Investigating the Impact of Social Media on Development of Marketing of Sports Products in Iran

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Abstract

The primary objective of this research was to investigate the impact of new social media on the marketing of sports products in Iran. The research utilized a qualitative and applied methodology, focusing on experts in sports marketing and sports management professors as the research population. Data from interviews were analyzed through three stages of coding: open, central, and selective. Within the context of Internet marketing in sports, several key issues emerged, including the absence of a dedicated authority for Internet sports marketing, instability in sports management, lack of comprehensive regulations, and underutilization of Internet marketing in sports business processes. Traditional methods persisted despite economic challenges. The study concluded that the absence of a specific authority for Internet marketing in sports leads to confusion, improper monitoring, and potentially harmful marketing practices. Establishing consistent regulations is crucial to the development and institutionalization of Internet marketing in the sports industry.

Key words: management, marketing, media, sports, virtual world.

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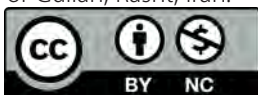
Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has generated significant buzz. The complexity of social networks often makes comprehending the entirety of their impact a challenging task (Hsu & Yoon, 2015). In its simplest form, online marketing involves communicating with customers through digital tools. In essence, online marketing shares common objectives with traditional marketing methods: boosting brand awareness, generating leads, and acquiring new customers (Kotler et al., 2005). In today's era, media has become an integral part of daily life. Newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and websites all play roles in society, each attracting its unique audience based on efficiency (Shahbazi et al., 2019). With the advent of the Internet and continuous computer networks, an organization's website has become the primary point of contact and interaction between users and the organization's services (Ameri et al., 2020), although in their seminal article, Zohouri et al. (2021) warn us we should take care not these services exclusively free, since they use our data for their own benefits.

New media has provided us with great opportunities to raise our voice and do not remain a silent victim (Zohouri et al., 2020). Social media has empowered marginalized and underrepresented individuals by providing a platform to share their stories, advocate for their rights, and mobilize support. It amplifies voices that were historically overlooked by traditional media, enabling them to address social issues, raise awareness, and effect change. Through hashtags, viral campaigns, and online communities, social media has democratized communication, allowing the voiceless to be heard and challenging established narratives, making it a powerful tool for social justice and advocacy. New media also provided services for the poor that they couldn't even think of accessing them (Nosrati et al., 2020). Social media has democratized access to information, education, and services, particularly benefiting the economically disadvantaged. It provides a platform for free or low-cost communication, online education, and access to job opportunities. Social networks facilitate peer support and crowdfunding for essential services, medical treatments, and education. Moreover, it enables small businesses and entrepreneurs to reach broader markets, potentially improving economic prospects for the less privileged. In essence, social media bridges gaps and provides opportunities for previously inaccessible services, helping the poor enhance their quality of life. The extent of change has been so vast in all aspects of human life and work that whole new species of phenomena have emerged (Sarfi et al., 2021). Social media has significantly reshaped industries by offering unique opportunities for growth and emergence.

Firstly, it has democratized marketing and advertising, allowing even small businesses to reach global audiences inexpensively. Influencer marketing, a product of social media, enables brands to collaborate with individuals who have large and engaged followings, providing a more authentic and personal way to connect with potential customers. Moreover, social media has facilitated the rise of e-commerce and online marketplaces, enabling companies to sell directly to consumers, cutting out intermediaries. Platforms like Instagram and Pinterest have transformed visual discovery, making them powerful tools for fashion, design, and lifestyle industries. The sharing economy has flourished through platforms like Airbnb and Uber, creating entirely new industries based on collaborative consumption. Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding are also empowered by social media, allowing startups and creators to access funds and resources more easily than ever before. One of these realms that has undergone a sea change has been sports marketing.

According to Kotler et al. (2005), "Sports marketing is a social and managerial process wherein individuals and groups create and exchange products and value through various means, including advertising, social media, digital platforms, ticket sales, and social relations." Online marketing, or internet marketing, encompasses any tool, strategy, or method that enhances brand visibility and recognition in the online sphere. The core objective of online marketing is to utilize internet tools to introduce businesses and products to potential customers, encouraging them to make purchases.

Sports marketing can be categorized into three parts. The first involves sports advertising and sports associations like the Olympics, the Spanish Football League, and the NFL, as well as sports teams such as Real Madrid and the New York Yankees. The second category utilizes sports events, teams, and individual athletes to promote various products. The third category aims to promote sports to increase participation (Divol et al., 2012).

