

Designing a Grounded Theory Model of Factors Affecting Coach Selection in the Iranian Premier Football League

Maryam. Tavakkoli¹, Arefeh. Jamshidi^{1*},
Mostafa. Soltani², Seyed Sajjad. Hosseini³,
Narges. Ghelich Afshar⁴

1. Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Qazvin Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qazvin, Iran

2. Department of Sport Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran

3. Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education & Sport Sciences, University of Abhar, Abhar, Iran

4. Department of Sport Management, Faculty of Physical Education & Sport Sciences, University of Abhar, Abhar, Iran

*Corresponding Authors' Email:
arefeh.jamshidi@iau.ac.ir

Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 9 Jan 2026
Revised 20 February 2022
Accepted 24 February 2026
Published online 01 March 2026

How to cite this article:

Tavakkoli, M., Jamshidi, A., Soltani, M., Hosseini, S. S., & Ghelich Afshar, N. (2025). Designing a Grounded Theory Model of Factors Affecting Coach Selection in the Iranian Premier Football League. *Game Nexus*, 2(4), 1-11.
<https://doi.org/10.61838/gamenexus.39>



© 2025 the authors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Selecting a coach in professional football is a strategic managerial decision that affects technical performance, organizational stability, public legitimacy, and long-term club development. The Iranian Premier Football League requires a context-sensitive model that explains how coach-selection decisions are formed and how they can be professionalized. Objective: This study aimed to design a grounded theory model of factors affecting coach selection in the Iranian Premier Football League. A qualitative grounded theory design based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with football executives, head coaches, coaches, agents, players, and sport-management experts. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Theoretical saturation was reached after 17 interviews, and 20 interviews were completed to enrich the data. Interviews were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding using constant comparison. Coding trustworthiness was supported by expert review and inter-coder reliability assessment. The analysis identified approximately 175 initial codes that were refined into 116 non-repetitive open codes, 28 subcategories, and 15 main categories. These categories were organized into six paradigmatic dimensions: causal conditions, core phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The model shows that professional competence and individual characteristics influence coach selection, while organizational structure, social context, informal influence, and competitive pressure shape the decision environment. The main strategies were structured evaluation, professional decision-making, and interaction management. The model provides a practical framework for clubs and football authorities to make coach selection more evidence-based, transparent, merit-oriented, and development-focused.

Keywords: coach selection; grounded theory; professional competence; football governance

Introduction

Football has become one of the most visible social, cultural, and economic institutions in contemporary sport. At the professional level, clubs are no longer merely competitive teams; they are complex organizations that combine sporting performance, financial management, media visibility, fan expectations, and long-term brand development. In this

environment, the coach occupies a position that is both technical and managerial. The coach designs training, organizes tactical plans, manages players and staff, responds to match-related uncertainty, and becomes the public face of success or failure. Therefore, the appointment of a coach is not a routine administrative decision but a strategic human-resource decision with consequences for performance, organizational identity, and stakeholder trust. The literature on coaching effectiveness emphasizes that successful coaching is not reducible to technical knowledge alone. Côté and Gilbert (2009) conceptualized coaching effectiveness through the interaction of coaches' knowledge, athletes' outcomes, and coaching contexts (1). This view is particularly relevant to professional football because a coach's success depends not only on tactical expertise but also on leadership, communication, emotional regulation, ethical conduct, and the ability to align decisions with the realities of the club. The International Sport Coaching Framework similarly highlights coaching as a contextual, relational, and developmental practice in which competence must be evaluated against role, environment, and athlete needs (2). Professional football clubs often state that coach recruitment is based on qualifications, previous results, and tactical philosophy. In practice, however, coach selection may also be shaped by time pressure, ownership preferences, media narratives, fan reactions, informal networks, and short-term match results. Research in Brazilian professional football has shown that coach recruitment and dismissal may follow unstable patterns that place immediate performance pressure above sustainable human-resource management (3). Other work on coach recruitment in European football has shown that informal networks can influence access to coaching opportunities and may weaken transparent, qualification-based recruitment systems (4). These findings suggest that coach selection should be studied as a socially embedded decision-making process rather than as a purely technical evaluation.

