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Archives in Sport Management and Leadership
Vol. 4, No. 2, 2026, pp. 143-162

Exploring Success and Failure Patterns of Sports Start-ups in Iraq: Insights from Thematic Analysis

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Received:
17 May 2026
Revised:
28 June 2026
Accepted:
28 June 2026

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to identify and explain the pattern of factors influencing the success and failure of sports start-ups in Iraq's sports industry. This study employed a qualitative approach using thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, including managers, founders of sports start-ups, and experts in entrepreneurship and sports, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The data analysis process included familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and producing the final report, through which the conceptual model of the study was developed. To ensure credibility, peer review, triangulation (confirming the consistency of findings with reality), and documentation and confirmation by peers were applied. The findings led to the identification of eight main themes: basic infrastructure, human resources, market and customers, advertising and branding, management and leadership, external environment, innovation and technology and entrepreneurial culture. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the success of sports start-ups in Iraq requires a systemic approach, targeted investment in infrastructure, human resource empowerment, development of market and customer knowledge and effective policy and legal support. In the absence of these elements, even creative ideas and potential capacities will lose the opportunity to become sustainable and profitable activities. Accordingly, the proposed research model can be used as a local analytical framework for designing policies, developing support programs, and assessing the status of the sports entrepreneurship ecosystem in Iraq.

Keywords: Iraq, Pattern, Sports Start-up, Thematic Analysis

Cite this article: Rezaei, S., Naseri plangerd, V., Soltani, M., & Faraj Al-Darraji, A. K. R. (2026). Exploring success and failure patterns of sports start-ups in iraq: insights from thematic analysis. *Archives in Sport Management and Leadership*, *4*(2), 143-162. doi: 10.22108/asml.2026.148910.1150

Introduction

In recent years, the sports industry has become one of the most important economic sectors in the world and plays an important role in the social, regional, and economic development of countries (Izadfar et al., 2020). The dramatic growth of this industry, with the global sports market size increasing from 486.61 billion dollars in 2022 to 512.14 billion dollars in 2023, has drawn investors' attention to sports entrepreneurship as a long-term business opportunity (Keshaav, 2023). Meanwhile, sports entrepreneurs, as agents of change, have paved the way for the development of new markets and the enhancement of the competitiveness of sports organizations by focusing on innovation, improving customer experience, and increasing productivity (Cardella et al., 2021; Legg & Gough, 2012). While sports startups have great potential to transform the sports industry, but competitive and challenging environment has resulted in a high failure rate for startups, with researches show that about 90% of startups face failure. (Aminova & Marchi, 2021). Factors such as intensity of competition, high entry requirements, time constraints in offering new services, need to attract capital and challenges in implementing the business model have made launching and sustaining sports startups require detailed and scientific analysis (Golobokov, 2024; Esin, 2024). The emerging business development model in the sport industry allows entrepreneurs and managers to comprehensively assess all factors impacting their businesses and create tailored strategies (Ghanbari et al., 2025). Globally, startups, as drivers of change in the sports industry, play a key role in introducing new technologies, services and products (Delarestaghi & Razavi, 2017). They can establish themselves in the market and ensure their survival by innovating in the value chain, developing products, optimizing distribution channels, designing effective marketing strategies, creating strategic partnerships and focusing on customer service (Raeei et al., 2024).

Various studies have been conducted in the field of entrepreneurship in sports. Hilmi (2018) in a study titled Entrepreneurship in farming concluded that greater dependence on oil revenues has a significant reducing effect on the density of new business formation in Iraq. The findings of the research by Kanabi & Tasie (2020) showed that political instability and lack of capital and infrastructure are key factors determining the business environment in northern Iraq. In this study, it was stated that in general, Iraq does not have the necessary e-commerce infrastructure as well as support for the development of intellectual property, and entrepreneurs do not have the motivation to present ideas and innovations in different fields. Recent studies suggest that start-up success and failure in fragile, post-conflict, or economically unstable environments cannot be explained only by firm-level variables such as entrepreneurial skills, product quality, or marketing capability. In such contexts, entrepreneurship is embedded in broader institutional, political, and socio-economic conditions. Moritz et al (2024), in a systematic review of entrepreneurship in post-conflict countries, emphasized that entrepreneurs in these environments often operate under political instability, weak institutional structures, economic uncertainty, social fragmentation, and limited access to resources. Similarly, Joseph et al (2023) argued that entrepreneurship in conflict-affected settings has a dual role: it can contribute to recovery, peacebuilding, employment, and social cohesion, but it may also be constrained by insecurity, institutional weakness, and fragile market structures. Evidence from other politically constrained contexts also shows that entrepreneurs respond to adversity through resilience, adaptation, informal networks, and opportunity reconfiguration rather than through conventional growth strategies alone (Lipinski & Shomali, 2024). The results of Zohrehvandian et al.'s research (2023) showed that the main obstacles to the growth of start-up businesses in the sports sector include six categories: managerial obstacles, cultural-social obstacles, administrative-financial obstacles, legal obstacles, human obstacles and environmental obstacles. Pirjamadi et al. (2022) introduced factors such as innovation and ideation, expert human capital, structural and governmental barriers, weak hard infrastructure, strategic challenges, environmental problems and lack of institutional support as challenges to the growth of sports start-up businesses. This perspective is particularly relevant to Iraq because its entrepreneurial ecosystem has been shaped by post-conflict reconstruction, oil dependence, bureaucratic complexity, weak institutional coordination, infrastructure gaps, and regional disparities. Al-Silefanee et al (2025), in their study of the entrepreneurial ecosystem of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, showed that the region’s entrepreneurial activity must be understood through the interaction of political, institutional, financial, cultural, and infrastructural domains. Also, in the research of Mohammadali & Abdulkhaliq (2019), it was found that the lack of easy access to capital and long-term financial resources for investment, the lack of skills required for starting and managing a business, the lack of adequate educational facilities, and the capacity to develop leadership for entrepreneurial activities are among the challenges faced by start-up businesses in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In the sports sector, these studies support the argument that sports start-ups in Iraq should not be analyzed as isolated firms, but as actors operating within a fragile and developing entrepreneurial ecosystem.

