Structural Modeling of Factors Influencing the Development of Personal Branding among Sports Coaches in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the structural model of factors influencing the development of personal branding among sports coaches in Iraq. The research employed a descriptive–correlational methodology and was conducted using a survey design, with structural equation modeling applied to test the hypotheses. The statistical population consisted of professional sports coaches in Iraq. The sample for this study was selected through convenience sampling, and a total of 360 participants constituted the final sample. To measure the structural factors influencing the development of personal branding among Iraqi sports coaches, a researcher-made questionnaire—designed based on interviews with experts—was utilized. Data analysis was conducted through structural equation modeling. The results indicated that variables such as environmental factors (political–economic conditions), expertise, coaching performance and skills, coaching experience, lifestyle outside the sports field, promotion, the coach's behavioral approach, and the coach's personality significantly influence the development of personal branding among sports coaches in Iraq. The development of a structural model of factors affecting the formation of personal branding among Iraqi sports coaches contributes to a deeper understanding of key determinants and provides precise guidance for enhancing coaches' professional standing. Moreover, this model facilitates the design of targeted strategies to improve the image and increase the influence of coaches within the sport domain.

Keywords: coaching skill, coaching experience, lifestyle outside the sports field, promotion, coach's behavioral approach, personality, personal branding

Introduction

The emergence of personal branding as a central component of professional identity construction has dramatically reshaped various fields, including business, education, digital entrepreneurship, and most notably, sport. The foundational idea that individuals, much like corporations, can be developed, positioned, and managed as brands can be traced back to early conceptualizations of self-marketing, where attention was drawn to how the individual could become a distinctive marketable entity in an increasingly competitive environment. One of the earliest and most influential articulations of this concept was offered by Peters, who famously argued that "the brand called you" reflects a paradigm shift in how individuals must take ownership of their professional identity and

reputation in order to thrive in modern labor markets (1). Building on this premise, scholars such as Shepherd emphasized that personal branding involves not merely self-promotion but the strategic management of one's values, expertise, competencies, and emotional appeal, enabling individuals to establish credibility, differentiation, and trust among audiences or consumers (2).

In the sports sector, personal branding has become particularly significant due to the visibility, symbolic capital, and influence associated with athletes and coaches. As argued by Labrecque, the evolution of digital platforms has intensified the relevance of online personal branding by enabling individuals to manage identity narratives, interact with audiences, and cultivate perceived authenticity (3). The rapid growth of social media has further transformed these dynamics by granting sports professionals access to global audiences regardless of organizational affiliations. According to Statista, Iraq's exponential rise in social media penetration has expanded the communicative infrastructure available to coaches and athletes, altering how personal image and credibility are formed and sustained in the public sphere (4). This environment has intensified competition, elevating the need for strategic, consistent, and differentiated personal branding among sports professionals.

As Jones highlights, personal branding in sports encompasses a combination of visual identity, behavioral consistency, communication style, and performance credibility, all of which contribute to how athletes and coaches are perceived and evaluated by teams, sponsors, fans, and stakeholders (5). The relational dimension of branding in sports is further emphasized by Kunkel, whose work shows that self-brand connection mediates how audiences attach meaning to coaches' and athletes' identities, influencing loyalty and engagement levels (6). This demonstrates that personal branding is not solely about self-representation but about psychological and emotional resonance with the audience, making it a strategic resource that coaches must cultivate systematically.

Recent years have witnessed a scholarly shift toward examining personal branding not only among athletes but also among sports coaches, whose leadership visibility has increasingly come under focus. Solberg's case study on elite football coaches shows that social media plays an essential role in disseminating coaching philosophy, demonstrating leadership authenticity, and shaping professional reputation, thereby influencing followers, organizations, and the public (7). In parallel, Oliveira's contribution to the understanding of brand equity emphasizes that personal brands, including those of coaches, operate through a chain in which brand perception, brand strength, and brand value interact dynamically to shape overall brand equity (8). This highlights that personal branding is not a one-dimensional construct but an integrated system involving communication, behavior, performance, and environmental context.

