



Providing a Conceptual Model to Counteract Brand Decline in Professional Sports Clubs in Iran

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research was conducted using the grounded theory approach with an emergent design. The participants included managers of professional sports clubs, sports marketing experts, and university professors specializing in sports branding. These individuals were purposefully selected, and based on theoretical saturation, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview designed to extract detailed and rich information. To evaluate the quality and reliability of the data, the criteria of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability were employed. Data analysis was performed through three stages of coding (open, selective, and theoretical), resulting in 70 initial codes categorized into 16 key concepts. These concepts were ultimately organized into four main categories: brand decline (including reduced value, profitability, market coverage, and brand credibility among customers), internal problems of clubs (such as inefficient management, failure to adapt to market changes, customer alienation, and lack of innovation), external challenges faced by clubs (such as the impact of government policies, financial constraints, and intense competition from foreign brands), and counterstrategies (such as changing marketing strategies, promoting the brand, brand revitalization, and improving customer experience). The findings indicate that brand decline in professional sports clubs in Iran is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in the interplay between internal and external factors. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive and multidimensional strategies.

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1. Introduction

Today, brands are recognized as one of the most valuable assets of companies because they play a significant role in increasing the economic and strategic value of their owners (Qi, Chai & Jiang, 2021). In addition, brands are considered one of the key communication tools in customer relationship management, as they can reduce consumer risk and minimize decision-making costs (Wider, Von Wallpach & Mühlbacher, 2018). These intangible assets strengthen long-term relationships and mutual commitment between buyers and sellers (Coelho, Rita & Santos, 2018). However, studies show that if customers become disappointed and frustrated with a brand, all the company's investments and future profits are at risk (Ramírez, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2019). For this reason, businesses are striving to develop their brand from various aspects and maximize the exploitation of this intangible organizational asset (Mousa, Sági & Zeman, 2021). One of the prominent areas among consumer brands is sports brands (Lee, Maeng, Lee & Jun, 2019). A 2021 report by the management consulting company Interbrand shows that the brands Nike (ranked 11th) and Adidas (ranked 49th) are among the top 50 brands in the world (Interbrand, 2021). Sports brands have become a global language by using their words, values, and representatives, and, like brands such as Philips (home appliances), Danone (food), and Samsung (multimedia products), they have integrated into people's daily lives. These brands are often known in the form of club brands (such as Manchester United, Real Madrid), corporate brands (Nike, Adidas, Reebok), celebrity brands (Tiger Woods, Roger Federer), events (Super Bowl, Olympics), and media partners (Sky Sports) (Bouchet, Hillairet & Bodet, 2013). However, from a strategic standpoint, the business model of sports brands differs depending on their offerings, challenges, and policies. Corporate and club brands, in particular, have the greatest

dominance over the sports market (Bridgewater, 2010). It is worth noting that these brands are mainly focused on economizing production lines, ensuring the profitability of offered products, and adjusting costs to capture the market. However, their returns, competitive ability, and market share are not uniform (Mühlbacher et al., 2018). Sometimes, brands lose their position due to poor performance and become "graveyard brands." These brands, which no longer occupy a place in customers' minds, lose the ability to return to the market (Sharp, 2010). According to studies, more than 80% of brands in various fields experience brand death (Jain et al., 2023).

2. Methodology

This research was qualitative in nature and was conducted using a grounded theory approach with an emerging paradigm. This method, which falls under the interpretive paradigm, seeks to discover and create new theories based on data collected from reality, rather than confirming pre-established hypotheses or theoretical frameworks (Howard-Payne, 2016). The choice of this method was made in accordance with the nature and objectives of the study. The participants in this research consisted of managers of professional sports clubs, sports marketing experts, and university professors specializing in sports branding. These individuals were purposefully selected, and based on theoretical saturation, 12 interviews were conducted. For further assurance, 3 additional interviews were conducted, bringing the total number of interviews to 15. The criteria for selecting these individuals included expertise in sports branding, practical experience in managing or analyzing sports club brands, and the ability to provide in-depth and relevant information on the research topic. The data collection tool for this study was semi-structured interviews, designed to extract rich and deep information from participants. These interviews were conducted using an interview guide that

