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Examining the Impact of Human Resource Management on the Performance of Sports Teams and Players in Iraq

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the impact of human resource management on the performance of sports teams and players in Iraq. The present study was descriptive–correlational and based on structural equations. Data were collected in the field using questionnaires. The statistical population consisted of all headquarters managers of the Iraqi Ministry of Sports, club managers, managers and coaches of national teams, and players at various levels of the Iraqi national teams, estimated to number 800 individuals. According to Morgan's table, 260 individuals were selected as the statistical sample using random availability sampling. To collect data, the study employed the Human Resource Management Questionnaire by Wayne (2010) and the Team Performance Questionnaire by Michael West (1994). The face and content validity of the questionnaires were confirmed by the academic supervisor. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was calculated at 0.83 for the Human Resource Management Questionnaire and 0.85 for the Performance Questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted using correlation coefficients, multiple regression tests, and structural equation modeling. All calculations were performed with PLS and SPSS software. The findings revealed that human resource management influences the effort of teams and players in Iraq. Human resource management affects the adoption of appropriate strategies by teams and players in Iraq. Moreover, human resource management impacts the effectiveness of teams and players in Iraq.

Keywords: Human resource management, performance, sports teams, players

1. Introduction

The study of human resource management (HRM) has long occupied a central place in organizational research, as it represents the interface between people and performance. HRM practices are generally understood as a bundle of policies and procedures that shape how individuals are recruited, developed, evaluated, and motivated in order to enhance organizational outcomes (Şendoğdu et al., 2013). Over the past few decades, a considerable body of literature has demonstrated that organizations which effectively align their HRM practices with strategic goals achieve higher levels of performance, adaptability, and competitiveness (Binit Daud, 2006; Figueiredo, 2016; Teo et al., 2008). The human resource function has thus evolved beyond a support role and now constitutes a strategic driver of effectiveness, innovation, and long-term sustainability (Haggerty & Wright, 2010).



In the sports sector, HRM assumes a particularly complex and critical role. Unlike many other industries, sports organizations operate in a highly competitive, emotionally charged, and public environment where both individual and collective performance are constantly scrutinized. Success in sport depends not only on the physical and technical abilities of athletes but also on the ability of managers, coaches, and administrators to harness human resources effectively. As Anwar and Abdullah (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021) demonstrate, HRM practices such as training, performance appraisal, and employee involvement are positively associated with organizational performance across sectors, and these relationships are highly relevant to the sporting domain. This is especially significant in Iraq, where the sports system has been undergoing rapid transformation amidst political, economic, and institutional challenges (Ebrahimi et al., 2022).

The development of sports in Iraq has increasingly become a priority both for policymakers and for civil society. Studies show that sport serves not only as a tool for physical well-being and social cohesion but also as a mechanism for national identity-building and international representation (Al-Fahham & Asefi, 2023). However, Iraqi sport faces numerous structural and governance-related barriers, including insufficient strategic planning, weak institutional frameworks, and lack of sustainable financial resources (Nasser Saleh et al., 2023). Within this context, the role of HRM is magnified, since the effective recruitment, training, and motivation of managers, coaches, and athletes is essential for overcoming systemic obstacles and fostering resilience.

The unique context of Iraqi sport has stimulated a growing number of futures studies and strategic analyses aimed at understanding the challenges and opportunities ahead. Fazel Hemadi et al. (Fazel Hemadi et al., 2023), for example, used scenario planning to analyze the trajectory of the Iraqi Premier Football League up to 2032, emphasizing the importance of governance reforms and talent management. Similarly, Nazem Masir et al. (Nazem Masir et al., 2024) examined the development of professional weightlifting clubs in Iraq, highlighting that HRM practices such as professional coaching, systematic training, and performance incentives are indispensable to long-term sustainability. These studies collectively point to the fact that without robust HRM systems, the ambitious visions of professional sports development in Iraq are unlikely to be realized.

At the organizational level, HRM has been consistently linked with enhanced performance across a variety of contexts. Pastor et al. (Pastor et al., 2010) found that HRM practices significantly improve knowledge management in the Spanish automotive industry, while Figueiredo (Figueiredo, 2016) reported similar effects in the Portuguese banking sector. These findings suggest that HRM is not merely about personnel administration but about fostering an environment where knowledge, innovation, and collaboration can flourish. This insight is critical for sports organizations, which must continuously adapt to changing conditions, technologies, and expectations. Ramezani Nejad et al. (Ramezani Nejad et al., 2014) specifically developed an effectiveness model for sports federations in Iraq, concluding that HRM practices such as strategic staffing and continuous professional development are decisive in enhancing institutional capacity.