In the context of sports, sports marketing encompasses the social and managerial processes through which fans, sports organizations, and other sports-related entities, including media and technology companies, create and exchange products and services, both through digital media like set-top boxes, the internet, mobile devices, social media, and during sporting events. Ticket sales, sponsorship, and broadcast rights management constitute the primary sources of income in sports markets. The sports industry features a multi-level structure, with each level playing a distinct role in business and sports marketing (Mason, 1999; Shaw, 2007).

Social media refers to user-oriented services that constitute a type of social network, allowing users to communicate through various content types, including text, photos, and videos. These platforms form virtual social networks, with nodes connected through specific dependencies. Today, social media has captivated a significant portion of internet users worldwide, and due to its broad array of functions and services, usage is expected to continue growing. Social media platforms serve as hubs for sharing thoughts, ideas, entertainment, social connections, and knowledge development. Unlike traditional mass media, such as television networks, which incurred substantial production and content distribution costs, social media platforms have minimal production expenses, enabling users to publish content and messages freely (Shahbazi et al., 2019).

In the sphere of sports marketing, customers are predominantly sports enthusiasts, and their support serves as the primary revenue source. Unlike other markets characterized by distinct organizational roles within the supply chain, such as retailers, distributors, manufacturers, and raw material providers, sports markets can be accurately described as intricate networks involving various organizations engaged in creating, marketing, distributing, and consuming sports products and services. Athletes, as individual players, undeniably form the bedrock of sports, and their increasing prominence has led to a marketing focus that often revolves exclusively around the individual athlete (Ritson, 2010). As Ritson (2010) contends, social media platforms inherently excel at promoting individuals, frequently surpassing their effectiveness in promoting brands compared to other media.

New technology can be regarded as a continuation of previous technological advancements that enhance the lives of individuals. In essence, the term "new technology" applies to the progress and innovations introduced in various fields of information technology. In today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, it is crucial to identify the prevailing technology trends and actively engage with them to stay abreast of the ever-changing developments and harness the opportunities they present (Vaziri et al., 2020).

Marketing, as a concept, has been in use for many years, and few organizations today remain unaware of its principles or indifferent to customer acquisition. The role of marketing in elevating enterprises and its impact on the growth and economic prosperity of nations are widely acknowledged. The internet has significantly reshaped marketing strategies and methods in the contemporary arena. The growth of the internet has opened up global online markets, and one of the opportunities it has brought forth is e-marketing. Given the

widespread utilization of the internet and information technology, every organization and industry must incorporate e-marketing into their business strategies to maintain their competitive edge. The evolution of new information and communication technologies has also created opportunities for growth and marketing in sectors related to education and culture, such as e-book sales.

Marketing through new technology and information offers several advantages, including access to a global market, enhanced efficiency compared to traditional marketing channels, novel service possibilities rooted in internet technology, time and cost savings, the ability to establish interactive and ongoing customer relationships, ease of choice, multimedia capabilities involving text, audio, and video, provision of substantial informative content, awareness of emerging opportunities, and staying up-to-date (Kim & Ko, 2012).

In the present era, given society's shift towards using technological tools to fulfill its needs, sports managers must adapt their attitudes and perspectives to align with technological advancements. The substantial number of internet users in Iran underscores the high income-generating potential that exists (Kiani & Nazari, 2022).

Internet marketing has emerged as a potent avenue, captivating the interest of more than half of today's youth and sports enthusiasts. It has become a pivotal source of revenue in the global sports landscape, with renowned clubs worldwide leveraging this digital space for economic gains. However, several hurdles hinder the effective deployment of internet marketing in sports. These include the absence of a dedicated overseer for sports internet marketing, a lack of management stability within the country's sports sector, the absence of comprehensive and cohesive regulations, and a dearth of enthusiasm from top-tier sports organizations to regulate sports internet marketing. Additionally, structural deficiencies in sports-related internet marketing, the absence of clear economic policies within clubs and federations, inadequate integration of internet marketing into sports business processes, a persistent reliance on traditional methods, a shortage of legal regulations concerning copyright in sports, recent economic crises leading to budget reductions for sports organizations, an undervaluation of the role and significance of internet marketing in the sports industry, a scarcity of marketing experts within the country's sports arena, an absence of evaluation systems for internet marketing platforms in sports, and the prevailing political climate governing the government, which consequently affects the sports sector, collectively represent the primary impediments to advancing internet marketing within the sports domain.