included questions related to the research topic to enable a more detailed examination of participants' interactions, perceptions, and experiences. For example, questions such as "In your opinion, what are the main factors affecting the decline of sports club brands?" and "What strategies can be suggested to combat this decline?" were asked. To assess the quality of the data and ensure the accuracy of the research findings, four key criteria from Lincoln & Guba (1985) were used: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. To enhance the credibility of the findings, techniques such as participant review and re-examination of the data by experts were used. The interviews were meticulously recorded and analyzed to ensure that the results reflected the participants' real-life experiences. To increase the transferability of the findings, detailed and rich descriptions of the research contexts and participants' experiences were provided, allowing other researchers to apply the findings in similar situations. For this purpose, details of the sampling process, interview procedures, and data analysis were transparently reported. For confirmability, all stages of the research, from data collection to analysis, were documented. This documentation allowed other researchers to review and verify the processes and results. Additionally, to minimize researcher bias, collaboration with academic colleagues and independent analysis of the data were employed. To examine dependability, the data coding process was carried out by an independent researcher, and the percentage of agreement between the coders was calculated using the following formula. This measure helped maintain consistency and accuracy in data analysis. Furthermore, a method of precise and organized documentation of all stages of the research was used to ensure a reproducible process.

Table 1. Results of Reliability Assessment

Interview Number	Total Codes	Agreements	Disagreements	Reliability Percentage
7	14	6	2	0.857
3	15	7	1	0.933
Total	29	13	3	0.896

In this research, the interviews were conducted in person. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any of the questions or stop the interview at any time. Before starting the interviews, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to the participants, and they were assured that all the information provided would remain confidential. It was also emphasized that if any quotes were used in the research results, pseudonyms would be used instead of real names. All interview questions were designed and asked within the framework of the research objectives, and questions outside of this framework were avoided. These measures were taken to ensure the ethical principles of the research were followed and to create a safe and secure environment for the participants. For data analysis, three stages of coding were used: open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding (Howard-Payne, 2016). In the open coding stage, the interview data were broken down into smaller components and key concepts were identified to highlight meaningful and significant points. Then, in the selective coding stage, the concepts were organized into categories and main themes related to the research topic. Finally, in the theoretical coding stage, the relationships between the categories were analyzed, and a comprehensive theoretical model was developed to explain the phenomenon under investigation. This three-stage process helped identify hidden structures and relationships in the data and facilitated the design of a conceptual and localized model to address brand decline in professional sports clubs in Iran.

3. Finding

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the 15 participants in this study. These participants included sports club managers, sports marketers, and university faculty members specializing in sports marketing. In terms of gender, the majority of participants were male (12 individuals), while three were female. In terms of age, the largest age group was between 35 and 57 years, which reflects the high level of experience of the participants in their

professional fields. The average age of the participants was 45 years. In terms of education, most participants held a PhD (10 individuals), and the remaining participants had a Master’s degree (5 individuals), indicating a high level of education and expertise. Regarding work experience, participants had between 12 and 29 years of professional experience. The majority had more than 15 years of experience, which highlights the depth of their knowledge and expertise in sports-related activities. In terms of professional focus, the participants were active in three main areas: sports club management, sports marketing, and university faculty positions.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Row	Gender	Age (Years)	Education	Work Experience (Years)	Area of Activity
1	Male	52	PhD	25	Sports Marketer
2	Male	57	PhD	29	Sports Club Manager
3	Female	41	Master’s	17	University Faculty
4	Female	38	Master’s	15	Sports Marketer
5	Male	37	PhD	17	Sports Marketer
6	Male	42	PhD	17	Sports Club Manager
7	Male	52	PhD	23	Sports Club Manager
8	Male	35	PhD	12	University Faculty
9	Male	54	Master’s	23	Sports Club Manager
10	Male	50	PhD	15	University Faculty
11	Male	47	PhD	18	University Faculty
12	Male	45	Master’s	20	Sports Marketer
13	Male	55	Master’s	29	Sports Club Manager
14	Female	32	PhD	13	University Faculty
15	Male	44	PhD	15	University Faculty

Table 3 shows the results of open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding. From the analysis of the interview data, a total of 70 initial codes were

identified. In the selective coding process, these codes were categorized into 16 key concepts. These concepts were then organized into 4 main categories that directly reflected the factors influencing the decline of professional sports club brands in Iran. These categories included:

Brand Decline (including brand devaluation, reduced profitability, reduced market coverage, and loss of brand credibility with customers).

