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Determinants of Success in the Freelancing Sector of the Football Industry

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to identify the key determinants of success in the freelancing sector of the football industry. This research is applied in terms of purpose and was conducted qualitatively in terms of strategy. The statistical population of this study includes 20 experts in the field of sports entrepreneurship and football management. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Grounded theory and Glaser's emergent approach were used to analyze the data. Coding was done in two stages of actual and theoretical coding, and three stages of open, axial, and selective coding, and the research components were identified. In the open coding stage, 124 codes were identified, in the axial coding stage 28 codes were identified, and in the selective coding stage 8 main categories affecting the development of freelancing in football were identified Which include: structural enablers, institutional dynamics, cultural capital, regulatory environment, learning and competency systems, networking mechanisms, market orientation, and psychological and behavioral skills were divided into three levels: macro (policy and structure), meso (organizational and network), and micro (individual). According to the research findings, the presented model can be used as a basis for necessary measures in the development of freelancing in football by policymakers and decision-makers in the field of employment in football.

Keywords: Freelancing, Soccer, Job Creation, Employment, Sports Entrepreneurship, Business.

Introduction

Employment remains one of the most fundamental pillars of socioeconomic stability and national development. In every society, the structure of employment not only influences economic growth but also plays a defining role in shaping welfare, social inclusion, and long-term development trajectories. Numerous countries, particularly developing ones, continue to struggle with rising graduate unemployment, inefficient labor market mechanisms, and a widening gap between educational outputs and employment needs. In Iran, these concerns are even more pronounced due to demographic pressures, limited job creation capacities, and structural inconsistencies between higher education and market demands [1, 2]. As a result, policymakers increasingly emphasize alternative employment pathways—especially entrepreneurship and self-employment—as viable solutions for enhancing productivity and alleviating unemployment among skilled populations.

Self-employment, as a contemporary approach to job creation, has gained global visibility because it empowers individuals to generate income independently, mobilize personal competencies, and exploit emerging market niches. A central component of self-employment is **freelancing**, a form of independent work characterized by flexibility, project-based income, and autonomy over work processes. The evolution of freelancing corresponds closely with digital transformation, which has enabled remote service delivery, expanded access to international markets, and reduced infrastructural barriers to entry [3, 4]. In contrast to traditional employment systems that rely on fixed salaries, hierarchical supervision, and rigid working

arrangements, freelancing thrives on adaptability, innovation, and the ability to meet dynamic customer needs. These features have positioned freelancing as a strategic pathway for youth employment and entrepreneurial growth in various sectors, including sport.

Sports—particularly football—offer unique conditions for the expansion of entrepreneurial and freelance activities. Football is globally recognized not only as a competitive sport but also as a multi-billion-dollar industry that integrates entertainment, media, technology, consumer culture, and international business [5, 6]. In Iran, football continues to attract millions of fans across social strata, creating extensive economic opportunities for the development of auxiliary services such as marketing, media production, coaching, analytics, event management, sports tourism, and specialized digital content. The sport's strong cultural footprint reinforces its economic potential, making football an ideal arena for innovative employment models.

Recent scholarly literature in the Iranian context highlights that employment challenges among sports graduates stem from structural, institutional, and cultural barriers. Research on labor market barriers in sports demonstrates persistent micro-, meso-, and macro-level limitations, from skill mismatches to weak industry-university partnerships, inadequate support mechanisms, and governance inefficiencies [2]. Studies further emphasize that sustainable employment in the sports sector requires coordinated reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and entrepreneurial ecosystems that stimulate private-sector engagement and self-directed income generation [1]. Thus, freelancing emerges as a compelling model for bridging these gaps, particularly in football, where the demand for specialized services is rapidly growing.

Within the domain of self-employment in sports, **entrepreneurship has been shown to catalyze innovation, job creation, and socioeconomic development**. Several studies demonstrate that entrepreneurial competencies—such as creativity, risk-taking, opportunity recognition, and leadership—play a fundamental role in shaping successful sports enterprises [7, 8]. Moreover, entrepreneurship in sports is increasingly understood as a strategic pathway for achieving sustainable development outcomes, including wealth creation, community engagement, and cultural advancement [9]. These findings align with broader global perspectives, emphasizing that entrepreneurship stimulates economic diversification, improves labor market efficiency, and fosters resilience in societies confronted with structural unemployment challenges.