Main research questions

- How do new media promote sports marketing?
- How do new media inform sports products?
- How do new media create structures in the marketing of sports products?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of new media marketing in sports products?

Method

The methodology employed in this article utilizes directional and summary content analysis. Directional content analysis is chosen because prior studies on the phenomenon under investigation often lack comprehensiveness. This research adopts a qualitative and theory-based approach. Given that our primary objective is to develop a causal model of internet marketing within the country's sports industry, our research can be effectively framed within the grounded theory methodology.

Summary content analysis serves to identify and quantify factors extracted from interview texts. Quantification is initiated to gain insight into the usage and application of content or words within the text. The application of summary content analysis in this article began with identifying factors related to sustainable participation in student sports within interview texts. This was done through a combination of manual and computer-assisted methods, determining and calculating word frequencies.

The statistical population for this research comprises specialists and experts well-versed in internet marketing, sports marketing, and related fields, including those actively involved in sports. Due to the complexity of defining and identifying this population accurately, we consulted institutions with a history of sports management at various levels, experts and professors knowledgeable about the country's marketing issues, and officials from sports federations' marketing committees to compile a preliminary list of individuals meeting the specified criteria.

The sampling method employed in grounded theory differs from conventional methods and aligns with the unique objectives and characteristics of this approach. It is aptly referred to as "theoretical sampling" since it is based on "concepts that have theoretical relevance to the evolving theory." After conducting 21 interviews, it was determined that new information was largely repeating prior findings. To enhance diversity and conceptual depth within the theory, we conducted up to 30 interviews. It's worth noting that the number of samples in grounded theory research is not predetermined and varies, typically ranging from 6 to 70, depending on the research's nature.

Findings

Internet marketing in this research included concepts that were obtained from the coded signs about the importance of the main phenomenon under investigation and the necessity of Internet marketing in sports. In Table 1, the results of the axial coding regarding internal evaluation in sports are stated.

Table 1. Findings from axial coding about internet marketing

1.   **The absence of a specific trustee in internet sports marketing**
2.   **Lack of managerial stability in the country's sports**
3.   **Lack of comprehensive and consistent rules and regulations**
4.   **Lack of will of upstream sports organizations to organize internet marketing of sports**
5.   **Lack of internet marketing structure in sports**
6.   **Lack of economic policy in clubs and federations**
7.   **Failure to properly apply internet marketing in sports business processes and functions**
8.   **Insisting on using traditional methods in sports business**
9.   **Statehood of sports**
10. **Lack of copyright laws**
11. **The recent economic crisis and budget cuts for sports organizations**
12. **Improper role and importance of internet marketing in the sports industry**
13. **Lack of marketing specialist in the country's sports**
14. **Absence of evaluation system of internet marketing spaces in sports of the country**
15. **The political conditions and atmosphere governing the government and consequently the sports of the country**

As can be seen in the table above, the concepts obtained from the coding of signs included 15 items.

In this section, due to the non-homogeneousness of the signs, the researcher preferred to mention all the concepts resulting from the data analysis without creating a specific category. In the following, it will be briefly reviewed by providing examples of the sentences quoted by the interviewees in relation to the current situation.

- According to the belief of some interviewees, internet marketing has not been used correctly in sports. For example, the 10th interviewee believes:

  "*We have various stores in the country, and these stores have designed and launched websites for themselves. As a result, a series of stores in the field of sports, such as Dayi and Pishkoh, have come and designed a website. On the other hand, such as Mashhad Leather, Rah Customer Club dropped, they have started such a club during a competitive or comparative or emotional behavior. And these were not based on a special method for internet marketing business at all.*" (P10)

Also, the lack of managerial stability in the country's sports is one of the other causal conditions. For example, the seventh interviewee believes:

  "*There are managers who agree to use this space for income generation after a whole meeting and discussion and do an internet activity for marketing, but as soon as there are changes in the management level, i.e. with the arrival of a new manager, these activities stagnate and this process or It must start from zero or it won't start anymore.*" (P7)

- Some of the interviewees believed that the state ownership of sports is one of the causes of the current situation in this phenomenon. For example, the second interviewee states:

