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Archives in Sport Management and Leadership
Vol. 4, No. 2, 2026, pp. 133-142

The Mediating Role of Strategic Flexibility in the Relationship Between Entrepreneurial Activities and the Performance of Sports Startups in Iraq

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Received:
29 May 2026
Revised:
21 June 2026
Accepted:
23 June 2026

Abstract

The ability of startups to survive and thrive in competitive environments depends largely on their entrepreneurial drive and strategic adaptability, yet empirical evidence from the sports industry remains limited. This research sought to investigate the mediating function of strategic flexibility in the relationship between entrepreneurial activities and the performance of sports startups in Iraq. The research was applied in purpose and descriptive-survey in nature. The population included managers and employees of sports startups, and 379 participants were selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using standardized questionnaires: entrepreneurial activities (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023), strategic flexibility (Sen et al., 2023), and startup performance (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023). The validity and reliability of the instruments were confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with Smart PLS software. The results indicated that entrepreneurial activities had a significant positive effect on startup performance ($\beta=0.283$, $t=5.568$, $p<0.001$) and strategic flexibility ($\beta=0.609$, $t=15.481$, $p<0.001$), while strategic flexibility directly enhanced startup performance ($\beta=0.483$, $t=9.319$, $p<0.001$). Furthermore, the mediating role of strategic flexibility in the pathway from entrepreneurial activities to startup performance was confirmed ($\beta=0.294$, $t=7.503$, $p<0.001$). The findings suggest that sports startups can enhance innovation and responsiveness to market changes by fostering an entrepreneurial culture and establishing flexible organizational structures.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial activities, Iraq, Sports startups, Startup performance, Strategic flexibility

Cite this article: Pashaie, S., Abdavi, F., & Hussin, H. (2026). The mediating role of strategic flexibility in the relationship between entrepreneurial activities and the performance of sports startups in Iraq. *Archives in Sport Management and Leadership*, *4*(2), 133-142. doi: 10.22108/asml.2026.149043.1155

2981-0523 Published by University of Isfahan

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a major driver of innovation and economic development across societies (Abasi Nami, 2021; Sagar, 2024). Emerging businesses are having a major influence on the sports sector, particularly when it comes to new company formation and entrepreneurial activity (Ghanbari et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the success of these startups depends on several influencing factors, among which entrepreneurship plays a central role (Aftab et al., 2022; Santisteban et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial activities can facilitate innovation processes and enhance startup performance (Golmohammadi et al., 2025). However, startups often lack sufficient internal resources and capabilities to effectively respond to external environmental conditions, forcing them to seek adaptive strategies that align with changing market dynamics (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023).

Over the last few years, academics have shown considerable interest in how a company's entrepreneurial approach relates to its overall success (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023). Studies show that more than 70% of startups go under within their initial twelve months, largely because they fail to correctly interpret and adapt to the outside circumstances surrounding their business (Anwar et al., 2022). Similarly, failure rates of 67% for Chinese startups within the first year and 85% within the first decade have been reported (Adomako et al., 2023). In the United Arab Emirates, more than half of newly established startups are unable to survive because they fail to align their strategies with long-term profitable opportunities. Such economic barriers, commonly associated with emerging economies, constrain startup growth and reduce their capacity to react to rapidly changing business conditions (Aftab et al., 2022). Consequently, many startups struggle to grow and provide innovative solutions capable of sustaining competitiveness in dynamic markets (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023). As a result, improving startup growth and performance in emerging economies has become an important focus for both researchers and practitioners (Anwar et al., 2022).

Growing academic interest has also been directed toward entrepreneurial orientation and strategic entrepreneurship in recent years (Alborathy et al., 2023). Within this context, strategic flexibility has been highlighted as an important moderating factor (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023). Strategic flexibility refers to an organization's ability to modify and adapt its strategies in response to shifting market conditions and evolving customer demands (Grewal & Tansuhaj, 2001). This capability enables startups to become more innovative when facing emerging opportunities and challenges, ultimately improving organizational performance (Brinckmann et al., 2019). In a similar way, having an entrepreneurial mindset serves as a key strategic asset for new businesses, enabling them to spot fresh market prospects, create original offerings, and solidify their competitive standing within the industry (Arabeche et al., 2022; Batra & Dhir, 2022). Moreover, the research conducted by Melesse stresses the complementary function of strategic orientations and strategic capabilities in attaining superior performance within developing economies (Melesse, 2024).

