of designing, developing, and applying a research model

### METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach with the grounded theory for data collection and analysis. Grounded theory is a qualitative method with a purpose to understand and perceive the experiences of people from events in a particular context (Khanifar, Moslemi, & Yazdani, 2017). This method is useful when limited research was conducted, no pattern, or the existent pattern does not solve the problem (Parvizi, Adib-Hajbaghery, & Salsali, 2010). Since little was known about Iranian female sport marketing, targeted interviews were conducted to identify the effective factors for developing a professional sports marketing model for Iranian female athletes. To collect data, the semi-structured interview was used. The purposefully selected samples were the professors of sports management in universities of Iran, who were actively involved in the sport administrative sectors, as well as the chairman and vice-chairman of the sports federations. Data collection process continued until saturation. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). 14 sports managers and sport's marketing experts in Iran, aged between 28 to 69, were interviewed. Six are females and the range of years of athletic administrative experience is 3 to 35. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with a directed content analysis with the aim of develop a theoretical framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Grounded theory and its coding process open coding, axial coding and selective coding were utilized. The purpose of open coding- the first stage, was to uncover concepts. Then based on the common nature of conceptual propositions, of codes they were grouped under a more abstract concept. Similar conceptual statements were classified as "main concepts". The next step was conducting the axial coding which converted the concepts derived from the first stage into categories. The third stage was the selective coding that the researchers developed the concepts of the relationship between

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the categories obtained in the axial coding pattern (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this research, guidelines of Guba and Lincoln (1989), were adopted to ensure the trustworthiness of a study.

### FINDING

#### Open Coding

From the analysis of the transcription, 296 codes were extracted, formed a total of 148 open codes. These 148 open codes were classified into 49 general concepts. The concepts were classified into 28 subcategories. Finally, the nine main categories are the result of three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. Based on the analysis of data frequency, it was found that among the 49 basic concepts extracted, the following codes are the most important ones among all.

1- Designing and developing a local marketing model for Iranian women's sports (with a frequency of 40 codes).

2- Designing a women's sports information system (with a frequency of 22 codes).

3- Attracting sponsors, financial and spiritual supporters to women’s sports (with a frequency of 20 codes).

This importance is derived from the repetition of the frequency of data and shows that experts always consider them as determining factors.

#### Axial coding

**Table 1. Coding of category concepts**

Central Phenomenon	Subcategories (Axial category)	Open Cods	Selective coding
Marketing hegemony in Iranian women's professional sports	Structural-managerial approaches	32 codes	Casual condition (104 codes)
	Weakness or the lack of marketing system in sports federations	46 codes	
	Media and Social Networks	26 codes	
	Socio-cultural and individual factors	14 codes	Context (43 codes)
	Governmental Thoughts	29 codes	Strategies (83 codes)
	Design a national marketing model for women's sports	60 codes	
	designing a professional women’s sports system	23 codes	
	Taking Advantage of the Opportunities Available to Sport Organizations and Federations	49codes	intervening conditions (66 codes)
	Approval supportive bills in the upstream documents of the country's laws	17 codes	

In the second stage, the coding of Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) paradigm patterns was used for axial coding. This paradigm pattern helps theorists to simplify the process of theorizing. Axial coding components include: Causal Conditions, Axial Phenomenon, Context, Intervening Conditions, Action/interaction Strategies, and Consequences. The cods and concepts identified in the previous stage were examinee in the current stage with the described approach. The paradigmatic pattern as the analysis results was presented as the Figure 1.