Internal Problems of the Clubs (such as inefficient management, failure to adapt to market changes, customer alienation, and inability to innovate).

External Problems of the Clubs (such as the impact of government policies, financial challenges in the country, and intense competition with foreign brands).

Counterstrategies (such as changing marketing strategies, brand promotion, brand revitalization, and improving customer experience).

Table 3. Results of Initial, Selective, and Theoretical Coding

Interview Code(s)	Initial Code	Concept	Category
P8, P10	Brand Devaluation	Brand Decline in the Market	Brand Decline
P6, P15	Brand Devaluation		
P4	Decrease in Market Share of Brand		
P2, P4, P11, P12	Decrease in Brand ROI		
P7, P9, P10, P11, P15	Decrease in Market Coverage		
P11	Decreased Brand Credibility Among Customers (Fans, Sponsors, and Other Stakeholders)	Brand Decline in Recognition	
P4, P11, P13, P15	Weak Consumer Response in Sports		
P3, P4, P7	Decrease in Brand Popularity in the Sports Community		
P3, P6, P12, P13	Increase in Complaints and Negative Customer Feedback		

P2, P3	Decrease in Customer Trust in the Brand		
P2, P4	Brand Forgetfulness	Ineffective Brand Management	Club Internal Problems
P11, P15	Brand Self-Deception		
P11	Brand Fraud		
P4, P11	Brand Overestimation		
P12	Brand Paranoia		
P6, P7	Brand Erosion		
P9, P11	Irrelevance of the Brand		
P12, P15	Failure to Adapt to Changes in Consumer Behavior	Failure to Adapt to Market Developments	
P1, P3, P8	Failure to Adapt to Changes in Sports Marketing Methods		
P12	Failure to Adapt to Changes in Laws and Regulations		
P2, P7	Failure to Adapt to Market Composition Changes		
P1, P8, P9	Failure to Adapt to Cultural and Lifestyle Changes		
P4, P6	Lack of Club Commitment to Customers	Customer Alienation	
P11, P14	Failure of Clubs to Communicate with Customers		
P2, P4, P8, P9, P13	Ignoring Customer Expectations by the Clubs		
P8, P10	Ignoring Customer Needs by Clubs		
P6, P9	Ignoring Customer Motivations by Clubs		
P12	Offering Low-Quality Products with Poor Technical Capabilities	Inability to Innovate and Use Technology	
P6, P13	Clubs' Inability to Offer		

	Attractive Products		
P2	Lack of R&D Funding in Clubs		
P5, P12, P13	Clubs Failing to Keep Up with the Internet of Things		
P2, P4	Clubs Not Adapting to Cloud Computing and Software Systems		
P2, P10	Clubs Not Adapting to Augmented and Virtual Reality		
P2, P3, P12	Clubs Not Using Digital Marketing Methods		
P6, P11	Lack of Financial Planning in Clubs	Structural Problems of Clubs	
P6, P15	Lack of Professional Management in Iranian Clubs		
P7, P9, P12	Political Issuance of Club Licenses		
P4, P10	Corruption in Clubs		
P14	Financial and Banking Constraints in Iran	National Ownership Issues	Club External Issues
P9, P11	Economic Fluctuations		
P5, P12, P13	Decrease in Customers' Purchasing Power		
P2, P4	Lack of Banking Facilities		
P2, P10	Weak Financial Strength of Sports Clubs in the Country		
P4	Government Financial Policies	Government Policies	
P3	Government Commercial Policies		
P4, P10	Government's International Policies		
P4, P6	Government Policy on Outsourcing and Private Sector Entry into Sports		
P12, P15	Shift in Sports Customers'	Consumer Mindset	



