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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Government-Centered Media Model for Empowering Nascent Sports Startups

Farshad Naderi¹ | Sirous Ahmadi^{2✉} | Majid Solimani³

1. Ph.D. Candidate Sports Management, Ha.c., Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran. E-mail: farshadn58@gmail.com
2. Corresponding author, Department of Physical Education, Ha.c., Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran. E-mail: sirous.ahmadi54@iau.ac.ir
3. Department of Physical Education, Mal.c., Islamic Azad University, Malayer, Iran. E-mail: majid.soleymani@iau.ac.ir

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

Over the past decade, sports startups have been recognized as one of the most significant driving forces in the innovation economy, public health, and sustainable social development. The rapid growth of digital technologies, the spread of healthy lifestyles, and the global focus on the experience-based economy have provided a favorable environment for the development of new businesses in the sports sector. These startups have emerged in the form of training platforms, mobility-based applications, sports health services, sports tourism, and innovations in sports equipment, and have responded to social challenges by combining technical knowledge, media, and creativity. Overall, domestic and international empirical background indicates that the growth

of sports startups requires not only technological infrastructure and financial resources but also structured media support. Without a clear media policy, these businesses cannot achieve a stable social position, public trust, or support networks; therefore, designing a national media model that institutionalizes the relationship between the government, the media, and sports startups is an undeniable necessity for the development of this dynamic and emerging sector.

Method:

This is a qualitative study with an exploratory and content analysis approach. The statistical population consisted of four main groups: founders of emerging sports startups in Iran; media experts with experience in sports and policy-making; managers of government institutions related to innovation and sports (Ministry of Sports, Ministry of Communications, and growth centers); and academic professors specializing in sports entrepreneurship and social media. Sampling was carried out purposively using the snowball method. The inclusion criteria for the sample included: experience in launching a sports startup, professional connection with policy-making or the media, or publication of scientific/executive works in the field of sports innovation. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with the average duration of each interview ranging from 45 to 75 minutes. The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was reached. For data analysis, the content analysis method based on the six-step model of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used. MaxQDA software was used for coding, reviewing, and extracting themes. The analysis steps included familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, creating themes, reviewing themes, naming them, and compiling the final report.

Findings:

The analysis process was conducted using an inductive approach, and a total of 4 overarching themes, 13 organizing themes, and 36 basic themes were extracted. The overarching themes identified are: government macro-policymaking in the media field, weak media infrastructure to support startups, communication breakdown between media and startup founders, and hidden media capacities to support sports innovation. The findings showed that inefficiency in media policy, lack of formal communication platforms, weak narrative skills, and failure to utilize new media capacities are among the most important obstacles to the visibility and growth of sports startups. Additionally, the conceptual model designed in this study illustrates a modifiable cycle in which media capacities can play a regenerative role in policymaking. Based on field data and empirical background, this study has provided suggestions for developing a national narrative document, establishing sports media literacy centers, and reforming the mission of the national media. These findings can serve as a basis for cultural policymaking in the field of sports and innovation.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study showed that the process of media empowerment of sports startups in Iran is not a simple issue of lack of financial support or individual weakness; rather, it encompasses a set of systematic inefficiencies, institutional breaks, skill challenges, and unused capacities. These results were extracted through thematic analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews with media, sports, and innovation experts, in the form of four overarching themes: macro-media policymaking, media infrastructure, communication gap, and hidden capacities. The first overarching theme is related to "macro-government policymaking in the media." The data show that the lack of a coherent media policy has caused the official media to not have a clear position to support sports innovations. Participant P11 states: "We had a proposal to produce a documentary, but the IRIB did not know what to do with the topic of sports startups! It is as if this type of narrative has not been defined for them." This statement practically indicates the absence of a media roadmap. Given the findings of this study, it is suggested that the policy-making units of the Ministry

of Sports, in cooperation with media institutions, develop a "National Document on Narrative Development of Sports Innovation" that defines the position of startups, the framework of media support, and the requirements for strengthening the innovation discourse in official media. Furthermore, establishing a "Media Empowerment Center for Sports Entrepreneurs" in the form of training courses on media literacy, algorithm reading, and narrative writing can reduce fear of media interaction and help produce effective content. On the other hand, targeted support for independent media, nano-influencers, and domestic platforms that focus on innovative sports should be included in official government policies. By reviewing its mission, the national media can create a new media space that is appropriate to the needs of the innovation ecosystem by producing hybrid programs with the participation of startups.

Data Availability Statement.

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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