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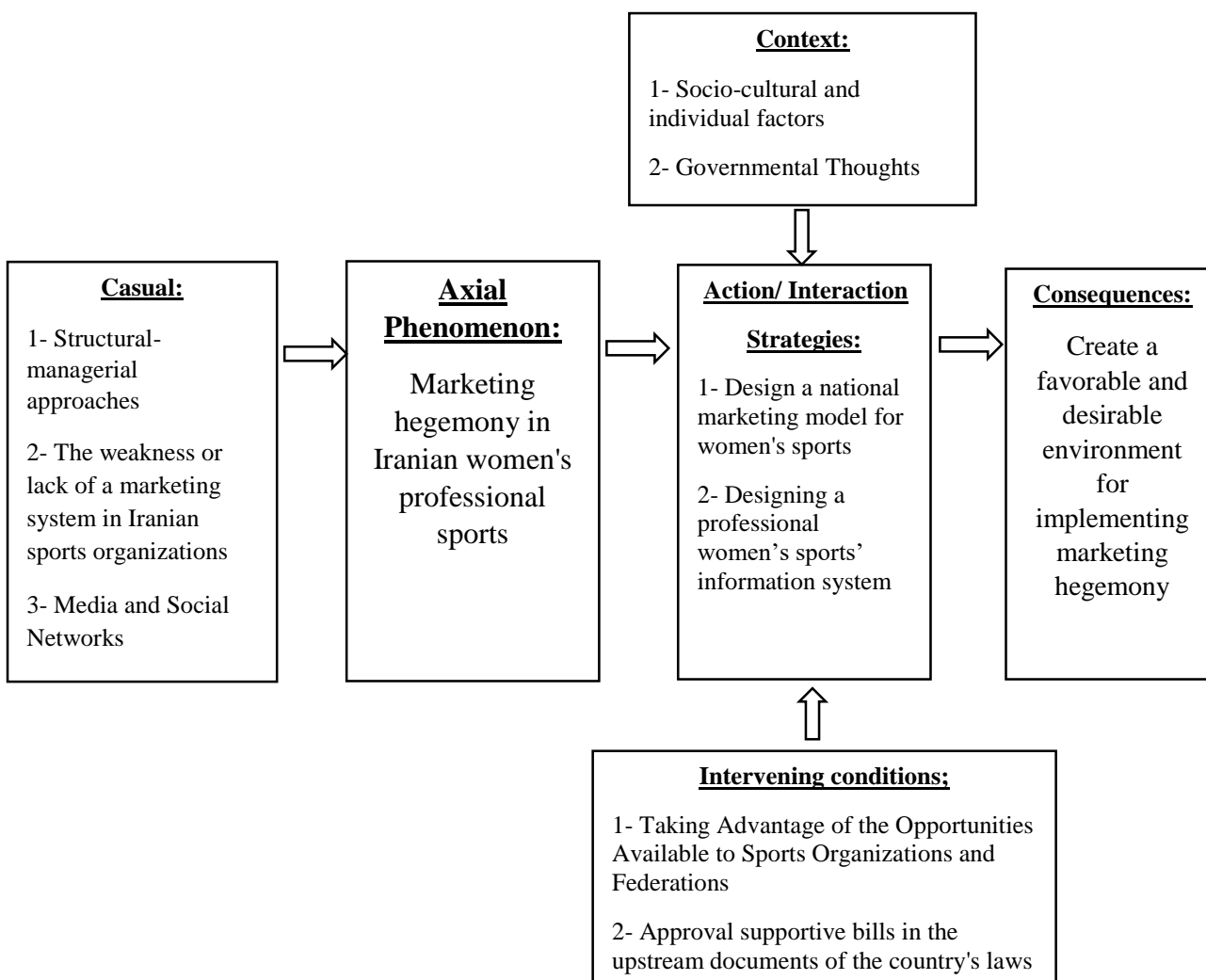


Figure 1. Paradigm pattern

### Selective coding

#### To Answer the First Purpose:

Causal conditions include factors that affect the central phenomenon or the current formation of the Iranian women's sports market. Factors that involve different stakeholders and each of them should address the current situation, solve their problems and contradictions to improve the marketing of professional sports for women. The results are driven from participant’s ideas show that among the three causal factors, the most important is the weakness or lack of marketing system in sports federations (37.2%), and the least important is related to the media (29.5%).