In this context, Kazemizadeh and colleagues (2024) carried out a study titled "The Impact of Business Intelligence on Customers' Behavioral Responses with Emphasis on the Mediating Role of Marketing, Innovation, and Financial Performance." Their results showed that business intelligence significantly affects both financial performance and customers' behavioral responses. A further study conducted by Golmohammadi and colleagues (2025), entitled "Investigating the Barriers Facing Physical Education Students in Using Advertising to Grow Emerging Sports Startups," showed that considerable financial obstacles including high startup expenses and limited starting capital constrain students' capacity to invest in their ventures. Moreover, a lack of familiarity with sports marketing concepts and the fast rate of technological advancement in advertising were recognized as significant barriers to successful promotional efforts.

Similarly, Mondalizadeh et al. (2024), in their study on identifying barriers to the growth of sports startups and proposing practical solutions, found that the growth of sports startups could be enhanced through the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem that supports all stakeholders in the sports sector. They emphasized the importance of favorable conditions such as intellectual property protection, low corruption levels, financial support, research and development assistance, and improved access to funding resources.

Ashouri et al. (2022), in their research titled "Identifying Entrepreneurial Opportunities in the Sports Industry with a Championship Sports Approach," identified and ranked 174 entrepreneurial opportunities across six subfields. Their findings indicated that revenue-generating and commercial activities, sports club operations, and sports talent identification ranked as the three most important areas. Notable characteristics

of these opportunities included low startup costs, high potential for innovation and employment generation, sustainable development potential, and considerable flexibility regarding business time and location. The study also highlighted that human resources in sports, including graduates and athletes, possess strong potential for entrepreneurial engagement based on their capabilities (Ashouri et al., 2022). Melesse (2024), in a research study entitled "Entrepreneurial Orientation and the Performance of Large Manufacturing Firms: The Role of Strategic Capabilities and Environmental Dynamism," investigated the impact of entrepreneurial orientation on organizational performance. The findings showed that entrepreneurial orientation significantly improves firm performance, while marketing capabilities serve as a mediating factor in this relationship (Melesse, 2024).

Furthermore, Alborathy and colleagues (2023), in their research titled "The Role of Entrepreneurial Orientation in Achieving Strategic Entrepreneurship through the Mediating Role of Organizational Agility," determined that entrepreneurial orientation serves a critical function in realizing strategic entrepreneurship. Their results revealed that organizational agility acts as a mediator in this relationship by enhancing firms' capacity to seize opportunities and properly tackle challenges. Moreover, the research conducted by Daradkeh and Mansoor (2023), entitled "The Impact of Networking Orientation and Entrepreneurial Orientation on Startup Innovation and Performance in Emerging Economies: The Moderating Role of Strategic Flexibility," revealed that strategic flexibility positively moderates the connections among entrepreneurial orientation, exploratory innovation, exploitative innovation, and startup performance. These results add to a deeper comprehension of startup development and performance from strategic and innovation viewpoints within emerging economies (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023).

Another important study conducted by Santisteban et al. (2021), entitled "Key Success Factors for Technology-Based Startups," emphasized that the success of technology-driven startups depends heavily on critical factors such as technology monitoring, absorptive capacity, and the quality of products and services. Additionally, understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with society's transition toward sustainability has become increasingly important for business success. Organizations are therefore expected to develop the capability to innovate, design, and implement effective business models that support sustainability objectives (França et al., 2017).

Entrepreneurship should also be viewed as a collection of attitudes and mindsets rather than merely a business activity. This perspective suggests that entrepreneurial thinking and behavior can emerge in any individual, not solely among those involved in business and economics (Fuchs et al., 2008). Davidsson's model suggests that entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors are shaped by both general attitudes such as competitiveness, financial orientation, openness to change, achievement, and independence and situational attitudes, including perceived efficiency, social participation, and business-related skills (Davidsson, 1995; Liñán & Chen, 2009). International research has similarly demonstrated that multiple factors shape organizational attitudes toward entrepreneurship (Kakouris, 2016).

