



the challenges affecting the internationalization of the Persian Gulf Pro League

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 19 July 2021 Revised: 10 August 2021 Accepted: 25 August 2021 Published online: 01 November 2021</p> <p>Keywords: challenges, internationalization, micro and macro environment, Persian Gulf Pro League.</p>	<p>Background: Internationalization of sports leagues can have several benefits, including increased exposure to a global audience; improved competitiveness; and enhanced financial opportunities and cultural exchange. Overall, the internationalization of a sports league can help it grow, become more competitive, and reach a wider audience, leading to benefits for both the league and its fans.</p> <p>Aim: The main objective of this research was to develop a model of challenges affecting the internationalization of the Persian Gulf Pro League (PGPL).</p> <p>Materials and Methods: We conducted twenty in-depth interviews with expertise involved in the functioning of the PGPL who were recruited using a convenience sampling method. The data was analyzed using grounded theory method, including open, axial, and selective coding. During the analysis, we identified 85 codes that generated 49 general concepts. Subsequently, through further reviewing the concepts and their combination with each other, we identified twenty two final categories that affect the internationalization of PGPL. These categories were classified into five main dimensions: political-economic; managerial; legal; technical-marketing and socio-cultural.</p> <p>Results: According to the research findings, it is necessary for the Iranian football managers and practitioners to first address the challenges affecting the internationalization of the PGPL and then provide the required conditions and platforms with attitude-behavioral alignment to move toward internationalization.</p> <p>Conclusion: The study suggests that Iranian football managers and practitioners need to address challenges hindering the internationalization of the PGPL and provide the necessary conditions and platforms to facilitate the process. By doing so, the PGPL can expand its presence and competitiveness in the global football industry, leading to growth and success.</p>

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1. Introduction

In the age of globalization, professional sport is an international business activity. Accordingly, most professional sports leagues and clubs have embraced a market orientation [1]. Many sports brands have expanded their geographical scope and are seeking internationalization due to the global demand for sports consumption. The English Premier League, for example, has pursued playing matches abroad and is increasingly acquiring revenues from non-domestic markets. This new marketing strategy is derived from the global popularity of football in general and the English Premier League (EPL) in particular [2, 3].

The brand is the most important and strategic asset for sports organizations and sports teams in particular [4, 5, 6, 7]. In this case, internationalization is a process through which a brand an organization or company increases its involvement abroad [8]. Research shows that international brands tend to perform better than domestic brands, as they are strong in their domestic markets, have a geographical balance in sales as well as a powerful corporate brand. This makes it far more likely that only strong brands can be successful globally [9, 10].

For instance, Soroush et al. (2022) in a research entitled ‘the internationalization potential of the Persian Gulf Pro League (PGPL)’, identified 39 factors affecting the internationalization of the league and showed that crossing the current geographical borders and entering the international arena will generate more income and The league's market share will

increase, and this in itself will create brand superiority, perceived quality, and preference among fans and international consumers of the league [11].

Along with this research, Soroush et al. (2021) in another study focusing on the outcomes of the brand globalization of the Iranian football pro league’ identified 32 final categories through which The League can benefit and improve their competitive advantage in comparison with other leagues and clubs. By way of illustration, promoting sport diplomacy, peace and friendship, soft power, increasing market share and international customers, attracting international investors and sponsors, developing the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in clubs [12].

Furthuremore, Hinson et al. (2020) showed that brand equity is jointly determined by the level of brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived quality [13]. However, increasing competition in international markets require professional football clubs to clearly define their marketing strategies to improve consumer perceptions. Moreover, Maderer and Holtbrugge (2019) showed that the internationalization of football clubs mostly has a positive impact on attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty [14]. However, the relationships between internationalization activities and fan loyalty are partially moderated by the fans’ country of residence.

In addition, Baena (2019) demonstrated the global marketing strategy of Bayern Munich football club was supported by local and global football fans and shareholders alike, the latter underpinned

by increased market share and financial turnover [15].

Blumrodt and Kitchen (2015) indicated that shareholder support is necessary given their capacity to strengthen or weaken the credibility and legitimacy of internationalization [16].