  "*When there is a government view, there is no expectation of profitability. It is a view and a sovereign view. But in the private sector, how to be is important.*" (P2)

Also, the sixth interviewee believes that:

  "*When there is government aid, it means taking over clubs and federations, which stagnates the atmosphere. The government's thinking does not allow managers to progress.*" (P6)

- A large number of interviewees mentioned the lack of expert staff as another condition in this phenomenon. For example, the twelfth interviewee states

"*In the clubs, there is no one expert in social networks. Neither in terms of infrastructure nor in terms of human resources.*" (P12)

Also, the sixth interviewee believes:

"*I wish that instead of inspectors of federations, sports marketers would be sent to the federations to help the federations. There is no expert force in the sports body.*" (P6)

Also, interviewee number one believes:

"*Which federation do we have in which it has a server room or which federation do we have that has the manpower specialized in this field?*" (P1)

• Lack of copyright is another fundamental issue in this field. For example, the fourth interviewee states:

"*Broadcasting rights and copyright laws are for thirty or forty years ago, unfortunately we still haven't been able to use these laws inside the country.*" (P4)

This interviewee also mentions in another place that:

"*In terms of internet marketing, we have game summary clips on the site. In other countries, it is called clip right, but we don't have anything at all in Iran. It can be a very good source of income.*" (P4)

• Some of the interviewees considered the lack of control mechanisms and the lack of an evaluation system as another reason for the current situation. For example, the 10th interviewee states:

"*In the world of internet marketing in our country, control mechanisms and process mechanisms have not yet been developed properly, that is, a person can start a blog with a phone number and an email or bank account address and try to sell any product that He wants to do it. Now this product can be a sports product. For example, now I will go to Rio and bring the products and symbols that are there in this period to Iran, and sell them here from Roshun Jasuichi, etc.*" (P10)

• The 13th interviewee also states:

"*We have not introduced a special protocol at all. For example, now we have an internet marketing symbol. But what does this symbol do? For example, we have a trade union and sportswear, which does a series of regulatory tasks. For example, it says that*

if you want to have a production You have to have this meter or anything else, but what monitoring tools are there in the field of internet marketing? In fact, there is no standardization." (P13)

• The lack of will of the upstream sports organizations to organize internet marketing of sports is another causal condition mentioned by the interviewees. For example, the sixth interviewee states:

"*Upstream organizations are also non-electronic. In federations, we send a request electronically, it is seen six months later, it is read a year later, and then they make a decision. So we and our upstream organizations are not digital."* (P6)

• The lack of comprehensive and consistent rules and regulations in internet marketing of sports is another cause of the current situation that the interviewees mentioned. For example, the third interviewee states:

"*There is a weakness in the laws in sports internet marketing in Iran. If there is a consumer's right, no club has the right to set up an SMS service in this way. That is, it cannot operate in the way it is now. A way to get money from consumers or fans. It is possible, but no service will be provided in return for receiving money."* (P3)
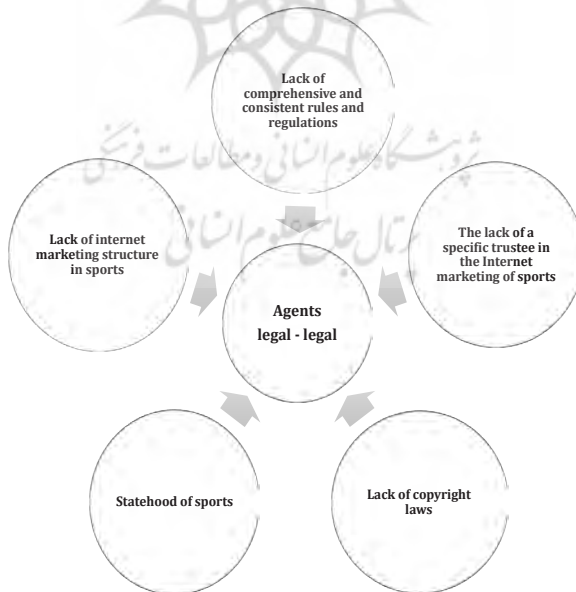

