

Phenomenological Analysis of the Key Factors in Foreign Player Recruitment in Iranian Professional Football Clubs

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Abstract

Purpose: Player recruitment significantly impacts a football team's performance and general success. Due to the economic context, this aspect of management has grown in importance to be a delicate process for football clubs in Iran, especially in the case of signing foreign players. This study aims to identify the key factors in the process of foreign player recruitment in Iranian professional football clubs to mitigate the potential risks and enhance the odds of success.

Methods: The present study is qualitative in nature, and the applied methodology is Phenomenological Analysis. The statistical population for this research consists of 7 experts who have held positions in coaching or administrative capacities within Iranian professional football clubs. Semi-constructed interviews were used as a collection tool. Concepts of credibility, confirmability, and transferability were also incorporated to verify validity.

Results: The results indicate that the factors professional football clubs need to consider in foreign player recruitment consist of 8 main themes and 27 sub-themes, divided into two club-related and player-related categories. The club-related themes include strategic factors and coaching factors. The player-related themes include physical, technical, contractual, psychological, statistical, and social factors.

Conclusion: The relevant managers' consideration of these factors in the recruitment process, aids the clubs through assessment of the process from a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective to mitigate the risks and increase the likelihood of improving the sporting and financial performance of the club.

Keywords: Soccer; Football Clubs; Sporting Management; Risk Management.

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Introduction

With the rise of competitiveness and globalization in football, this sport is currently being treated as an industry and the professional football clubs operating within this system seek novel and innovative approaches to gain advantage over their rivals. In this climate, the stakeholders of football clubs have come to recognize that this business should be managed professionally, and this would involve all of the functions of management (Coskun et al., 2021). This recognition has culminated in an urgency to abandon the traditional management models and follow new methods (Parnell et al., 2022), driving clubs toward the adoption of effective modern management practices. Samur (2017) asserts that in order to be successful in the professional section, effective management is essential for clubs in every aspect to navigate today's competitive and high-tech environment and generate the necessary revenue for long-term success. One of the effective contemporary concepts that is deemed suitable and is widely implemented by clubs around the globe is the cohesive management concept. This concept states that football clubs are characterized by their far-reaching feature, and operate in an extremely competitive reality, where success depends on the commitment of highly diverse talents from all over the world (Zgrzywa-Ziemak et al., 2024). This highlights the prerequisite for success in football in the form of an impeccable management structure that manages to build a cohesive squad based on a diverse range of players from different backgrounds. This process of "building" is closely tied to an important aspect of management called player recruitment. For professional football clubs, player recruitment decisions account for the most important strategic decisions taken because playing talent is a key source of sustainable competitive advantage (Rossi et al., 2016). Furthermore, player recruitment impacts a football team's performance and eventual success, as effective recruitment improves the team and is a possible

source of revenue in the future (Datta & Rudra, 2022; Lawlor et al., 2021; Jafari et al., 2023). In regard to internal club affairs, decision-making protocols employed by club administrators and head coaches' intuitive assessments of a player's potential and fit within the team typically co-exist within football clubs in the player recruitment process (Schlesinger et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2021). Within the different realms of player recruitment, one popular and controversial sector is foreign player recruitment. Cigerci et al. (2023) argue that foreign players increase the quality of their teams and their leagues in a significant way. Royuela & Gasquez (2018) believe that teams with foreign players perform better internationally and continentally but this superiority fades within their respective leagues' context. Ivanov (2020) has also revealed the positive impact of foreign players on talent development in Bulgaria. Additionally, Schokkaert (2016) stresses the importance of contextual factors in foreign player recruitment and believes that it is highly influenced by a country's economic development. It is evident that the process of player recruitment is a significant segment of management and its importance must naturally push decision-makers towards risk management. The ineffective form of player recruitment may result in significant costs in terms of performances and results, as well as salaries and transfer fees, limiting the potential return on investment (ROI) for clubs (Lawlor et al., 2021). Hence, nowadays European football clubs seek to minimize the risks of player recruitment by investing heavily in scouting and identifying suitable players for their objectives (Singh & Suguna, 2023). Furthermore, even a new specialized role has emerged within the structure of professional football clubs, which is known as Sporting Director, to specifically address the risk management in the process of player recruitment (Parnell et al., 2021). These evolutions stress the delicacy and the

importance of effective recruitment in managing sporting performance.

