

eISSN: 2981-1554

Original Article (Mixed)

Recognition of Entrepreneurial Opportunities in Women's Sports Using a Mixed-Methods Approach

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Receive:

28 June 2025

Revise:

23 July 2025

Accept:

18 August 2025

Abstract

The aim of this research is to identify and prioritize entrepreneurship opportunities in women's sports in Iran. The present research was conducted with a mixed approach and in two parts: qualitative and quantitative. In the qualitative part, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 experts in the field of women's sports entrepreneurship and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. In this part, 65 basic themes and 8 organizing themes were identified. In the quantitative part, to validate the qualitative results, a 65-question questionnaire was designed based on the basic themes, each question representing a basic theme. Based on the database of the Ministry of Sports and Youth's Employment and Entrepreneurship Working Group, the number of people in the statistical population that included women's sports business activists in Tehran province was identified as about 500 people, and based on the Cochran formula, the required sample size was estimated at 218 people. Finally, 238 questionnaires were collected and the data were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis. MAXQDA software was used for the qualitative analysis and Smart-PLS software was used for the quantitative analysis. The results showed that the identified entrepreneurial opportunities fall into eight main categories, including technology-based opportunities, opportunities related to aging, marketing and advertising, education, sports services, nutrition and health, sports venues and events, and sports equipment and apparel production. In addition to filling the existing theoretical gap, these findings can form the basis for policymaking, investment, and women's empowerment programs in the sports economy. It is suggested that policymakers should facilitate the realization of these opportunities by utilizing new technologies, developing specialized training, and creating supportive infrastructure.

Keywords:

Sports entrepreneurship, women's sports, business opportunities, sports technology, sports services

Please cite this article as (APA): Naeiji, M. J. and Riyahi, M. (2025). Recognition of Entrepreneurial Opportunities in Women's Sports Using a Mixed-Methods Approach. *Journal of New Approaches in Management and Marketing*, 4(2), 195-219.



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jnamm.2025.543888.1132>



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Publisher: Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In recent decades, sports have gone beyond a mere recreational activity and have become a dynamic, multi-billion dollar industry that has extensive economic, social, and cultural impacts. According to the Global Sports Market Report (2025), the global sports economy is estimated to be worth more than \$478 billion and is expected to exceed \$500 billion by the end of 2025. Meanwhile, women's sports, as an emerging segment of the global sports economy with a growth rate of more than 50 percent in attracting financial support, have attracted increasing attention from policymakers and investors. However, in Iran, women's economic participation in sports is still limited and accounts for a small share of GDP (about 0.7 percent). Along with cultural and institutional challenges, lack of infrastructure and lack of use of new technologies have prevented the potential entrepreneurial capacities in women's sports from fully flourishing. In such circumstances, identifying real and operational opportunities can guide policymakers, investors, and entrepreneurs to develop the women's sports economy.

Previous research has mainly focused on environmental barriers or threats to women's entrepreneurship in sports and has less systematically analyzed opportunities. Also, a significant portion of existing studies lack a coherent theoretical framework or mixed methodology for simultaneously analyzing qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Accordingly, this research attempts to address the gap in the theoretical literature and reveal the hidden dimensions and capacities of women's entrepreneurship development in sports. The central question of the research is: what are the opportunities for women's entrepreneurship in Iranian sports and in which structures and analytical frameworks can these opportunities be classified?

Theoretical Framework

Sports entrepreneurship is an interdisciplinary branch that integrates the concepts of management, innovation, and market in the context of the sports industry. According to Ratten (2024), sports entrepreneurship is a platform for identifying market gaps and creating economic and social value through sports. In the meantime, "women's sports entrepreneurship" is considered one of the growing dimensions of this field, which is formed based on a combination of innovation, technology and social goals. This type of sports entrepreneurship refers to activities through which women identify and commercialize economic, cultural and social opportunities in the field of sports (Costa & Miragaia, 2022).

In summary, the research background, it can be said that women's sports entrepreneurship in Iran and the world has gradually transformed from a marginal issue to a strategic area over the past two decades. In Iran, early studies focused more on identifying general opportunities in the sports industry, but over time, the gender perspective and attention to women's specific opportunities have been strengthened. Although obstacles such as cultural attitudes, lack of infrastructure and weak media hinder the growth of women's entrepreneurship, the increase in social demand for women's sports, the expansion of sports education and the growing need for educational services, coaching, tourism and sports management have created valuable grounds for entrepreneurship. Other researches have identified emerging opportunities for women in digital technologies, social media, personal branding, education, sports leadership, and health-focused markets. The COVID-19 crisis, despite its limitations, has helped to expand the use of technology, online education, and new business models in women's sports.