Sports in Iraq, however, are not only a matter of organizational performance but also deeply embedded in broader political, economic, and cultural systems. Ebrahimi et al. (Ebrahimi et al., 2022) examined the sports challenges in the political system of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, underscoring that political instability and governance issues directly affect the functioning of sports institutions. Nasser Saleh et al. (Nasser Saleh et al., 2023) emphasized the need for multi-level governance in the Iraqi sports system to withstand crises and promote stability. Within such complex environments, HRM can provide stability, clarity, and strategic alignment, ensuring that organizational objectives are not derailed by external uncertainties.

A further challenge in Iraqi sport relates to entrepreneurship and innovation. Rahim Mohammed et al. (Rahim Mohammed et al., 2023) proposed a model of entrepreneurial capacity in the Kurdistan Region's sports sector, demonstrating how HRM practices such as training, empowerment, and motivational incentives enhance entrepreneurial outcomes. Similarly, Hamed Abdulhajjami et al. (Hamed Abdulhajjami et al., 2024) developed a model for startup formation and growth in the Iraqi football industry, pointing out that systematic HRM practices underpin the capacity to build and sustain new ventures. These findings are consistent with international research showing that HRM functions as a facilitator of organizational innovation and adaptability (Teo et al., 2008).



The specific case of football, Iraq's most popular sport, illustrates the decisive role of HRM even more vividly. Harbi et al. (Harbi et al., 2024) employed causal layered analysis to explore the future identity of Iraqi professional football, concluding that strategic HRM practices are central to shaping the desired image and outcomes. Similarly, Mohammed Abdul Zohre et al. (Mohammed Abdul Zohre et al., 2024) proposed a model of scientific sports development in Iraq, where the integration of HRM practices was found to be critical to achieving systematic progress. These studies collectively underscore the notion that HRM represents both a driver of short-term performance and a cornerstone of long-term transformation in Iraqi sport.

The international literature further reinforces these insights. Studies such as Şendoğdu et al. (Şendoğdu et al., 2013) confirm that HRM practices are strongly related to organizational commitment, while Haggerty and Wright (Haggerty & Wright, 2010) emphasize that the HR function shapes organizational "situations" that strongly influence performance. Binito Daud (Binito Daud, 2006) highlighted the moderating role of strategies and environmental uncertainties in the HRM–performance link, a finding particularly pertinent to volatile contexts such as Iraq. Together, these works demonstrate the necessity of tailoring HRM practices to specific organizational and environmental conditions.

Recent studies in Iraq have also begun to explore the digital transformation of sports federations, which adds another dimension to HRM. Sattar Jabbar Al-Awisi et al. (Sattar Jabbar Al-Awisi et al., 2024) proposed a framework for assessing digital transformation capacity in Iraqi sports federations, using the football federation as a case study. Their findings suggest that HRM practices, particularly in recruitment, training, and knowledge management, are crucial for enabling digital readiness. This perspective aligns with broader international evidence that HRM contributes to technological adoption and knowledge management (Figueiredo, 2016).

Collectively, these studies point to a common conclusion: the effectiveness of Iraqi sports organizations, teams, and players depends heavily on the quality of HRM practices. While previous research has highlighted important elements such as governance, entrepreneurship, and digital transformation, few empirical studies have directly examined the causal impact of HRM on the performance of sports teams and players in Iraq. This gap is striking given the country's pressing need to strengthen its sports system in order to compete regionally and internationally. By focusing specifically on the linkage between HRM and performance outcomes, this study seeks to provide both theoretical insights and practical guidance.

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of human resource management on the performance of sports teams and players in Iraq.

2. Methods and Materials

The present research was a descriptive–correlational study based on structural equation modeling (SEM) and, in terms of purpose, it was considered applied research. The statistical population of this study included all headquarters managers of the Iraqi Ministry of Sports, club managers, managers and coaches of national teams, and players at various levels of the Iraqi national teams, which were estimated at 800 individuals. According to Morgan's table, a population of 260 individuals was randomly selected as the research sample, and they completed the questionnaires, which were distributed both electronically and in printed form.

In addition to library studies, field methods were employed to collect the data. The instruments used in this study included two standardized questionnaires: the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire by Bass and Avolio (1997) and the Team Performance Questionnaire by Michael West (1994).