In this regard, multiple Iranian studies highlight the significance of identifying and developing entrepreneurial opportunities within the sports industry. For example, Ashuri et al. identified championship sports, commercial services, and talent development as major domains with tangible entrepreneurial potential [10]. Afshari Pour and Hakak Zadeh similarly emphasized the need for an entrepreneurial capacity model tailored to Iran's sports ecosystem, underscoring the relevance of strategic planning and capability development [11]. Complementary studies point to the importance of privatization, organizational reform, and systematic restructuring of employment systems in sports to foster self-employment and freelancing pathways [12, 13].

Parallel to these insights, the emergence of freelancing in global economic systems has triggered new approaches to labor, digital work, and service delivery. According to Munirovich Akhmetshin et al., freelancing operates as a modern form of entrepreneurship that flourishes within flexible and technology-driven economic environments [14]. The growing popularity of freelancing is attributed to digital platforms, advancements in communication technologies, and shifting organizational preferences toward outsourcing and contract-based service provision [3]. Such trends directly influence the sports industry, where clubs and organizations increasingly require digital marketing, data analytics, multimedia production, virtual fan

engagement tools, and specialized consulting services. Football, with its wide media presence, represents one of the sectors most deeply impacted by these digital shifts.

Furthermore, the freestanding nature of football as a cultural and social phenomenon enhances the viability of freelance work within this sector. Football's ability to mobilize public enthusiasm, shape identity, influence consumption behavior, and stimulate economic activity has been extensively documented, positioning it as a powerful platform for entrepreneurial ventures [15]. At the same time, Iran's football ecosystem faces challenges—ranging from administrative inefficiencies, economic volatility, and talent mismanagement to insufficient integration of professional development systems—which further motivate the search for alternative employment structures grounded in self-initiative, innovation, and agility [16].

The literature also highlights that political, economic, and institutional conditions significantly affect entrepreneurial behavior. Political stability, coherent governance, and effective policy design are essential for reducing uncertainty and encouraging private initiative. Conversely, political risk acts as a major obstacle to entrepreneurship and tends to reduce investment incentives and business confidence [17]. This is particularly relevant in Iran's football sector, where incoherent institutional directives and administrative bottlenecks often constrain entrepreneurial initiatives. Therefore, designing supportive regulatory environments—such as streamlined licensing, tax incentives, insurance mechanisms, and simplified bureaucratic procedures—is necessary for enabling sports freelancers to operate with greater security and efficiency [18].

Cultural factors further shape the dynamics of entrepreneurship and freelancing. Research emphasizes that cultural acceptance of self-employment, societal attitudes toward risk, and collective perceptions of sports as a legitimate professional field influence the extent to which individuals pursue freelance careers [19]. The institutionalization of sports culture within communities, alongside initiatives that promote public engagement, awareness, and trust, contributes to creating a supportive environment in which freelance work can flourish [20]. Families, educational institutions, and media systems function as key agents in shaping these cultural orientations.

Another vital dimension of freelancing success lies in the educational and competency systems that prepare individuals for competitive environments. Traditional academic programs in sports sciences have been criticized for insufficient alignment with labor market realities and inadequate development of practical skills. Strengthening partnerships between universities and industry, integrating competency-based learning, and fostering experiential training are therefore essential for equipping future freelancers with the necessary capabilities [2, 21]. Furthermore, the shift toward entrepreneurial universities, as argued by numerous scholars, enhances knowledge transfer, innovation, and opportunity discovery essential for the sports freelancing economy [22].

Market orientation and customer engagement also constitute critical components of freelancing success. As football clubs modernize their business operations and seek to enhance competitive advantage, demand for specialized services—digital media production, content strategy, fan relationship management, skill coaching, data analysis, and commercial promotion—continues to rise [15]. Freelancers who effectively identify gaps, respond to evolving customer needs, and create meaningful value propositions are better able to secure long-term employment and contribute to the sector's professionalization [3]. In this sense, freelancing facilitates financial mobility, diversification of income channels, and development of creative industries associated with football.

Recent contributions by Nasr Esfahani and Ashrafi introduce a freelancing model specifically tailored to Iran's sports industry, emphasizing macro-level (cultural, political, economic, legal), meso-level (technological, educational, media-based),

and micro-level (behavioral and psychological) drivers that shape its development [23]. Their framework supports the argument that freelancing in football is not merely an occupational choice but a systemic economic capacity that must be cultivated through integrated policy, institutional collaboration, and human capital development.

