



Presenting the Freelancing Model in Iran's Sports Industry

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ABSTRACT

The current research aimed to develop a freelancing model in Iran's sports industry. This study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of methodology. The statistical population consisted of experts in entrepreneurship, management, and sports management. A purposive snowball sampling method was used, and 19 participants were selected based on theoretical saturation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. The data were analyzed using the grounded theory approach and Glaser's emergent method. Coding was performed in two stages and three steps: actual coding (open and selective coding) and theoretical coding, through which the research components were identified. In total, 160 codes and 41 categories were extracted across 10 dimensions at three levels: macro, meso, and micro. The findings indicate that at the macro level, cultural, political, social, economic, and legal factors are influential; at the meso level, educational, technological, and media factors play a role; and at the micro level, behavioral and psychological factors are significant. Given the unemployment rate among graduates of sports science and physical education, it is recommended that managers and policymakers take coordinated steps to leverage freelancing capacities to improve employment and entrepreneurship in the country's sports sector.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive world, the workforce is one of the most critical production factors in any society. In recent decades, specialized human resources have been a primary driver of economic growth in countries. However, the rapid growth of the labor force, insufficient coordination between the education system and the labor market, the mismatch between economic growth and employment capacities, and the lack of market-relevant skills among university graduates have made employment a major concern for policymakers in developing countries, including Iran (Afshari Pour et al., 2021).

According to statistics published by the Iranian Statistics Center in the summer of 2023, 42.8% of the unemployed population were university graduates. This rate was higher among women compared to men and in urban areas compared to rural areas. These statistics show that nearly half of the country's unemployed are educated individuals (Bureau of Population, Labor and Family Economy, 2023). Therefore, the rising trend of unemployment among university graduates, including those in physical education and sports sciences, is one of the most significant social challenges in the country. One solution to this challenge is to focus on the growth of project outsourcing or freelancing. The development of such businesses plays a vital role in job creation and economic growth. Expanding these businesses not only creates new jobs but also brings wealth, self-fulfillment, and independence to their owners (Sharififar and Mohammadian, 2016).

Freelancing is equivalent to self-employment or independent work. The term “freelancer” dates back to the 19th century, when it referred to medieval soldiers who fought for whichever lord or group paid them the most. The word “Lance” refers to the long weapon used by knights in duels. Over time, the term took on an independent meaning. Thus, the first freelancers were soldiers in the Middle Ages who fought for the lord of their choice—soldiers

who did not belong to a specific king, lord, or region and fought enemies for rewards. Today, the term “freelancer” has evolved, and in the current century, it no longer refers to volunteer soldiers but encompasses a much broader scope. It is predicted that freelancers will play a significant role in the global economy in the coming years (Munirovich Akhmetshin et al., 2018).

Now, the global trend toward freelancing or independent work is evident. The growth of self-employment is positively correlated with employment and wealth creation. For this reason, self-employment has always been a focus of governments and policymakers. To address the unemployment crisis and expand job opportunities, attention to the growth of freelancing and self-employment, or creating conditions for the development of freelancers, is a crucial strategy. On the other hand, sports are a critical factor in promoting societal vitality and health. And given the expansion of sports activities and the public's growing interest in sports services, events, and activities, sports domains are one of the arenas for self-employment. Moreover, in the current century, sports have become a vast industry offering all kinds of goods and services. Also, sports are recognized as the sixth most lucrative industry in developed countries, and given their extensive dimensions, they can be considered one of the fastest-growing sectors, closely linked to the world's economic, social, and political spheres (Munirovich Akhmetshin et al., 2018).

Thus, the sports industry holds numerous achievements and opportunities. It has the potential to serve as a strategic solution to reduce unemployment and increase employment in the country. The economic and market conditions in sports, influenced by factors such as financial resources, labor, physical facilities, economic infrastructure, and specialized services, impact the motivation for entrepreneurship and the success rate

of sports science graduates (Bibak, 2019). Given the observed unemployment among university graduates, fostering a self-employment mindset in sports—particularly given the industry's high potential in this area—can effectively reduce unemployment rates among graduates in this field. Therefore, it seems essential to develop a model for freelancing growth in Iran's sports industry. Considering the above, and the importance of promoting self-employment among physical education graduates, the main question of this research is: What is the freelancing model in Iran's sports industry?

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

The historical evolution of the concept of self-employment can be divided into five periods: *15th and 16th Centuries*: During this period, large construction projects such as churches, castles, and military installations were outsourced by governments to self-employed individuals and entrepreneurs. *17th Century*: This era coincided with the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The Industrial Revolution was marked by a rapid increase in factories. It can be said that the Industrial Revolution marked the beginning of the modern concept of organizations. Alongside the emergence of organizations, the concept of jobs also took on new meaning. In this era, the modern concept of a job emerged, where an employee committed to a long-term relationship with an employer. Job security also became a serious concern around this time. During this period, the link between self-employment indicators, entrepreneurship, and risk-taking was established.