#### To Answer the Second Purpose:

It should be noted that the marketing of women's professional sports in Iran faces limitations. Some of which are related to context issues. Therefore, to achieve the desired marketing situation in Iranian women's sports, it is necessary to consider the basic requirements. The finding of the context condition analysis based on sports’ experts showed; the most important factors were socio-cultural and individual factors (69.6%), and the least important were governmental ideas, belief and thought (30.4%).

#### To Answer the Third Purpose:

The intervening condition has the desired consequences by influencing the strategies. Among the two factors that constitute intervening factors, the most important is related to taking advantage of the opportunities available to sport organizations and federations (73%), and the least important is related to approve supportive bills in the upstream documents of the country's laws (27%).

#### To Answer the Fourth Purpose:

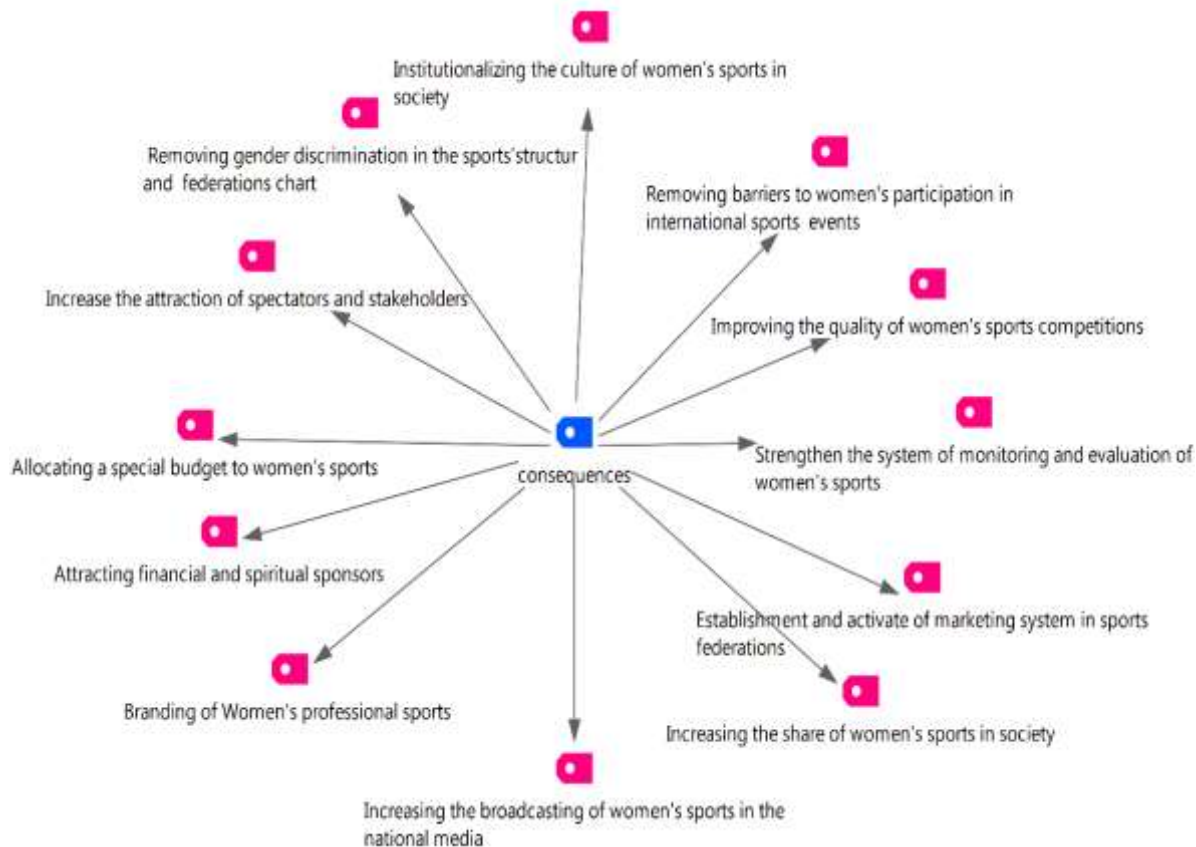
Strategies are specific actions or interactions that are resulted from the main phenomenon. Iranian society has its conditions and requirements, then sports activities cannot go beyond that. Achieving the desired condition that can be depicted for marketing in the women's professional sports sector requires special strategies and mechanisms of this unique system. These ideas were taken from