Taken together, the existing body of evidence demonstrates that the football industry possesses significant potential for supporting freelancing as an adaptive, innovative, and sustainable form of employment. However, this potential can be realized only through a comprehensive understanding of the determinants that enable freelancers to succeed in this sector—spanning structural enablers, institutional dynamics, cultural foundations, competence systems, market mechanisms, and psychological capabilities. Given these foundations, the present study aims to identify the key determinants of success in the freelancing sector of the football industry.

Methodology

The present research is qualitative and has been conducted using the grounded theory method with a phenomenological approach. In this method, coding was done in two stages of actual and theoretical coding and three steps of open, axial, and selective coding, and the components of the research were identified. In this method, the open coding stage began with the conceptualization of data, and as the number of concepts increased, the categorization of similar concepts began. After the formation of several concepts, axial coding was performed. With the formation of the first image in the researcher's mind, the initial and primary drawing and selective coding, and pattern design were also carried out, and then these three stages were pursued simultaneously until theoretical saturation was achieved. The method of data analysis was continuous questioning and comparison within the types of coding. The method of data collection included reviewing the research literature and semi-structured qualitative interviews (open and flexible). The statistical population of the research was purposefully selected from among experts and opinion leaders in the field of sports entrepreneurship and the football industry who had been active in these areas for 10 years or more (Table 2), and sampling continued until the stage of theoretical saturation of concepts. In this research, theoretical saturation was achieved in interviews with 20 people. Each interview lasted 40 to 50 minutes, and in order to record qualitative data and focus more on the interview process, with the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded, and notes were taken on key points of each interview. In the interview sessions, the concept of freelancing was briefly explained to the interviewees, and then, considering the research topic, questions such as: "Express your views on entrepreneurship and self-employment in Iran and specifically in football"; "In your opinion, who is called a freelancer and express your views on freelancing"; "You can express your views on freelancing in football"; "In your opinion, what key determinants of success in the freelancing and self-employment of the football industry?"; "In your opinion, how can each of these factors affect the growth of freelancing in football?" and so on were raised.

In qualitative research, narrative places more emphasis on the accuracy of data (internal narrative) than on the meaning used in quantitative studies. If the interviewees confirm the research findings, one can be more confident about the research narrative. Additionally, to examine the reliability of the coding of interviews, the method of internal subject reliability was used. In this method, the percentage of subject agreement between two coders (60 percent or more) is a way to ensure the reliability of the analysis. In this research, to achieve narrative and reliability, in addition to adhering to the principles mentioned above, the method of agreement between two specific coders (reproducibility) and coding by the researcher at a

specific time interval was used. This was done by having three interviews coded by another researcher approved by professors, and the coding results were compared. The results indicated a definite similarity of more than 60 percent coding at each stage; therefore, the reliability of the coding was confirmed. Additionally, two experts familiar with grounded theory supervised the various stages of coding, conceptualization, extraction of categories, and theory development. The percentage of subject agreement is calculated using the formula below:

$$\frac{\text{Number of agreements} \times 2}{\text{Total number of codes}} = (\text{Percentage of thematic agreement}) \times 100$$

The results of this coding are shown in Table 1:

Table 1

Calculation of reliability between the two coders

Interview Number	Total Number of Codes	Number of Agreements	Reliability
3	35	15	0.85
5	22	9	0.81
10	30	12	0.80
Total	87	36	0.82

Findings and Results

In this section, the demographic characteristics of the research sample are presented in terms of gender, age, level of education, experience in entrepreneurship and employment in football, and their job status (Tables 2 and 3). Then, we proceed to the stages of data coding.

Table 2

Demographic characteristics of research participants

	Gender		Education		Age			Work Experience in Entrepreneurship and employment in football (Years)		
	Female	Male	PhD	Masters	Less than 30 years	31-50	Over 51	Less than 15 years	16-25 years	Over 26 years
Frequency	3	17	14	6	1	12	7	5	9	6
Percentage (%)	15.0	85.0	70.0	30.0	5.0	60.0	35.0	25.0	45.0	30.0

Table 3

Job status of research participants

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Managers and Executives	7	0.35
Faculty Members	8	0.40
Entrepreneurs	5	0.25

In the following, we will analyze the information obtained from the sample in question. Initially, the interview texts were analyzed line by line in open coding. Then, irrelevant sentences were removed, key concepts were extracted, and similar items were merged. In axial coding, similar concepts identified in the open coding stage were categorized, and based on the proximity and similarity of concepts, axial codes were formed; finally, the theoretical model was drawn based on the selective codes. The findings from the coding are shown in Table 4. As can be seen, in the open coding stage, 124 codes, in the axial coding stage, 28 codes, and in the selective coding stage, 8 main categories influencing the development of freelancing in football were identified, which are: structural enablers, institutional dynamics, cultural capital, regulatory environment,

learning and competency systems, networking mechanisms, market orientation, and psychological behavioral skills were divided into three levels: macro (policy and structural systems), meso (organizational and network mechanisms), and micro (individual and behavioral capabilities).