Chanavat (2017) showed that attracting foreign investors from Russia and Qatar has raised awareness and promoted the Paris Saint-Germain's brand and increased its financial turnover [17]. Attracting domestic and international sponsors would be another global strategy and consequence of the growth of football brands, which has been emphasized by Chanavat (2017) as reinforces the economic power of clubs and promotes that brand in a specific geographical area [17].

Also, Richelieu (2016) studied 46 sports clubs in the United States and Europe in terms of structural, financial, and cultural properties showed that internationalization could increase revenue as well as improve brand reputation and prestige [18]. Hence, as presented, with the saturation of traditional markets in Western Europe and North America and with increasing competition between professional clubs to make more revenue and increase market shares, numerous professional football leagues and clubs have pursued internationalization [3, 15, 19].

Currently, the internationalization of the brand is of particular importance for football leagues and clubs, because an international brand can easily enter new markets through fame, be the center of media attention, and take advantage of its global image [2, 3].

Meanwhile, the PGPL and its associated clubs have a high potential for promoting the brand equity and movement

on the international path due to their historical background, Asian championships, participation in international events such as the Club World Cup and past achievements. However, due to the lack of identification of hardware and software infrastructure, as well as the absence of clear strategies for brand development and failure to take significant measures in this regard, they have not been able to raise their brand to a level beyond national borders and in the global arena. This factor is the main reason why the brand of the PGPL and Iranian football clubs has remained unknown.

On the other hand, some research has highlighted some unintended negative consequences for internationalization. For instance, Thibault (2009) states that that the migration of athletes and coaches from third world countries to developed countries and the negative effects of sports on the environment are the bitter realities of internationalization [20]. Some researchers also see this trend as the product of the efforts and costs of individuals, organizations, and low-resource countries whose benefits are sent to developed countries [21, 22, 23].

Sondaal (2013) also presented a new conceptual model called "Localism anew" and showed that the outcomes of internationalization are not the same everywhere and depend on local capacity and socio-local environment. In his research, he emphasizes the growth of international social capital in the body of English domestic leagues, along with the entry of foreign players and managers [24].

Therefore, regarding the results obtained from the current study, which were sometimes contradictory, as well as the paucity of sufficient theoretical foundations

and the existence of several ambiguities in this field, it was decided to perform research in this regard. Also, since internationalization in Iran is a new issue, and many of the world's most prestigious football leagues and clubs are currently revisiting their brand's portfolio and using international marketing strategies, our country will have to accept and implement it in the near future. Thus, formulating a model of the challenges affecting the internationalization of the PGPL would likely assist the capacity of the PGPL to do so. Accordingly, the central question of this research is, what are the challenges affecting the internationalization of the PGPL?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The 20 participants in the study included the PGPL marketing executives, the PGPL club executives and people with either industry or academic expertise in internationalization or sport marketing.

2.2. Procedure

This research involved an in-depth qualitative investigation of the challenges affecting the internationalization of the PGPL. Using a purposive sampling method, the lead author contacted various industry executives via email from his own professional network.

Semi-structured interviews were used because of their ability to allow researchers to engage in a more natural form of conversation and pursue unexpected lines of inquiry. Open-ended questions were used to facilitate rich and elaborate responses

from the interviewees. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher.

2.3. Statistic

The data from the interviews were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding [25]. In the first phase of the analysis, broad codes reflecting emergent themes were applied. Phase 2 involved revisiting the data and matching text. Axial coding then consolidated codes into interconnecting categories, creating “sub-nodes” for each overarching node. Phase Three involved “selective coding” which re-assembled the deconstructed data into a coherent narrative, enabling conclusions relevant to the overarching research aim.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, the coding process was repeated within a period of 30 days. The reliability of re-testing between the coding process by the researcher at two-time intervals was calculated using this formula:

$$\text{The percentage of reliability} = \frac{2 \times \text{Number of agreements}}{\text{Total number of codes}} \times 100$$

As depicted in Table 1, the reliability of the coding retest of the was 85%, comfortably in excess of the recommended 60% threshold [26]. Efforts to maximize the reliability (trustworthiness of the data) also included reviewing coding time, confirming the results by referring to “member checking”, and approving the research by “peer debriefing” [27].