	Preferences Towards European Club Brands		
P5, P11, P13	Lack of Positive Sentiment Towards Domestic Club Brands Among Sports Customers		
P1, P7, P8, P9, P10	Preference for Foreign Club Brands Over Domestic Brands		
P2, P8	Presence of Strong and Influential Competitors	Competitor Strength	
P4, P7	Competitor Dumping Policies		
P5, P10	Financial Capabilities of Competitors		
P5, P7, P10, P12, P14	Competitors Offering Higher-Quality Products and Services		
P1, P2, P3, P8, P12, P14, P15	Changing Marketing Strategy Based on Market Conditions	Marketing Strategy Change	Counter-Strategies
P2, P4	Changing Marketing Strategy Based on Weaknesses and Strengths		
P8, P11	Changing Target Market Definition		
P1, P2, P3, P6, P7, P8, P9, P13	Changing Pricing Strategy		
P7, P10, P11, P14, P15	Changing Advertising Methods		
P9, P8, P13	Changing Marketing Strategy Based on New Goals		
P8	Advertising on Social Media	Brand Promotion	
P8, P11	Using Electronic Customer Relationship Management Systems		
P14	Blog Advertising		

P3, P12	Video and TV Advertising		
P1, P2, P3, P15	Redefining Brand Position	Brand Revival	
P1, P14	Strengthening the Remaining Brand Culture		
P14	Creating Strategy Based on Sports Customers' Preferences and Interests		
P3, P12	Rebuilding Brand Trust		
P6, P8, P13	Changing Brand Platform (Logo, Name)		
P2, P7	Ease of Access to Brand Products and Services	Improving Customer Experience	
P5, P14	Offering Higher-Quality Products and Services		
P5, P13	Respecting Customer Privacy		
P6	Collaborating with Customers to Solve Problems		
P2, P10	Identifying Brand Weaknesses	Brand Diagnosis	
P9, P10	Identifying Threats Facing the Brand		
P2, P4, P10	Identifying Competitive Risks in the Market		
P2, P4	Identifying Reasons for Decreased Customer Satisfaction		
P11, P13	Identifying Key Brand Uncertainties for the Future		

Based on the results obtained, the following theory can be proposed: the decline of professional sports club brands is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in the complex interactions of internal and external factors. Internal factors include inefficient brand management, failure to adapt to market changes, customer alienation, inability to innovate and adopt new technologies, and structural issues within the

clubs. These factors lead to a reduction in brand value and recognition among fans, sponsors, and other stakeholders. On the other hand, external factors such as the country's financial problems, government policies, customer mindsets, and the strength of competitors serve as facilitating environments for brand decline. Considering these factors, addressing brand decline requires strategies that can manage both internal issues and external threats simultaneously. These strategies include changing marketing strategies, brand promotion, brand revitalization, brand diagnostics, and improving customer experience.

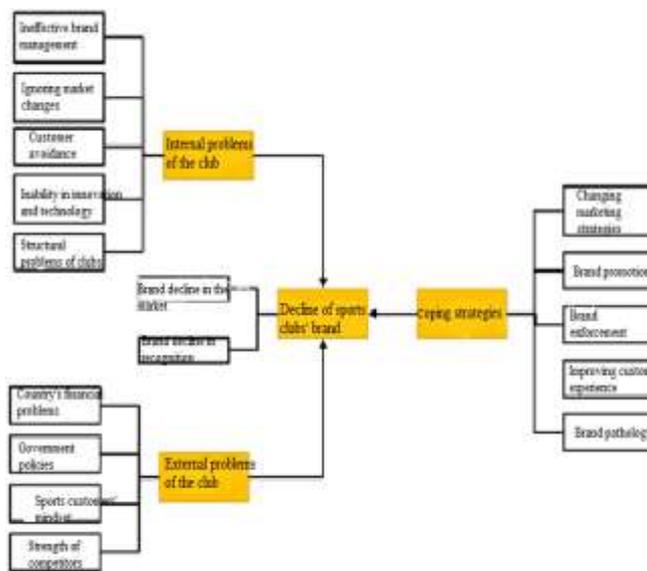


Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Addressing Brand Decline in Professional Sports Clubs in Iran