In this era, most independent workers contracted with governments to produce goods or provide services. The amount of these government contracts was usually fixed, but due to price instability, the initial costs for producing or providing services were variable, and entrepreneurs could face financial losses or reap substantial profits. In this context, Richard Cantillon, a prominent 17th-century economist and writer, developed theories related to entrepreneurship. He described

entrepreneurs as risk-takers (Omid and Omid, 2013).

3 *.18th and 19th Centuries*: During this period, investors were separate from entrepreneurs.

4 *.Mid-20th Century*: In this era, entrepreneurs were regarded as innovators, attracting the attention of many scholars, including economist Schumpeter. Schumpeter believed that an entrepreneur's function was to reform or completely transform production patterns through innovation or, more broadly, untested technologies related to new production methods or the production of old goods in new ways, opening new resource channels, identifying new markets for products, and organizing new industries.

5 *.Contemporary Era (Late 1970s–Present)*: This period coincided with the new wave of information technology, the growth of virtual spaces, the emergence of new businesses, small workshops, and the rise of freelancers. Gradually, psychologists, sociologists, and management scholars also turned their attention to various aspects of entrepreneurship, independent work, and their role in job creation and entrepreneurship (Omid and Omid, 2013).

In recent decades, with the advent of the internet and the expansion of the web, freelancing has grown significantly. This growth has been so remarkable that today, terms like the freelancer economy or the gig economy have emerged. The development of the internet and information technology has influenced the growth of the freelancer economy in two ways: Communication technologies have increased opportunities for remote work and non-face-to-face project exchanges, thereby expanding work capacity.

With the development of information technology, dozens of new activities, such as web security services, web design, and app development, have emerged, inherently possessing significant potential for freelancing (Wood et al., 2018).

Thus, today the term “freelancer” refers to someone who is not permanently or long-term employed. Freelancers often offer their services through specialized online platforms, newspaper



advertisements, or word-of-mouth, i.e., personal connections. Sometimes, freelancers represent a company or temporary agency that resells freelance work to clients—a form of outsourcing. Given the above, it can be said that this type of employment differs from traditional employment (i.e., working in government or private organizations) in several ways, including duration of employment, fixed vs. variable salaries, workplace, autonomy, competitive environment, speed of advancement, and benefits. One of the features and advantages of this sector of the economy is that it gradually prepares individuals to acquire the necessary skills to enter larger and broader markets (Munirovich Akhmetshin et al., 2018). Self-employment and working for oneself pave the way for the growth of independent work and entrepreneurship in society. Therefore, self-employment, due to its flexibility in working hours and independence in work conditions, can be welcomed.

The sports industry is one of the areas where freelancing and the entry of skilled individuals into the labor market can flourish. Today, sports are no longer viewed merely as entertainment or games but as an industry. It is believed that employment opportunities must be identified, and these opportunities should be leveraged to create entrepreneurial activities. From Ratten et al.'s perspective, sports are an entrepreneurial process (Ratten et al., 2017). In the current era, due to people's growing interest in sports and the demand for sports goods and services, the sports industry is one of the world's most profitable industries, providing a platform for new jobs in society. Studies show that the sports industry has grown faster than other industries. From 2009 to 2014, the global sports industry grew by an average of 7% annually—a rate higher than the economic growth of some countries. The sports industry generated approximately \$700 billion in revenue from 2009 to 2014, accounting for about 1% of the world's total gross domestic product. These figures highlight the increasing importance of the sports industry (Ghorbani and Vahadani, 2015). Additionally,

research indicates that the sports industry's revenue was approximately \$354 billion in 2020 and reached \$501 billion in 2021, reflecting an annual growth rate of 41.3% from 2020 to 2022. Furthermore, the sports market is expected to exceed \$700 billion by 2026 (Bibak, 2019).

Regarding the most important studies conducted on this topic, Pierce (2019), in a study on creating new jobs in sports, identified the inclusion of sports sales and marketing courses in universities as a key factor in increasing new jobs in sports. Proman (2019) found that technology significantly impacts the employment of athletes and fan engagement, with budgets projected to rise from \$2.5 billion to \$30 billion by 2024. Rossi et al. (2019) concluded in their research that the types of sports offered and organizational characteristics are strategic variables in the sports market compared to organizational strategies.

Ahonen (2019), in a study conducted in Finland, found that government support for small and medium-sized businesses in elite sports could contribute to the development of sports businesses. Hayduk and Walker (2018), in a study titled "Mapping the strategic factor market for sport entrepreneurship", examined influential factors such as communication, sales services, consumer needs, technology, media, and retail. Raven (2018) investigated the educational positioning of sports management in relation to employment in the fitness industry. The results showed that employment education improves job opportunities in the sports sector.