Extensive research in entrepreneurship has adopted different approaches to explaining why individuals engage in entrepreneurial behavior. Some scholars argue that psychological characteristics can effectively predict entrepreneurial intentions and tendencies (Brinckmann et al., 2019; Stewart Jr et al., 1999). An increase in the number of entrepreneurs intensifies market competition (Fritsch, 2008), while entrepreneurship itself contributes to economic growth through innovation, resource diversification, invention, and competitiveness (Baumol, 1993). Positive attitudes and beliefs toward business activities also encourage entrepreneurial behavior among university graduates and students (Baharvand & Gouran, 2020).

Given the importance of entrepreneurship as a positive force for socioeconomic transformation, conducting research in this field is essential for identifying strategies that improve existing conditions (Sagar, 2024). Despite the growing recognition of entrepreneurial activities and strategic flexibility as key drivers of organizational performance, limited empirical research has examined their interplay within the context of sports startups, particularly in emerging economies such as Iraq. To address this gap, the present study investigates how entrepreneurial activities influence the performance of sports startups in Iraq and examines the mediating role of strategic flexibility in this relationship.

Research Methods

This research is applied in terms of its objective and descriptive-survey in terms of its nature and data collection method. The main objective of the study is to examine the relationships among the research

variables and explain their effects on startup performance within the framework of structural equation modeling.

Population and Sample

The statistical population of this study consists of managers and employees of startups active in the field of study. Sampling was carried out using the convenience method. Considering the use of structural equation modeling based on partial least squares (PLS-SEM), the sample size was determined based on the criteria of this method.

In studies based on structural equation modeling, it is generally recommended that the sample size be determined at a ratio of 15 to 20 respondents per questionnaire item. Since the questionnaire used in this study consisted of 16 items, the required sample size was estimated to range from 240 to 320 respondents. However, in order to increase the statistical power and enhance the generalizability of the findings, a final sample of 379 respondents was selected, and the required data were collected from them. This sample size adequately satisfies the necessary requirements for conducting PLS-SEM analyses and contributes to improving the validity and robustness of the research findings.

Data Collection

Standard questionnaires were used to measure the research variables. The variable "entrepreneurial activities" was measured based on the Daradkeh and Mansoor (2023) tool, which had 6 questions. "Strategic flexibility" was measured using a valid questionnaire presented by Sen et al. (2023) that had 6 questions. Also, to assess "startup performance", the indicators presented in the Daradkeh and Mansoor (2023) study were used, which had 4 questions.

Validity and Reliability

To assess the validity of the research instruments, face validity and content validity of the questionnaires were first evaluated by a panel of professors and experts in the fields of entrepreneurship and startup management. The experts' comments regarding the wording of certain items, the clarity of concepts, and the degree of correspondence between the questions and the theoretical constructs were incorporated to ensure the appropriateness of the instruments for the research context, particularly in the Iraqi setting. Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine construct validity. The results indicated that all factor loadings exceeded 0.50 and that the model fit indices were within acceptable ranges. Therefore, the conceptual structure of the questionnaires demonstrated a satisfactory level of fit.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess the reliability of the research instruments. The results showed that Cronbach's alpha values for all variables exceeded 0.70, and the CR values were also greater than 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency among the measurement items. Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs was greater than 0.50, confirming convergent validity and the adequacy of the measurement instruments. Overall, the findings indicate that the questionnaires used in this study possessed acceptable levels of validity and reliability and were therefore suitable for subsequent analyses.

Data Analysis

In this study, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the data. The selection of this method was based on the predictive nature of the study, the presence of latent variables measured by multiple indicators, and its suitability for a moderate sample size. Data analyses were performed using SmartPLS software. In the first stage, the measurement model was evaluated to confirm the validity and reliability of the constructs. In this stage, indicators such as factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity based on the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT) criterion were calculated and examined. After confirming the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to test the research hypotheses. At this stage, path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), the goodness-of-fit index (GOF), and bootstrap results were reported to determine the significance of the relationships among the variables. The use of the PLS approach enabled the study to accurately evaluate not only the structural relationships among the variables but also the explanatory power of the model and the extent to which each construct influenced other constructs. This method is particularly appropriate for complex conceptual models and data with non-normal distributions; therefore, it was selected as the most suitable analytical approach for the purposes of the present study.