The educational and developmental literature further supports the need for a broader view of coaching competence. Cushion, Armour, and Jones (2003) argued that coaching knowledge is strongly shaped by experience, observation, mentoring, and reflection; formal certification alone may not capture the tacit and situated knowledge required in daily practice (5). Stodter and Cushion (2017), using grounded theory principles, showed that soccer coaches actively construct, adapt, and reject knowledge through contextual filters and reflective conversations (6). Such studies are important because they show why clubs require assessment systems that combine formal evidence, experiential judgment, and contextual interpretation. At the same time, professional coaching requires psychological and emotional capacity. Football coaches operate under continuous public evaluation, intense feedback, and uncertainty. Lee and Chelladurai (2018) demonstrated that emotional competence is a meaningful part of football coaching because coaches must deal with emotional triggers, regulate their responses, and manage the psychological and social consequences of pressure (7). In a league context where public expectations and media pressure are strong, the psychological stability of coaches and their ability to motivate players are not secondary characteristics; they are central selection criteria.

The Iranian Premier Football League provides an important context for examining these issues. Football in Iran attracts widespread public attention, and clubs operate within a competitive, social, and institutional environment in which sporting decisions are closely followed by fans and media. The dissertation from which this article is derived showed that the selection of coaches in this context is influenced by individual, organizational, and environmental factors. It also indicated that the process may be affected by informal relations and short-term pressures. These characteristics make the Iranian context suitable for a grounded theory inquiry because the phenomenon cannot be adequately explained through imported checklists alone. From a sport-management perspective, developing a native model can serve several purposes. First, it can help clubs define and prioritize the competencies they expect from coaches. Second, it can make the selection process more transparent by distinguishing between legitimate contextual adaptation and non-professional interference. Third, it can support accountability by requiring decision-makers to document the reasons for coach selection. Fourth, it can help federations and

league authorities design guidelines that encourage meritocracy and reduce the costs of frequent and poorly justified coaching changes.

Despite the importance of the issue, the specific process through which Iranian Premier League coaches are selected has not been sufficiently modeled through a qualitative, context-sensitive approach. Much of the available discussion focuses either on general coaching qualities or on performance outcomes after coaches are appointed. Less attention has been given to the actual decision-making ecosystem that precedes appointment: who influences the decision, what criteria are emphasized, how formal and informal factors interact, and what consequences a structured or unstructured choice may produce. Accordingly, the present article reports a grounded theory study that sought to identify causal, contextual, intervening, strategic, and consequential dimensions of coach selection in the Iranian Premier Football League.

Methods and Materials

Design. This study used a qualitative grounded theory design. The systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin was selected because the objective was not to test a predetermined model but to build a conceptual explanation from the experiences and interpretations of knowledgeable participants (8). Grounded theory was appropriate because coach selection is a process-oriented phenomenon shaped by interaction among clubs, decision-makers, coaches, agents, media, and the wider football environment. **Participants and sampling.** The research population consisted of individuals with direct or specialized knowledge of coach selection in the Iranian Premier Football League. Participants included chief executives of Premier League clubs, head coaches and coaches, football agents, and academic experts in sport management. Purposive sampling was first used to identify information-rich participants, followed by snowball sampling to access additional experts. In total, 20 participants were interviewed. Theoretical saturation was reached after 17 interviews, but three additional interviews were conducted to strengthen conceptual richness and ensure that no major dimension of the phenomenon was omitted. **Data collection.** Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide focused on criteria used in coach selection, the role of club conditions, the influence of external pressures, the involvement of formal and informal actors, strategies for improving decisions, and expected consequences of systematic selection. Semi-structured interviewing allowed consistent coverage of the research questions while preserving flexibility to explore examples, experiences, and unexpected themes.