Munirovich Akhmetshin et al. (2018), in a study titled "Freehancing as a type of entereneurship: advantages, disadntages, disadvantages, disadvantages and development prospects", examined the development of freelancing within the framework of modern economic realities. The study also explored the legal status of freelancers in line with modern laws. The research method was based on a dialectical approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The researchers concluded that freelancing contributes to employment

development and small businesses. Zhang et al. (2018) found that implementing continuous sports marketing processes in sports organizations is effective in economic development, job creation, and sports revenue generation. Ratten et al. (2017), in a study titled "Sport Startups: What are They?", identified factors such as new technologies, equipment and clothing, new strategies and training, new consumer products and services, media, and new opportunities as innovative positions in the sports industry. They concluded that the role of sports innovations in business has received less scientific attention.

Saeedi et al. (2024) also conducted a study titled "Three decades of research on employment in the Iranian sports labor market: A look at micro, meso, and macro barriers", examining Iran's sports labor market from 2001 to 2023. The findings indicate that employment in Iran's sports labor market has faced numerous challenges, and overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive, long-term approach by policymakers, managers, economic activists, and job seekers in this field. Khaledifard et al. (2023) investigated and analyzed contextual and intervening factors affecting the sustainable employment of Iranian sports science graduates. The findings related to contextual factors revealed 29 main concepts and four individual categories, including policy and planning, economic and financial factors, university-community-industry linkages, and professional competence in sports. The findings related to intervening factors identified five main categories: economic, cultural and social, political, repositioning sports sciences, and networking.

Rahmaty et al. (2022) conducted a study titled "Presenting a Development Model of Sport Entrepreneurship in the Professional Clubs of Premier Football League: A Mixed Approach". Based on thematic analysis, the researchers identified three overarching themes: using the capacity of virtual media and having regard to the club departments and the trend of commercialization activity. Afshari Pour et al. (2021), in a study titled "An Entrepreneurial

Capacity Model in Iran Sports Industry with a Combination of Design Approaches", examined entrepreneurial capacities in Iran's sports industry. The results showed that causal conditions affect entrepreneurial capacity by 64%, contextual conditions affect strategies by 47%, intervening conditions affect strategies by 40%, entrepreneurial capacity affects strategies by 56%, and strategies affect outcomes by 71%. Ashuri et al. (2022) identified entrepreneurial opportunities in the sports industry with a focus on elite sports. The researchers classified 174 entrepreneurial opportunities into six sub-domains, with income and commercial activities, sports club activities, and sports talent scouting ranking first to third in importance, respectively. Also, the results of Radanfar and Eydi (2025) research showed that the development of entrepreneurship programs, the creation of innovation centers and accelerators, the awareness of students, interdisciplinary interactions, and the evaluation of the main strategies of the sports science faculty were entrepreneurs, and in this regard, it is necessary for the managers and officials of the ministries of science and higher education and sports science faculties to provide the necessary platform to move towards becoming an entrepreneur with attitudinal-behavioral alignment. The innovation of this research was to highlight the issue of entrepreneurship in sports science faculties due to the increasing unemployment of university graduates and due to the huge capacities of the field of sports as a part of the concerns of the students of this field, which was less paid attention to in past researches. Also, the results of Khaleghi Arani et al.'s (2025) research showed that the growth of the sports equipment industry, private sector investment in startups, the use of innovative technologies in startups, and increased competition in the sports industry market are four key uncertainties that create two plausible stories named "Dynamic Growth of the Sports Industry" and "Recession in the Sports Industry". In the Hosseini Asgarabadi (2025) study; "Identifying Effective Indicators on Strategic Entrepreneurship in Sports Tourism in Golestan Province" concluded that

factors such as strategic planning, human resource management, marketing and advertising, infrastructure development, government support, innovation and technology, international cooperation, sustainable development, risk management, and customer experience are among the key factors that contribute to the development of strategic entrepreneurship. They help in the tourism industry. The results of Karimi et al.'s (2025) research showed that using positive leadership strategies and encouraging innovative behaviors among managers and employees can have a significant impact on the development and creation of sports entrepreneurship.

The other researcher such as Ghorbani and Vahadani (2015), in a study titled “Designing the competency model of entrepreneurs in Iran's sports industry”, identified existing contexts as supportive platforms and infrastructures, weaknesses in entrepreneurial thinking and managerial support, insufficient penetration of sports in society, social support, specialized human resources, entrepreneurial intention, and financial support. They concluded that addressing these platforms at the macro level would yield positive outcomes, such as economic growth and socio-cultural development for Iran's sports industry. Naderian Jahormi and Pejohan (2019), in a study titled “Analysis of the role of entrepreneurship education in the employment of sports science graduates”, found that technology, cultural, executive policies, educational and research, and individual factors are highly significant for sports entrepreneurship development.

Thus, given the above, unemployment is currently one of the country's major challenges. One of the key factors contributing to unemployment is the imbalance between labor supply and demand. The enthusiasm for education among the large youth population has led to investments that should have been directed toward job creation and production enterprises being diverted toward establishing

various universities (public, self-governing campuses affiliated with public universities, Islamic Azad University, non-profit higher education institutions, Payame Noor University, University of Applied Science and Technology, and virtual universities). The result of this expansion in education has been an increase in the general level of education in the country. Efforts to create sufficient employment have been inadequate, and the unemployment of previous years has not only persisted but has transformed into another form of unemployment—graduate unemployment (Zaki et al., 2019). This type of unemployment affects not only the country's economy but also other societal aspects, such as rising marriage ages, changes and diversity in social problems, and reduced tax revenues.