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participant's announcements. It was found that the categories that makeup strategies are two factors. Among these two factors, the most important is the design and development of a national model of Iranian women's professional sports (55%) and the less important is the design of the Iranian women's professional sports information system (45%).

### CONSEQUENCES

Consequences are the outputs obtained from the use of the strategies. By applying the correct principles of sports marketing and paying attention to the effective cases mentioned in women's sports marketing, we could see positive results and consequences that indicate the desirability of using scientific-professional and local marketing.



### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to design and develop a comprehensive model of professional sports marketing for Iranian female athletes. What came out of the data was that this central phenomenon must be a concept beyond the factors influencing marketing. Factors that think beyond just paying attention to the importance of the Ps marketing mix.

Cultural, religious, ethnic, political and economic factors of Iranian society should have been considered in choosing the central phenomenon. Due to the importance of these factors, the researchers decided to choose "the marketing hegemony in Iranian women's professional sports" as a central phenomenon. Marketing hegemony means the domination and influence of marketing science on all aspects of Iranian women's professional sports. It means removing the existing barriers to the implementation of scientific-specialized marketing in women's sports, and the complete mastery of sports marketing in all aspects of women's professional sports.

#### Casual condition

Despite the increase in the number of women in the workplace, there is no significant increase in managerial positions. Sports organizations, like other organizations, are subjected to gender bias and discrimination. These gender inequalities are much higher in sports organizations, and women face personal, organizational, and social barriers to holding managerial positions (Kara, Çolakoğlu, & OGUT, 2016). In addition to managerial problems, the lack of proper sports facilities and equipment and access to it, are also the factors that cause the negative effects and slow down of female athletes progress (Ramazaninezhad, Mollaie, & Khalili nodehi, 2016).

Previous studies showed, women's professional sports have not been able to attract the attention of the media. In other words, it is minor and secondary to men's sports (Lee, Kalik, & Alexander Brothers, 2017). Losing publicity in women's sports means that fewer entrants (spectators) and less rewards go to female athletes. Sponsors want to find a market for their products by investing in sports that attract large crowds such as football, cricket, and motorcycling (Lee, Kalik, et al., 2017). Meanwhile, the media play a key role in introducing and promoting women's sports and women athletes but women are often portrayed in the media as sexual



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tools. Something that tarnishes women's position and discourages men from attending their wives workouts and sports activities (Abisha & Vincent, 2015). Sports organizations in Muslim countries should design their sports programs in a way that is desirable and pleasing to women and girls. Increase their attitude towards sports and physical activities. Consequently, increase the number of female athletes participants in international and Olympic sporting events (Marwat, Syed, Muhammad, Hazratullah, & Safeena, 2014).

Participants in this study announced that; the formal- legal condition of the media towards women's sports, the domination of the Iranian government over radio and television, discrimination in the television broadcasting of women's sports, the lack of interaction between the sports structure and federations with the national media have created unsuitable conditions for women's sports. It is necessary to reform, change the attitude and fundamental interaction of Iranian sports, especially women's sports, with the mass media and the national media. The mentioned causal factors create the current marketing conditions in Iranian women's professional sports, which are not favorable conditions.