Table 4

Coding results

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes	
Structural Enablers	Economic prosperity	Ability to attract domestic and foreign markets	
		Price stability	
		Adoption of appropriate monetary and exchange rate policies by the government with the aim of promoting self-employment	
		Using the capacity of foreign markets to grow freelancing in football	
	Competitive open space	Fighting antitrust laws	
		Encouraging competition	
		Creating a level playing field for competitors	
	Compilation of written program	Using the experiences of other countries for economic planning in the field of freelancing in football	
		Designing a long-term plan for business development in the field of freelancing in football	
		Attracting investors with the aim of implementing creative ideas in football	
	Financial support	Creating appropriate financial resources to develop and improve freelancing in football	
		Establishing funds to support self-employed people	
Expanding institutions supporting self-employment in football			
Institutional Dynamics	Performance stability	Football's low impact on the prevailing conditions in the country	
		The government's adherence to the legal obligations of previous governments	
	Synergy between institutions	Introducing the main custodians of self-employment support	
		Constructive interaction between government institutions and the private sector	
		Cooperation between organizations and bodies in charge of employment	
	Adopting supportive policies	Creating appropriate business infrastructure from the government	
		Creating conditions for appropriate business interactions at the international level with other countries	
Cultural Capital	Institutionalizing a culture of self-employment	Creating self-employment attitudes at grassroots levels	
		Acceptance of self-employment as a value in society	
		Preventing the development of a desk culture	
		Acceptance of self-employment in society and efforts to introduce self-employment as a value in society	
		Paying attention to the culture prevailing in a region in order to expand freelancing in football	
		Developing and institutionalizing a culture of exercise among the community	
		Developing and promoting a culture of self-employment in society	
		Increasing public trust in sports and related services	
	Using the capacity of civil society institutions	Creating civic institutions to develop self-employment in football	
		Supporting civil society organizations active in the field of self-employment in football	
	Regulatory Environment	Facilitating the implementation of laws	Flexibility of labor market rules and procedures
			Developing laws to facilitate the granting of necessary permits
			Developing laws to facilitate insurance services for freelancers in football
Developing rules to support freelancers in football		Enactment of government laws and regulations to support self-employed individuals	
		Recognizing freelancing in football as a legal type of business	
		Creating mechanisms for job security in the field of freelancing	
		Creation of tax exemptions	
		Creating incentives in the field of insurance services	
		Providing self-employment facilities and loans	
Amendment of the rules		Fighting administrative corruption and improving legal health	
		Reforming the laws governing the banking system	
	Reforming the laws governing the tax system		
Learning and Competency Systems	Cooperation between universities and the labor market	Moving from a knowledge-based university to an entrepreneurial university	
		Creating effective connections between self-employed individuals and academic environments	
		Creating appropriate interaction between university and industry	
	Making changes in the education system	Combining theoretical knowledge with practical and empirical knowledge related to self-employment	
		Require universities and educational centers to teach concepts related to self-employment and business management	
	Raising public awareness about freelancing in football	Creating facilities for publishing effective experiences of freelancers in the field of football	
		Creating scientific cores to identify opportunities in the field of freelancing in football	
		Training the necessary skills to enter freelance jobs in football	
		Encouraging and training sports micro-entrepreneurs	