Findings

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the research sample. Of the total 379 participants, 52.8% (200) were male and 47.2% (179) were female, which is an almost balanced gender ratio. The largest age group in the sample was 31–40 years old with 39.6% (150) and the smallest age group was over 50 years old with 5% (19). In terms of education level, the largest share was for bachelor's degree holders with 52.8%

(200) and the smallest share was for doctorate holders with 5% (19). Regarding work experience, the largest group with 39.6% (150) had 5–10 years of work experience and the smallest group with 10.3% (39) had more than 20 years of work experience.

Table 1- Frequency distribution and percentage of the sample by gender, age Group, educational Level, and work experience

Demographic Variable	Category	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	200	52.8
	Female	179	47.2
Age	20-30	120	31.7
	31-40	150	39.6
	41-50	90	23.7
	Over 50	19	5.0
Education	Diploma	50	13.2
	Bachelor	200	52.8
	Master	110	29.0
	Doctorate	19	5.0
Work Experience	Less than 5 years	100	26.4
	5-10 years	150	39.6
	11-20 years	90	23.7
	More than 20 years	39	10.3

Overall, the study sample included a diverse range of gender, age, education, and work experience, which is considered a good representation of the study population.

Table 2 shows that all the research variables, namely strategic flexibility, startup performance and entrepreneurial activities, have high psychometric reliability and validity.

Table 2- Reliability and convergent validity indicators for the measurement constructs

Variable	AVE	CR	A
Strategic Flexibility	0.669	0.902	0.901
Startup Performance	0.678	0.905	0.905
Entrepreneurial Activities	0.679	0.909	0.905

Cronbach's α values for all three variables are above 0.90, indicating very good internal consistency of the items. Also, the composite validity (CR) of each variable is above 0.90, indicating that the indicators reliably measure the constructs. The variance extracted (AVE) for all three variables is more than 0.66, indicating good convergent validity. Overall, the results of this table confirm that the measurement instruments used in the study are psychometrically reliable and valid.

Table 3- Correlation matrix between research variables

Variable	Strategic Flexibility	Startup Performance
Startup Performance	0.724	
Entrepreneurial Activities	0.670	0.634

Table 3 shows the correlation matrix between the research variables. According to this table, there is a positive and strong correlation (r = 0.724) between strategic flexibility and startup performance, which indicates that increasing strategic flexibility is associated with improving startup performance. Also, entrepreneurial activities have correlations of 0.634 and 0.670 with startup performance and strategic flexibility, respectively, which indicates that entrepreneurial activities have a positive and significant relationship with both variables. Overall, these results confirm that there are positive and significant relationships between the research constructs.