### **Context conditions**

Sport is one of the most important human activities in the modern era. Due to its breadth and pervasiveness, becoming a social institution, and doing it, is one of the necessities of life. The first factor of the context refers to the socio-cultural and individual barriers of Iranian women athletes. Factors such as dated or old-fashioned ideas and beliefs institutionalized in society about women's sports, cultural problems, instrumental view of women whose main and final task are marriage, parenting, and housekeeping are among the wrong socio-cultural views that reduce women's motivation to participate in sports activities.

In some parts of the multinational country such as India women are traditionally not encouraged to play sports because it is considered a male activity. In such countries, sport is a full-fledged mirror to expose this oppression and abuse that is rooted in the heart of society. There are social factors such as lower wages and fewer opportunities for women athletes in these societies to create a social structure of unequal status and injustice for women in sports (SUBBA, 2018).

The second factor identified in this study was the ideology of the government and the authorities. The thoughts and political-religious attitudes of religious leaders and imitators, as well as obstacles to sending female athletes to overseas sporting events.

In some Islamic societies, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and to some extent Pakistan, the orders and fatwas of religious leaders and imitators have directly and indirectly overshadowed most aspects of people's lives (Qureshi & Ghouri, 2011). From the fatwa of banning watching matches such as football, wrestling, and weightlifting to the presence of women in stadiums and their participation in international sporting events.

In order to successfully implement the marketing components in women's professional sports. Sports' managers who were interwoven in this study suggested "paying attention to the context conditional such as the use of images of elite female athletes in textbooks, the use of movies and television to promote sports culture in families, and the institutionalization of women's sports culture in society seems necessary and requirement". They believed "attracting the attention of religious leaders to women's sports and promoting women's sports by using the potential of their influence in society can facilitate this context factor". It is also recommended by them to remove barriers to sending athletes to overseas sporting events and to provide an adequate budget for women's sports, as well as to eliminate discrimination in prioritizing men's sports for international competitions

### **The intervening conditions**

One of the ways to introduce women's sports to society to create a suitable market in this sector is to attract spectators and their presence in sports venues. The not-so-high quality of women's competitions does not motivate spectators to attend. By raising the quality level of competitions and professional games that women athletes show, the spectators should be attracted to their games.

The more crowded these environments become, the better it becomes for advertisers and marketers to promote their productions. Another important issue is the creation of a campaign for supporters of women's professional sports. Three of the interviewees have this idea that "we have charities in the community that works together to build schools, mosques, and health centers. They participate in good deeds under various pretexts". Sportswomen should try to attract the attention of these valuable assets to the women's sports environment and create a campaign for women's sports fans by creating a proper culture. These suggestions are extracted from this research.

The second intervening factor was the approval of supportive bills in the upstream documents of the country's laws. In Iran, due to the regulations, holders of Olympic, Asian, and world championship medals can use educational facilities, employment, living facilities, sports disability insurance, as much as possible (Mozafare, 2009). According to the champions' athletes, these facilities are mostly promotional and in practice, either do not exist or their amount is very small. A clear example of this is the non-timely payment of champions' bonuses (Ramazaninezhad et al., 2016).

### **Action/ Interaction Strategies**

The first factor required the need to design a women's professional sports information system.

The suggestions existing from participants ideas in this current study for this part included: "the branding of women's sports, designing specialized and desirable sports clothing, justice in the geography of sports development, explaining and developing

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transnational ideas about women's sports, and designing a women's sports information system". Creating a brand of women's sports means creating credibility with the customer. The key to creating a successful brand is to look at branding as an investment, not a cost. Branding of women's professional sports is one of the most important tasks that the relevant sports organizations should include in the strategic plans of their federation. Attracting financial and spiritual sponsors such as; Creative competition between companies to sponsor in the women's professional sports sector, developing support packages for supporters, segmenting sponsors into different markets, contracts with occasional sponsors. They also believed in this recommendation that "tax exemptions and facilities for sponsors, directing light industries such as gold, jewelry, and cosmetics to support women's sports". Identifying sponsors' goals, and their motivations are effective and significant strategies that in this sector participants mentioned to it.