Table 1. Coding-retest reliability

Interview title	Total number of codes	Number of agreements	Number of disagreements	Re-test reliability percentage
P1	70	32	10	91%
P3	90	35	7	77%
P4	83	33	9	79%

P5	39	18	4	92%
P7	68	30	11	88%
P9	65	29	10	89%
P11	71	31	8	87%
P12	82	33	6	80%
	568	241	65	85%

3. Results

In relation to the descriptive statistics of the present study, a total of 20 interviewees, 90% of them were male, 95% had a PhD degree, and 5% had an MSc degree. Ninety-five percent had a degree in physical education. Also, 90% of the research community had a research background in marketing. However, the analysis identified 85 codes, which were placed in 49 general concepts based on their closeness to the

subject (Table 2).

In the following, by further examining the concepts obtained, combining them and finding preliminary relationships between the concepts, 22 final categories were identified. These categories were assigned to one of five dimensions: political-economic, managerial, legal, technical-marketing and socio-cultural. Table 3 displays the results of selective coding process.

Table 2. Findings obtained from open, axial coding

Dimensions	Concepts
Political-Economic	1. The special complexity of the internationalization process in Iran
	2. Existing uncertainties and fear of change
	3. The recent political crisis and insecurity in the Middle East region
	4- Existence of hostilities between Iran and other countries in the region
	5. Political labels and different titles to exclude efficient people
	6. The extravagance of some countries
	7. Only focusing on economic resources in sports
	8. The recent economic crisis and the budget reduction of the league
	9. Low market share of football in the country
	10. Lack of financial resources
	11. The low extent of export of the league brand
	12. Adopting wrong economic policies and lack of development in the league
	13. Insisting on traditional methods in the football industry
Managerial	1. The lack of independence of the league and the influence of governments
	2. The absence of a specific trustee in the internationalization of the league
	3. Absence of specialized groups to guide programs
	4. Lack of human resources specialized in international marketing
	5. Managers' poor understanding of the brand and its internationalization
	6. Removal of capable managers at the head and body of the league
	7. Lack of managerial stability
	8. Confusion in the outside environment of football
Legal	1. Absence of comprehensive and coherent laws and regulations
	2. Failure to comply with the copyright law
	3. Not having professional contracts with players
	4. The existence of many legal cases in FIFA and AFC
	5. Paying heavy fines
	6. Failure to comply with international protocols
	7. Weakness in observing the professional principles of football
	8. Haste and indiscipline in doing things, especially setting up contracts
	9. Not having plans in the ownership of clubs

Dimensions	Concepts
Technical-marketing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of a suitable structure for the internationalization of the league 2. Absence of special processes, mechanisms and organizations for internationalization 3. Absence of international marketing specialized committees in the league 4. Weak understanding of branding 5. Sheer focusing on localization 6. Insufficient attention to other brands within the comprehensive brand of the league 7. Lack of independence of football brands in the country 8. The anonymity of the country's football brands 9. Backlogs of clubs due to non-internationalization
Socio-cultural	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Weakness in self-confidence 2. The lack of will of the upstream football organizations for internationalization 3. Unprofessional ethics in the clubs and organizations in charge of the league 4. Projection and lack of responsibility 5. Political work and marginalization 6. Negative publicity and filing 7. Fights and arguments 8. Weak communication of sports brands in the country 9. Haste in doing things 10. Various political labels and titles