Data analysis and trustworthiness. Interviews were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding. During open coding, interview content was broken into meaningful conceptual units and initial codes were generated. During axial coding, related codes were grouped into subcategories and main categories, and relationships among causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences were examined. During selective coding, the central storyline was integrated into a paradigmatic model. Trustworthiness was supported through expert review by academic supervisors and by inter-coder reliability assessment. Three interviews were independently coded by the researcher and an assisting coder. Across these interviews, 66 codes were compared; 51 agreements and 15 disagreements produced an inter-coder agreement of 77.2%, which was considered acceptable for qualitative reliability in this study.

The methodological characteristics of the study and the inter-coder reliability procedure are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Methodological characteristics and coding reliability of the study

Component	Extracted value / procedure
Research design	Qualitative grounded theory using the systematic Strauss-Corbin approach
Data collection	Individual semi-structured interviews with key informants
Sampling	Purposive and snowball sampling
Theoretical saturation	Reached after 17 interviews; 20 interviews completed for data enrichment

Coding procedure	Open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and constant comparison
Code reduction	Approximately 175 initial codes refined to 116 non-repetitive open codes
Final coding structure	116 basic concepts, 28 subcategories, 15 main categories, and 6 paradigmatic dimensions
Inter-coder reliability	66 total coding units; 51 agreements; 15 disagreements; overall reliability = 77.2%

Findings and Results

The grounded theory analysis produced a hierarchical and paradigmatic model of coach selection. To make the qualitative results more transparent, the findings are presented below in three analytical layers: (1) coding reduction and reliability, (2) conceptual density across the paradigmatic dimensions, and (3) direct answers to the research questions. The numerical values reported in this section are descriptive indicators derived from the coding process and should not be interpreted as inferential statistical tests. The overall coding outputs and descriptive analytic indicators derived from the grounded theory analysis are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive coding analytics derived from the grounded theory analysis

Analytical indicator	Number	Percentage / interpretation
Initial codes identified before refinement	≈175	100.0% initial coding pool
Non-repetitive open codes retained	116	66.3% of the initial coding pool retained after merging overlaps
Codes removed or merged during refinement	≈59	33.7% reduction through conceptual consolidation
Subcategories	28	Each subcategory grouped conceptually similar open codes
Main categories	15	Higher-order categories explaining coach-selection determinants
Paradigmatic dimensions	6	Causal conditions, core phenomenon, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences
Inter-coder agreement	51 / 66	77.2% overall reliability; above the acceptable threshold reported in the dissertation
Inter-coder disagreements	15 / 66	22.8% of checked coding units

The distribution of categories and concepts across the paradigmatic dimensions is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Conceptual density of the paradigmatic model

Paradigmatic dimension	Main categories	No. of categories	No. of main	No. of subcategories	No. of basic concepts	Share of 116 concepts
Causal conditions	Professional competence; individual characteristics	2		4	16	13.8%
Core phenomenon	Hybrid rationality; situational flexibility	2		2	8	6.9%
Contextual conditions	Organizational structure; social context	2		4	16	13.8%
Intervening conditions	Informal influence; competitive pressure	2		4	16	13.8%
Strategies	Structured evaluation; professional decision-making; interaction management	3		6	36	31.0%
Consequences	Competitive quality; organizational cohesion; professional credibility; sustainable	4		8	24	20.7%

	development				
Total	Final theory model	grounded	15	28	116
					100.0%

As shown in Table 3, the strategic layer of the model had the highest conceptual density (36 concepts; 31.0%), followed by the consequences layer (24 concepts; 20.7%). This distribution indicates that participants did not describe coach selection merely as a set of personal criteria. Rather, they emphasized operational mechanisms—such as structured evaluation, professional decision-making, and interaction management—and the organizational consequences expected from a more systematic appointment process. The main categories, subcategories, and representative concepts extracted from the interviews are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Main categories, subcategories, and selected concepts extracted from the interviews