Standard Human Resource Management Questionnaire: The standardized Human Resource Management Questionnaire developed by Wayne (2010) consists of 14 items. This instrument covers the components of recruitment, training and development, performance evaluation, compensation, and working conditions.

Team and Player Performance Evaluation Questionnaire: The Team Performance Questionnaire was developed by Michael West (1994). It consists of 17 items and 6 subscales: team motivation (3 items), team composition (3 items), interpersonal relationships (3 items), effort (3 items), appropriate strategy (3 items), and effectiveness (2 items). It is designed to assess team performance and is structured on a seven-point Likert scale.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation coefficients, multiple regression tests, and structural equation modeling were applied. All computations were conducted using PLS and SPSS software.



3. Findings and Results

At the beginning, the demographic characteristics of physical education teachers in Iraq are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Physical Education Teachers in Iraq

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	20–30 years	126	48
	31–40 years	62	25
	41–50 years	45	17
	51–60 years	27	10
Gender	Female	96	44
	Male	164	56
Educational Level	Bachelor's degree	157	61
	Master's/Doctoral degree	103	39

As indicated in Table 1, men participated in the study more than women. The majority of the statistical sample fell within the age range of 20–30 years, and most participants held a bachelor's degree.

In Table 2, the descriptive statistics of the research variables are reported.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum Score	Maximum Score
Human Resource Management	44.62	5.86	23	68
Performance	53.19	4.72	26	78

According to the above table, the mean score of the Human Resource Management variable was 44.62, and the mean score of Performance was 53.19.

The relationships among the variables examined in each research hypothesis were tested based on a causal structure using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique. In the following section, the relationships among the main research variables are presented. The *t* statistic was also reported to assess the significance of the relationships.

First, the main research model is displayed in the form of standardized coefficients and z-significance coefficients.