Globally, the commercial potential of personal branding has grown significantly, especially in the digital marketing era. Kostadinović's research demonstrates how athletes can leverage communication strategies online to enhance commercial opportunities, visibility, and market value (9). Although athletes typically stand at the forefront of commercialization, the increasing digitalization of sports has brought coaches closer to this landscape, positioning their personal brands as monetizable assets that extend beyond team boundaries. Digital branding transformations have also reshaped the symbolic dimensions of identity; as Pedersen shows, even the redesign of an athlete's personal brand logo involves emotional, cultural, and commercial considerations that can alter audience perception (10). Such dynamics imply that coaching brands, too, must be deliberately managed and periodically refined to remain relevant.

The visual and symbolic dimensions of personal branding are further explored by Guoguang, who emphasizes that optimizing brand visual symbols significantly improves customer perception and purchase intention (11).

Although this study focuses on consumer markets, its implications extend to the sport domain, where coaches present visual cues—such as appearance, expression styles, digital aesthetics, and professional imagery—that influence how their capabilities and credibility are interpreted. This interplay between symbolic communication and perceived value becomes particularly important in countries like Iraq, where the sports sector is undergoing modernization and increased digital exposure.

In the Iraqi context, structural transformations in sports have opened new opportunities and challenges for coaches seeking to strengthen their professional identity. The Iraqi Ministry of Youth and Sports highlights in its 2022 annual report that the country has expanded its investments in sports development, coaching education, and infrastructure upgrades, resulting in greater public visibility and competitive expectations for coaches (12). This intensified visibility underscores the importance of personal branding as a strategic capability enabling coaches to differentiate themselves, enhance their influence, and navigate emerging professional pathways. However, despite these governmental efforts, many Iraqi coaches still face barriers related to limited marketing knowledge, restricted access to digital branding tools, and lack of systematic support for brand development.

Comparative research in neighboring contexts also underscores the growing scholarly attention to coaching brands. Mortezaei's qualitative study of sports coaches in Iran reveals that personal branding emerges from a complex interplay of environmental factors, institutional culture, career history, communication behavior, and personal values, suggesting that branding is dynamic rather than static (13). The authors argue that coaches who strategically cultivate personal branding gain professional advantages such as greater trust from athletes, stronger social influence, and increased organizational demand. These findings highlight the need for similar systematic examination in Iraq, where sports coaches operate within distinct political, cultural, and economic conditions.

Personal branding theory also intersects with leadership theory. Avolio suggests that authentic leadership development, grounded in self-awareness, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective, contributes significantly to how individuals are perceived as credible leaders (14). Since coaches are both leaders and educators, their leadership authenticity becomes a core component of their personal brand. The relational and ethical dimensions of leadership consequently overlap with branding components such as character, behavioral consistency, and communication ethos.

The modern era of personal branding is also deeply intertwined with digital platforms. According to Tajik Ismaili, emotional intelligence moderates how young users engage with personal brands on Instagram, indicating that digital identity is shaped not only by visual content but also by relational and emotional competencies (15). Such insights are critical for coaches in Iraq, who increasingly use Instagram and Facebook for professional communication, athlete engagement, and reputation building. Oshiro's research in sport marketing education further demonstrates that structured personal branding projects improve individuals' understanding of digital storytelling, identity presentation, and professional positioning (16). These findings suggest that systematic education in digital personal branding could significantly empower Iraqi coaches.

The commercial dimension of personal branding is also noted in the branding literature. Sutanto identifies the integrated relationship between brand trust, brand image, and brand equity in shaping repurchase intention, implying that brand strength is largely built on perceived reliability and emotional connection (17). In sports coaching, trust and credibility determine athlete loyalty, parent confidence, and organizational support, making these branding components essential for long-term success. Complementarily, Azizi's grounded-theory framework for personal branding of business coaches reveals that values, expertise, reputation, and communication behaviors collectively

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shape how specialists construct a resilient, marketable personal brand (18). These principles are readily applicable to sports coaching, where both technical credibility and interpersonal communication are indispensable.