Earlier studies aimed to identify ways to improve talent identification and player recruitment in football. Larkin et al. (2020) conducted an academic investigation to understand the role of scouts in Australian football talent identification, using interviews and thematic analysis. The study revealed four primary themes of recruiter characteristics, processes and practices, assessment methods, and selection criteria. Nooraini et al. (2024) conducted a SLR to identify the key factors influencing talent development in youth football. This work revealed seven key factors that impact talent development. These factors included psychological, social, environmental, biological, educational, physical, and mental toughness and resilience. Ünsoy (2022) developed a decision-making framework for player recruitment in European football clubs using value-focused thinking and identified five aspects of player characteristics regarding technical performance, physical performance, age, contract type, and playing regulations as key in player recruitment. Larkin & O'Connor (2017) implemented a modified delphi method and through interviews and questionnaires with 20 youth technical directors and coaches, revealed a hierarchy of important attributes for under 13 years of age talent identification. This hierarchy included technical, tactical, psychological, physiological, anthropometrical, and sociological attributes.

In Iran, Professional football clubs have showed an evident inclination to recruit foreign players in the previous years to satisfy the supporters and add foreign quality to their squad. With the growing rate of inflation in Iran and the abysmal background of Iranian football clubs in financial stability (Emamifar et al., 2023), Iranian managers are compelled to invest more prudently in foreign talent. However, Iranian football clubs have been embroiled in constant controversy in regard to

signing foreign players and have faced numerous significant failures. Many cases of foreign recruitment have failed to bear sporting benefits and even resulted in substantial financial damages. One prominent example is Kevin Constant, a high-profile player whose contract was terminated just one month after his arrival due to medical issues and managerial oversight, costing Tractor SC a substantial \$820,000 in fines ("Errors lead to \$820k fine," 2021). The underlying causes of these foreign recruitment failures vary. Cultural aspects, the lack of stability in management, the challenges posed by legal issues and existing regulations, the lack of utilization of contemporary knowledge in sports management and club administration, a high reliance on external advice such as that provided by agents, and the impact of state funding coupled with the absence of professional expertise among government-appointed managers are some factors that may play a role in the problem (Emamifar et al., 2023; Najafi et al., 2023). In this climate, a task which is meant to assist active clubs within the Iranian football structure has frequently proven detrimental in various cases across various dimensions. Furthermore, despite being a challenging aspect of management, previous studies have showed a low tendency to investigate foreign player recruitment and its key factors in Iranian football, leaving this specific topic underexplored. As a result, the authors identified a research gap within the existing body of literature. This study aims to identify key factors of foreign player recruitment in Iranian football using an experience-based method.

Identifying the key factors in foreign player recruitment can accustom Iranian professional football clubs to the key elements of success in this area. With the existence of causes of ineffective foreign recruitment previously discussed in this paper, comprehending the key factors involved in this process is critical. Understanding these factors enables clubs to

limit the risks pertinent to foreign player recruitment, which in return can enhance the odds of success. This potential success may bring about various significant benefits to the clubs and the development of the professional sector through the addition of competitive advantage and technical quality to the context. Additionally, instances such as the free recruitment of Mame Thiam, which provided Esteghlal FC with both a competitive edge and a financial profit when he was subsequently transferred to another club for \$307,000 (Transfermarkt, n.d.), illustrate that effective recruitment may also yield substantial economic profits. Therefore, by identifying the key factors football clubs need to consider in the foreign recruitment process, clubs may be able to transform a very challenging and high-risk process into a constructive tool to enhance sporting and financial performance. Thus, the present study aims to answer the following question: What key factors should Iranian professional football clubs consider in the foreign player recruitment process?

Materials and methods

The current field research was qualitative in nature and the used qualitative method was phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological analysis is a research methodology that explores how individuals make sense of their experiences of a specific phenomenon. It delves into individuals' perceptions, offering insights into human consciousness and its intricate connection with the environment in management research and it does that by focusing on understanding individuals' subjective experiences through deep exploration, interactive listening, and reliance on participants' own words and concepts (Taylor et al., 2023). The subject of research required incredible accuracy and phenomenological analysis could yield the desired level. The statistical population in this research was 7 experts in the sport of football. As highlighted in the work of Sarfo et al.