In reality, factors such as the imbalance between university graduates and job opportunities, inattention to fostering a self-employment mindset, and the theoretical nature of educational materials contribute to the growth of the unemployed educated population. Freelancing is one solution to the unemployment problem. Various self-employment methods allow individuals to establish independent and successful businesses based on their skills, interests, and conditions. Freelancing is one such method. With the expansion of communication technologies and modern technologies, along with the work opportunities they have created, freelancing has grown significantly in recent decades. Although studies have been conducted on the role of self-employment in reducing unemployment in the sports industry, no research has been done on freelancing in sports and its significant role in the employment of sports professionals and graduates. Therefore, given the results of previous studies and the research gap in this area, the researchers in this study seek to develop and present a freelancing model in Iran's sports industry.

2. Methodology

Based on Saunders' research onion, this study is exploratory in nature. Events have occurred or are occurring, and in examining these events, new causes may be discovered. The research paradigm is interpretivism. This study adopts an inductive approach, meaning the theory formation process moves from the specific to the general. The research strategy is grounded theory. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method used for theorizing about the phenomenon under study. This method is employed when the research literature on the topic lacks sufficient depth, and the goal is to present a new theory not previously discussed in research communities. The research is conducted qualitatively. Qualitative research is an effort to understand a phenomenon from various perspectives, like to crystallizing the phenomenon under study. This type of research emphasizes participants' experiences and the direct relationship the researcher establishes with the research community and environment. Qualitative research, inherently exploratory, is used when there is a concern about understanding how phenomena occur and how they relate to one another, without measuring the relationship between variables. The research timeframe is cross-sectional, and data collection is done through interviews (Ebrahimi and Dai nabi, 2019). Additionally, in this study, coding was performed in three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

The participants in this study included 19 experts and scholars in entrepreneurship, sports entrepreneurship, physical education, economics, management, sociology, and psychology, each with at least 10 years of experience in these fields. The sampling method was purposive snowball sampling. In this method, one or more individuals with the desired characteristics were initially selected, and they were then asked to introduce others with similar traits. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation and sufficiency were achieved in the interviews. "Theoretical saturation of a category is the basis for judging when to stop sampling from the relevant groups. Sampling and

data collection end when theoretical saturation of a category or group of cases is achieved (i.e., nothing new is obtained)" (Flick, 2007). In other words, the interview and data collection process continued until no new data could be obtained, ensuring theoretical saturation of the categories. In this study, theoretical saturation was achieved after interviewing 19 experts. The criterion for 19 interviews was theoretical saturation, as the researchers found no new insights after the 16th interview, and the results became repetitive. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm theoretical saturation (Table 1).

Each interview was conducted in the offices of university faculty members, sports executives, and sports entrepreneurs, lasting between 35 and 50 minutes. To record qualitative data and focus more on the interview process, with the participants' permission, the interviews were recorded, and key points were noted. At the beginning of each interview, the concept of freelancing was briefly explained to the participants. Then, questions related to the research topic were asked, such as: "What is your view on entrepreneurship and self-employment in Iran, particularly in the country's sports sector?" "In your opinion, who is a freelancer, and what is your perspective on freelancing?" "Can you share your views on freelancing in sports?" "What factors do you think influence freelancing?" "How do you think each of these factors affects the growth of freelancing in Iran's sports industry?" "If there are other factors influencing the growth of freelancing in Iran's sports industry that have not been mentioned, please mention and explain them."

Regarding the validity and reliability of the study, the trustworthiness in grounded theory is based on four criteria: the fit of the theory with the data, the relevance of the theory, its effectiveness and applicability, and the ability to modify the theory (Glaser et al., 2009).

The percentage of agreement between two coders (60% or higher) in each case is also a method for ensuring reliability (Creswell, 2012). In this study,

to ensure validity and reliability, in addition to adhering to the above principles, the method of agreement between two coders (reproducibility) and the researcher's coding at a specific time interval were used. Three interviews were coded by another researcher approved by the professors, and the coding results were compared. The results indicated

over 60% similarity in coding at each stage, confirming coding reliability. Additionally, two experts familiar with grounded theory supervised the various stages of coding, conceptualization, category extraction, and theory development. The percentage of thematic agreement was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Percentage of Thematic Agreement} = \frac{\text{Number of Agreements} \times 2}{\text{Total Number of Codes}} \times 100$$

The results of this coding are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Calculation of reliability between the two coders

Interview No	Encoder number	Total Codes	Agreements	Disagreements	Reliability(%)
4	Encoder1	13	9	2	0/75
	Encoder2	11			
2	Encoder1	25	18	4	0/76
	Encoder2	22			
7	Encoder1	18	13	3	0/74
	Encoder2	16			
Total		106	40	9	0/75