In the sport management literature, recent studies also highlight the need to examine sport entrepreneurship as a distinct and context-sensitive field. Pellegrini et al (2020) synthesized the sport entrepreneurship literature and showed that this field is still emerging and requires stronger conceptual and empirical development. Ratten and Jones (2020) emphasized that digital transformation, co-creation, and design thinking are becoming central to value creation in sport entrepreneurship. Cardella et al (2021) showed that sport entrepreneurship can contribute to social inclusion, community change, and local development. More recently, Hammerschmidt et al. (2024) emphasized the role of innovation and creativity in sport entrepreneurship, while Kraus et al (2024) attempted to clarify the conceptual boundaries of sport entrepreneurship as a research field. Technology and digital adaptation have also become central to the survival of sport start-ups, especially in uncertain environments. González-Serrano et al (2023), showed that technology helped small sport businesses maintain competitiveness during the COVID-19 crisis by supporting digitalization, innovation, and adaptive customer engagement. Hamed Abdol-Hajami et al. (2024) introduced culture, communications, organizational support, human resources, financial resources, facilities, and legal infrastructure as factors affecting the formation and growth of start-up businesses in the Iraqi football industry. Fekrat et al (2025) introduced technology as a tool that entrepreneurs can use it to develop strategic plans, increase innovation, and increase business revenue. Shirali et al (2024), identified support mechanisms, advertising, technology, market awareness, and entrepreneurial culture as important factors in the development of sports entrepreneurship with emphasis on sports start-ups. Similarly, Akbari et al. (2024), in a study, analyzed the factors of success and failure of sports startups and entrepreneurs in developing countries. The results showed that efficient management, experienced team, innovation and adaptation to market needs, were identified as key elements of success. In contrast, weak management, lack of experience, financial problems and lack of adaptation to the market were considered among the main reasons for startup failure. External factors such as infrastructure, government policies, economic conditions and high competition have also important effects on the performance of these startups. Countries with better infrastructure and more government support usually witness more success of sports startups, while bureaucratic complexities and lack of adequate support can lead to startup failure. Also, cultural and economic differences play an important role in the success or failure of startups, so startups must adjust their strategies based on local conditions. Naqib Hosseini, et al (2022) showed that in order to create and launch a business, providing the infrastructure and appropriate conditions for social networks can be one of the effective ways to stimulate the business environment in the country's sports. Raeei et al. (2024) in a mixed-method study, identified the factors that accelerate the success of sports startups. The results showed that expert human capital, digital infrastructure, institutional support, and effective networking play a significant role in the growth of sports startups. Aminova and Marchi (2021), concluded that startups that benefit from continuous innovation, customer feedback and product updates, have a higher probability of success. In contrast, lack of innovation, lack of alignment with market needs and disregard for feedback have been identified as the main factors of failure. Therefore, the present study extends this literature by providing context-specific qualitative evidence from Iraq and by showing how sport start-up success and failure are shaped by the interaction of infrastructure, finance, human resources, customers, branding, leadership, legal conditions, technology, and entrepreneurial culture.

In recent decades, sports entrepreneurship has been proposed as one of the effective solutions for creating employment, stimulating innovation and improving productivity in the sports industry. However, the high failure rate of start-ups, especially in developing countries like Iraq, poses a serious challenge to policymakers and entrepreneurs in this field. In a situation where Iraq, on the one hand, has considerable cultural, geographical and human capacities in the field of sports and on the other hand, faces institutional limitations, economic instability, security and political uncertainty, weak infrastructure, and the absence of a systematic support mechanism for start-ups, it is essential to conduct scientific and localized research to identify the success and failure patterns of sports start-ups.

In the present study, success refers to the ability of a sports start-up to survive, maintain market activity, attract and retain customers, generate sustainable income and adapt to Iraq's unstable economic and institutional environment. In contrast, failure refers to business discontinuity, inability to achieve financial stability, loss of customers, operational stagnation or withdrawal from the market. The results of this research, in addition to responding to theoretical gaps in the sports entrepreneurship literature, can provide a basis for formulating supportive and educational policies and operational planning for the development of the Iraqi sports economy. Sports start-ups in Iraq are particularly important because sport is not only an economic activity but also a social and cultural field connected with youth employment, community participation, post-conflict reconstruction, digital consumption and the growing demand for sports products and services. Therefore, the present study, by carefully examining internal and external variables, including innovation, financial resources, human resource quality, market and customer behavior, advertising and branding, management and leadership, government policies, security and political stability, legal barriers, infrastructure, and supportive networks, attempts to answer the following questions: What patterns of internal and external factors distinguish successful from failed sports start-ups in Iraq? Given these patterns, what key principles can form a context-appropriate support framework for developing sports start-ups in Iraq?

Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to identify and interpret the patterns of factors associated with the success and failure of sports start-ups in Iraq. Thematic analysis was used as the main analytical approach, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Since the aim of the study was not to develop a single optimal or prescriptive model, thematic analysis was applied to identify recurrent themes, compare factor configurations across participants, and explain how internal and external conditions were associated with different experiences of success and failure in Iraqi sports start-ups. To strengthen the explanatory dimension of the analysis, a cross-case comparison matrix was also used after initial theme development. This matrix allowed the researchers to compare the presence, absence, and combination of key factors across different participant groups, including founders, managers, and experts.

The statistical population of the study included entrepreneurs, founders, managers, and experts active in sports start-ups and sports-related retail businesses in Iraq. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling based on the following criteria: direct experience in launching, managing, or consulting sports start-ups; at least three years of practical experience in the sports business sector; familiarity with the challenges of success and failure in start-up activities; and willingness to participate in the interview process. In order to capture diverse perspectives, participants were selected from different geographical areas of Iraq, including Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Mosul, Najaf, Karbala, and Sulaymaniyah, and from different types of sports businesses such as sports retail, sports apparel, fitness products, sports equipment supply, digital sports sales platforms, and advisory services. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional knowledgeable participants. To reduce homophily bias in snowball sampling, referrals were not limited to a single network; instead, participants were recruited through multiple referral chains and from different regions, roles, and business types.

The final sample consisted of 15 participants. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached. Saturation was assessed through the continuous comparison of interview data during the coding process. After the twelfth interview, no substantially new codes or themes emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the extracted themes. Therefore, saturation was considered to have been achieved after 15 interviews.

The main data collection instrument was individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the literature on sports entrepreneurship, start-up success and failure, institutional and economic conditions in Iraq and the specific characteristics of the Iraqi sports market. However, the questions were designed in an open-ended manner to avoid imposing pre-existing theoretical categories on participants. The interview guide included questions about participants' experiences of launching or managing sports start-ups, perceived factors contributing to survival or decline, market and customer challenges, financial and institutional constraints, security and political conditions, infrastructure, innovation, human resources and support networks. Follow-up probes were used during the interviews to explore unexpected issues and obtain richer explanations.

Before the main interviews, the relevance and clarity of the interview questions were reviewed through pre-interviews with three experts in sports management, entrepreneurship and Iraqi sports business. Their feedback was used to revise ambiguous questions, add context-specific items related to Iraq's economic and institutional environment and ensure that the questions were appropriate for different types of sports start-ups, not only retail businesses. Therefore, this stage was used to enhance the face validity and contextual relevance of the interview guide. The sample of the questions posed is as follows:

- What factors did you find effective in starting your sports business?
- what obstacles did you face at the beginning of the journey?
- In what cases did you feel that your business was at risk of failure? How do you analyze the reasons for this?
- What role has government support, federations, or sports organizations played in your success or failure?
- What strategies did you use to attract, market, and retain your customers, and how successful were they?
- In your opinion, what features of management or internal structure contribute to the sustainability and growth of start-up businesses?
- What role or impact do you see for the economic, social, or cultural conditions of Iraq in the success or failure of your business?
- If you had the experience you have today, what would you have done differently?