(2021), the use of this specific number of participants in phenomenological research is supported by previous studies (Morse, 1995; Creswell, 2013). Additionally, earlier studies also employed 7 participants in their phenomenological analysis (Ritanti et al., 2017; Aquino-Russell, 2006). All 7 participants of this research had either been part of the coaching (Head coach, coach, analyst, etc.) or the administrative staff (Sports Manager, President, etc.) of a professional football club and this was the key criterion for their participation in the research. The intention to include people with coaching and administrative experiences was to add a variety of opinions and gain perspective of the two complementary sides in the process of player recruitment in professional football clubs. Therefore, the participants were chosen via purposive sampling and a homogenous approach, considering diversity at the same time. Interviews were conducted until a state of theoretical saturation was reached.

The data collection tool in this research was semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted in person or through online platforms, depending on the participants' preferences. The questions involved in the interview process were flexible in essence and the contents included introductory, exploratory, contextual, and reflective questions. In order to verify the validity, the concepts of credibility, confirmability, and transferability were used. For this purpose, the credibility was checked by eight experts of sports management. Also, two coders codified several interview samples to ensure a lack of contradictions. To evaluate transferability, the research findings were consulted with three experts who had not participated in the study. Also, to verify confirmability, all interviews were recorded and reviewed when necessary. The reliability of the qualitative data was evaluated by a specialized committee through inter-coder reliability checks, assessment of the coding process, and involvement in the development

and execution of the interview protocols. In order to analyze the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used which is one of the most efficient methods in qualitative data analysis, especially in phenomenological research. This combination allows for exploring participants' lived experiences (phenomenological analysis) and identifying recurring patterns or themes within those experiences (thematic analysis). After finalization of the analysis, 8 main themes and 27 sub-themes were identified.

Results

The demographic characteristics of research

participants are presented in Table 1. The demographic characteristics of research participants showed that all the participants were male and this is justified by the lack of involvement of women in executive and coaching capacities in male professional football in Iran. Participants who were above 50 years of age had the highest frequency percentage (57.1%) in this research which validates the prevalence of experience in the collected data. People with coaching experience also had the highest frequency percentage (57.1%) in comparison to people with administrative experience (42.8%).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants

| Demographic variables | frequency | percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 0 | 0% |
| Male | 7 | 100% |
| Total | 7 | 100% |
| Age Range | | |
| Under 35 | 1 | 14.3% |
| 35-50 | 2 | 28.6% |
| Above 50 | 4 | 57.1% |
| Total | 7 | 100% |
| Working Background | | |
| Administrative Staff | 3 | 42.9% |
| Coaching Staff | 4 | 57.1% |
| Total | 7 | 100% |

The thematic analysis revealed 8 main themes and 27 sub-themes within the qualitative data. These 8 main themes were subsequently divided into two categories of Club-related themes (8 sub-themes) and Player-related

themes (19 sub-themes). The club-related themes and their associated sub-themes are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2. Club-related themes

| Main Themes | Sub-themes | Participants Involved |
|--------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Strategic factors | The financial capability of the club | P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7 |
| | Reputation and prestige of the club | P1, P2, P5, P6 |
| | Club's short-term and long-term objectives | P2, P3, P5, P6 |
| | Culture of the club | P2, P5, P6, P7 |

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Coaching factors | The specific position in need of improvement | P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7 |
| | Game philosophy of the coach | P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7 |
| | The specific tactical role required in the game plan/philosophy | P1, P3, P4, P6, P7 |
| | The distinctive quality required in the game plan/philosophy | P1, P3, P4, P7 |

Club-related themes involve crucial factors that must be initially considered within a football club to determine a clear basic strategy for foreign player recruitment. They include two main themes; Strategic factors and Coaching factors.

Strategic factors are derived from the history, culture, and core capacities of a professional football club. In this regard, Participant 5 emphasized the importance of reputation alignment:

The signing's reputation must be aligned with the reputation and prestige of the club. Although I believe talent is the most important aspect, the player's reputation should be considered too.

Participant 6 pointed out the importance of financial capacity:

[..] and it's needless to say the most important factor is the financial capacity of the club because the whole operation is fundamentally based on that.

Participant 2 highlighted the objectives of the clubs' prominence:

In my experience, the first order of business must be the evaluation of the long-term and short-term objectives of the club. Is the signing a short-term replacement for an injured player or a more provident outlook should be involved? Are we an organization that prioritizes selling their player for profit or an organization that craves quality with immediate impact?