Figure 1. Internet marketing model affecting managerial factors of Internet marketing
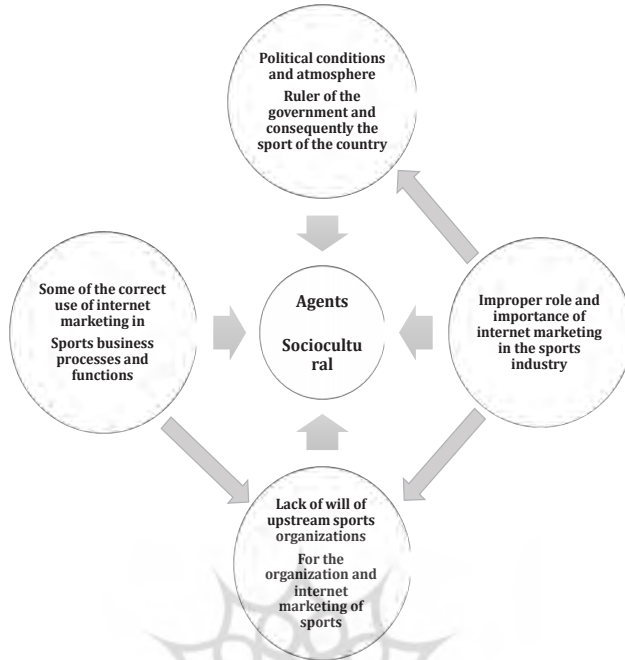
Figure 2. Internet marketing model affecting
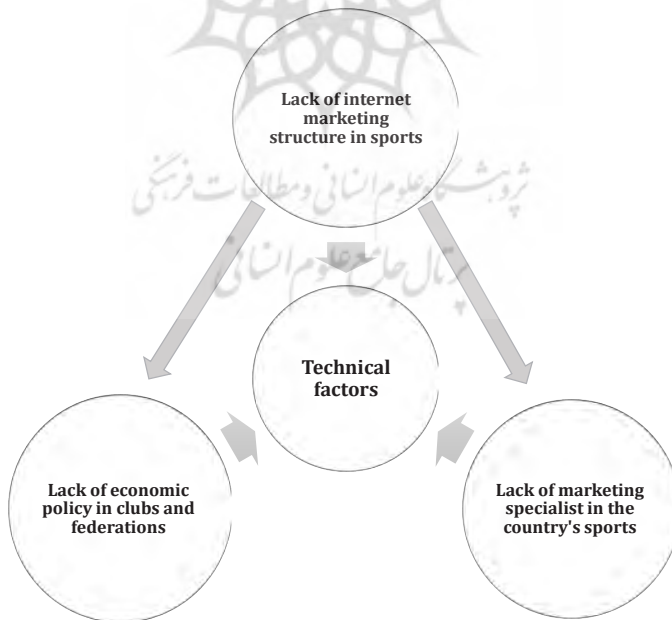the legal factors of Internet marketing in sports

Figure 3. Internet marketing model affecting
socio-cultural factors of Internet marketing in sports

Discussion and Conclusion

The rapid expansion of information and communication technology is intricately intertwined with culture. As a result, the socio-cultural characteristics of a society can significantly impact marketing techniques within the realm of media. In contemporary times, the influence of inappropriate culture has become increasingly evident in the online sphere. Instances of defamation, intense suspicion, and involvement in matters unrelated to sports serve as clear manifestations of the low cultural norms prevalent among sports users in the digital realm. This phenomenon may, in part, be attributed to the fact that most social media platforms are not native to many users. Unfortunately, like other emerging technologies, the proper cultural context for their use has not been adequately explained to a substantial portion of society, particularly within the sports community. The subject of the current research was internal evaluation in sports, which includes conditions that affect the central category and included the following:

1. The absence of a specific trustee in internet sports marketing
2. Lack of managerial stability in the country's sports
3. Lack of comprehensive and consistent rules and regulations
4. Lack of will of upstream sports organizations to organize internet marketing of sports
5. Lack of internet marketing structure in sports
6. Lack of economic policy in clubs and federations
7. Failure to properly apply internet marketing in sports business processes and functions
8. Insisting on using traditional methods in sports business
9. Statehood of sports
10. Lack of copyright laws
11. The recent economic crisis and the budget reduction of sports organizations
12. Improper role and importance of internet marketing in the sports industry
13. Lack of marketing specialist in the country's sports
14. Absence of evaluation system of internet marketing spaces in sports of the country
15. The political conditions and atmosphere governing the government and consequently the sports of the country