Paradigmatic dimension	Main category	Subcategories	Selected concepts
Causal conditions	Professional competence	Technical ability; team leadership	Tactical knowledge; training design; performance analysis; professional coaching experience; player guidance; competitive decision-making; staff management; team cohesion
Causal conditions	Individual characteristics	Professional personality; psychological capacity	Sport ethics; organizational commitment; personal charisma; self-discipline; motivation; pressure control; emotional understanding of players; psychological stability in decisions
Core phenomenon	Hybrid rationality	Decision logic	Combining analysis and experience; integrating data and judgment; balancing quantitative and qualitative evidence; multi-source evaluation
Core phenomenon	Situational flexibility	Contextual adaptation	Changing criteria according to club status; timing of decisions; adaptation to competitive conditions; alignment with club situation
Contextual conditions	Organizational structure	Club governance; professional infrastructure	Management stability; decision centralization; administrative transparency; manager evaluation system; training facilities; specialized support units; information systems
Contextual conditions	Social context	Football culture; media environment	Professionalism level; attitudes toward coaches; tolerance of weak results; sport behavior patterns; media influence; social media; public pressure; quality of media analysis
Intervening conditions	Informal influence	Hidden relations; political orientation	Personal connections; managerial lobbying; influence networks; intermediaries; external institutional interference; macro-managerial changes; political considerations
Intervening conditions	Competitive pressure	Short-term results; environmental expectations	Need for immediate wins; fear of dismissal; low tolerance of failure; dependence on recent results; fan demands; media pressure; managerial expectations
Strategies	Structured evaluation	Assessment system; procedural transparency	Defined criteria; weighted indicators; standardized forms; multi-stage evaluation; specialist committee; transparent reporting; compliance control
Strategies	Professional decision-making	Analytical capacity; modern tools	Decision-making training; use of consultants; candidate profiling; updated data; access to records; decision models; scenario analysis; risk assessment; data-driven systems
Strategies	Interaction management	External communication; internal coordination	Media responsiveness; unified public narrative; fan-expectation management; social feedback; managerial convergence; reduced decision conflict; documentation of negotiations
Consequences	Competitive quality	Team performance; player development	Improved match results; game coordination; performance stability; individual skill improvement; match readiness; tactical progress
Consequences	Organizational cohesion	Team stability; club order	Reduced staff turnover; continuity of programs; stability of decisions; reduced internal conflict; coordination between units; organizational discipline
Consequences	Professional credibility	Public trust; organizational image	Fan satisfaction; media trust; acceptance of decisions; improved club brand; league credibility; professional image
Consequences	Sustainable development	Structural growth; future orientation	Development of infrastructure; improvement of processes; continuity of success; increased investment; improved international position

The first research question concerned causal conditions. The results show that coach selection begins with two primary drivers: professional competence and individual characteristics. Professional competence captures the technical and leadership capacities required to manage a Premier League team, whereas individual characteristics capture the ethical, psychological, and behavioral traits that support sustainable leadership under pressure. The second research question

concerned contextual conditions. The findings identify organizational structure and social context as the two major contextual domains. Club governance, administrative transparency, professional infrastructure, football culture, media pressure, and public expectations create the setting in which coach-selection decisions are interpreted and implemented. The third research question concerned intervening conditions. Informal influence and competitive pressure were the two major intervening domains. These factors do not form the ideal basis of coach selection, but they may modify, accelerate, distort, or intensify the decision process. Their presence explains why formal criteria alone may not be sufficient unless clubs also manage influence networks, political considerations, and short-term performance pressure. The fourth research question concerned the components of the core phenomenon. The core phenomenon was conceptualized as coach selection through hybrid rationality and situational flexibility. Hybrid rationality indicates that effective selection requires both evidence-based analysis and experienced professional judgment. Situational flexibility indicates that the preferred coaching profile should be adjusted to the club's strategic status, competitive moment, and organizational needs. The fifth research question concerned strategies. Table 3 shows that strategies had the highest conceptual density in the model, with 36 of the 116 basic concepts. This indicates that participants placed strong emphasis on practical solutions rather than only on diagnostic categories. The main strategies were structured evaluation, professional decision-making, and interaction management. The sixth research question concerned consequences. The consequences of systematic coach selection were not limited to match outcomes. Participants associated appropriate coach selection with competitive quality, organizational cohesion, professional credibility, and sustainable development. These consequences show that coach selection is both a technical and a governance issue.