The increasing relevance of personal branding in diverse contexts reinforces the necessity of understanding the underlying structural factors affecting coaches' branding. With growing competition, digital exposure, and institutional shifts, sports coaches in Iraq face pressure to articulate and manage a distinctive brand that reflects not only their coaching expertise but also their ethical behavior, lifestyle, digital image, and leadership identity. Without a clear understanding of these dimensions, coaches may struggle to leverage emerging opportunities, navigate modern sports ecosystems, or attain meaningful professional visibility.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to develop and test a structural model of the factors influencing the personal brand development of sports coaches in Iraq.

Methods and Materials

The present study is applied in terms of its purpose, mixed-method in terms of data collection, and descriptive–survey in terms of its nature and method. The statistical population consisted of professional sports coaches in Iraq who were selected through convenience sampling, resulting in a final sample size of 386 participants. The data collection instruments included a researcher-made questionnaire measuring factors influencing the development of personal branding among Iraqi sports coaches. This questionnaire, designed based on expert interviews, contained 93 items. The indicators were identified using theme analysis. Six overarching constructs—environmental factors, coaching expertise, lifestyle outside the sports field, promotion, the coach's behavioral approach, and the coach's personality—were considered as the main components of the questionnaire.

To assess the validity of the questionnaire, two types of validity were considered: logical validity and construct validity. In this regard, content validity, face validity, and factor validity (factor analysis) were examined. All these tests were conducted using Smart PLS software. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), two criteria are used in factor analysis: first, factor loadings for observed variables should exceed .50, and second, the composite reliability of the variables representing a given factor should exceed .80. Under a more conservative perspective, factor loadings greater than .70 are considered to have acceptable validity (1999).

Table 1. **Validity and Reliability of the Research Model in PLS Software**

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Environmental Factors	.77	.79	.70
Coaching Expertise	.81	.86	.64
Lifestyle Outside the Sports Field	.91	.97	.78
Promotion	.85	.89	.66
Coach's Behavioral Approach	.77	.81	.52
Coach's Personality	.90	.94	.69

In the present study, Fornell and Larcker's (1981) approach was applied to interpret factor loading values. Based on the software output, all factor loadings for the research variables exceeded .50; therefore, these items possess acceptable validity. Furthermore, the data in Table 2 show that the composite reliability of all variables is greater than .70, and the average variance extracted for all variables—except for two cases—is greater than .50, indicating relatively high convergent validity. To assess data normality, SPSS software and the Kolmogorov–Smirnov (KS) test were used. The results indicated the non-significance of the KS test, meaning that the data were non-normal; therefore, the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method and PLS software were used for data analysis. One of the major

advantages of PLS, compared with similar software such as AMOS and LISREL, is its ability to model data with non-normal distributions.

Findings and Results

Several criteria are used to determine the goodness-of-fit of the structural research model, with the t-statistic being the most fundamental criterion. The most basic measure for assessing the relationship between variables in the structural component of the model is the significance of t-values. If these values exceed 1.96, the relationship between the variables is considered valid, and the research hypothesis is confirmed at a 95% confidence level. The significance value provides similar information; if it is less than .05, the relationship between variables is accepted at the 95% confidence level. The results of the structural model of the present study are presented in Diagram 2 and Table 2.