Marketers need to know how to use the potential of athletes and participants in events to promote their brand by using prizes and gifts. On the other hand, it should be taken into account that women's sports teams should also work to maintain good sponsors to be able to provide these prizes and gifts (Lee, Nesbitt, et al., 2017).

The findings of this study consider; it necessary to pay attention to the unique conditions of Iranian society and the impact of this special system on sports activities, especially in women's sports.

### **CONCLUSSION**

#### **Explain the proposed research model and the consequences of applying marketing hegemony in Iranian women's professional sports**

According to Creswell (2005), causal conditions affect the central phenomenon, the axial phenomena, intervening, and cotext condition affect the strategies and the strategies affect the consequences (Creswell, 2005). This study aimed to design and develop a favorable model for marketing professional sports for female athletes in Iran. Based on the paradigm model of the research, the current situation of Iranian women's professional sports marketing is formed under the influence of causal factors related to the legal conditions of the media, weakness, or lack of marketing system in federations, structural-managerial approaches to sports in Iran. The central phenomenon, marketing hegemony in Iranian women's professional sports, is the key solution to change the existing causal conditions. Marketing hegemony in women's professional sports is like an umbrella that should cover and dominate all aspects of women's sports marketing. If this hegemony is used properly, we would see favorable results in the marketing of Iranian women's professional sports. Changing procedures and interactions between causal factors will lead to the development of marketing in this sector.

Marketing hegemony in women's professional sports is an idea or image that is the basis of theorizing the phenomenon of women's sports marketing. It could have beneficial consequences if the use of appropriate strategies in the program and purpose of federations will being considered. Designing a women's professional sports information system and using a localization model was suggested as a solution in this section. Due to the cultural and ethnic diversity in Iran, the use of a fixed pattern is not recommended. The pattern that works in the central regions of Iran may not be appropriate in the border regions due to differences in their beliefs and culture. It also suggested, depending on the popularity of a sport among women, the appropriate pattern for one federation may differ from another.

Of course, these strategies must be formed according to the governing ideas of the society. Iran is neither the largest Islamic country, nor the origin of Islam, but the Islamic Republic of Iran has very unique conditions. This country is the only country in the world where the hijab is mandatory in all regions, and this issue should be considered to take in all parts of this marketing hegemony. Governmental ideas are the thoughts, beliefs, and orders of religious leaders that directly and indirectly influence the policies and laws governing Iran. Therefore, strategies adopted for the marketing hegemony of women's sports must be allowed to take place in the socio-cultural conditions of the country, despite the religious and governmental thoughts. Undoubtedly, taking advantage of the opportunities that exist for sports federations and approval of supportive bills in the upstream documents of the country's laws are necessary for the success of effective strategies in this hegemony, such as allowing women's to entrance stadiums. By using these intervening, the strategies will lead to consequences. The final consequence of implementing this model is a favorable situation in the marketing of women's professional sports. Proper implementation of these strategies can have consequences for changing attitudes and beliefs towards female athletes in society. Institutionalizing the culture of women's sports and securing the future career of elite athletes. The consequences of the interaction of sports organizations with the media and social networks have caused more people to pay attention to women's sports, and this in turn has attracted the attention of investors and sponsors to support women's sports.

The mentioned consequences of this research have been emphasized in several pieces of research as effective components in the marketing of women's professional sports. Among the researches of researchers such as (Salimi et al., 2015), they pointed to the obstacles to the development of sports marketing in Iran, (Najafzade et al., 2012), the effective factors in the development of sports marketing for women in West Azerbaijan province. (Ghasemi et al., 2015), pointed to the identification of barriers to sports marketing in Iran, and (Lee, Nesbitt, et al., 2017), examined marketing approaches in martial arts and female athletes in these disciplines, as well as (Yoh, 2014) (Yoh, 2014), who sought to market in college Women's basketball (USA) and (Fallatah, Seok Pyo, & Alsaleh, 2019), also noted the importance of these components.

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