Many of the aforementioned cases underscore the weaknesses in internet marketing within the country's sports landscape. The absence of a clear oversight body for internet marketing in sports can lead to confusion among sports clubs and federations regarding the initiation

of such activities in this domain. Without a specific governing authority, proper monitoring becomes challenging, giving rise to potentially harmful false marketing spaces. Another critical issue in internet marketing is the lack of comprehensive and consistent rules and regulations, which can have a profound impact on this field's effectiveness. The presence of relevant laws and regulations is essential to institutionalize any business. This importance has been emphasized in prior research. Lotfi et al. (2015) did not view legal and regulatory barriers as significant impediments to the implementation of internet marketing for sports goods, contradicting these findings. In their research, Rezaei et al. (2013) highlighted legal obstacles within companies producing sports equipment and supplies, suggesting that the absence of comprehensive and general laws and regulations in marketing is a concerning issue that needs attention. This deficiency poses a threat to marketing efforts. Similarly, in the study conducted by Rahimizadeh et al. (2021), which examined e-commerce challenges in the sports industry, legal challenges were identified, aligning with these results.

However, the most conspicuous issue is the absence of an internet marketing structure within the country's sports sector. Without a specific framework in place, significant progress in this field is unattainable. A structured framework provides definition and guidance in activities. Due to the lack of such a framework in sports, clubs and federations have embarked on internet marketing initiatives, with many of them proving unprofitable and being discontinued. One of the primary reasons for this is the absence of a structure to shape and optimize these activities for profitability. Researchers have emphasized the importance of internet marketing strategies in their research, reinforcing this component's significance. Although income generation is one of the pivotal macro policies for clubs, the findings indicate a lack of economic policies within clubs and federations. This suggests that clubs and federations lack a formal plan for marketing and income generation, relying instead on ad-hoc economic activities tied to short-term objectives. In essence, policymaking in any domain clarifies the goals and methods to achieve them. If clubs and federations were to allocate a portion of their economic policy to internet marketing, even if initially small, it could be beneficial, as this allocation can grow over time alongside technological advancements. However, an examination of the current state of sports clubs and federations suggests that this policy has not been developed or implemented, possibly due to the need for expert input in this field.

One of the prevailing issues lies in the entrenched traditional approach to revenue generation within the sports sector. It appears

that many sports managers continue to rely on conventional methods of income generation and marketing. These managers often gravitate toward traditional techniques that promise quick results and immediate income, while overlooking newer methods and tools for marketing. Baena (2016) highlighted a transformative shift among sports managers at Real Madrid, who transitioned from traditional income generation models to embrace online and mobile phone marketing methods, resulting in substantial profits.

The state's financial support and sports' reliance on government resources have contributed to a mindset focused less on revenue generation. A significant portion of the country's sports managers adopts a cost-centric approach, partly influenced by the state's role in sports. In the public sector, the emphasis is often placed on "being," with less regard for "how to be." This government-centric perspective can hinder innovative and entrepreneurial thinking. In recent years, organizations that have outsourced some or all of their activities to the private sector have achieved notable success in income generation.

Another notable concern is the inadequate recognition of the role and importance of internet marketing within the sports industry. In the sports community, the significance of this field has not been firmly established. Although sporadic efforts have been made in this domain, some of which have yielded positive results, they often lack organization and planning. Researchers have underscored the significance of marketing strategies, internet and internet marketing, business strategies, and online consumer behavior in their research, highlighting the importance of this domain. Furthermore, research consistently emphasizes the need for specialized marketing expertise within sports organizations. The dearth of marketing specialists in the country's sports sector is a contributing factor to the challenges in internet marketing. Nurturing a young and creative workforce in the realm of sports marketing is crucial for the nation's sports sector. These professionals could play a pivotal role in monitoring sports clubs and federations. While some sports clubs and federations do employ marketing personnel, these resources are often underutilized, and their activities are frequently ad-hoc. By examining successful international clubs renowned for their marketing efforts, it becomes evident that their marketing teams operate with deliberate and well-structured plans, often employing similar programs in sports marketing. Thus, the key to success in our country's sports lies not in specific programs and activities but in harnessing talented individuals who can effectively activate these spaces and generate revenue from them.

Ethical considerations
The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Conflicts of interests
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

Data availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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