2.1. Data Analysis

For data analysis, Glaser's grounded theory method was used. Glaser believes that the connections between categories should emerge from the data conceptually, not forced into a specific framework like Strauss's paradigmatic model (Flick, 2007). Given this, Glaser's emergent approach was adopted in this study. In the grounded theory analysis process, data are coded in two stages and three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective (theoretical) coding, through which the research components were identified. The three main steps for coding data are:

Open Coding: This involves breaking down, comparing, labeling, conceptualizing, and categorizing data. During open coding, data are fragmented into separate parts and examined for similarities and differences. In this study, 160 open codes were extracted after reviewing the interviews.

Axial Coding: This is the second stage of analysis in grounded theory. The goal is to establish relationships between the categories generated in the open coding stage. This coding is called "axial" because it revolves around a central category. In this stage, the researcher selects one category as the core phenomenon and explores its relationship with other categories. Here, 41 axial codes were extracted.

Selective Coding: Once the memos are organized and their relationships identified, selective coding is performed. Selective coding integrates concepts through a relational pattern. Selective codes weave fragmented concepts together and conceptualize how real codes might relate to form a hypothetical theory. These hypotheses function together in a theory, addressing the primary concerns of the participants.

Other actions to consider in Glaser's approach include memo-writing and theory drafting. Memos are theoretical reports of ideas about codes and their

relationships that occur to the analyst during coding. Grounded theorists view memo-writing as an intermediate stage between data collection and drafting the theory. The next step is organizing and categorizing the memos, which is key to formulating the theory for presentation to others (Danai Fard et al., 2013).

When the memos are organized and their relationships clarified, selective coding is conducted. Selective coding refers to the integration of concepts through a relational pattern. Selective codes weave fragmented concepts together and conceptualize how real codes might relate to form a hypothetical theory. These hypotheses function

3. Findings of the Research

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the research sample, including

together in a theory, addressing the primary concerns of the participants. Eventually, when the various categories are linked to the core variable, the product of grounded theory takes shape and resembles a theory. The process continues until no new concepts emerge from the data, indicating theoretical saturation. The theory is only valid when the researcher reaches saturation. This requires fieldwork until no new evidence is obtained from the data. In other words, the data must be thoroughly reviewed (Danai Fard et al., 2013). Overall, the data analysis process in this study was conducted manually.

gender, age, education level, work experience in entrepreneurship, and job position (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of interviewees

	Gender		Education	Age		Work Experience in Entrepreneurship (Years)		
	Female	Male	PhD	31-50	Over 51	Less than 15	16-25	Over 26
Frequency	5	14	19	2	17	1	2	16
Percentage (%)	26/32	73/68	100	10/52	89/48	5/27	10/52	84/21

Table 3. Job position of interviewees

Position	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Executives and Managers	4	21.05
University Faculty Members	10	52.63
Entrepreneurs	5	26.32

Table 4. Theoretical saturation

No Pivotal codes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	Number of open codes under the core codes
Economic Stability	1		1	1																3
Financial Independence		1			1															2
Financial Support	1	1	2	1				1		1	1	1								9
Financial Oversight		1				1	1													3
Economic Security	1									1										2
Economic Infrastructure		1				1			1		1									4
Institutionalizing a culture of self-employment and entrepreneurship	1						1	1	1		1	1	1							8

[illegible]

No Pivotal codes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	Number of open codes under the core codes
Increase laws supporting entrepreneurs			1		1		1			1	1									5
International support			1													1		1		3
Support property rights laws	1								1											2
Protective laws in the field of employment insurance, welfare, retirement, etc.						1									1		1			3
Develop information technology infrastructure	1	1	1		1		1	2		1										8
Develop science and technology parks		1																1	1	3
Create national and regional information networks			1												1		1			3
Create databases to provide job opportunities in the field of freelancing in sports	1		1										1							3
Remove obstacles to the growth of information networks		1					1													2
Develop and promote specialized training in the field of entrepreneurship and self-employment in sports	1	1				1					1	1								5
Review the mission and vision of universities in the field of education			1				1													2
Change the syllabi of university courses		1	1								1									3
Coordination of universities with the labor market	1		1						1	1				1						5
Review the professor promotion system		1							1							1				3
Develop advertising in the field of freelancing in sports	1													1			1			3
Produce content in the field of developing freelancing in sports	1												1				1			3
Strengthen entrepreneurial spirit	1	1		1	1		1			1		1	1							8
Strengthen entrepreneurial ability	1	1	1	1		1				1	1	1		1						9
Number of new open codes	19	18	18	9	9	9	13	7	7	12	9	8	4	3	3	3	4	3	2	Total codes: 160

The findings from open coding are shown in Table 4. As observed, in the open coding stage, 160 codes were extracted; in the axial coding stage, 41 codes; and in the selective coding stage, 10 main categories influencing the development of freelancing in Iran's

sports industry were identified. These categories include economic, social, cultural, political, legal, technological, educational, media, behavioral, and psychological factors, which can be classified into three levels: macro, meso, and micro.