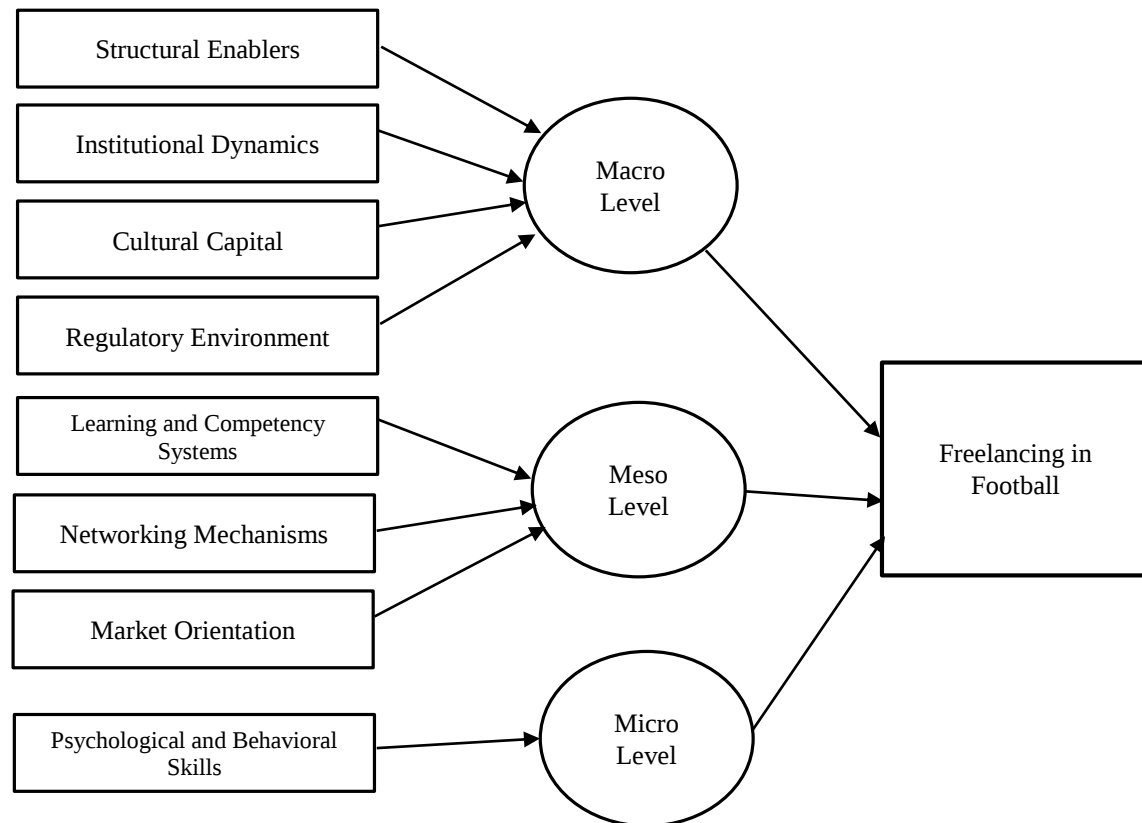
Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
		Improving the level of knowledge of football fans about the potential of freelancing in football Informing the general public, and especially football fans, about job opportunities in freelancing in football. Raising awareness among families in order to include football in the household budget Attracting different groups to football Creating workshops and consulting classes on self-employment in football Continuous monitoring of general and specialized information related to self-employment in football Strengthen intellectual capital Having studies and future research in the field of self-employment in football Development of science parks in the field of football Using cyberspace facilities to identify and introduce employment opportunities in the field of freelancing in football
Networking Mechanisms	Using new technologies in advertising	Taking advantage of the benefits of social networks and cyberspace in the field of developing freelancing in football Creating applications to introduce football freelancers to clients Creating specialized websites in the field of freelancing in football Introducing the skills of football entrepreneurs through new technologies
		Making documentaries to introduce successful freelancers in the field of football Creating programs to present the experiences of other countries in the field of freelancing in football Creating programs around the topic of freelancing in football with the presence of experts in this field
	Using the capacity of the media	Creating information exchange systems between self-employed people in the field of football Creating communication networks between clients and freelancers in football Benefit from networking and the ability to attract support from networks
		Paying attention to the growth of freelance jobs in football clubs and schools Establishing connections between freelancers in football and active institutions in football such as clubs, leagues, sports boards, etc. Encouraging institutions active in football to outsource their projects
	Creating communication networks	Identifying gaps and deficiencies in the market environment Proper analysis of the market environment and its potential potentials Paying attention to people's lifestyles and identifying their needs Paying attention to unmet needs and demands of customers Paying attention to customers' needs and interests Linking individual skills with customer needs Classifying customers according to their needs Paying attention to gaps and deficiencies in the services provided to customers
		Gathering information on market developments Paying attention to markets in other countries around the world and modeling based on local markets Using new marketing strategies such as e-marketing Using new advertising methods to attract customers
	Relationship between freelancers and football-related entities	Creating a satisfying experience for customers Survey to understand strengths and weaknesses from the customer perspective Creating a sense of trust and loyalty in customers Effective communication with customers Attracting new customers and retaining existing customers Customer orientation and customer valuing Strengthen customer relationship management Motivating customers by providing the necessary incentives
		Creating new opportunities by people active in football A thorough search for opportunities in all sources, including media, the Internet, etc. Taking advantage of opportunities available in football, such as football fans, public interest in football, etc. Awareness of opportunities and threats in the workplace Awareness of opportunities available for self-employment in football
		Applying new and creative ideas Focusing on being first and ignoring being the best Using unconventional ideas and adapting them to sports-related businesses Long-term view of business and plan development
		Having deep and different thinking about the environment Intelligent look at the activities of other competitors Increase the power of vision A broad view of the workplace Having a development-oriented mindset