Table 2. Direct Path Coefficients and t-Statistics for Hypotheses Related to the Structural Model Paths

| Path	Relationship	Path Coefficient	t-Statistic	Significance	Result
First	Environmental Factors → Coach's Personal Brand	.742	3.622	.001	Confirmed
Second	Coaching Expertise → Coach's Personal Brand	.791	3.232	.001	Confirmed
Third	Lifestyle Outside the Sports Field → Coach's Personal Brand	.762	3.547	.001	Confirmed
Fourth	Promotion → Coach's Personal Brand	.748	3.332	.001	Confirmed
Fifth	Coach's Behavioral Approach → Coach's Personal Brand	.732	3.698	.001	Confirmed
Sixth	Coach's Personality → Coach's Personal Brand	.755	3.213	.001	Confirmed
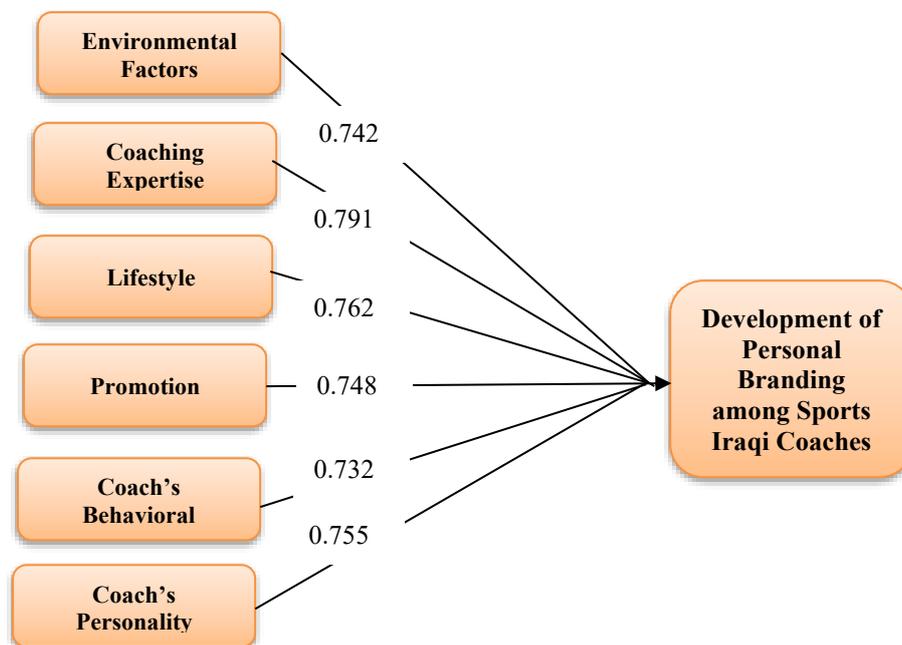
Figure 1. Structural Path Model

According to the interpretive framework in structural equation modeling, if the t-statistic for a given path exceeds 1.96, the corresponding path is considered significant at the 95% confidence level and its related hypothesis is confirmed. Based on the results in Table 2, it can be concluded that all variables in the model have a positive and significant relationship with the coach's personal brand. The most influential factor on the coach's personal brand was coaching expertise, with a path coefficient of .791. The R^2 and Q^2 indices, which relate to the dependent variable, are reviewed next. R^2 indicates the extent to which the independent variables influence the dependent

variable; values of .19, .33, and .67 represent weak, moderate, and strong effects, respectively. Q^2 indicates the predictive relevance of the independent variables for the dependent variable; values of .20, .15, and .35 signify weak, moderate, and strong predictive power, respectively. The table below provides these values for the dependent variable of organizational performance.

Table 3. R^2 and Q^2 Criteria for the Dependent Variable

Index	R^2	Result	Q^2	Result
Value	.716	Strong	.652	Strong

Based on the obtained results, the R^2 and Q^2 indices for the variable of self-management fall within the strong range. Therefore, it can be concluded that environmental factors, coaching expertise, lifestyle outside the sports field, promotion, the coach's behavioral approach, and the coach's personality exert a strong influence on the development of personal branding among Iraqi sports coaches and strongly predict it. In general, for evaluating the confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling in the PLS method, the GOF index is used. The average R^2 values of the structural model also indicate good model fit. The results of GOF and R^2 are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. GOF and R^2 Criteria for Model Fit