Table 5. Data coding results

Open Codes	Core Codes	Selected Code	Category
Reducing inflation, stabilizing prices, reducing currency fluctuations	Economic Stability	Economic	Macro
Independence from government institutions, creating conditions for income generation	Financial Independence		
Creating support systems, facilities in accordance with Islamic economics for entrepreneurs to enter the labor market, creating suitable conditions for entering global markets, maintaining sports sponsors, supporting the country's banking system for entrepreneurship and developing freelancing in the Iranian sports industry, creating financial incentives for entrepreneurs and freelancers in the field of sports	Financial Support		
Controlling and supervising the granting of financial facilities, examining the efficiency of the granted financial facilities, using modern financial tools	Financial Supervision		
Promoting economic security for risk-taking and investment in the field of freelancing in the Iranian sports industry, promoting a culture of risk aversion in the environment, creating space for job security	Economic Security		
Promoting government investment in the development of freelancing in the Iranian sports industry, formulating and planning macroeconomic policies in the field of developing self-employment and freelancing in the Iranian sports industry, reforming the structure and programs that hinder the growth and development of freelancing in the Iranian sports industry, increasing the share of sports in Gross Domestic Product	Economic Infrastructure	Cultural	
Introducing opportunities, ideas and jobs in the field of entrepreneurship and self-employment, developing and institutionalizing the concepts of self-confidence from childhood, especially in primary school education texts, building culture through environmental advertising, billboards, advertising teasers, creating campaigns to promote the culture of self-employment and the development of freelancing in Iranian sports, creating operational programs to teach freelancing programs in Iranian sports, teaching entrepreneurial and self-employment skills in the family, school and university, promoting ideation and creativity in the field of sports through documenting the education and publishing the experiences of top entrepreneurs	Institutionalizing a Culture of Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship		
Removing obstacles to the development and promotion of self-employment and entrepreneurship, promoting the value of self-employment and entrepreneurship, eliminating gender barriers in entering the labor market and self-employment	Removing Cultural Barriers to the Development of Freelancing in Sports		
Creating the belief that business in the field of sports in Iran is profitable, creating the belief in self-employment in sports instead of employment in government organizations among university graduates, placing sports in the household basket, promoting the social status of sports, changing perspectives From documentary orientation to entrepreneurship and self-employment in sports, creating belief in investment in the field of sports	Believing in the Belief in Self-Employment and Freelancing in Sports among the General Public		
Increasing the publication of specialized books and publications in the field of freelancing in sports, using the capacity of cyberspace to increase public information in the field of freelancing in sports, supporting research conducted in the field of self-employment and the development of freelancing in sports, using the experiences of other countries in this field	Promoting Specialized Knowledge in the Field of Freelancing in Sports		
Holding conferences, seminars in the field of entrepreneurship and the development of freelancing in sports, introducing opportunities and challenges for the development of freelancing in the field of sports, holding workshops with the aim of changing the views of managers and officials in	Holding Annual National and International Gatherings and Conferences	Social	

the country's government sports sectors in order to strengthen freelancing in sports in the country		
Increasing social capacities in order to develop social participation in the field of freelancing in sports, supporting non-governmental organizations in the field of introducing attractions and opportunities for the development of freelancing in sports, developing social capital in the field of freelancing in the country	Creating Social Participation	
Encouraging physical education students and professors to present ideas in the field of development Freelancing in the country's sports, printing and publishing top ideas in the field of self-employment for the use of members of the community, implementing top ideas in the field of self-employment and freelancing in the country's sports industry	Creating Programs in the Field of Introducing Ideas	
Developing consulting centers in the field of freelancing in sports, holding webinars on the topic of consulting services in the field of entrepreneurship on social networks, producing content on consulting for starting a business in the field of freelancing in sports	Providing Consulting Services in the Field of Entrepreneurship	
Developing a modern model in the field of self-employment and requiring compliance with the provisions of the model by relevant agencies such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, and the Ministry of Cooperatives Labour and Social Welfare, etc. in order to create interaction between the formal education system and the real labor market of the country, creating synergy between the agencies in charge of implementing the country's codified self-employment model and preventing the overlap of duties of these agencies	Developing and Presenting a Single Model for Self-Employment and Empowering Students	
Downsizing the government, transferring a large part of government activities to the private sector, reducing government ownership	Outsourcing in the Government	Political
Preventing the impact of political tendencies on the development of freelancing in sports, political cohesion in Sports	Political Stability	
Changing the attitude of government policies in the field of developing freelancing in sports, efforts by government organizations to introduce freelancing opportunities in sports and support its development, creating support for activists in the field of freelancing, increasing the guarantees for the execution of contracts between entrepreneurs and government organizations, developing effective laws for the presence of entrepreneurs in cyberspace, removing obstacles in obtaining the desired licenses, promoting support by eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic processes, explaining and implementing government support programs for the development of freelancing in sports in the country, government support for entrepreneurship and self-employment development plans during the economic recession	Government Support for the Development of Freelancing in the Country's Sports	
Establishing interaction with other countries in order to develop freelancing in sports in the country, using the experiences of successful countries in the field of freelancing in sports, international cooperation in the field of creating educational programs	Improving Political Interactions at the Global Level	
Enhancing the support for local services and goods in the country, creating laws to prohibit the entry of foreign goods and services into the country in order to support entrepreneurs in the field of sports, requiring government organizations to use local services of domestic entrepreneurs	Adopting Supportive Policies to Develop and Grow Domestic Services in the Field of Freelancing	
Reducing interference Unconventional government institutions in the field of freelancing in sports, reduction of policy-making institutions in the field of sports	Reducing Government Intervention	
Supporting the development of freelancing in sports by creating stability in laws, clarifying and informing the formulated laws, formulating necessary and specific laws for the development of freelancing in sports	Transparency and Establishing Stability in Laws	Legal
Reducing unnecessary laws in the field of the development of freelancing in sports, updating laws in accordance with social, cultural, global conditions, etc.	Update and Amend Laws	