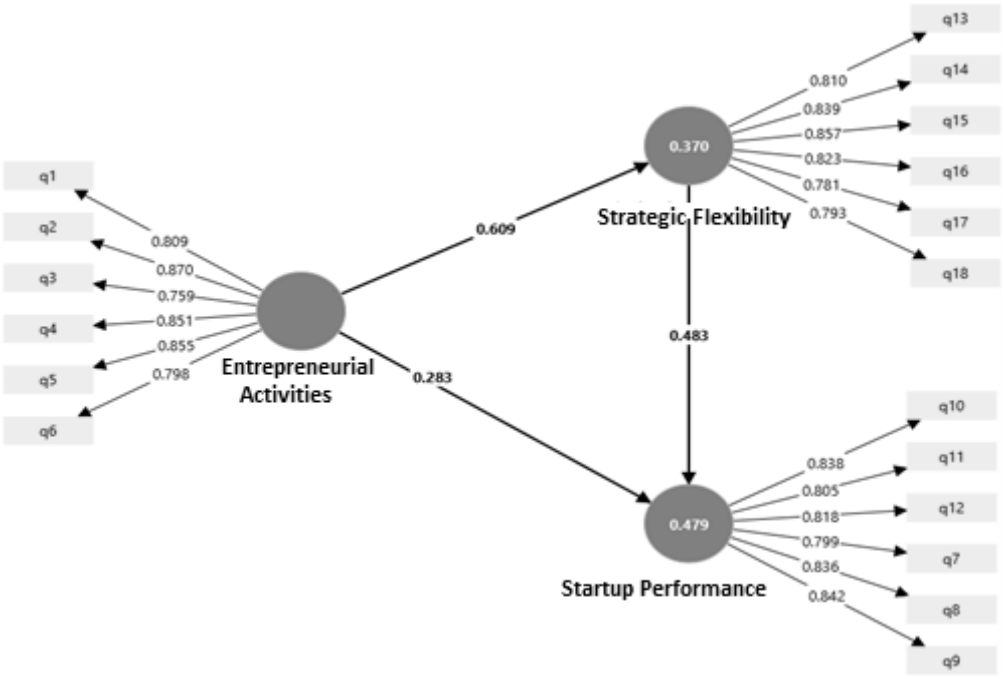

Figure 1. Structural model of research in standard mode

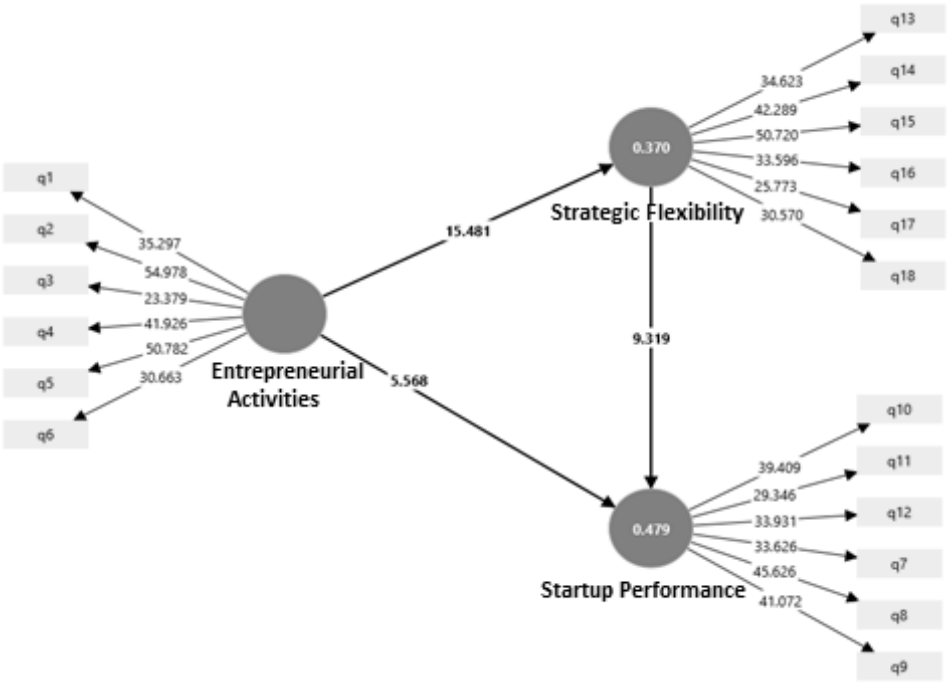

Figure 2. Structural model of research in meaningful mode

Table 4- Results from the structural model

Paths	t_values	β	Sig	Result
Entrepreneurial activities → Startup performance	5.568	0.283	0.0001	Confirmed
Entrepreneurial activities → Strategic flexibility	15.481	0.609	0.0001	Confirmed
Strategic flexibility → Startup performance	9.319	0.483	0.0001	Confirmed
Entrepreneurial activities → Strategic flexibility → Startup performance	7.503	0.294	0.0001	Confirmed

Table 4 presents the results of the structural model of the research. All tested paths have a high level of significance (Sig = 0.0001), and thus the relationships between the variables are confirmed. The path from entrepreneurial activities to startup performance (β = 0.283, t = 5.568) indicates a positive and significant effect of entrepreneurial activities on startup performance. Furthermore, entrepreneurial activities have a

strong positive effect on strategic flexibility (β = 0.609, t = 15.481), and strategic flexibility also has a positive and significant effect on startup performance (β = 0.483, t = 9.319). The mediating path of entrepreneurial activities on startup performance through strategic flexibility is also confirmed (β = 0.294, t = 7.503), indicating that strategic flexibility plays a partial mediating role in the effect of entrepreneurial activities on startup performance.