Index	R^2	Result	GOF	Result
Value	.702	Strong	.702	Strong

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrated that all examined factors—environmental conditions, coaching expertise, lifestyle outside the sports field, promotion, behavioral approach, and personality—had significant and positive effects on the development of personal branding among sports coaches in Iraq. These results reveal that personal branding in the Iraqi sports context is a multidimensional construct shaped simultaneously by structural conditions, individual competencies, social behavior, and identity presentation. This aligns with early conceptual frameworks suggesting that personal branding is not merely a communication technique but a holistic process of constructing, managing, and sustaining a distinct professional identity in competitive environments ([1]). This view reinforces the relevance of the present study's structural model as an effective approach for understanding how Iraqi coaches negotiate their visibility and value in a rapidly transforming sports ecosystem.

The strongest predictor among all variables was coaching expertise, which significantly shaped coaches' personal brand perception. This dominance of technical and professional competence is consistent with previous studies that emphasize expertise as the foundational element in constructing a credible and trustworthy personal brand. For instance, Azizi shows that expertise and specialized skills act as core assets that differentiate coaches and increase their attractiveness in the professional marketplace ([18]). Similarly, Jones emphasizes that coaching knowledge, decision-making capability, and performance management form the backbone of a coach's identity and brand strength ([5]). These works converge with the current findings, suggesting that in the Iraqi context—where sports infrastructures and coach training systems are still evolving—technical expertise becomes a particularly visible marker of credibility and professional legitimacy. This also corresponds to the argument that in developing sports systems, expertise compensates for structural instability by offering observers a tangible indication of competence.

The significant effect of environmental factors, including political and economic conditions, also shows that personal branding does not occur in isolation but is deeply influenced by contextual realities. Research conducted in Iraq underscores how broader institutional, political, and social dynamics shape opportunities for sports professionals to develop visibility and public recognition. The Ministry of Youth and Sports highlights the uneven distribution of resources, fluctuating political conditions, and limited access to professional development as constraints that shape coaches' career trajectories (12). These circumstances imply that branding must evolve not only as an individual competency but also as a strategic response to environmental uncertainty. This is further supported by Shepherd, who describes personal branding as a form of adaptive differentiation that helps individuals navigate unstable professional landscapes (2). Thus, the finding that environmental factors significantly influence personal branding aligns with both theoretical expectations and contextual realities.

Lifestyle outside the sports field also emerged as a strong predictor, highlighting that personal branding extends beyond technical skills and professional performance. This supports Labrecque's observation that in the digital age, personal life, values, and lifestyle decisions become intertwined with how audiences form impressions and develop trust (3). The high social media penetration in Iraq, documented by Statista, intensifies the visibility of coaches' daily behaviors and personal choices, contributing to a more holistic impression of their identity (4). Additionally, Solberg's study on elite football coaches demonstrates that off-field behavior contributes to identity formation by signaling authenticity, emotional stability, and relatability (7). These parallel findings suggest that for Iraqi coaches, lifestyle presentation—whether through social media, community involvement, or personal conduct—plays a central role in shaping how they are perceived, trusted, and evaluated.

Promotion and visibility strategies also had a significant impact on personal branding. In the current digital environment, communication and promotional activities allow coaches to strategically project expertise, values, and experiences to broader audiences. Pedersen illustrates this through athletes' intentional rebranding strategies, showing that promotional messaging and aesthetic decisions influence audience perception of competence and identity (10). Similarly, Oshiro demonstrates that structured communication practices enhance the clarity and attractiveness of sports professionals' brands (16). These findings align with Oliveira's assertion that branding effectiveness is strengthened when communication activities reinforce brand elements and contribute to a coherent equity chain (8). In Iraq, where traditional media visibility may be limited, promotional efforts via social media and community engagement serve as essential means for coaches to build influence across regions.