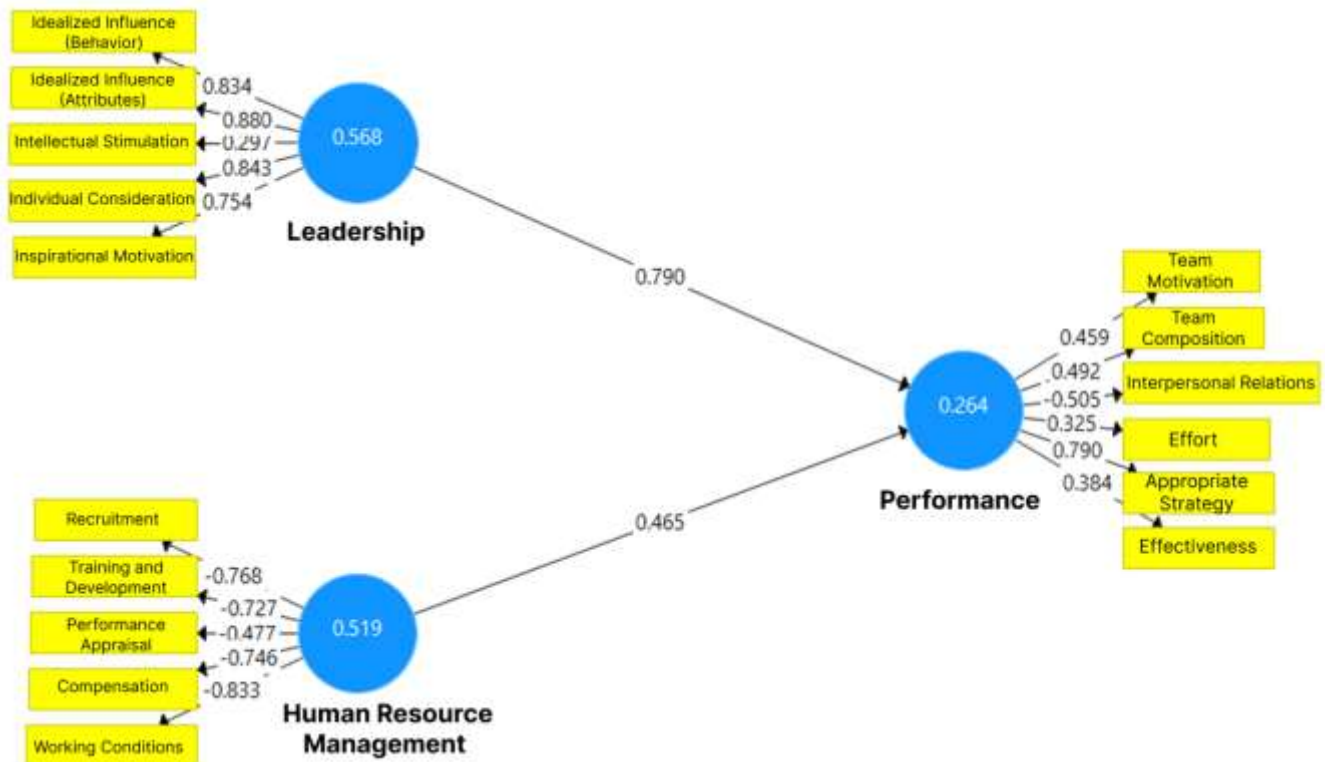


Figure 1. Standardized Coefficients of the Main Research Model

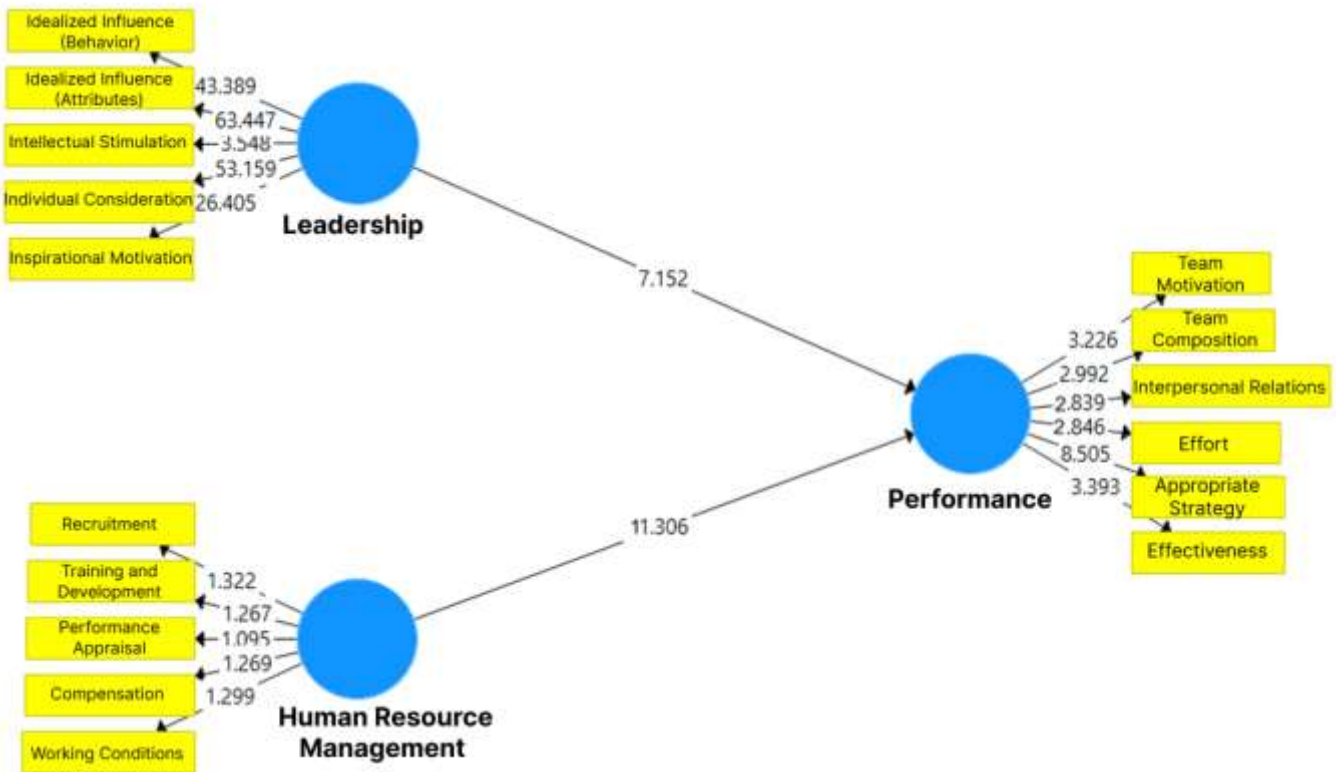


Figure 2. z-Significance Coefficients and Explained Variance of the Main Research Model