Market Orientation	Needs assessment	Identifying gaps and deficiencies in the market environment Proper analysis of the market environment and its potential potentials Paying attention to people's lifestyles and identifying their needs Paying attention to unmet needs and demands of customers Paying attention to customers' needs and interests Linking individual skills with customer needs Classifying customers according to their needs Paying attention to gaps and deficiencies in the services provided to customers
		Gathering information on market developments Paying attention to markets in other countries around the world and modeling based on local markets Using new marketing strategies such as e-marketing Using new advertising methods to attract customers
	Using new methods in marketing	Creating a satisfying experience for customers Survey to understand strengths and weaknesses from the customer perspective Creating a sense of trust and loyalty in customers Effective communication with customers Attracting new customers and retaining existing customers Customer orientation and customer valuing Strengthen customer relationship management Motivating customers by providing the necessary incentives
		Creating new opportunities by people active in football A thorough search for opportunities in all sources, including media, the Internet, etc. Taking advantage of opportunities available in football, such as football fans, public interest in football, etc. Awareness of opportunities and threats in the workplace Awareness of opportunities available for self-employment in football
	Customer orientation	Applying new and creative ideas Focusing on being first and ignoring being the best Using unconventional ideas and adapting them to sports-related businesses Long-term view of business and plan development
		Having deep and different thinking about the environment Intelligent look at the activities of other competitors Increase the power of vision A broad view of the workplace Having a development-oriented mindset
Psychological and Behavioral Skills	Opportunism	Identifying gaps and deficiencies in the market environment Proper analysis of the market environment and its potential potentials Paying attention to people's lifestyles and identifying their needs Paying attention to unmet needs and demands of customers Paying attention to customers' needs and interests Linking individual skills with customer needs Classifying customers according to their needs Paying attention to gaps and deficiencies in the services provided to customers
		Gathering information on market developments Paying attention to markets in other countries around the world and modeling based on local markets Using new marketing strategies such as e-marketing Using new advertising methods to attract customers
	Creativity and innovation	Creating a satisfying experience for customers Survey to understand strengths and weaknesses from the customer perspective Creating a sense of trust and loyalty in customers Effective communication with customers Attracting new customers and retaining existing customers Customer orientation and customer valuing Strengthen customer relationship management Motivating customers by providing the necessary incentives
		Creating new opportunities by people active in football A thorough search for opportunities in all sources, including media, the Internet, etc. Taking advantage of opportunities available in football, such as football fans, public interest in football, etc. Awareness of opportunities and threats in the workplace Awareness of opportunities available for self-employment in football
	Leadership power	Applying new and creative ideas Focusing on being first and ignoring being the best Using unconventional ideas and adapting them to sports-related businesses Long-term view of business and plan development
		Having deep and different thinking about the environment Intelligent look at the activities of other competitors Increase the power of vision A broad view of the workplace Having a development-oriented mindset

