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Consequences of Commercialization of Iraqi Handball Clubs

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Abstract

This study examines the consequences of commercialization in Iraqi handball clubs as a strategy for sustainable development. Using a qualitative, applied–developmental approach, data were collected through purposive interviews with 18 handball experts and specialists. The interviews were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding until theoretical saturation was reached. The findings identified four major consequences of commercialization: increased social participation through public engagement in sport, reinforcement of national identity via sports symbolism and collective pride, economic growth through job creation and sustainable revenue, and managerial development through professionalization and innovation. The study concludes that commercialization represents a multidimensional approach that can enhance financial sustainability, strengthen social capital, promote national cohesion, and improve managerial structures, offering policymakers a viable pathway for developing Iraqi handball.

Introduction:

Commercialization of sports, particularly in the form of professional clubs, is today recognized as one of the key strategies of sustainable development, playing a fundamental role in enhancing organizational efficiency and increasing social participation (Yonathan Lukar & Resky, 2024). In this regard, sports clubs not only provide a platform for sports activities but also serve as centers of social interaction, playing an important role in building social capital and group cohesion (Barbieri, 2017). From a sociological perspective, sport is recognized as a tool for promoting social cooperation and developing civic participation, and in many countries has led to social convergence and reduction of cultural divides (Ulitin, 2024). This indicates that commercialization of clubs can provide a suitable context for increasing social interactions and for the development of public sports (Chalip, 2006). Despite its economic dimension, the commercialization of sport extends far beyond financial outcomes, producing notable cultural and national identity impacts. In numerous contexts, sporting achievements and club symbols function as cultural assets that reinforce collective pride and enhance social cohesion (Liu, 2006). This influence becomes particularly significant in developing countries, where sport serves as a powerful instrument for reproducing and consolidating national identity (Houlihan, 1997). Moreover, large-scale sporting events frequently operate as venues for displaying national symbols and fostering social unity, contributing to the production of symbolic and cultural capital (Wang et al., 2025). These insights reveal that commercialization of sports clubs, while generating economic returns, simultaneously fulfills a strategic cultural role by strengthening identity and cohesion (Jaksa, 2011).

Parallel to cultural implications, the economic consequences of commercialization are substantial. Professional sports clubs stimulate both local and national economies by generating employment opportunities and developing complementary business activities (Silveira Pérez et al., 2023). For countries such as Iraq, where strengthening the sports economy and creating sustainable job markets are urgent priorities, this dimension is particularly critical (He, 2018). The integration of public and private sector resources into commercialization not only amplifies investment but also establishes a foundation for long-term economic stability (Vamplew, 2023). The sports industry and its associated commercial practices have thus emerged as drivers of macroeconomic growth in contemporary societies (Kharchenko & Liu, 2021). However, scholars also caution that the commercialization of sport interacts with nationalism in complex ways, sometimes reinforcing it and at other times undermining it, depending largely on governance systems (Şahin et al., 2010).

In various studies, it has been emphasized that growth of the sports industry, alongside its social effects, also contributes to the improvement of macroeconomic indicators and sustainable investment development (Dong & Zhang, 2018). In this respect, media and the sports advertising industry have also played a vital role in increasing revenues and expanding the economic influence of clubs (Seifart, 1984)(Naji, 2018). On the other hand, economic research has shown that sport, through redistribution of resources and increasing financial circulation, can play a role in national economic sustainability (Yang & Lin, 2022). Therefore, commercialization of Iraqi handball clubs, in addition to ensuring financial profitability of clubs, can also strengthen the national economy.

Beyond social, cultural, and economic dimensions, managerial outcomes form another critical facet of commercialization. Professionalization of sports management, adoption of advanced administrative systems, and reinforcement of professional standards significantly enhance organizational efficiency in clubs (Tošić, 2023)(Ahmed Askar et al., 2024). This transition simultaneously provides the foundation for innovation in sports activities and the development of novel services (Schwarz, 2010). Evidence further suggests that commercialization combined with effective marketing strategies strengthens strategic decision-making and expands opportunities for innovation (Smith et al., 2012)(Dhiya et al., 2024). Under such conditions, commercialized clubs function not only as athletic institutions but also as arenas for entrepreneurship and innovation in the sports sector (Ratten, 2011).

The application of modern analytical tools, including data-driven commercialization strategies, has been shown to improve both financial outcomes and macro-level decision-making capacity within sports organizations (Bouchet et al., 2020). These practices contribute to long-term organizational resilience and competitive advantage (Metelski, 2023)(Neamah AL-Jadaan et al., 2024). Moreover, comparative international experiences indicate that commercialization enhances flexibility, innovation, and the evolution of managerial models, thereby fostering sustainable growth at the macro level (Leroux & Dalla Pria, 2024). In this respect, developing clubs under a commercialization framework supports not only revenue diversification but also the institutionalization of professional standards in sports management (Ciomaga & Kent, 2015).