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide a conceptual model for combating brand decline in professional sports clubs in Iran. The findings of this research revealed that the decline of the brand in Iranian professional sports clubs is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in the complex interactions of internal and external factors. Internal factors include ineffective brand management, insufficient attention to market trends, customer alienation, inability to innovate and adopt new technologies, and structural problems within the clubs. These factors contribute to the reduction of brand value and recognition among fans, sponsors, and other stakeholders, thus weakening the competitive

position of the clubs. For example, the disregard for fans' needs and failure to use modern technologies, such as digital marketing, has led to customer dissatisfaction and decreased brand appeal. On the other hand, external factors such as the country's financial issues, government policies, the mindset of customers towards foreign brands, and the strength of competitors serve as facilitating factors for brand decline. Ineffective government policies and financial and banking limitations have prevented clubs from creating sustainable financial resources. Moreover, competition with international brands that are stronger in terms of finance, technology, and marketing has significantly weakened the position of domestic clubs. Shifting customer preferences towards foreign brands have further exacerbated this situation. These findings can be explained within the context of existing literature. For instance, previous studies like Shariatnejad & Ghahremani (2023) have categorized brand decline factors into two groups: internal and external factors. The findings of this study similarly demonstrate the interactive effect of internal factors (e.g., ineffective brand management and structural problems of clubs) and external factors (e.g., government policies and competition with foreign brands). However, this research, focusing on Iranian professional sports clubs, highlights specific local dimensions that have been less emphasized in previous studies. Additionally, the findings of this study indicate that factors such as decreased customer trust, fan dissatisfaction, and weak interactions with stakeholders play a significant role in brand decline. This aligns with Mousavi et al. (2022)'s perspective on the impact of managerial decisions and consumer perceptions of the brand but provides a fresh viewpoint by adding the role of sports fans and the specific challenges faced by Iranian clubs. Similarly, the research by Kohyari Haghghat et al. (2018) examined the impact of organizational problems such as customer alienation, poor marketing strategies, and environmental factors like weak business relationships and intense competition with foreign brands. The findings of this study align with these

studies but emphasize specific issues related to Iranian professional sports clubs, such as the customer mindset toward domestic brands and the influence of government financial policies. It is worth noting that internal problems are one of the most important factors contributing to brand decline in Iranian professional sports clubs, significantly affecting their performance.

Ineffective brand management, including weak decision-making, the absence of strategic planning, and poor communication with fans and sponsors, is a key reason for the reduction in brand value. The managers' failure to adapt to market changes and modern technologies, such as not utilizing digital marketing, customer management systems, and innovative tools, has led these clubs to fail in meeting the expectations of their customers and fans. Furthermore, customer alienation, due to neglecting the needs and expectations of customers, has led to a decline in their loyalty and engagement. Structural problems in the clubs also pose serious obstacles to maintaining and developing the brand; these problems include organizational corruption, lack of transparency in decision-making, and the inability to access sustainable financial resources, which reduce the clubs' competitiveness. These internal factors not only lead to a reduction in brand recognition among audiences but also have a direct impact on weakening the position of the clubs in both domestic and international markets.

External Factors and Their Role in Brand Decline in Iranian Professional Sports Clubs

External factors also play a crucial role in accelerating the process of brand decline in Iranian professional sports clubs. Ineffective government policies, such as the lack of financial support and facilitative regulations, have placed considerable pressure on clubs and restricted their competitive space. Financial problems in the country, including economic fluctuations, banking limitations, and the absence of financial facilities, have prevented clubs from making the necessary investments to develop their brands and enhance their competitiveness. Furthermore, intense competition with international

brands, which are superior in financial capacity, technology, and marketing, has severely challenged the position of domestic clubs. Changing preferences of sports customers, driven by their inclination towards higher-quality foreign brands, has exacerbated the situation. The mindset of customers towards domestic brands, often shaped by dissatisfaction and negative past experiences, acts as an obstacle to the revival of domestic brands. These external factors, in interaction with internal issues, have created a favorable environment for brand decline and require comprehensive strategies to address these challenges.

Strategies to Address These Challenges

To address these challenges, strategies are needed that can simultaneously manage both internal and external problems while strengthening weaknesses and creating new opportunities to improve the brand position of sports clubs. These strategies include changing marketing strategies, brand promotion, brand revival, brand diagnostics, and improving customer experience.