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
		having a purpose
		Awareness of facilitating and reinforcing structures in the workplace
		Management of financial resources
		Reducing ongoing costs at work
		Having turnover
		Anticipating potential problems and providing solutions to them
	Personality traits	risk taking
		Having a critical spirit
		Having self-confidence
		Having courage and boldness
		Having internal control
		Desire to succeed
		Interest in working in the field of freelancing
	Individual skills	Present a strong resume
		Awareness of the latest developments in existing technologies
		Possessing scientific knowledge and practical skills

In the selective coding stage, after discussing and reviewing the results obtained from the open and axial coding stages, consulting with experts and stakeholders, and repeatedly reviewing and examining the research results, the model of determinants of success in the freelancing sector of the football industry was finally obtained as Figure 1.

Figure 1

The model of determinants of success in the freelancing sector of the football industry



Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to identify the key determinants of success in the freelancing sector of the football industry using a grounded theory approach. The findings revealed that the determinants shaping freelancing success in

Iranian football can be understood across three interconnected levels—macro, meso, and micro. These include structural enablers, institutional dynamics, cultural capital, the regulatory environment, learning and competency systems, networking mechanisms, market orientation, and psychological–behavioral skills. Together, these components construct a multilevel ecosystem that affects the ability of freelancers to enter, operate in, and sustain a presence within the football industry. The identification of these determinants confirms that freelancing in football is not merely an individual occupational choice but a product of systemic, institutional, and behavioral conditions, echoing the broader literature on sports entrepreneurship and employment models.

At the macro level, the findings showed that structural enablers such as economic stability, inflation control, and effective financial policies play a significant role in facilitating freelancing. These results are consistent with the argument that macroeconomic conditions influence the feasibility and direction of entrepreneurial activity. For example, Zivari and Mohammadi Khayareh emphasize that economic factors—including price stability and competitive environments—substantially shape entrepreneurial outcomes [20]. Likewise, the recognition that appropriate monetary, exchange rate, and fiscal policies support self-employment aligns with the strategic frameworks proposed by Rezaei and Salehipour, who argue that the sports industry requires structural planning and resource allocation to thrive [13]. Thus, the current study reinforces the idea that football freelancing cannot flourish independently of the broader political economy in which it is embedded.

Institutional dynamics emerged as another foundational determinant. The identified need for governmental consistency, cross-institutional synergy, and coherent support policies reflects previous findings by Ansari Samani and Mirzapour, who argue that political risk and institutional instability negatively affect entrepreneurial ecosystems [17]. Similarly, scholars have emphasized that inter-organizational cooperation is crucial for sports development. For instance, Khujasteh Iqbal et al. highlight that grassroots football suffers when institutional coordination is weak and when administrative bodies fail to collaborate effectively [16]. The present study deepens this perspective by showing that freelancing specifically requires stable and collaborative institutions that can reduce uncertainty, enhance predictability, and provide registered pathways for operating within the football industry.

Cultural capital also appeared as a pivotal macro-level factor, particularly the social acceptance of self-employment, shifts in public attitudes, and the role of family and community in shaping entrepreneurial motivation. The significance of culture in shaping entrepreneurial tendencies has been widely documented. Niazi et al., for example, identified cultural factors as central to the development of Iran's sports entrepreneurship, arguing that cultural endorsement of sports-related ventures enhances participation and innovation [19]. Similarly, Sharififar and Mohammadian emphasized that organizational and cultural structures influence sports organizations' entrepreneurial behavior [24]. In alignment with these studies, the present findings confirm that freelance success in football depends greatly on society's receptiveness to non-traditional employment forms and on the normalization of sports entrepreneurship as a legitimate career pathway.

The regulatory environment also emerged as a major theme in the findings. The study showed that simplified laws, supportive regulations, tax incentives, and insurance frameworks are necessary to facilitate freelancing, echoing the conclusions of Rahmaty et al., who observed that for professional football clubs to become entrepreneurial, regulatory reforms must reduce bureaucratic burdens and create enabling conditions [18]. The emphasis on reducing administrative corruption and improving legal transparency is similarly supported by past research, particularly Razavi et al., who found that privatization-oriented reforms and legal clarity were essential for improving employment conditions in sports [12].

Altogether, these alignments highlight that freelancing thrives when regulatory barriers are minimized, legal protections are strengthened, and formal recognition of freelance activity is institutionalized.

At the meso level, learning and competency systems were identified as essential mechanisms for supporting freelancing growth. Participants emphasized the importance of university–industry partnerships, transformational changes in education, and public awareness efforts. These findings closely parallel the work of Pierce, who argued that higher education must integrate practical and market-relevant curricula—such as sports marketing, sales training, and applied management—to prepare graduates for new industry roles [21]. Additionally, Saeedi et al.’s systematic review of employment barriers in the Iranian sports labor market showed that structural weaknesses in sports education often lead to graduate unemployment, thus reinforcing the urgency of competency-aligned training [2]. Furthermore, Afshari Pour and Hakak Zadeh documented that entrepreneurial capacity in Iran’s sports industry depends heavily on systematic training that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world practice [11]. The current findings extend these arguments by demonstrating that freelancing specifically requires skill-building programs, knowledge transfer hubs, consulting workshops, and stronger connections between educational institutions and industry stakeholders.