Table 3. Selective coding: Identified challenges

Dimensions	Categories
Political-Economic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The complexity of the international process and existing ambiguities 2. The recent political crisis and the creation of insecurity and instability 3. The existence of a conflict between Iran and other Arab countries 4. Existing economic bottlenecks and budget insufficiency 5. The low share of the country's football market 6. Insisting on traditional methods for financing the football industry
Managerial	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Governmental or quasi-governmental nature of the country's football 2. Lack of specialized manpower in international marketing in the PGPL 3. Managers' unawareness about internationalization 4. Lack of managerial stability in the PGPL
Legal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of comprehensive and coherent rules and regulations 2. Existing legal problems (copyright, numerous cases, etc.) 3. Failure to comply with international standards and protocols 4. Ambiguity in club ownership
Technical-marketing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of proper structure for the internationalization of the PGPL 2. Lack of establishment of specialized committees of international marketing 3. Anonymity and poor identity of the PGPL and its related clubs 4. Exclusive focus on sheer localization
Socio-cultural	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of self-confidence and weak will of upstream football organizations 2. Unprofessional ethics in clubs and organizations in charge of the league 3. Failure to improve the media capacity of the league 4. The atmosphere governing the country's football (including: circumstantiality, disputes, making a case, etc.)

Figure 1 presents a broad and sequential review of challenges affecting the internationalization of the PGPL. As shown

in Figure 1, the relationship between the research dimensions is circular, which indicates overlap and interaction of the

dimensions. For the internationalization of the PGPL, the model highlights the value of

a comprehensive view of the micro and macro environment.