Table 5- Model fit and predictive relevance indices

Variable	SRMR	Q^2	R^2
Strategic flexibility	0.050	0.240	0.370
Startup performance		0.317	0.479

Table 5 presents the fit indices of the structural model. The R^2 value for strategic flexibility is 0.370, and for startup performance it is 0.479, indicating that the model has a substantial ability to explain the variance of these variables. The Q^2 index, used to assess the model's predictive relevance, is 0.240 for strategic flexibility and 0.317 for startup performance, demonstrating an adequate predictive capability of the model. Furthermore, the SRMR value is 0.050, which is less than 0.08, indicating an acceptable overall fit of the structural model. Overall, the results show that the research model is statistically valid and appropriate.

Discussion

The findings of the research demonstrated that entrepreneurial activities exert a positive and significant impact on startup performance, indicating that the more actively startups engage in opportunity identification, innovation, risk-taking, and learning, the higher their potential for growth, survival, and market competitiveness. This finding aligns with the research literature, introducing entrepreneurship as the "driving engine of economic development and innovation" (Abasi Nami, 2021; Sagar, 2024). Studies by Aftab et al. (2022) and Santisteban et al. (2021) also indicate that without entrepreneurial behavior and attitudes, startups cannot actualize their growth capacities nor experience long-term success. This finding highlights the importance of fostering an entrepreneurial culture, encouraging innovation, and creating an active learning environment for startup success. It also demonstrates that corporate entrepreneurial ability is a key factor in achieving superior performance and sustainable competitiveness. In the context of sports startups, these findings hold particular practical significance, as the sports industry is characterized by rapid changes in technology, audience preferences, and market opportunities. To capitalize on these changes, sports startups and organizations must systematically encourage creativity, innovation, and ideation, while providing the necessary resources to realize new ideas. Creating such an environment enables sports startups not only to respond effectively to current market needs but also to anticipate emerging trends and design innovative services and products, thereby establishing a sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, fostering an entrepreneurial culture within sports organizations strengthens risk-taking, continuous learning, and the identification of new business opportunities, ultimately enhancing their capacity for long-term growth and development.

The results of the study showed that entrepreneurial activities significantly increase strategic flexibility, indicating that entrepreneurship goes beyond generating innovative ideas and strengthens organizations' ability to reinvent strategies, revise competitive orientation, and adapt quickly to environmental changes. According to the findings of Daradkeh & Mansoor (2023), startups can maintain their competitive position only when they are learning-oriented, agile, and flexible, and can dynamically adjust their strategies and decisions according to environmental conditions. Therefore, strategic flexibility acts as a key mediating factor, facilitating the relationship between entrepreneurial activities and achieving optimal performance, because flexible organizations are able to identify environmental opportunities and threats and respond to them with speed and accuracy. This result highlights the importance of designing learning-oriented and agile organizational structures and processes in startups, demonstrating that a sole focus on innovative ideas without the ability to be flexible cannot lead to superior performance. In the sports context, strategic flexibility takes on special importance because the sports environment is rapidly changing, and audience preferences, training trends, and sports technologies are constantly evolving. To maintain their competitive position and improve their performance, sports startups and organizations must have the ability to rapidly redesign their services, products, and business models. For example, clubs can adjust their services according

to new fan needs and market changes by developing online courses, offering digital monthly subscription models, or designing hybrid training programs, thereby effectively exploiting innovative opportunities. Another practical suggestion includes establishing continuous monitoring and feedback systems to analyze audience behavior and sports market trends, enabling managers to make fast, accurate, and flexible decisions. Using this approach, sports startups can not only respond to environmental changes but also proactively redesign their strategies and capitalize on emerging opportunities. These actions increase organizations' capacity to face competition, enhance performance, and achieve sustainable growth in the sports industry (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023).

The results of the study showed that strategic flexibility directly improves startup performance; organizations with higher flexibility are able to make faster decisions based on precise environmental analysis and, as a result, demonstrate more sustainable and competitive performance (Brinckmann et al., 2019; Grewal & Tansuhaj, 2001). This finding is consistent with domestic research as well, indicating that organizational flexibility can help attract more customers, improve services, and increase business success (Kazemizadeh et al., 2024). The importance of this issue is particularly notable in the sports context, because the sports market is rapidly changing, and consumer and fan behavior is strongly influenced by emerging trends (Golmohammadi et al., 2025). Sports startups and organizations that are able to anticipate and adapt to changes in modern training methods, sports programs, and fan preferences can capture a larger market share. Organizational flexibility in this context means the ability to rapidly revise strategies, improve internal processes, and use data for more accurate decision-making.