Networking mechanisms emerged as another influential meso-level determinant. The study found that media platforms, digital communication channels, and professional networks facilitate freelancer visibility, client interaction, and access to market opportunities. These findings correspond with the conclusions of Imani and Hosseinifar, who emphasized the critical role of social networks and digital media in fostering digital entrepreneurship [22]. Similarly, Wood et al. argued that online platforms are instrumental in organizing freelancers, connecting them with clients, and enhancing their negotiating power within the gig economy [3]. The importance of digital infrastructure—websites, apps, communication systems, and content creation tools—confirms that freelancing in football increasingly depends on technological connectivity, brand development, and cross-network collaboration. Additionally, the present findings parallel Ahonen’s research, which showed that entrepreneurial growth in elite sport SMEs depends heavily on collaboration, visibility, and linkages with broader networks [5].

At the micro level, market orientation appeared as a decisive factor for freelancing success. This includes needs assessment, lifestyle analysis, identification of market gaps, new marketing strategies, and customer engagement practices. These findings strongly align with the work of Shirvani et al., who demonstrated that football clubs benefit significantly from marketing strategies that increase fan engagement, attract sponsors, and generate revenue [15]. Similarly, Man underscored the importance of technology-driven methods such as data analytics, digital marketing, and fan engagement platforms in shaping the future of sports services and employment models [4]. The present study expands on these insights by showing how individual freelancers, not just organizations, rely on strategic market understanding to align their skills with customer demands and differentiate themselves within the competitive football ecosystem.

Finally, psychological and behavioral skills emerged as core micro-level capacities necessary for freelancing success. Respondents highlighted creativity, risk-taking, innovation, self-confidence, leadership, and the ability to identify opportunities. These findings strongly reflect the competency models proposed by Ghorbani and Vahadani, who emphasized that entrepreneurial success in the sports industry depends on personal attributes such as initiative, creativity, and resilience [7]. Ehsani et al. similarly showed that social entrepreneurship in sports is driven by individuals who demonstrate courage, community orientation, and proactive engagement [8]. The current study corroborates these conclusions by demonstrating

that psychological readiness and behavioral adaptability are foundational to freelancing, especially within uncertain and dynamic environments like football. Research by Munirovich Akhmetshin et al. on freelancing further supports this, highlighting that freelancers must possess strong personal and technical skills to navigate the uncertainties of gig-based work [14]. Overall, the alignment between the present findings and previous studies confirms that freelancing success in football is fundamentally shaped by both external structures and internal capabilities.

This study, despite its comprehensive qualitative approach, faces several limitations. First, freelancing in the football industry is an emerging phenomenon in Iran, and the scarcity of academic resources limited the availability of theoretical and empirical comparisons. Second, the sample consisted of 20 experts, which, although sufficient for grounded theory, restricts generalizability to broader populations. Third, contextual variations between Iranian football and international football industries limit the transferability of findings. Fourth, reliance on self-reported experiences may have introduced subjective biases. Finally, the rapid technological and economic changes affecting freelancing may cause some identified determinants to evolve in the near future.

Future studies should explore quantitative validation of the proposed model to assess the relative weight and interactions of each determinant. Comparative studies across different sports—such as basketball, volleyball, or martial arts—could reveal whether freelancing determinants are sport-specific or generalizable. Investigating the economic impact of freelancing on football clubs, leagues, and fan engagement could provide managerial insights. Longitudinal research examining freelancers' career trajectories would also deepen understanding of sustainability and professional growth. Moreover, future work should analyze the role of digital platforms, AI tools, and social media ecosystems in shaping freelancing opportunities within the football sector.

Practitioners should invest in creating specialized freelancing platforms tailored to football services, provide mentorship programs for aspiring freelancers, and integrate digital marketing and entrepreneurial training into sports curricula. Football clubs should outsource appropriate functions to freelancers and develop transparent contracting mechanisms. Policymakers should simplify licensing, create tax incentives, and ensure financial support mechanisms that lower barriers to freelance entry. Finally, media organizations and sports federations should contribute to public awareness campaigns that highlight freelancing as a legitimate and valuable career path within the football industry.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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