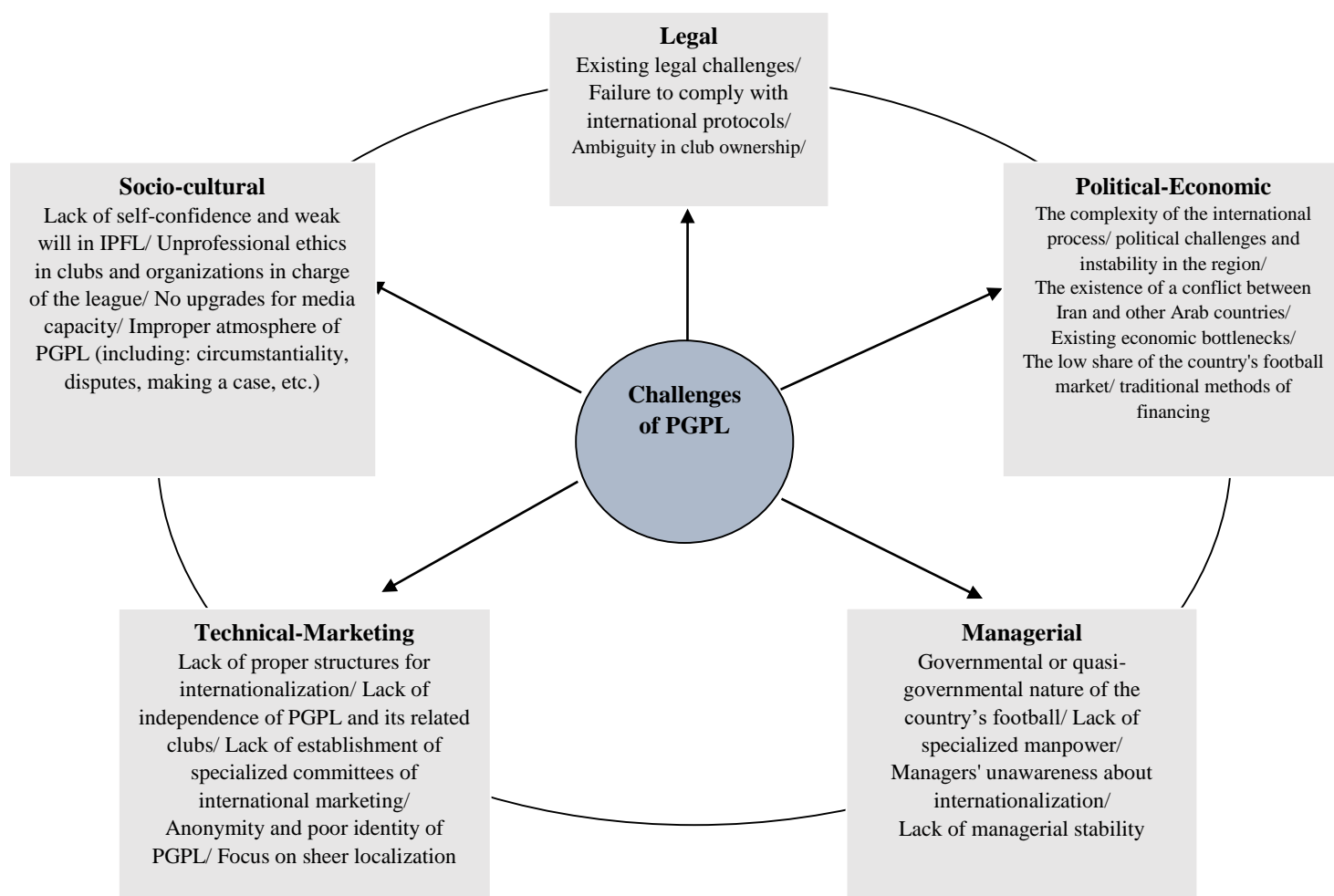


Figure 1. The model of challenges affecting the internationalization of the PGPL

4. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to formulate a model of the challenges affecting the internationalization of the Persian Gulf Pro League (PGPL). As presented earlier in the result section, during the analysis, 85 codes were distinguished, which generated 49 general concepts. Subsequently, by further reviewing the concepts and their combination with each other, 22 final categories affecting the internationalization

of PGPL were identified. These categories were classified into five dimensions: political-economic, managerial, legal, technical-marketing and socio-cultural.

The political and economic challenges identified in the present study indicated macro-level problems. The complexity of the internationalization process and the existing ambiguities, political crises, conflicts between Iran and other countries in the region, economic bottlenecks combined with ineffective policies in the

field of professional football, are constraining the internationalization of the PGPL. What is certain is that internationalization in the age of globalization has its own complexities and ambiguities. Some researchers have regarded this internationalization as a factor for growth, peace and friendship, and enhancing goodwill between and amongst nations [28, 29]. On the other hand, others view internationalization as synonymous with crisis, poverty, unequal competition, and the disappearance of weak societies [23, 30].

Sondaal (2013) emphasizes the concept of national and international social capital that can be exploited by adopting a flexible approach called "Localism anew". Therefore, it can be hoped that by providing the necessary infrastructure and arrangements, the challenges of the internationalization will be avoided and the existing local capacity will be developed to create only the expected positive outcomes [24]. It is therefore very important for the PGPL to attract specialized manpower and nurture young and creative people in the field of sports marketing. Currently, there are some specialized forces in marketing in the federation, the league organization and a number of clubs, but these forces are not organized and most of their activities are unprofessional. This part of the research results is consistent with the findings of Hinson et al. (2020) [13], Soroush et al. (2020) [31], Baena (2019) [15], Richelieu (2016) [18], Chanavat et al. (2017) [17] and Rasooli et al. (2016) [32].

In addition, the governmental or quasi-governmental nature and the dependence of football on government resources is another important challenge. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of the research

conducted by Soroush et al. (2022) [11], Soroush et al. (2021) [28], Rezaei (2015) [34], and Khabiri (2004) [33]. The state nature of football in Iran has made the managers reluctant to increase the income of the football clubs. In this regard, Soroush (2021) [28] and Rezaei et al. (2015) [34] introduced the government as the biggest obstacle to the privatization and internationalization of Iranian football. Also, FIFA rules limit an organization to owning only one club [35]. The government's ownership of several clubs is arguably a violation of FIFA statutes. Therefore, the role and relationship of the government with football clubs should be carefully re-assessed as part of an internationalization strategy.

Other challenges affecting the research phenomenon include categories such as non-compliance with brand rights (such as non-compliance with copyright, etc.) and the lack of coherent and relevant laws and regulations. In this context, Soroush et al. (2020) [31] and Rasooli et al. (2016) [32] showed that various issues at the national and especially international level are not only destructive to the credit of the PGPL, but also to the image of the Iran.

Technical and marketing challenges such as lack of proper structure, lack of specialized marketing committees, neglect of football brand development, and lack of independence were among the most important categories affecting the internationalization of the PGPL. Given the results of the interviews, managers are still inclined to use traditional methods in technical and marketing matters. Establishing a committee or at least an international marketing working group in clubs, league organization and football federation can encourage new approaches.