Participant 5 stressed the significance of clubs' culture:

The culture of the club impacts the process because some clubs are traditionally more focused on giving opportunities to local talents and this affects the inclination to sign a foreign player. There is a possibility that the fans value this tradition like Athletic Bilbao fans do in Spain.

Coaching factors include the coach's input and requirements which consist one of the most important segments of the process because the whole operation is designed to satisfy the coaches' desires. Participant 4 highlighted the topic of required distinctive quality:

What distinctive quality is lacking in the team and game plan? That must be an integral segment of the process as well because some coaches may want to emphasize, for example, pin-point crossing and they may need someone specific to achieve that.

Participant 3 discussed the coach's philosophy and its significance:

The philosophy of the coach must dictate the process because the player is going to be played based on that philosophy. For example, if the coach tends to implement high-press and employ intense counter-press, the player's qualities should be in total compliance with that. He should possess the physical and mental qualities to fit in that philosophy.

Participant 7 mentioned the tactical aspects:

In addition to the targeted position, the required tactical role is vital to the eventual success of the operation. The role and the position are two different concepts. [...] Does the coach need a Box-to-Box midfielder [a type of midfielder who supports offensive and defensive moves] or a Regista [a type of defensive midfielder who operates in deep positions to orchestrate offensive moves]? Because they are very

different and it's rather a specialized topic that the sporting director must be acquainted with.

Player-related themes formed a second category, which center around individual factors of the player that must be considered by the clubs. The player-related themes and their associated sub-themes are shown below in Table 3.

Table 3. Player-related Themes.

| Main Themes | Sub-themes | Participant Code |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Physical factors | Height | P1, P3, P4, P6, P7 |
| | Medical History | P2, P3, P4, P7 |
| | Age | P2, P4, P5, P7 |
| | Fitness | P2, P4, P5, P6, P7 |
| Technical factors | Distinctive Strengths | P2, P3, P4, P5, P7 |
| | Distinctive Weaknesses | P3, P4, P5, P7 |
| | Positional versatility | P1, P3, P4, P6, P7 |
| | Wage demand | P2, P4, P5, P7 |
| Contractual factors | Length of contract demand | P2, P4, P5, P7 |
| | Provision and clause demand | P2, P4, P5, P7 |
| Psychological factors | History of conflict & controversy | P2, P3, P5, P7 |
| | Personality | P3, P4, P5, P6 |
| | International experience | P2, P4, P5, P7 |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Statistical factors | Overall career statistics | P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7 |
| | Worst season statistics | P1, P2, P5, P7 P1, P2, P5, P7 |
| | Best season statistics | |
| | Targeted statistical variable analysis | P1, P3, P5, P7 |
| Social factors | Fluent Languages | P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7 |
| | Cultural Adaptability | P1, P5, P6, P7 |

The Player-related themes essentially supplement the factors involved in the first category. This category includes 6 main themes; physical, technical, contractual, psychological, statistical, and social factors.

Physical factors aim for the physical features of players to be meticulously studied as they play a very principal role in their overall ability to perform. Participant 7 discussed the importance of height:

[...] coaches are particularly attentive about the height of the player they want because it defines the superiority in aerial duels and it is important in retaining the possession.

Participant 4 pointed out the importance of fitness:

Clubs should ensure that a player is fit enough to fulfill the objectives of the process. If the player is out of shape, then you cannot refer to his previous records and performances and it will require resources to get him to the ideal condition, which will affect the club's desired results in the short term.

Participant 3 highlighted the medical aspects and their neglected role:

You cannot believe how many clubs miss medical issues before signing a player. The injury history is the most basic and important aspect and it provides a plethora of information about how injury-prone a player is. In addition, medical history should also be examined to

ensure there is no history of any specific disease or condition that may affect the performance of that player.

The topic of age was mentioned by participant 5:

Age should be separately considered. A player's age may be key in fulfilling long-term objectives. If you sign a young player who has ticked all the boxes in the technical aspect, then you can count on selling that player for profit, which we have unfortunately rarely seen in the country. Clubs should start to pay attention to this aspect to maximize profits on promising young foreign players in the future.

Technical factors were identified throughout the interviews. Ensuring the player possesses the technical ability to meet the team's tactical and collective requirements is a very deciding factor. Participant 4 affirmed the significance of versatility:

The versatility of a player is sometimes overlooked in a short-term signing but the fact that a player has the ability to play in a different position or role can bring a lot of flexibility to the team and the coach's ideas.