Consequently, the commercialization of Iraqi handball clubs should be conceptualized as a multidimensional process with significant social, cultural, economic, and managerial implications. While commercialization holds the potential to boost social participation, fortify national identity, and generate economic growth, it also creates new managerial challenges and

opportunities. The absence of structured commercialization strategies has left Iraqi handball clubs financially stagnant, organizationally fragile, and socially underleveraged. Nonetheless, international evidence demonstrates that when tailored to local conditions, commercialization can act as a catalyst for economic development, social integration, and managerial innovation. Thus, Iraqi handball clubs currently face a dual reality of “potential versus stagnation”: on one hand, possessing considerable cultural and social capital, yet on the other, struggling to mobilize these assets in the absence of commercialization mechanisms. This research is essential to provide, through analysis of the consequences of handball commercialization in Iraq, a comprehensive framework adapted to local realities that can prepare the path for sustainable development of this sport discipline. Accordingly, the most important research question is: What are the consequences of commercialization of handball clubs in Iraq?

Methodology:

To address these gaps, this research employed a qualitative and exploratory methodology, seeking to identify and interpret the consequences of commercialization within Iraqi handball clubs. The research method was grounded theory with Strauss and Corbin’s systematic approach, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with experts and specialists in the handball discipline. Sampling was purposive and convenient and continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

The data analysis process was carried out using inductive coding in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. In the course of this analysis, the consequences were identified and introduced. Data were successively transformed into open codes (statements), axial codes (themes), and finally into main categories.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees in Interviews

Index	Characteristics	number	Organizational Role and Position Number	number
Gender	Male	15	Executive	4
	Female	3	Director and Club Manager	
Education Level	Bachelor's	3	Faculty Members	3
	Master's	5	Union Officials and Specialized Committees	5
	Doctorate	10		
age	Under 40 years	8	Marketing Specialists	3
	40 to 50 years	3	Players and Coaches	3
	50 to 60 years	7		
Total		18	Total	18

The number of experts participating in the research was 18, until theoretical saturation was reached through semi-structured interviews. That is, from the sixteenth interview onward, the data became repetitive, and for greater assurance, interviews were continued up to the eighteenth expert, but no new open code was added. Sampling for selecting research experts and specialists was done purposively and conveniently. Interviews with research experts were analyzed inductively with open, axial, and selective coding within the construct of consequences.

To evaluate the validity of the research, Lincoln and Guba's four proposed criteria were used: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure data reliability, the intercoder agreement method was employed; in this regard, one of the research colleagues participated in the coding process, and an acceptable percentage of agreement between the two coders was achieved.

Findings of the Research

The results from the analysis of the interviews and the synthesis of the responses confirmed by the research group, after reaching theoretical saturation, are presented in Table 2. Following Strauss and Corbin's systematic guidelines and the inductive method (part-to-whole), the main categories were extracted. At the first stage, by separating the interview texts into meaningful units at the level of sentence or paragraph, open codes were identified. Then these codes were classified within the construct of the consequences of commercialization of Iraqi handball clubs.

The findings revealed four primary consequences: (a) increase in social participation, (b) strengthening of national identity, (c) economic growth, and (d) managerial consequences.

Table 2: Coding of Interviews in the Consequences Construct

Selective Code	Axial Codes:	Open Codes
Increase in social participation	Social dynamism	Establishment of neighborhood-based fan clubs to facilitate social interactions
		Recruitment of volunteers in event management and club-related social services
		Improving interaction with local audiences
		Increasing the popularity and interest of fans in handball in Iraq
	Promotion of public sports	Establishment of free educational academies in deprived areas for grassroots development
		Development of sports facilities
		Creating school leagues supported by clubs to reduce juvenile delinquency
	Sports symbolization	Use of national colors and slogans in the design of uniforms and stadiums

Strengthening of national identity		Turning national players into cultural ambassadors in the media
	Collective pride	Holding inter-ethnic competitions with the participation of Iraq's diverse ethnic groups
		Teams composed of players from different provinces to strengthen national solidarity
		Expanding the scope of Iraq's championship competitions and achieving international successes
		Designing professional brand semiotics (logo, colors, slogans)
Economic growth	Job creation	Hiring local workers in club management, maintenance, and marketing departments
		Boosting surrounding or indirect jobs (hospitality, transportation, food industries) during events
	Sustainable income generation	Launching clothing and handball equipment production lines under club brands
		Increasing financial revenues
		Increasing financial sponsorships
		Attracting business partners
		Growth of the digital market
		Improving contractual opportunities for international competitions
		Improving marketing campaigns
Managerial consequences	Professionalization of management	Improving governance structures
		Recruiting specialized managers
		Improving professional club management
		Developing women's handball
	Development of innovation	Expansion of new services
		Increasing demand for diversified services
		Significant growth in sectors such as technology and e-learning

		More use of artificial intelligence in data analysis to study fan behavior
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Conclusion:

Among these, increased social participation emerged as a pivotal outcome. This category, encompassing social dynamism and the promotion of public sports, demonstrates that commercialization of Iraqi handball clubs can decisively enhance community interaction and collective health. Expanding opportunities through group events and local initiatives not only boosts physical activity levels but also cultivates a sense of belonging, cohesion, and strengthened social capital (Yonathan Lukar & Resky, 2024; Barbieri, 2017; Ulitin, 2024). Prior research emphasizes that public sports initiatives are particularly effective for advancing social cooperation and civic engagement (Chalip, 2006; Ciomaga & Kent, 2015).