The interviews were conducted individually in Arabic or Kurdish, depending on the participant's preference. When necessary, the interviews were translated into English for analysis and reporting. To ensure translation accuracy, the translated transcripts were checked against the original recordings and reviewed by a bilingual researcher familiar with the Iraqi sports business context. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability and security conditions. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed verbatim. The textual data served as the basis for coding, theme development, cross-case comparison, and interpretation of the patterns of success and failure.

Data analysis was conducted in six stages based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. In the first stage, the researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences. In the second stage, initial codes were generated inductively from the data. In the third stage, similar codes were grouped into preliminary themes. In the fourth stage, the themes were reviewed to ensure internal coherence and distinction from other themes. In the fifth stage, themes and sub-themes were defined and named. In the final stage, the findings were organized into a pattern-based analytical framework showing how different internal and external factors were associated with the success or failure of sports start-ups in Iraq.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were used, including peer review, documentation of coding decisions, comparison of themes with raw interview data and review of interpretations by research peers.

Disagreements were discussed between the coders, and the coding framework was revised where necessary. This process was not used as a purely statistical validation procedure, but as a means of improving transparency, dependability, and consistency in the qualitative analysis. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions about the factors influencing the failure and success of start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry, Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method was used.

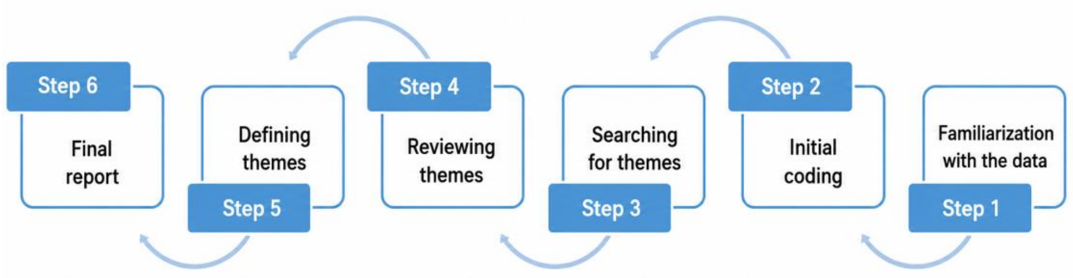

Figure 1. Steps in the content analysis method

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1- The Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age	City/Region in Iraq	Occupational Position	Type of Sports Business/Start-up	Work Experience in Sports Business
P1	Male	34	Baghdad	Founder/Owner	Sports equipment retail start-up	8 years
P2	Male	41	Erbil	Manager	Multi-brand sportswear store	12 years
P3	Female	29	Baghdad	Co-founder	Online sports apparel store	5 years
P4	Male	37	Basra	Entrepreneur	Fitness and gym equipment supplier	10 years
P5	Male	32	Najaf	Store Manager	Sports shoes and accessories store	7 years
P6	Female	35	Sulaymaniyah	Marketing Specialist	Digital sports retail platform	6 years
P7	Male	44	Mosul	Business Consultant	Sports retail and start-up advisory	15 years
P8	Male	30	Karbala	Founder	Small-scale sportswear start-up	4 years
P9	Female	38	Baghdad	Sales Manager	Sports nutrition and fitness products	9 years
P10	Male	46	Erbil	Senior Expert	Sports entrepreneurship and retail development	18 years
P11	Male	33	Basra	Co-founder	Online and offline sports accessories store	6 years
P12	Female	31	Baghdad	Entrepreneur	Women’s sportswear start-up	5 years
P13	Male	39	Najaf	Operations Manager	Sports equipment distribution business	11 years
P14	Male	28	Mosul	Founder	Digital-based sports product start-up	3 years
P15	Male	42	Sulaymaniyah	Retail Expert	Sports goods retail and supply chain	14 years

As shown in Table 2, the participants included 15 individuals actively involved in sports start-ups and sports-related retail businesses in Iraq. The sample consisted of entrepreneurs, founders, managers, marketing specialists, and business experts with direct experience in launching, managing, or consulting sports businesses. Participants were selected from different Iraqi cities, including Baghdad, Erbil, Basra, Najaf, Mosul, Karbala, and Sulaymaniyah, in order to capture diverse regional experiences. Their ages ranged from 28 to 46 years, and their professional experience in sports business ranged from 3 to 18 years. This diversity helped provide rich qualitative insights into the patterns of success and failure among sports start-ups in Iraq.

In the first step of content analysis method (familiarization with the data), the researcher repeatedly and repeatedly read and reread the full text of interviews conducted with entrepreneurs and managers in this field in order to gain a deep understanding of the factors influencing the failure and success of start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry. This process was the first step in thematic analysis and helped the researcher to delve deeply into the content of the data to identify common and diverse areas of participants' lived experiences and understand the semantic structure of the data.

In the second stage (generating initial codes), the researcher extracted initial codes from the interview text using the open coding method and 80 codes were extracted. At this stage, the researcher used descriptive and conceptual coding simultaneously and attempted to produce codes that were accurate, transparent and independent of theoretical assumptions and were extracted solely based on the participants' experimental data and the content of the conversations.

In the third stage (theme search), the researcher carefully examined and consolidated the extracted initial codes to identify common semantic patterns among the codes. In this process, codes that were aligned with each other in terms of content, orientation, and conceptual context were categorized into primary and more coherent themes. This initial categorization of themes served as the basis for forming the final conceptual structure of the study in the subsequent stages of thematic analysis. Examples of direct quotes and their grouping into subthemes are shown in Table 2.

Table 2- Examples of direct quotes and their grouping into subthemes

Sub themes	Direct quote
Technical infrastructure	We had counted on online sales, but the internet was so weak and intermittent that many orders were actually canceled and customers were dissatisfied and did not return.
	Professional stores have apps or websites, but we only worked with Instagram. The lack of a dedicated platform made many customers distrustful.
	It happened many times that a customer placed an order but we had no inventory because inventory control was manual and inaccurate.
Financial infrastructure	We applied for a loan, but banks rejected our application because we didn't have a strong track record or guarantor.
	There were no investors willing to take a risk on our small sports business; everyone was looking for a quick profit.
	We started our business with minimal capital; we didn't even have the money to pay the rent for the next two months, and we were constantly worried about meeting initial expenses.
Employees competence	Our employees did not have sports sales expertise and could not properly introduce products or communicate effectively with customers.
	Some employees were not interested in training at all and thought the traditional method was better.
	The staff's approach was very initial, and customers felt like they were dealing with an unprofessional team.
Job stability	The employees were not permanent, they would go with the first offer that was better, and we constantly had to train new staff.
	We didn't have a formal contract or insurance, and this caused loyalty and job commitment to decline.
	There were many times when we couldn't pay salaries at the end of the month, and this caused the troops to lose confidence.
Market knowledge	We didn't have accurate information about our competitors, we didn't know how to differentiate ourselves or create a competitive advantage.
	When we imported items that the market didn't want, we would have inventory on hand and make a loss.
	We had no accurate, official statistical data about the market or sports population in the area, so we were just going by guesswork.
Customer behavior	People didn't trust the new brand and preferred to shop at established stores.
	Our customers were looking for low prices above all else; quality was not their first priority.
	Many purchases were emotional, for example, sales would spike after a game or sporting event but then drop.
	Banner ads didn't work at all; it seems like people don't pay attention to this model anymore.