Participant 3 discussed technical qualities:

The distinctive qualities of a player should be analyzed. The coach should know how to count on a player, using his distinctive strength. The same applies to the weak points and how the coach should work to conceal them in his

system. For example, a fullback who is great at crossing and dribbling can be used in offensive movements but if he has defensive weaknesses, the coach should consider that in defensive transitions.

Contractual factors were also deemed important upon analysis of the initial findings. Assessing a player's contractual demands works in proximity to strategic factors. They exist to ensure the approximate demands of the player are appropriate for the general strategies of the club. Participant 5 thoroughly discussed this aspect:

Contractual demands should be evaluated to ensure they are in line with the strategy of the club. For instance, a contract's length is important for short-term and long-term objectives. [...] Attention must be paid to wage demands with a provident outlook, as an unusually high salary might cause unrest within the squad and push other players to request higher salaries. [...] the executive managers should also be wary of the clauses both parties agree to insert into the contract. Clubs should not give too much freedom to the player in the contract and safeguard the values of the club.

To ensure reaching collective objectives set before the transfer, a club needs to also consider the **psychological qualities** of a player, and these considerations are presented in psychological factors. These factors aim to minimize the risks by exploring the psychological aspect of a player. Participant 7 affirmed the importance of international experience:

A player's experience on a national level will give you an approximate view of his quality and professionalism. The more experienced he is, the more useful he can be. Youth-level international experience might have less value but they can be exploited too.

Participant 2 mentioned professionalism and the history of controversy:

Some players, as talented as they might be, have this eagerness to follow controversy. I think every club should explore the past to ensure the professionalism of their transfer target. For instance, a club may look for previous articles about the player and his interviews. That way we can avoid having the likes of Anthony Stokes in Iran.

Participant 5 pointed out personality:

Clubs may consider the personal characteristics of the players that may influence the team. Some players possess the ability to lead others to the goal and be a role model in the locker room. Some players do not respect authority which can be a problem in the future. [...] Information about the personality traits and mindset of the players can be particularly beneficial in long-term projections.

Statistical factors can assist clubs with limited scouting budgets to assess players through various perspectives. This may help the clubs to reach a more calculated decision regarding foreign player recruitment, since the knowledge about foreign players may be inadequate internally. Participant 5 emphasized on the overall importance of data and statistics:

It is good to highlight the overall, the best, and the worst season a player has had in his career statistically in separate segments to get a complete picture in terms of performance. Overall stats may provide a generalized depiction. Through the analysis of the worst season of a player, you may understand the circumstances in which a player failed to perform adequately in a specific period to avoid facing the same issues in your club. The best season may also provide guidelines to properly use a player.

Participant 3 discussed targeted statistical variable analysis:

Targeting and analyzing the statistical variables that are in close pertinence to the tactical and collective requirements of the coach is a very

useful way of determining how compatible a player is for a professional football club. For example, if the coach wants someone skilled in terms of interceptions in the defensive third, then the club can analyze data to target a player who has had a high success rate in interception variables in the past.

Social factors were also found to be crucial. Social aspects of a player must be closely reviewed to assess that player's social qualities. Participant 4 pointed out the communicational skills:

Clubs must ensure the transfer target speaks at least the English language to guarantee that there are not going to be any communication problems for the player and the rest of the team. Communication is integral to team bonding and integration.

Participant 1 highlighted the cultural adaptability:

I think players should be assessed in terms of cultural adaptability. That is basically how they react to the possible cultural shock they would be exposed to. For instance, Players born in Arab countries or players who have played in a Muslim country may cope better with the cultural shock. Ricardo Alves played in Azerbaijan before arriving in Iran and he has performed very well in Tractor Sazi. It is fair to say he has coped well with the change of culture.

Discussion

Foreign player recruitment can be a complicated process and with the general economic context of the Iranian football, there is no room for miscalculation. Successful player recruitment is crucial for generating revenue, funding future projects, and maintaining financial stability, while recruitment failures can jeopardize a club's financial health and fan base support (Unsoy, 2022). In this climate, identifying the key factors influencing effective foreign player

recruitment is crucial to mitigate risks and increase the odds of sporting and financial success. These considerations convinced the authors to conduct the present study.