The results of the study showed that the mediating role of strategic flexibility in the relationship between entrepreneurial activities and startup performance is highly critical. In other words, innovation, risk-taking, and opportunity identification can only have a positive and sustained impact on startup performance when the organization is able to convert these capabilities into flexible decision-making and planning mechanisms (Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023). This finding emphasizes that startups should not focus solely on generating innovative ideas, but rather design their organizational structures and managerial processes in a way that enables continuous learning, rapid adaptation to environmental changes, and effective strategy implementation. In other words, strategic flexibility acts as a bridge between entrepreneurial orientation and organizational performance, enhancing the organization's capabilities in facing environmental uncertainties (Brinckmann et al., 2019; Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023). In the sports context, these findings are highly significant because sports startups and organizations face a dynamic, competitive, and volatile environment (Golmohammadi et al., 2025; Kazemizadeh et al., 2024). In order to fully exploit entrepreneurial capacities, sports organizations must increase their ability to rapidly adapt to market needs, manage resources, and make strategic decisions. This includes establishing flexible systems for managing clubs, teams, and sports academies that can quickly respond to environmental opportunities and threats. Furthermore, strengthening internal processes such as organizational learning, data analysis, and forward-looking planning provides the necessary foundation for leveraging entrepreneurial activities (Brinckmann et al., 2019; Daradkeh & Mansoor, 2023).

Practical Recommendations

Establishing a Sports Innovation Center or specialized Sports Accelerators can provide a structured environment for nurturing new ideas such as e-sports clubs, smart training applications, data-driven analytics services, and sports tourism initiatives. Additionally, developing continuous monitoring and feedback systems to analyze audience behavior and market trends enables managers to make fast, flexible decisions. Specific measures include data mining, fan experience analysis, and management dashboards to track athlete performance and engagement trends. For example, clubs that responded early to trends like functional training and CrossFit were able to attract larger audiences.

Further practical suggestions include offering training courses in managerial and strategic skills for coaches, club managers, and academy directors; designing sports business roadmaps; conducting scenario planning; and establishing agile decision-making systems. Implementing continuous feedback processes and performance monitoring tools helps sports startups rapidly adapt to environmental changes. Collectively, these actions improve economic performance, enhance competitiveness, and enable sustainable growth in the sports industry.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences; future research should employ longitudinal designs. Second, the focus on sports startups in Iraq limits generalizability; future studies should examine other regions and startup types. Third, reliance on self-reported questionnaires suggests that qualitative methods such as case studies or in-depth interviews could complement these findings. Finally, future studies could investigate potential moderators (e.g., environmental dynamism, organizational culture) or mediators (e.g., innovation capability, learning orientation) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms linking entrepreneurial activities to startup performance.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the impact of entrepreneurial activities on the performance of sports startups in Iraq, with a particular focus on the mediating role of strategic flexibility. The findings confirm that entrepreneurial activities positively and significantly enhance both strategic flexibility and startup performance. More importantly, strategic flexibility serves as a crucial mechanism through which entrepreneurial efforts translate into superior and sustainable performance. For sports startups operating in Iraq's unique economic, social, and cultural context, these results underscore the necessity of fostering an entrepreneurial culture alongside building flexible, learning-oriented organizational structures. Theoretical contributions include extending the entrepreneurship and strategic management literature to the underexplored context of Iraqi sports startups. Practically, the findings guide managers and policymakers to invest in innovation centers, monitoring systems, and managerial training. While the study has limitations regarding generalizability and cross-sectional design, it provides a solid foundation for future research and offers actionable insights for developing a more competitive and sustainable sports startup ecosystem in Iraq.

Acknowledgments

This article is derived from a Ph.D. dissertation (Thesis) conducted in the Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to the faculty members, experts, and participants who contributed to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in this study.

Funding

This study was supported solely by the authors.

Statement on the Use of AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used AI tools (ChatGPT) to improve the language and readability of certain parts of the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this work.

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