Research Methodology

The present study is of applicable type and was conducted using a mixed method. In the qualitative part, the statistical population included experts and activists with managerial or entrepreneurial experience in women's sports, selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. By conducting interviews with ten experts and achieving theoretical saturation, data were collected and analyzed using Brown and Clark's six-step thematic analysis method. The result of this stage was the identification of 65 basic themes and 8 organizing themes. In the quantitative part, to validate the qualitative findings, a 65-question questionnaire was designed and distributed among 238 business activists in women's sports in Tehran province. The data were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and SmartPLS software. The reliability of the constructs was examined with Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) and was obtained in all cases above 0.7. Also, the **Average Variance Extracted (AVE) index was higher than 0.5, indicating the desirable convergent and divergent validity of the model.

Findings

The results of the qualitative section showed that entrepreneurial opportunities in Iranian women's sports can be classified into eight main categories:

1- Technology-based opportunities: including sports applications, online training platforms, virtual reality, wearable gadgets, and smart club management systems. Technology was identified as the most important driver of innovation in women's sports entrepreneurship.

2- Aging-related opportunities: given the increasing trend of the country's elderly population; designing sports, nutrition, and rehabilitation services specifically for elderly women was raised as one of the promising areas. This section is a combination of health, prevention, and social welfare.

3- Sports marketing and advertising opportunities: including personal branding, digital marketing, sponsorship, and social media. Interviewees emphasized the importance of female athletes' digital presence and converting fame into economic capital.

4- Educational opportunities: the broadest category of opportunities includes the establishment of sports academies, training of female coaches and managers, specialized mother-child courses, and training in management and marketing skills. Education was recognized as the foundation of sustainable development in women's sports.

5- Sports service opportunities: including talent acquisition, insurance, sports psychology, branding consulting, and support services for athletes. This category of opportunities is related to strengthening the quality of services and creating sustainable jobs.

6- Nutrition and health opportunities: including sports catering, natural supplements, nutritional consulting, and health-oriented cafes for female athletes. This area has economic and social potential due to the growth of a culture of health and conscious nutrition among women.

7- Opportunities related to sports venues and events: such as the design and construction of women-specific venues, sports camps, Muslim women's festivals, and sports tourism. This category of opportunities is important in connection with the tourism and health industries.

8- Opportunities for the production of sports equipment and clothing: including the production of clothing, accessories, sports equipment and devices tailored to women's characteristics. The lack of products with appropriate and cultural design has turned this area into a virgin market for entrepreneurship.

The results of the quantitative section confirmed that all eight categories have a significant factor load and above 0.5 and, overall, form a valid and coherent structure. The average of the

highest factor load was related to technology opportunities (0.74) and sports services (0.742), which indicate the importance of the role of technology and specialized services in the development of women's entrepreneurship.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study show that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Iranian women's sports has a networked and multifaceted nature, in which technology, education and health are the three main pillars. Technology provides a platform for creating innovation and direct access to the market; education ensures human resource empowerment and the development of specialized skills; and health strengthens the social and cultural bonds of women's entrepreneurship. Compared to previous studies, this study, for the first time, systematically extracts opportunities using a mixed method and goes beyond the conceptual identification stage. For example, while previous studies focused solely on tourism or sports marketing, this study also includes lesser-known dimensions such as aging and sports nutrition into the theoretical framework.

From a theoretical perspective, this study presents an indigenous model of entrepreneurial opportunities in women's sports that is based on the interaction of the three components of "knowledge-technology-culture". This model indicates that the development of the women's sports economy is not possible with financial capital alone, but also requires the creation of knowledge and technological infrastructure and the modification of cultural attitudes towards women's economic participation.

From a practical perspective, the findings can be useful for government institutions, universities, and investors. First, the Ministry of Sports and Youth and the Deputy Minister of Women and Family Affairs can use the research results to design support programs, facilitate licensing, and establish women's sports innovation centers. Second, universities and educational institutions can fill the existing knowledge gap by developing skills and sports entrepreneurship courses for women. Third, private sector investors can focus on areas such as sports technologies, healthy nutrition, and clothing production, given the global trend of women's sports growth and increasing demand in the domestic market.