Table 3. Path Coefficients of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t -value	p -value
H1	Leadership and Human Resource Management \rightarrow Effort of Teams and Players	0.325	2.826	0.000
H2	Leadership and Human Resource Management \rightarrow Appropriate Strategy of Teams and Players	0.790	8.505	0.000
H3	Leadership and Human Resource Management \rightarrow Effectiveness of Teams and Players	0.384	3.393	0.000

As presented in Table 3, the results of the path analysis revealed that leadership and human resource management had a positive and significant effect on all three dimensions of team performance in Iraq. Specifically, leadership and human resource management significantly enhanced the effort of teams and players ($\beta = 0.325$, $t = 2.826$, $p = 0.000$), supported the adoption of appropriate strategies ($\beta = 0.790$, $t = 8.505$, $p = 0.000$), and improved the effectiveness of teams and players ($\beta = 0.384$, $t = 3.393$, $p = 0.000$). All t -values were above the threshold of 1.96 and the p -values were below 0.05, thereby confirming the significance of the proposed hypotheses.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of human resource management on the performance of sports teams and players in Iraq. The results of the structural equation modeling demonstrated that human resource management had significant and positive effects on multiple dimensions of team and player performance. Specifically, HRM was found to enhance effort, promote the adoption of appropriate strategies, and increase effectiveness, all of which are vital components of sustained sports success. These findings contribute to both the local context of Iraqi sport and the broader body of literature on HRM and organizational performance.

The first major finding was the significant relationship between HRM and the effort exerted by teams and players. This suggests that when human resource practices such as recruitment, training, evaluation, and compensation are implemented effectively, players and teams are more likely to demonstrate commitment, motivation, and perseverance. This result resonates with the findings of Şendoğdu et al. (Şendoğdu et al., 2013), who showed that HRM practices are strongly correlated with organizational commitment, indicating that supportive HRM systems foster higher levels of dedication. Similarly, Anwar and

Abdullah (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021) found that HRM practices positively affect employee performance in general organizational settings, emphasizing the importance of aligning human capital strategies with performance outcomes. The confirmation of this relationship in the Iraqi sports sector validates the universal importance of HRM in motivating individuals to exert greater effort toward collective goals.

The second key finding was the significant effect of HRM on the adoption of appropriate strategies by teams and players. Strategic orientation is crucial in sports organizations, where success often depends on the capacity to plan, adapt, and execute under pressure. The results showed that HRM not only provides technical and administrative support but also enables strategic thinking within teams. This finding aligns with the work of Binita Daud (Binita Daud, 2006), who emphasized the moderating role of strategies in the HRM–performance relationship. By ensuring that employees (or in this case, players and coaches) are adequately trained, appraised, and rewarded, HRM helps to cultivate an environment where effective strategies can be designed and implemented. Similarly, Pastor et al. (Pastor et al., 2010) demonstrated that HRM practices enhance knowledge management in organizations, which is directly linked to strategic capacity. The evidence from this study therefore extends these insights to the domain of sports, showing that HRM is integral not only for motivation but also for strategic decision-making.

The third major finding was the positive and significant effect of HRM on team and player effectiveness. Effectiveness in this context refers to the extent to which teams and players achieve their goals, maintain cohesion, and deliver consistent performance. The results revealed that HRM practices, by improving recruitment, training, evaluation, and working conditions, directly enhance the overall effectiveness of teams. This is consistent with the conclusions of Figueiredo (Figueiredo, 2016), who found that HRM practices foster knowledge management and productivity in the banking sector, and with Teo et al. (Teo et al., 2008), who demonstrated the strategic value of HRM in knowledge-intensive professional service firms. These international findings highlight the universal role of HRM as a driver of effectiveness across diverse contexts. Within Iraq, Ramezani Nejad et al. (Ramezani Nejad et al., 2014) emphasized the necessity of HRM practices for improving the effectiveness of sports federations, and the present study confirms this linkage at the level of teams and players.

These results are particularly significant in the Iraqi context, where the sports system is characterized by political, institutional, and resource-related challenges. Previous studies have emphasized the structural difficulties facing Iraqi sport, such as weak governance, limited financial sustainability, and political instability (Ebrahimi et al., 2022; Nasser Saleh et al., 2023). Within such an environment, HRM emerges as a stabilizing factor that helps organizations maintain consistency and effectiveness despite external uncertainties. For example, Al-Fahham and Asefi (Al-Fahham & Asefi, 2023) demonstrated that the development of public sports in Iraq depends heavily on drivers such as institutional frameworks and strategic management capacity, both of which are closely tied to HRM practices. Similarly, Harbi et al. (Harbi et al., 2024) showed that the future identity of Iraqi professional football requires systemic interventions, of which HRM is a critical component. The present findings confirm that HRM plays a central role in enabling sports organizations to overcome systemic barriers and perform effectively in turbulent contexts.