The behavioral approach of coaches—such as emotional control, communication style, and leadership behavior—also showed a strong positive relationship with personal brand development. This is consistent with Avolio's framework of authentic leadership, which highlights how relational transparency, moral grounding, and behavioral integrity contribute to perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness (14). These behavioral qualities resonate strongly in coaching contexts, where athletes and stakeholders expect leadership that is not only technically skilled but psychologically supportive and ethically grounded. Furthermore, Kunkel notes that emotional connection between fans and sports professionals is shaped by authentic behavioral displays, which directly enhance brand perception (6). This alignment indicates that in Iraq's cultural context—where interpersonal respect, dignity, and conduct carry significant weight—behavioral approaches contribute profoundly to coaches' reputation.

Another important finding is the considerable influence of personality traits on brand development. Personality has been extensively recognized as a core element of personal branding, especially in environments where relational dynamics and emotional resonance are central. Tajik Ismaili's study on Instagram engagement reveals

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that emotional intelligence and personality significantly affect how audiences interpret digital identity (15). This complements the current findings by emphasizing that personal branding effectiveness requires not only competence and communication but also personality qualities that resonate with followers. Similarly, Guoguang demonstrates that emotional appeal and symbolic attributes shape the audience's perception of brand value (11). These insights parallel the Iraqi findings, suggesting that coaches whose personalities convey confidence, warmth, or integrity attract more positive brand associations.

This study also reinforces Mortezaei's findings that personal branding among sports coaches relies on a complex interplay of contextual factors, behavioral patterns, communication interactions, and individual characteristics (13). The alignment between these findings indicates that despite cultural differences between Iraq and Iran, coaches in both contexts share similar challenges: limited institutional support, strong dependence on personal networks, and a growing reliance on digital spaces for professional visibility. This shared regional context strengthens the argument that personal branding frameworks developed in Western contexts should be adapted to local cultural and institutional realities.

The predictive strength of the structural model—evidenced by high R^2 and Q^2 values—also supports the argument that personal branding in Iraq is not random or incidental but systematically shaped by measurable factors. This provides empirical support for Oliveira's conceptualization of brand equity as a structured, accumulative process influenced by multiple interacting variables (8). Similarly, Sutanto shows that trust, image, and equity—elements highly relevant to coaching brands—interact to shape behavioral outcomes, providing further theoretical grounding for the significance of these factors (17). Thus, the present findings not only confirm existing theories but also extend them by demonstrating their applicability in the Iraqi sports sector.

Overall, the results provide strong evidence that personal branding among Iraqi sports coaches is a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by personal characteristics, professional competencies, behavioral qualities, social visibility, and contextual pressures. The convergence between the present findings and previous research across multiple countries and disciplines reinforces the robustness of the model and highlights the urgency of supporting coaches through structured personal branding education, institutional development, and digital empowerment.

This study faced several limitations. The research relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias, especially in cultural contexts where reputation and honor carry significant weight. The sample was limited to coaches who were accessible and willing to participate, meaning some regions or coaching categories may be underrepresented. Additionally, the study was cross-sectional and therefore cannot establish causality. The data were collected during a period of social and economic fluctuation in Iraq, which may have influenced participants' responses about environmental conditions. The study also did not examine differences across types of sports, coaching levels, or demographic groups, which may limit the generalizability of the results.

Future research should consider conducting longitudinal studies to examine how personal branding develops over time and how changing political or economic conditions influence branding strategies. Comparative studies between different countries in the Middle East could provide deeper insights into cultural influences on coaching brands. Researchers should also explore gender differences in personal branding, as female coaches may experience unique barriers and opportunities. Additional qualitative work could capture deeper insights into the lived experiences of coaches navigating identity, digital presence, and public visibility. Finally, future research may integrate athlete perceptions to examine how coaches' branding influences team motivation, recruitment, or performance outcomes.

Practical interventions should be designed to help coaches build personal branding competencies, including digital literacy, communication skills, and audience engagement strategies. Sports federations should integrate personal branding training into coach development programs to ensure consistent professional growth. Coaching organizations can also support brand building by providing media exposure, mentorship opportunities, and guidelines for ethical and effective online conduct. Clubs and sports institutions should encourage coaches to develop professional profiles that highlight expertise, values, and achievements, improving both individual and organizational reputation.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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