The findings further underscore the role of strengthening national identity national identity as another major consequence. Club achievements and sports symbols act as cultural mechanisms for building collective pride and fostering cohesion (Liu, 2006; Houlihan, 1997). The organization of national and international sporting events provides tangible opportunities for displaying national symbols and deepening unity, thereby strengthening the sense of national belonging among citizens (Wang et al., 2025; Jaksa, 2011). Sport, in this context, emerges not only as a cultural and social phenomenon but also as an integral component of public policy for promoting unity and solidarity (Şahin et al., 2010)(Hbeeb Abass, 2020). Hence, commercialization can be understood as a strategic instrument for nation-building in addition to its financial aspects.

Economic growth was also identified as a key consequence, encompassing job creation and the generation of stable income streams. The commercial expansion of clubs fosters local and national economic development by creating employment opportunities and attracting diverse investments, thereby ensuring sustainable and predictable revenue flows (Silveira Pérez et al., 2023; He, 2018). Integration of private and public sectors in the commercialization process increases economic capacities and provides the necessary foundation for sustainable infrastructure development (Vamplew, 2023; Kharchenko & Liu, 2021). Moreover, scientific evidence shows that the sports industry, by redistributing resources, enhancing investments, and increasing employment, is one of the main drivers of economic growth (Dong & Zhang,

2018; Seifart, 1984; Yang & Lin, 2022). Thus, commercialization of Iraqi handball clubs can simultaneously ensure financial profitability of clubs and national economic growth.

Finally, findings indicated that managerial consequences of commercialization include professionalization of management and development of innovation. Adopting professional management practices in clubs can lead to higher organizational efficiency, better resource productivity, and enhanced innovation in sports services and products (Tošić, 2023; Vamplew, 2023). Previous studies indicate that synergy between professional management and sports marketing improves decision-making processes, increases flexibility, and creates innovative opportunities in clubs (Schwarz, 2010; Smith et al., 2012). Finally, managerial consequences emerged as a central dimension. Commercialization grounded in modern management principles provides an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and the application of business analytics, both of which improve financial performance and strategic decision-making (Ratten, 2011; Bouchet et al., 2020). This progression raises professional standards, enhances innovation capacity, and secures long-term organizational sustainability (Metelski, 2023; Leroux & Dalla Pria, 2024; Ciomaga & Kent, 2015).

In light of these findings, it is recommended that Iraqi handball clubs adopt local and regional engagement strategies—including school leagues, community tournaments, and sports festivals—to broaden access and encourage participation across diverse segments of society (Jassim et al., n.d.; Saad & Haider, 2020). Such initiatives would operationalize the social and cultural potential of commercialization while simultaneously supporting economic and managerial development. Sports policymakers should draft programs to reduce the cost of access to public sports (discount cards, financial support for low-income groups) to increase public participation. Using digital media and social networks to launch social campaigns aiming to encourage families to take part in handball club sports activities should be expanded. These measures can strengthen social capital and collective belonging in society and improve civic participation.

Considering that the findings showed sports symbolization and collective pride as important consequences of commercialization, it is recommended that Iraqi handball clubs in their marketing processes use national symbols, colors, and values so that club brands are linked with national identity (Hadar & Ali, 2021; Haider & Saad, 2021). Hosting international events and regional or Asian championships can showcase Iraq's sporting and national capacities. National media should capitalize on the successes of handball clubs as tools to strengthen

national pride and tell inspiring stories of players and teams. These strategies will make handball recognized not only as a sport but also as a tool for social unity and national cohesion. Based on the results which identified economic growth through job creation and sustainable revenue generation, it is suggested that clubs move towards creating diversified revenue models such as ticket sales, broadcasting rights, sponsorships, sports merchandise sales, and digital marketing. The Iraqi government should provide tax incentives and credit facilities to encourage the private sector to invest in handball clubs. Establishing a sports ecosystem around clubs, including sports tourism, fan shops, and side activities (festivals, exhibitions), can help ensure economic sustainability of clubs. These measures will not only secure financial resources for clubs but also stimulate the local economy and increase employment.

The findings indicated that commercialization can lead to professionalization of management and the development of innovation. Therefore, it is recommended to design and implement special training programs for sports managers in areas such as commercial management, sports marketing, financial management, and innovation. Creation of a performance evaluation system for club managers based on competence and innovation criteria, to make decision-making processes more transparent and efficient. Encourage clubs to pursue sports entrepreneurship by supporting innovative projects in digital marketing, sports data analysis, and fan technologies. Strengthening cooperation between universities and sports clubs for transferring managerial knowledge and scientific innovations in the field of sports. These solutions will enhance the professionalism of club management, increase resource productivity, and improve strategic decision-making.

In general, it can be concluded that commercialization of Iraqi handball clubs is a multidimensional process that simultaneously produces social, cultural, economic, and managerial impacts. This approach, by increasing social participation, strengthening national identity, economic growth, and professional management, can create the foundation for sustainable development of handball and elevate its status at national and international levels.

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