Another critical dimension highlighted by this study is the role of HRM in supporting futures thinking and innovation in sports organizations. Research by Fazel Hemadi et al. (Fazel Hemadi et al., 2023) and Nazem Masir et al. (Nazem Masir et al., 2024) emphasized the importance of scenario-based planning and futures studies for Iraqi sports development, particularly in football and weightlifting. Both studies recognized HRM as a fundamental enabler of such futures strategies, since the ability to train, develop, and retain skilled human resources is essential for the realization of long-term visions. Likewise, Hamed Abdulhajjami et al. (Hamed Abdulhajjami et al., 2024) and Rahim Mohammed et al. (Rahim Mohammed et al., 2023) highlighted the role of HRM in fostering entrepreneurship and startups within the Iraqi football and sports industries. The current study complements these insights by empirically demonstrating that HRM influences not only immediate performance but also strategic orientation and long-term effectiveness.

Digital transformation is another area where HRM plays a significant role. Sattar Jabbar Al-Awisi et al. (Sattar Jabbar Al-Awisi et al., 2024) analyzed digital transformation in Iraqi sports federations and concluded that HRM practices, particularly in training and recruitment, are critical for building digital capacity. The findings of the present study reinforce this by showing



that HRM enhances effectiveness and strategy, both of which are essential for digital transformation. These results echo international evidence that HRM supports organizational innovation and technological readiness (Figueiredo, 2016; Haggerty & Wright, 2010).

Overall, the findings from this research support the conclusion that HRM is a critical determinant of performance in Iraqi sports organizations. The positive impact of HRM on effort, strategy, and effectiveness indicates that sports administrators must prioritize systematic HRM practices if they wish to achieve competitive and sustainable outcomes. Moreover, the alignment of these findings with international studies (Pastor et al., 2010; Şendoğdu et al., 2013; Teo et al., 2008) strengthens the theoretical basis for considering HRM as a universal driver of performance, while the alignment with local studies (Harbi et al., 2024; Mohammed Abdul Zohre et al., 2024; Ramezani Nejad et al., 2014) underscores its particular relevance in the Iraqi context.

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research employed a cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to make definitive causal inferences. Although structural equation modeling provides evidence of associations and directional relationships, it does not fully capture dynamic changes over time. Second, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, which may have been subject to response bias, social desirability, or misinterpretation. Third, the sample was drawn from a specific subset of the Iraqi sports system, including managers, coaches, and national team players. While this population provides rich insights, the findings may not fully generalize to other sports organizations, grassroots levels, or private-sector sports entities. Finally, contextual factors such as political instability, resource constraints, and cultural dynamics may limit the transferability of findings to other national contexts.

Future research could build upon this study in several ways. Longitudinal studies would provide greater insight into how HRM practices influence team and player performance over time, particularly in response to political and institutional changes. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs could also strengthen causal claims by testing the direct effects of specific HRM interventions, such as training programs or performance appraisal systems. Comparative studies between Iraq and other countries in the Middle East or beyond could help to identify the extent to which HRM effects are context-specific or universal. In addition, future studies could integrate qualitative approaches, such as interviews and case studies, to capture the lived experiences of athletes, managers, and coaches with HRM practices. Finally, research on the intersection of HRM with digital transformation, entrepreneurship, and futures planning would further illuminate the strategic role of HRM in shaping the future of Iraqi sport.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that sports organizations in Iraq should prioritize the development and institutionalization of HRM systems that are both comprehensive and context-sensitive. Administrators should design recruitment processes that attract and retain talented athletes and managers, establish continuous training and development programs, and implement performance appraisal systems that provide constructive feedback. Compensation and working conditions should be structured to enhance motivation and reduce turnover. Moreover, HRM should be strategically aligned with organizational goals to ensure that effort, strategy, and effectiveness are continuously reinforced. By integrating HRM into the core of sports management, Iraqi organizations can strengthen their resilience, improve competitive outcomes, and contribute to the broader development of sport in the country.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.



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