Sub themes	Direct quote
Advertising strategy	We were completely dependent on Instagram, and when post views dropped, sales dropped to zero. We advertised, but we never checked which method worked; we didn't analyze feedback.
Brand identity	Our logo design, colors and packaging didn't match, our brand lacked integrity. Our brand had no story or philosophy; it was just a name with no meaning or narrative behind it. Compared to competing stores, our brand had no credibility at all because we were neither visible nor had we built trust.
Operational management	We didn't have a daily plan; that is, we did things every day without a goal, and this disorganization caused sales to decrease. Several times a customer had ordered something and we didn't have it. Because inventory control was not accurate, the actual inventory was different from what we had recorded. We never listened to the customer. We didn't ask for feedback, nor did we analyze complaints, so we didn't understand what was wrong.
Team leadership	Employees made suggestions but were not taken seriously, which caused them to lose motivation and stop cooperating. Disputes between members remained unanswered; no one mediated nor was a solution offered, resulting in a negative atmosphere among the forces. There was no emotional support; the manager only talked about work but did not pay attention to the team's individual concerns, which increased the team's distance.
Economic conditions	The rise in the dollar rate made many foreign sporting goods more expensive, so we were forced to raise prices and lost customers. People didn't have money for sports; their main spending was on essential needs, which is why sales of sports equipment had decreased. Every month, rent and utility bills went up, but sales didn't change, which put a lot of financial pressure on us.
Legal barriers	We spent months going from office to office to get the license. Each office wanted something different, the processes were not transparent and it was tedious. A start-up business is not defined in Iraqi law. We were treated like traditional shops, even though we have different needs. Even though we had just started, government imposed a high tax on us from the very beginning; this prevented us from even getting above zero.
Digital transformation	We didn't have any online stores. When Corona came, we saw that others were easily selling online, but our sales all went down. We never analyzed which products were best-selling, we just bought based on our gut feeling, and sometimes the items would just sit on our hands. We didn't know how algorithms worked; our posts weren't getting views and our ads were ineffective.
Technological innovation	We only had Face-to-face sales. Some stores had subscriptions or special packages, but we continued with the traditional model. We had no plans to send to other cities. Customers who ordered from other provinces often gave up on their purchases. Once the product was sold, we no longer had any contact with the customer. We had no after-sales service, and this caused dissatisfaction.
Social attitude	Still in our society, people who have their own businesses are not taken seriously. Everyone is looking for government jobs. Families did not prioritize sports; when the general culture is not sports-friendly, the market for these products will not take off. We were afraid of being judged, because people around us thought you couldn't make money from sports, you were just wasting time.
Entrepreneurial thinking	Many times we had ideas but didn't implement them because of the fear of failure. This fear was always with us. We were waiting for the government to support us. We didn't have the courage to make decisions ourselves and were looking for external approval. In the back of our minds, we knew that business would not succeed in Iraq. This lack of self-confidence had hindered our progress.

Also, Codes clustering and initial theme extraction is shown in table 3.

Table 3- Codes clustering and initial theme extraction

Main Themes	Sub Themes	Initial Codes
Basic infrastructure	Technical infrastructure	Lack of stable internet
		Lack of sales system
		Lack of warehousing software
		Lack of online payment system
		Weaknesses in digital security
	Financial infrastructure	Insufficient initial capital
		Lack of access to loans
		Current cost pressures
		Not attracting investors
		High cost of advertising
Human Resources	Employees competence	Lack of specialized training
		Weakness in communication skills
		Unfamiliarity with technology
		Lack of learning spirit
		Disinterest in sports
	Job stability	High quit rate
		Not paying salaries on time
		Lack of formal contract
		Feeling of unfairness in payment
		Lack of career advancement path
Market and customer	Market knowledge	Lack of competitors analysis
		Ignorance of customer needs
		Being unplanned in pricing
		Not studying the target market
		Lack of local statistical information
	Customer behavior	Distrust of the new brand
		Focus on cheap price
		The impact of cyberspace on purchasing decisions
		Emotional behavior in shopping
		Low customer loyalty
Advertising and branding	Advertising strategy	Ineffective traditional advertising
		Complete reliance on Instagram
		Not having a promotional calendar
		Limited use of local advertising
		Ignoring to feedback analysis
	Brand identity	Lack of distinctive brand name
		Inconsistency in visual design
		Lack of brand story
		Brand message not being the same
		Weak Brand credibility
Management and leadership	Operational management	Lack of specific daily schedule
		Weakness in inventory management
		Irregularity in the distribution of tasks
		Lack of a feedback recording system
		Emotional decisions
	Team leadership	Lack of motivation among employees
		Not having a leadership role model
		Ignoring team opinions
		Weakness in conflict resolution
		Lack of emotional support
External environment	Economic conditions	Exchange rate fluctuations
		Decrease in people's purchasing power
		Inflation and current costs
		Recession of the sports market
		Lack of governmental financial support
	Legal barriers	Complicated registration bureaucracy

Main Themes	Sub Themes	Initial Codes
		Lack of supportive laws of startups
		Disproportionate taxes
		Restrictions on importing goods
		Lack of monitoring over the informal market
Innovation and technology	Digital transformation	Lack of online store
		Not using of CRM
		Lack of use of data analysis
		Weakness in digital content production
		Incompatibility with platform algorithms
	Technological innovation	Lack of a new sales model
		Lack of variety in sending methods
		Neglecting to personalize the shopping experience
		Lack of after-sales service
		Disability to create a specific experience
	Social attitude	Distrust of startups
Entrepreneurial culture		Negative view to private work
		Weaknesses in successful models
		Concerned with social judgment
		Low priority of sports in society
	Entrepreneurial thinking	Fear of taking risks
		Dependence on external support
		Short term motivation
		Lack of the spirit of flexibility
		Weakness in self-confidence

After the initial themes were developed, a cross-case comparison matrix was used to examine how the extracted factors appeared across different groups of participants. For this purpose, participants were grouped into three analytical categories: founders and entrepreneurs (P1, P3, P4, P8, P11, P12, and P14), managers and operational specialists (P2, P5, P6, P9, and P13), and experts and consultants (P7, P10, and P15). The matrix was not designed as a statistical frequency table; rather, it was used as an analytical tool to compare the relative salience, presence, and configuration of key themes across participant groups. Cross-case comparison of success and failure factors across participant groups is shown in table 4.