Developing moral support for freelancing activists in sports, creating a safe and legal platform for those interested in freelancing in sports, creating laws to provide incentive, discount and facilitation platforms for those interested in freelancing in sports, improving specialized laws in the field of entrepreneurship in sports, requiring the government to develop the necessary incentive packages for those interested in entering the field of freelancing in sports	Increasing laws supporting entrepreneurs		
Creating opportunities for international support for activists in the field of freelancing in sports, creating security for business at the international level, creating facilities for business at the international level	International support		
Paying attention to property rights, copyright laws in the field of freelancing in sports, paying attention to copyright and intellectual property laws for owners of sports products and services	Supporting property rights laws		
Increasing welfare and insurance facilities for sports entrepreneurs in order to develop freelancing in sports in the country, creating financial facilities to develop businesses in the field of freelancing in sports, considering tax discounts	Supporting laws in the field of employment insurance, welfare, retirement, etc.		
Developing internet facilities, encouraging the entry of businesses and sports activities to the Internet space and the use of information technology facilities and electronic spaces, creating information and electronic infrastructures to introduce freelancing activists in sports, creating infrastructures to improve information technology in order to develop exchanges in the field of entrepreneurship in sports, creating applications and software and social networks to introduce entrepreneurs in the field of sports, introducing applications and software prepared in order to develop sports entrepreneurship at the community level, popularizing the use of applications and software prepared in order to develop freelancing in sports in the country	Developing information technology infrastructure	Technological	Meso
Synchronizing science and technology parks in the field of sports, conducting future research in science parks on the subject of freelancing in sports, attracting experts active in the field of freelancing in science parks	Developing science and technology parks		
Creating national and regional information networks in order to develop and inform innovative chains in products and services, creating communication and information networks between people active in the field of freelancing in sports, creating databases in the field of identifying people active in the field of freelancing in Sports	Creating national and regional information networks		
Creating databases to introduce freelancing opportunities in sports, providing facilities for updating statistics and information in this field and identifying new self-employment opportunities, creating new comprehensive job search systems	Creating databases to provide job opportunities in the field of freelancing in sports		
Increasing internet speed, removing obstacles to the growth of businesses that depend on the development of information technology	Removing obstacles to the growth of information networks		
Promoting educational packages to improve entrepreneurial skills in the family, promoting entrepreneurial skills in universities, providing government support programs to provide free training in the field of entrepreneurship to young people and physical education graduates to enter the labor market and increase their social knowledge in this field, holding knowledge-enhancing workshops to develop freelancing in sports specifically for students, holding special empowerment courses for professors and the impact of these courses on their promotion	Developing and promoting specialized training in the field of entrepreneurship and self-employment in sports	Educational	
Changing and reviewing the mission of universities and schools and paying attention to promoting self-confidence and entrepreneurship in education, changing the direction from the process of creating degrees in universities to cultivating entrepreneurial students	Reviewing the mission and vision of universities and schools in the field of education		
Paying attention to practical lessons instead of emphasizing theoretical lessons, Using the experiences of other successful countries in the field of sports entrepreneurship in developing physical education courses, coordinating and adapting university courses to the needs of the country's	Changing the syllabi of university courses		

market, including topics related to entrepreneurship and the development of freelancing in sports