This part of the research results was in consistent with the research results of Hinson et al. (2020) [13], Maderer & Holtbrugge (2019) [14], Baena (2019) [15], Chanavat (2017) [17], and Rasooli et al. (2016) [32].

The PGPL is not experiencing good cultural and social conditions. The PGPL is dealing with, several issues, such as circumstantiality, unprofessional and immoral behaviours, hooliganism,, which erodes the brand of the clubs and league alike. Many researchers, including Soroush et al. (2021) [28], Naha and Hassan (2018) [36], Auweele et al. (2015) [37], and Tomlinson (2014) [38], write of the new ethical and social challenges in football and other sports and stated that ethical standards should be based on new priorities and responsibilities to prevent potential abuses. The role of the media in promoting ethical behaviours is also important [39].

In general, internationalization and market orientation is a phenomenon that most leagues and football clubs around the world have contemplated. According to the research evidence and the consensus of most interviewees, it is necessary for the PGPL's stakeholders to overcome the political-economic, managerial, legal, technical-marketing and socio-cultural challenges. Formulating specific strategy for internationalization is a necessary stage on the path toward internationalization.

Despite the insights we offer, our study was not without limitations. The limitations of the present studies naturally include non-random and purposeful selection of the research experts as well as difficulty in generalizability. The results contribute to theorizing about internationalization constraints but cannot be generalized, given the exclusive focus on the PGPL. Future

studies of other professional sports leagues, especially from what might be regarding as developing economies, are needed to validate and generalize our findings. Based on the findings of this research, the following strategies are suggested:

The political-economic dimension: Maximum use of sports diplomacy in order to remove hostility, resolve knots and political problems with other countries; Creating a change and fostering the discourse of internationalization at the highest political levels of the country; Support of the government, politicians and upper institutions of the PGPL clubs and providing subsidies; maximum privatization of the federation, league organization and clubs of the PGPL; Identifying new target markets in the countries of the region and the target community; Applying new methods in order to finance and generate optimal income in the league; Creating financial transparency in the PGPL.

Managerial dimension: Designing a strategic plan for the global recovery of the PGPL; Using the transition strategy for the internationalization of the league brand; Establishing a specialized international marketing department in the PGPL; Employing capable, creative and up-to-date managers in the league; Obtaining international seats by referees, trainers and famous people; following the example of the world's top leagues and clubs; Outsourcing in order to downsize and increase quality in the league.

Legal dimension: Drafting and ratifying the rules and facilitating regulations for the internationalization of the league; Compliance with international standards, procedures and protocols; adherence to specific professional

principles in the PGPL; Dealing with existing legal gaps and solving them; Asserting the rights of football (for example: TV right, copy right, etc.)

Technical and marketing dimension:

Promoting of technical knowledge, quality of games and services of the league at the international level; Designing branding factors to differentiate and promote awareness of the league brand; Using new information and communication technologies for the internationalization of the league; maximum use of virtual space (development of digital marketing and online marketing); Attendance and success in major and international football events; Preparing of today's advanced stadiums; updating existing facilities; recruiting and using prominent international players; attracting and using prominent international coaches and referees; strengthening and cultivating legionnaires; attention to grassroot and talent identification in different categories; setting up friendly games, summer and off-season tours in the countries of the region and the target community.

Socio-cultural dimension: Improving media capacity; development of international communication; use of appropriate cultural symbols and slogans; team building and creating a common language with elites and academics; focusing on the interests of all stakeholders, especially fans and spectators; exploitation of football in order to create solidarity, social capital, fight against racial discrimination and hooliganism; utilizing women's football as much as possible and creating grounds for their attendance in stadiums; special attention to Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) in the PGPL.

5. Conclusion

The study suggests that Iranian football managers and practitioners need to address challenges hindering the internationalization of the PGPL and provide the necessary conditions and platforms to facilitate the process. By doing so, the PGPL can expand its presence and competitiveness in the global football industry, leading to growth and success.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages; they were also assured about the confidentiality of their information. Moreover, they were allowed to leave the study whenever they want, and if desired, the results of the research would be available to them.

The research was conducted based on the Helsinki Declaration.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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