Table 4- Cross-case comparison matrix of success and failure factors across participant groups

Cross-case interpretation	Experts	Managers	Founders	Sub-theme	Main theme
Weak internet, lack of online platforms, absence of online payment systems, and poor inventory technologies were emphasized as major barriers to survival and scalability.	●	◐	●	Technical infrastructure	Basic infrastructure
Limited initial capital, difficulty in accessing bank loans, lack of investors, and rising operating costs were viewed as central causes of early vulnerability.	●	◐	●	Financial infrastructure	
Managers and experts strongly emphasized weak sales skills, limited technological knowledge, and insufficient specialized training as barriers to service quality.	●	●	◐	Employee competence	Human resources
Managers mainly highlighted employee turnover, delayed salaries, lack of formal contracts, and weak commitment as operational threats.	◐	●	◐	Job stability	
All groups emphasized that lack of	●	●	●	Market	Market and

Cross-case interpretation	Experts	Managers	Founders	Sub-theme	Main theme
competitor analysis, weak demand assessment, and absence of reliable local market data lead to wrong product and pricing decisions.				Knowledge	customer
Price sensitivity, low customer loyalty, distrust of new brands, and event-driven purchasing behavior were repeatedly reported by founders and managers.	◐	●	●	Customer behavior	
Overreliance on Instagram, ineffective traditional advertising, lack of promotional calendars, and absence of feedback analysis weakened customer acquisition.	◐	●	●	Advertising strategy	Advertising and branding
Founders particularly referred to weak brand credibility, lack of brand story, inconsistent visual identity, and inability to build emotional connection with customers.	◐	◐	●	Brand identity	
Poor planning, inaccurate inventory control, emotional decision-making, and lack of feedback systems appeared across all participant groups.	●	●	●	Operational management	Manageme nt and leadership
Weak conflict resolution, ignoring team opinions, and lack of emotional support were emphasized as factors reducing motivation and internal cohesion.	●	●	◐	Team leadership	
Exchange-rate fluctuations, inflation, reduced purchasing power, rent increases, and market recession were considered systemic threats to sports start-ups.	●	●	●	Economic conditions	External environmen t
Participants emphasized complicated registration procedures, unclear start-up regulations, tax pressure, import restrictions, and weak legal support.	●	◐	●	Legal barriers	
Lack of e-commerce systems, CRM, data analytics, digital content skills, and platform algorithm knowledge weakened competitiveness.	●	◐	●	Digital transformatio n	Innovation and technology
Traditional sales models, limited delivery methods, weak personalization, and lack of after-sales services reduced differentiation and customer retention.	●	◐	●	Technologic al innovation	
Distrust of start-ups, preference for government employment, social judgment, and low priority of sport in society limited entrepreneurial legitimacy.	●	◐	●	Social attitude	Entreprene urial culture
Fear of failure, dependence on external support, short-term motivation, and weak self-confidence reduced adaptive capacity and risk-taking.	●	◐	●	Entrepreneur ial thinking	

Note. ● = strongly emphasized; ◐ = moderately emphasized.

The cross-case comparison shows that the success or failure of Iraqi sports start-ups is not explained by a single factor, but by the configuration of several internal and external conditions. Founders and entrepreneurs mainly emphasized financial constraints, weak technical infrastructure, market uncertainty, customer distrust, weak branding, digital limitations, and legal–economic instability because these factors directly affected survival, revenue generation, and business continuity. Managers and operational specialists placed stronger emphasis on employee competence, job stability, advertising execution, customer interaction, operational routines, and team leadership because these issues shaped daily implementation and service delivery. Experts and consultants interpreted the same problems at the ecosystem level and emphasized the interaction between weak infrastructure, limited finance, legal ambiguity, human-capital limitations, digital underdevelopment, and fragile entrepreneurial culture. Overall, the matrix indicates that vulnerable or failed start-ups were usually characterized by the combined presence of weak financial infrastructure, insufficient market knowledge, limited digital transformation, poor operational management, and exposure to unstable economic and legal conditions. In contrast, comparatively more resilient cases were those in which founders partially compensated for environmental constraints through stronger customer knowledge, more active use of digital channels, clearer brand identity, more disciplined inventory and operational practices, and adaptive entrepreneurial thinking. Therefore, the cross-case comparison supports the proposed model by showing that success and failure in Iraqi sports start-ups are configurational, context-dependent, and shaped by the interaction of firm-level capabilities and ecosystem-level constraints.

In the fourth stage (theme review), the researcher systematically reviewed and evaluated the initial themes to ensure the internal coherence of codes of each theme and the conceptual distinction between different themes. A detailed analysis of the content related to each theme showed that the codes assigned to each category were fully consistent with the conceptual structure of that theme and covered the diverse experiences of the participants. In none of the cases was there a need to remove or decompose themes, and only in some cases were the nomenclatures redefined in a more precise conceptual way to align more closely with the content of the codes.

The eight final themes could clearly and analytically represent the various dimensions of the experimental failures and successes of sports startups in Iraq. The researcher's final evaluation showed that the eight-part structure of the main themes is at a desirable level in terms of data adequacy, semantic coherence and analytical distinction and provides the capacity to interpret the data in depth and present a reliable model of the findings.

In the fifth stage (definition and naming of themes), the researcher carefully explained the content of the main and sub-themes and selected comprehensive and precise names for them.

In the sixth stage of the thematic analysis process, the researcher, relying on the final extracted themes and based on Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, began to compile a final qualitative data analysis report. In the final report, eight main themes, including: basic infrastructure, human resources, market and customer, advertising and branding, management and leadership, external environment, innovation and technology, and entrepreneurial culture, were analyzed and explained, along with 16 sub-themes and 80 initial codes. According to the findings, a conceptual model was designed to explain the factors affecting the failure and success of start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry. This model can be used as an analytical and strategic framework for sports policymakers, supportive institutions, entrepreneurial consultants and founders of sports startups. This model shows that only by paying integrated and synergistic attention to the infrastructural, human, managerial, technological, cultural and environmental dimensions can increase the chances of success of these businesses and prevent from their failure. The pattern of failure and success factors in start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry is shown in Figure 2.