Coordination between student admission and the needs of the labor market, approving research projects and theses in accordance with the needs of the labor market, providing funding for the implementation of students' research projects, coordinating the content learned in universities with the needs of the labor market, creating internships in order to promote freelancing in sports	Coordination of universities with the labor market	Media	Micro
More communication between professors and the sports industry sector, encouraging professors to create opportunities in the field of freelancing in sports by allocating points to their performance, holding scientific seminars, specialized meetings, training workshops, etc. on the topic of freelancing in sports	Reviewing the professor promotion system		
Paying attention to the role of the national media in advertising in the field of developing freelancing in sports, making the role of the media more efficient in developing an entrepreneurial attitude in sports, using new techniques in the field of advertising	Developing advertising in the field of freelancing in sports		
Introducing top entrepreneurs in the national media, creating programs with the concept of the importance of entrepreneurship in sports, Producing content on the topic of introducing successful people in the field of freelancing	Producing content in the field of developing freelancing in sports		
Strengthening self-belief, self-confidence, independence, commitment, self-esteem, high energy, risk-taking, and responsibility among university graduates	Strengthening the spirit of entrepreneurship	Behavioral and psychological	
Strengthening abilities such as: social communication skills, self-management ability, marketing ability, emotional intelligence, opportunity-seeking ability, ability to manage others, ability to tolerate failure, body language skills	Strengthening entrepreneurial ability		

4. Discussion and conclusion

The issue of employment and unemployment in the country is highly complex and requires a diverse set of policies beyond those recommended for increasing investment volume and aggregate demand. In other words, unemployment and underemployment are not self-correcting or transient phenomena but symptoms of broader economic and social disruptions (Movahedi and Charkhtabian, 2014).

To overcome this crisis and reduce unemployment while expanding job opportunities, attention to the growth of freelancing and self-employment, or creating conditions for freelancers, is a crucial strategy. The results of this study showed that 10 main categories influence the development of freelancing in Iran's sports industry: economic, social, cultural, political, legal, technological, educational, media, behavioral, and psychological factors. These categories can be classified into three levels: macro, meso, and micro.

At the macro level, cultural, political, social, economic, and legal factors influence the growth of freelancing in sports. The impact of cultural factors

indicates that the values and beliefs prevalent in society regarding freelancing can drive fundamental societal changes and shift individuals' perspectives on employment. Political factors reflect the influence of national policies, international relations, government support for freelancers in sports, and more. Social factors include aspects such as social capital in sports, household spending on sports, social norms, and societal attitudes toward freelancing as a career choice.

The economic factor refers to the impact of components such as the country's monetary and fiscal policies, economic obstacles to implementing the policies of Article 44 of the Constitution, economic security, per capita national income in the country, state ownership, economic stability, and more. Innovative activities tend to be more sustainable and enduring in stronger economies. Legal factors, another macro-level influence, include property rights, rule of law, import-export policies, legal stability, and more.

The meso level is the second tier influencing freelancing development in Iran's sports industry.

At this level, three factors—technology, education, and media—were examined. Educational factors focus on training job seekers, adopting a practical and entrepreneurial approach to university curricula (for graduates), introducing freelancing opportunities in universities, and more. Technological factors emphasize the development of the internet and information technology. This category has influenced the freelancer economy in two ways: Communication technologies have increased opportunities for remote work and non-face-to-face project exchanges, expanding work capacity.

With the development of information technology, dozens of new activities, such as web security services, web design, and app development, have emerged, inherently possessing significant potential for freelancing.

Regarding the role of media in freelancing development in sports, mass media influence socialization, generalization, and repetition of specific behaviors in society. Audiences react to messages conveyed by the media, and one such reaction is their career choices. Thus, mass media play a significant role in introducing freelancing careers and their opportunities and benefits to audiences.

The micro level includes behavioral and psychological factors. Behavioral factors focus on strengthening skills such as social communication, emotional intelligence, self- and team management, resilience, opportunity recognition, body language, and more, which contribute to an individual's success in freelancing. Psychological factors emphasize mental attitudes, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, self-belief, confidence, independence, commitment, self-esteem, risk-taking, and responsibility, which can foster freelancing growth in Iran's sports industry.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that given the observed unemployment among sports graduates, fostering a self-employment mindset in this field—particularly leveraging the sports industry's high potential for freelancing—can

effectively reduce unemployment rates among graduates in this discipline.

This study faced certain limitations. Due to the novelty of the topic, Persian-language resources on freelancing in the sports industry are scarce. Similarly, direct foreign sources related to the research topic are limited. This study examined the freelancing model at three levels—macro, meso, and micro—while other factors should be explored to reach robust conclusions. The number of researchers with comprehensive academic and practical expertise in this field was also limited. Additionally, accessing some individuals was challenging and time-consuming. Nevertheless, the researchers made every effort to reach most of the study's sample population.

Given that this study examines freelancing development in the sports industry as a form of self-employment, it can serve as a starting point for further research on identifying freelancing opportunities in sports. Moreover, since a large number of physical education graduates enter the job market annually, this study can help policymakers and relevant organizations plan systematically to create structures for freelancing and self-employment in sports, thereby reducing costs for these organizations. For future studies, it is recommended to identify freelancing-related jobs in sports and introduce employment opportunities in this field to physical education graduates. Additionally, analyzing the financial impacts of freelancing development in sports and factors influencing freelancing in specific sports disciplines can significantly contribute to scientific knowledge in this area.

5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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