Revisiting Marketing Strategies

Sports clubs need to revisit their marketing strategies to align with changing customer needs and respond to economic and competitive conditions. Changes in defining target markets, smarter pricing strategies, and the adoption of modern advertising methods, such as digital marketing, video content, and interactive campaigns, are among the actions that can help improve the brand's position. Additionally, focusing on local marketing to enhance engagement with domestic audiences and developing international marketing to attract foreign audiences are considered essential strategies.

Brand Promotion

Brand promotion involves strengthening the brand's presence in customers' minds and establishing a positive, long-term relationship with them. In this regard, the use of social media platforms, influencer marketing, and customer loyalty programs can play an effective role. Organizing sports events, actively engaging with fans via digital platforms, and

promoting brand values (such as honesty, innovation, and commitment to the community) also contribute to reinforcing the brand's position. Video and television advertising remain powerful tools for increasing brand awareness on a larger scale.

Brand Revival

Brand revival involves rebuilding customer trust, improving relationships with stakeholders, and redefining the brand's position in the market. This can be achieved through internal policy reforms, offering new services or products, and revitalizing the brand's visual identity (such as changing the logo or slogan). Creating strategies based on the preferences and tastes of sports customers, strengthening the remaining brand culture, and fostering a sense of belonging among fans are key actions for brand revival.

Brand Diagnostics

Brand diagnostics involves identifying weaknesses, threats, and internal and external factors that impact the brand. This helps clubs make better decisions by analyzing data and reviewing customer feedback. Tools such as fan surveys, social media analysis, and sales data reviews can be used in this process. Additionally, identifying competitive threats and examining the performance of successful international brands can provide valuable guidance for overcoming challenges.

Improving Customer Experience

One of the most important actions for maintaining and strengthening a brand is enhancing the customer experience. This involves offering higher-quality services, personalizing services based on customer needs, and establishing positive and meaningful relationships with fans. For this purpose, clubs should use technologies such as customer management systems, digital loyalty programs, and interactive platforms. Respecting customer privacy and ensuring transparency in communications also help to increase customer trust and loyalty.

These strategies, with a focus on comprehensive management of internal and external factors, help sports clubs stabilize their position in the market and save their brand from decline. These actions not only improve the performance of clubs and increase

fan satisfaction but also foster sustainable competitiveness in both domestic and international markets. Therefore, it is recommended that professional sports clubs in Iran form specialized brand management committees to identify and analyze internal and external factors affecting their brand and develop operational plans based on these analyses. Additionally, clubs can improve customer experience and establish more effective communication with fans by investing in modern technologies such as customer management systems, digital marketing, and augmented reality. Strengthening international relationships and partnering with foreign brands to benefit from advanced knowledge and technologies could also enhance the competitive position of clubs. Furthermore, it is suggested that clubs increase customer and fan loyalty by formulating targeted marketing strategies, including appropriate pricing, interactive advertising, and designing campaigns based on local culture and needs. Finally, the development of transparent and professional management structures, along with close supervision of the performance of managers and staff, can help reduce internal problems and improve the brand position at the national and international levels. This research had some limitations. One of the main limitations was the focus on professional sports clubs in Iran, which limited the findings to the specific conditions of this country and reduced the ability to directly generalize the results to other countries or different sports industries. Another limitation relates to the qualitative nature of the research; because this type of research focuses on the in-depth and exploratory discovery of phenomena, its results do not allow for precise measurement or generalization to larger populations. Additionally, the data analysis process in qualitative research may be somewhat influenced by the perspectives and assumptions of the researcher, though efforts were made to minimize this impact through participant review techniques and independent analysis. Given these limitations, it is recommended that future research use a mixed-method approach (qualitative-quantitative) to



provide a more comprehensive examination and evaluation of the subject. Furthermore, cross-national comparative studies to explore the similarities and differences in brand decline in sports clubs across different countries could enrich the findings.

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6. Author Contributions: All Authors contributed equally.

7. Declaration: We utilized the ChatGPT language model to enhance and refine the academic writing of our paper.

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