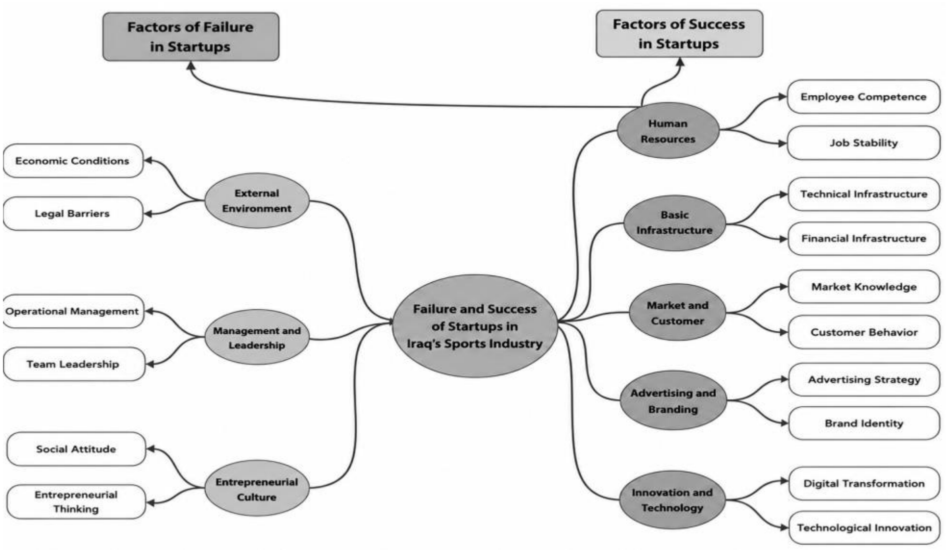

Figure 2. Pattern of failure and success factors in start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that basic infrastructure plays a pivotal role in the formation, continuation, or cessation of the activities of these types of businesses. This category consists of two key components: technical infrastructure and financial infrastructure. Each of these components, independently and in interaction with other environmental and organizational conditions, can determine the trajectory and sustainability of start-up businesses. In the first area (technical infrastructure), field data showed that start-ups in the Iraqi sports industry face challenges such as the lack of stable internet, lack of appropriate technological equipment, poor use of customer management and market analysis software, and lack of access to modern digital tools. These shortcomings are a serious obstacle to innovation and effective engagement with target audiences. The findings of this study are consistent with the study of Kraus et al. (2024), Shirali et al. (2024) and Naqib Hosseini et al. (2023), who have emphasized the importance of cyberspace and technological tools in the success of sports businesses. At the international level, Raeei et al. (2024) emphasize that in developing countries, the lack of digital infrastructure is one of the main inhibiting factors in the growth and maturity of start-ups. In explaining this section, we can say: The lack of technical infrastructure causes start-up businesses to be at a practical disadvantage in competition with better-equipped competitors. Weakness in digital connectivity prevents the rapid, accurate, and targeted implementation of services and eliminates the opportunity to enter emerging markets or interact with a new generation of customers. The inability to utilize digital tools even causes marketing, human resource management, and customer service activities to remain at a rudimentary level. These shortcomings not only prevent competitive advantage, but also destroy the ability to respond to environmental changes and market demands. As a result, businesses launched under such conditions will not be sufficiently resilient to even simple challenges. “Financial infrastructure” as the second most important component in the category of basic infrastructure, plays a fundamental role in the ability to establish, survive, and grow new businesses. The findings show that limited access to financial resources, the lack of financial support systems from the government or sports institutions, and the difficulty of attracting investors are among the most important challenges in this area. The inability to secure primary resources has caused many businesses to fail in the very early stages. This part of the findings is consistent with the research of Akbari et al. (2024), Moritz et al. (2024), Al-Silefanee et al. (2025), Hamed Abdol-Hajami et al (2024) and Mohammadali & Abdulkhaliq (2019), who emphasized the importance of financing and its role in the sustainability of startups. Also, Aminova & Marchi (2021) stated in an international study that the lack of sufficient financial resources, especially in the early stages, is one of the most important reasons for the failure of sports startups. In explaining this section, we can say: Limited financial resources not only make the startup process slow and costly, but also hinder innovation, product development, attracting skilled labor, and investing in marketing. Lack of capital can cause delays in production, uncertainty in payment of wages, and distrust among customers and business partners. Even businesses with high idea generation capacity, in the absence of financial support, lose the ability to turn ideas into real products or services. In such circumstances, competitive strategies will be completely disrupted and businesses will be forced to become passive and eventually exit the market. Financial infrastructure, in fact, is the backbone of a business, and its weakness in the economic system of countries like Iraq has emerged as a structural barrier to the flourishing of startups in the sports industry.

The findings of this study showed that human resources play a key and fundamental role in guiding, stabilizing and developing the activities of these types of businesses. This category consists of two key components: employee competence and job stability. The quality of human resources, in terms of knowledge, skills and motivation, can be a factor of differentiation and success or, conversely, the reason for the failure of businesses; especially in the unstable and competitive environment of developing countries such as Iraq. In the first area (employee competence), field findings indicate that weaknesses in specialized skills, unfamiliarity with sports management principles, inability to use modern marketing tools and inefficiency in customer interaction have been serious obstacles to improving the performance of start-up businesses. In many cases, these weaknesses have caused waste of resources, wrong decisions, and customer dissatisfaction, ultimately accelerating business failure. The findings of this section are consistent with the research of Zohrehvandian et al (2022), Akbari et al (2024) and Mohammadali & Abdulkhaliq (2019). In explaining this section, we can say: The lack of competence among human resources causes start-up businesses to face unprofessional decisions, weakness in implementing key processes, and inability to adapt to market changes in their growth path. Also, when employees lack up-to-date training in the fields of technology, communications, sales, and customer orientation, the overall efficiency of the business decreases and its competitive advantage weakens. In a complex and dynamic environment such as the sports industry, unprepared employees are not only unable to provide professional services, but also do not have a proper understanding of the needs of the audience. The result of these shortcomings is a decrease in customer trust, the loss of business opportunities, and ultimately market isolation. In the second part, job stability, as the second most important component in the human resource category, refers to the continued presence of employees in the workplace and creating a sense of security and belonging in them. According to the findings, many new sports businesses in Iraq suffer from the lack of transparent employment contracts, delayed payment of wages, lack of insurance, and sudden termination of cooperation. This instability has caused burnout, reduced motivation, and loss of efficient workers. This part is also consistent with the research of Pirjamadi et al (2022). In explaining this section, we can say: Job stability is one of the pillars of creating a sustainable organizational culture and successful long-term performance. When employees are not sure about their job future, efforts to improve performance, innovation, and organizational commitment are greatly reduced. Also, constant turnover of forces causes a waste of training resources and instability in business operational systems. In the absence of this stability, intra-organizational interactions, team trust, and organizational cohesion are also weakened, and ultimately, the level of productivity of the entire complex drops.

In examining the factors affecting the failure or success of start-ups in the Iraqi sports industry, one of the fundamental categories identified was the market and the customer. This category includes two basic components: market knowledge and customer behavior. The findings show that awareness of the structure, capacity, demand, and trends of the sports market, as well as a detailed understanding of customer behavior, preferences, and sensitivities, play a decisive role in the success or failure of start-ups. In the first component (market knowledge), the qualitative data of the study indicate that many new businesses in the Iraqi sports industry have entered the field without conducting initial market studies, demand analysis, or competitor research. This lack of accurate information has led to the provision of services or products that are not in line with the real market needs or have inappropriate timing and geographical location. Ignoring market trends and failing to analyze opportunities and threats has prevented many businesses from creating a suitable competitive position for themselves. This section is consistent with the research of Joseph et al. (2023), Mohammadali & Abdulkhaliq (2019) and Pirjamadi et al (2022). In explaining this section, we can say: Ignorance of the market structure leads to incorrect decisions regarding the type of service, pricing, choice of physical or digital location, and even choice of target audience. Also, the lack of reliable data on the market situation leads to a failure to recognize environmental opportunities or threats, and as a result, it will prevent the design of dynamic and flexible strategies. In a changing and turbulent market such as the Iraqi sports industry, the lack of proper understanding of the supply and demand situation is like moving in the dark for start-ups. In the second component (customer behavior), research findings show that many start-up businesses lack a detailed understanding of their customers' motivations, preferences, purchasing power and consumption patterns. Some businesses have designed services and advertisements without considering the cultural, economic and psychological conditions of their audiences, which have had no appeal to customers. Lack of effective customer interaction, disregard for feedback and inability to personalize services have been among the main disadvantages of this area. This section is also consistent with the research of Keshaav (2023) and Hamed Abdol-Hajami et al (2024). In explaining this section, we can say: In the absence of proper analysis of customer behavior, businesses will not be able to provide their services in accordance with the real tastes and preferences of customers. Also, an incomplete understanding of the cultural or economic factors of customers can lead to crises such as inappropriate pricing, ineffective advertising, and reduced customer loyalty. In such situations, new businesses, by failing to attract and retain customers, are caught in a vicious cycle of high costs and low revenue, which ends in early exit from the market.