This study aimed to identify key factors of foreign player recruitment that Iranian football clubs need to consider through the phenomenological analysis method. In regard to the research question, the findings revealed a diverse range of factors that must be carefully examined during the recruitment process to mitigate risks and enhance the odds of success. Due to the existence of this range, the 8 themes identified within the qualitative data were categorized into two general categories of Club-related themes and Player-related themes to add clarity to the significance of the findings. The involved factors within these themes (strategic, coaching, physical, psychological, contractual, technical, statistical, and social) point out the extremely delicate nature of the process, and the accuracy and attention it requires to be a successful operation.

Within the context of Club-related themes, the findings are in line with the results of previous studies (Tošić, 2023; Zhang, 2024; Esin 2024; Lethole et al., 2024). Lethole et al. (2024) pointed out that coaching factors provide a general direction of requirements to be sought, and the input and needs of the head coach may be perceived as the basis of player recruitment, which supports the findings pertaining to the importance of coaching factors. Within the realm of Player-related themes, the findings are also consistent with the earlier studies (Sauvigne & Miller, 2013; Suchomel et al., 2016; Modric et al., 2022; Slaidins & Fernate, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020; Forcher et al., 2022; Berri et al., 2024; Giancaspro, 2018; McIntosh & Robertson, 2023; Musculus & Lobinger, 2018; Ünsoy, 2022; Lovin et al., 2023; Weidmann & Deming, 2020). Modric et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of physical factors through their impact on tactical and technical performance in high-level matches,

which points out the critical role of these factors within performance-based goals. Forcher et al. (2022) focused on the various technical skills required for different positional roles, highlighting the significance of a player's versatility and the technical factors. The findings pertaining to the importance of psychological factors are supported by Musculus & Lobinger (2018). In this study, disciplinary and mental factors guide managers and decision-makers in the analysis of data to assess the previous behavioral pattern of the recruitment targets. Ünsoy (2022) discussed that effective decision-making in football involves statistical analysis, underlining the need for clubs to utilize data analytics and modeling for talent identification, which supports the consistency of results regarding statistical factors.

The findings offer guidance to Iranian football clubs and relevant managers on mitigating the risks associated with a process that has proven detrimental in many cases in recent years. By considering the factors identified in this study, decision-makers can assess the foreign player recruitment process from a comprehensive, multifaceted perspective, increasing the odds of improving sporting and financial performance. In terms of theoretical contribution, this study addresses a gap in the existing literature on foreign player recruitment by studying this topic within the underexplored context of Iranian football.

While this study provides valuable insights into the foreign player recruitment process in Iranian football, it is important to recognize a limitation that could affect the generalizability and application of the findings to other contexts. During the process of interviews, two participants (P2, P7) pointed out the inadequate marketing infrastructure in professional football in Iran and similarly believed that the marketing aim is occasionally an influential factor in player recruitment in the world of football. For instance, Pau FC's signing of

Vietnamese player Nguyễn Quang Hải boosted the club's visibility in South Asia and led to a surge in merchandise sales (“‘Vietnamese Messi’ Close to Moving to Ligue 2 Side Pau,” 2022). Iranian football lacks the required infrastructure to take advantage of most marketing opportunities (e.g., merchandise sales), hence this factor cannot be studied thoroughly in research within the context of Iranian football.

The authors recommend clubs active within the Iranian professional football structure to consider the findings in the foreign player recruitment process to mitigate the risks, and increase the likelihood of improving sporting and financial performance. Finally, in order to cover the limitation identified in this study and improve the marketing sector of Iranian football, the authors also invite researchers and future works to focus on developing effective methods to create infrastructure for marketing avenues for Iranian professional football clubs to capitalize on their assets and maximize financial gains.

Conclusion

Foreign player recruitment provides a significant competitive advantage and enhances a squad's overall quality. Due to the economic context, foreign player recruitment has become a delicate task for the relevant managers of Iranian professional football clubs. Thus, this study aimed to identify key factors of foreign player recruitment that football clubs need to consider using the phenomenological analysis method. The findings of this study indicate that the factors professional football clubs need to consider in foreign player recruitment consist of 8 main themes and 27 sub-themes, divided into two club-related and player-related categories. The club-related main themes include strategic factors and coaching factors. The player-related main themes include physical, technical, contractual, psychological, statistical, and social factors. Consideration of these factors in the foreign player recruitment

process can aid Iranian professional football clubs in assessing the transfer from a comprehensive and multifaceted perspective to mitigate the risks, and increase the likelihood of improving sporting and financial performance.

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