In analyzing the factors affecting on the performance of start-ups businesses in the Iraqi sports industry, one of the key categories is advertising and branding. This category includes two basic components: advertising strategy and brand identity. The findings show that the way of advertising, the choice of communication channels, the style of messaging, and the mental image formed of the brand in the minds of customers play a decisive role in creating or weakening the competitive position of these businesses. In the first section (advertising strategy), field data indicates that many start-ups in the Iraqi sports industry lack a targeted advertising plan. Some of them rely solely on traditional methods such as street banners or word-of-mouth advertising to introduce themselves, while not taking advantage of the potential of social networks, digital advertising or influencer marketing. This lack of strategy has resulted in customer awareness of these brands remaining very limited and a competitive advantage not being formed. The findings of this section are consistent with the research of Al-Silefanee et al. (2025), and Mohammadali & Abdulkhaliq (2019). In interpreting this section, we can say that the lack of a clear advertising strategy leads to fragmentation in messaging, lack of coherence in branding and ultimately a decrease in audience trust and awareness. Not using modern advertising tools causes a new business to fall behind the competition and not have the opportunity to establish its position in the market. As a result, instead of attracting customers, it faces a crisis of invisibility and becomes very vulnerable to more active and creative brands. In the second part, brand identity, as a determining factor, plays a role in the audience's mindset towards the values, personality, quality and trustworthiness of the business. The findings of this study show that many start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry lack a clear and differentiated brand identity. This has led to their lack of differentiation from competitors, weakness in attracting customer loyalty and inability to create an emotional connection with the audience. This finding is consistent with the research of Kanabi & Tasie (2020) and Delarestaghi et al (2017). In interpreting this section, it can be said: A brand without a clear identity will be just a meaningless name in the customer's mind that has neither a competitive advantage nor an incentive to return. In the absence of a coherent identity structure (slogan, color, brand personality, mission, and values), start-ups will not be able to establish an emotional and symbolic connection with their audience. The result of this lack of identity is the rapid forgetting of the brand in a competitive market environment, loss of market share, and inability to build long-term loyalty.

The results showed that the category of "management and leadership" is one of the vital elements in guiding and sustaining the performance of these types of businesses. This category consists of two basic sub-components, namely operational management and team leadership, each of which complements the structural role, decision-making, and internal cohesion of start-ups. Operational management refers to a business's ability to manage resources, plan carefully, monitor activities, and guide the organization toward achieving goals. Field data from this study shows that many start-ups lack a well-documented, agile, and data-driven operational management model. The lack of clear executive structures and the lack of basic skills in the field of project management lead to functional chaos and loss of efficiency. The findings of this section are consistent with the results of studies by Akbari et al (2024), Zohrehvandian et al. (2022) and Hamed Abdol-Hajami et al (2024). In interpreting this section, we can say: Poor operational management not only causes waste of time and money, but also leads to team distrust, customer dissatisfaction, and the inability to maintain service quality. In start-up businesses where every decision can be crucial, the lack of precise control and planning systems leads to a dead end. Without a flexible and documented management structure, these businesses react unproductively to environmental fluctuations and competitors' decisions, turning growth opportunities into threats. In the second part, team leadership refers to the role of leaders in motivating, empathizing, guiding members and building committed and collaborative teams. Results showed that many managers in start-ups lack transformational and collaborative leadership skills and play a more mechanical supervisory role. As a result, teamwork is disrupted, the intra-organizational atmosphere becomes tense, and innovation and loyalty of members decrease. The findings of this section are consistent with the study by Mohammadali & Abdulkhaliq (2019). In interpreting this section, we can say: In start-up businesses where organizational stability has not yet been achieved, the role of the leader goes beyond that of a technical or executive manager; the leader must be an inspiration, a guide, and a catalyst for empathy and group effort. Ineffective leadership will lead to conflict, low morale and the departure of key players. In contrast, effective leadership can set the team on a path to sustainability and growth by creating a shared vision, fostering a culture of learning, and encouraging participation. In the challenging environment of Iraqi sports, effective leadership is a prerequisite for resilience and success in a competitive market.

The results showed that the external environment, as one of the key influential areas, plays a serious role in facilitating or disrupting the growth path of these businesses. This category consists of two main subcategories: economic conditions and legal barriers. Each of these factors, by shaping the external activity context, can directly or indirectly affect the survival or decline of new businesses. In the first part (economic conditions), as one of the main external factors, refer to the overall state of the country's economy, inflation rate, currency stability, purchasing power of the community, operating costs and access to cheap financial resources. Field data from this study show that the unstable economic situation in Iraq, including exchange rate fluctuations, lack of investment security, and reduced purchasing power of customers, have created serious obstacles for emerging sports businesses. Economic instability has reduced market predictability, increased the cost of sports services and ultimately reduced the competitiveness of start-up businesses. The results of this section are consistent with the results of studies by Al-Silefanee et al. (2025), Moritz et al. (2024), Hilmi (2018) & Hamed Abdol-Hajami et al (2024). In interpreting this section, we can say: The lack of economic stability deprives entrepreneurs of an atmosphere of trust and predictability. High inflation rates and operating costs increase the price of services and put start-up businesses at a disadvantage in competition with larger or non-sports businesses. Lack of access to cheap capital and high interest rates on loans also hinder innovation and the development of new services. In such an environment, even creative ideas and capable teams struggle to break even and survive due to external pressures. In the second part (legal obstacles), refers to complex regulations, administrative bureaucracy, lack of transparent legal protection and lack of coordination between government agencies. Field findings showed that start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry face problems such as lack of easy registration, lack of supportive laws, unstable taxes and contradictions in the interpretation of laws. This situation has caused many activists in this field to either carry out their activities informally or to completely refrain from entering the formal market. The results of this section are consistent with the results of studies by Kanabi & Tasie (2020) and Hamed Abdol-Hajami et al (2024). In interpreting this section, we can say: The lack of a transparent legal framework and stability in policymaking increases the legal risk of start-up activities and reduces the incentive for investment and development. Heavy bureaucracy and lack of legal protections slow down the growth process and even cause some businesses to withdraw from the formal cycle of activity. In the absence of effective rules, the market suffers from chaos, non-transparent activities and the loss of healthy competitive advantages.

The results showed that the category of innovation and technology is one of the key elements in creating competitive differentiation and enhancing the resilience of start-ups to market changes. This category has two important components: digital transformation and service innovation, both of which provide a platform for scalability, performance improvement and creating added value for customers. Digital transformation means the strategic use of new technologies in operational processes, marketing, customer relations and data-driven decision-making. Field data showed that emerging sports businesses in Iraq, especially in large cities, are struggling to adopt technologies such as point-of-sale software, communication applications, online service booking systems and customer management systems. However, infrastructure limitations, high technology costs, and some managers' unfamiliarity with digital tools have made the digital transformation process challenging. The findings of this section are consistent with the results of studies by Kanabi & Tasie (2020), Hammerschmidt et al. (2024), Kraus et al. (2024), Raeei et al (2024), Fekrat et al (2025) and Lv et al. (2025). In the interpretation of this section, we can say: Digital transformation allows startups to lead in technological innovation instead of competing for limited physical resources. The use of digital solutions increases the speed of response to customers and reduces operational costs. In the absence of digital transformation, start-ups remain dependent on traditional methods and lose their competitiveness in changing markets. In the second part, service innovation refers to the design and delivery of new services tailored to the new needs of customers. Sports startups in Iraq are trying to create a different experience for their audiences by designing special service packages, combining educational, recreational and health-oriented activities, or utilizing sharing models. In the interpretation of this section, we can say: Service innovation not only creates differences among competitors, but also allows for rapid response to market changes and new customer needs. In situations where start-up businesses lack extensive financial resources or strong infrastructure, service innovation can be a solution to attract customer attention, reduce marketing costs and strengthen the brand. Businesses that are able to design innovative services often grow faster in the market and show greater resilience to crises.

The results showed that entrepreneurial culture, as one of the important contextual factors, has a significant impact on the formation, continuation or weakening of sports startups. This category includes two subcategories: societal attitude and entrepreneurial attitude. Each of these components, whether from the perspective of external perception towards entrepreneurship or from the entrepreneur's internal and psychological perspective, plays a vital role in the path of this type of business. In the first section, the societal attitude refers to the perception, beliefs and level of public acceptance of entrepreneurship, especially in the field of sports. Field findings showed that in some parts of Iraqi society, especially in underprivileged or traditional areas, start-up businesses are still considered risky and unstable activities. This negative attitude leads to reduced social support, distrust of new services, and even indifference of local institutions towards these businesses. In contrast, in areas where the level of education or familiarity with the digital economy is higher, more positive reception and interaction with entrepreneurial ideas is seen. The findings of this section are consistent with the results of studies by Hamed Abdol-Hajami et al (2024). In interpreting this section, we can say that the attitude of society towards entrepreneurship determines the supportive or inhibitory atmosphere around start-up businesses. When society considers entrepreneurial activity to be valuable and respected, more people are motivated to enter this field and customer trust also increases. In contrast, a negative cultural atmosphere causes entrepreneurs to be isolated, have difficulty in attracting social support and are unable to access informal sources such as word-of-mouth advertising; therefore, reforming public attitudes and institutionalizing an entrepreneurial culture are prerequisites for sustainable success in the field of sports start-ups. In the second part, the entrepreneurial thinking is related to the perceptions, beliefs and psychological and cognitive characteristics of the founders of these businesses. The findings showed that the level of motivation, resilience, self-belief, foresight and tolerance for ambiguity among emerging Iraqi sports entrepreneurs is one of the factors that differentiates between successful and unsuccessful businesses. Entrepreneurs who have a proactive attitude, self-confidence, and innovative spirit continue their development path with greater strength, even in difficult economic conditions. This part of the findings is in line with the research of Pirjamadi et al (2022) and Shirali et al. (2024). In explaining this section, we can say: Entrepreneurial attitude is the psychological pillar of the sustainability of start-ups. When a business founder operates with a growth perspective, a willingness to accept failure and intellectual flexibility, he or she is able to find alternative ways even when faced with severe constraints. Conversely, a negative or conservative attitude towards the future leads to passivity, fear of innovation and a lack of effective interaction with the market and customers. As a result, businesses with hopeful, creative and strategic leaders have a higher chance of survival and growth. Strengthening entrepreneurial thinking in talented individuals can be considered as one of the key policies for economic development in Iraq.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the failure or success of start-up businesses in the Iraqi sports industry is influenced by a complex and multi-layered set of structural, human, environmental, managerial, and cultural factors. in total, eight main categories including: basic infrastructure, human resources, market and customer, advertising and branding, management and leadership, external environment, innovation and technology and entrepreneurial culture, were identified as the fundamental dimensions of the analyzed model, each of which, through its sub-components, plays a decisive role in the formation, sustainability or collapse of these businesses.

The important point is the synergy between factors; for example, the lack of technical and financial infrastructure can exacerbate the negative effect of components such as innovation or marketing and weaknesses in human resource management or the inability to properly understand customer behavior severely threaten the economic sustainability of these businesses. Also, legal barriers and unfavorable macroeconomic conditions have created an insecure and unstable environment for investment in which entrepreneurial risk-taking is reduced. Studies showed that the success of sports startups in Iraq requires a systemic approach, targeted investment in infrastructure, human resource empowerment, development of market and customer knowledge, as well as effective policy and legal support. Without these elements, even creative ideas and potential capacities will miss the opportunity to become sustainable and profitable activities. Finally, the researchers concluded that strengthening basic infrastructure, human resources, market and customer, advertising and branding, management and leadership, external environment, innovation and technology and entrepreneurial culture can play an important role in development of start-up sports businesses. Therefore, the proposed research model can be used as a local analytical framework for designing policies, writing support programs and assessing the status of the sports entrepreneurship ecosystem in Iraq.

Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study faced some limitations that could affect the generalizability of the results. Some of these limitations include: Limited access to founders and managers of sports startups in less developed areas of Iraq, Lack of official and reliable registration and documentation in many start-up businesses, Inability to expand the sampling area to remote areas due to time and researcher facilities limitations, Translating interviews from Arabic and Kurdish to English and then to Persian may have caused semantic changes and limitations in designing questions and guiding the conversation. The following research is recommended for future research: Conducting research with a larger sample especially of founders and managers of sports startups in less developed regions., Comparative analysis of the views of successful and unsuccessful sports startup managers on legal policies and structural barriers, Analyzing the effect of technological innovation and digital transformation on customer satisfaction in Startup Sports Stores, Investigating the impact of technical and financial infrastructure on the success of sports startups using structural equation modeling. It is also suggested that the role of political instability and war, which are factors affecting the success or failure of sports startups in a country like Iraq, be examined.

Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank all participants for their valuable contributions to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This work was supported only by the authors.

Statement on the Use of AI

Gemini AI was used for grammatical improvement of this article.

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