To clarify the empirical response to each research question, Table 5 maps the study questions to the corresponding findings and implications.

Table 5. Direct mapping of research questions to empirical answers

Research question	Empirical answer based on the model	Main implication
What are the causal conditions?	Professional competence and individual characteristics	Clubs should evaluate both technical capability and personal/psychological suitability.
What are the contextual conditions?	Organizational structure and social context	Selection decisions must be aligned with club governance, resources, culture, and media environment.
What are the intervening conditions?	Informal influence and competitive pressure	Clubs need safeguards against non-transparent pressure and short-termism.
What are the components of the core phenomenon?	Hybrid rationality and situational flexibility	Data, judgment, and context should be integrated instead of relying on one-dimensional criteria.
What strategies improve coach selection?	Structured evaluation, professional decision-making, and interaction management	Selection should be formalized through criteria, committees, evidence, communication, and documentation.
What are the consequences?	Competitive quality, organizational cohesion, professional credibility, and sustainable development	Better selection can improve both team performance and institutional legitimacy.

The integrated paradigmatic model developed from the coding process is presented in Figure 1. As illustrated in Figure 1, coach selection is positioned as a core process shaped by causal, contextual, and intervening conditions. The model indicates that professional competence and individual characteristics provide the main basis for evaluating candidates; however, the practical quality of selection depends on whether clubs can manage contextual constraints and intervening pressures through structured evaluation, professional decision-making, and interaction management.

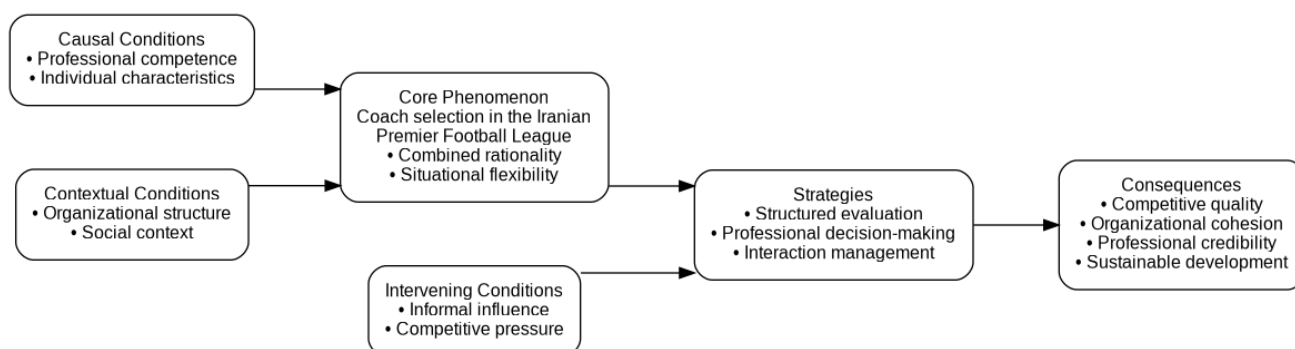


Figure 1. Paradigmatic model of coach selection in the Iranian Premier Football League

Discussion and Conclusion

This study developed a grounded theory model of factors affecting coach selection in the Iranian Premier Football League. The model shows that coach selection is a multidimensional process in which technical competence, personality, organizational conditions, social expectations, informal influences, and competitive pressure interact. The central theoretical contribution is the concept of hybrid rationality combined with situational flexibility. This means that professional clubs should neither rely only on informal managerial intuition nor reduce coach selection to a rigid scoring form. Instead, clubs need a structured decision architecture that allows evidence, experience, and contextual interpretation to be considered together. The importance of professional competence in the model is consistent with broader coaching literature. Côté and Gilbert (2009) argued that coaching effectiveness involves knowledge, athlete outcomes, and context (1). The present findings support this position because participants did not define competence as tactical knowledge alone. They also referred to leadership, staff management, communication, motivation, and psychological stability. This is particularly important in elite football, where the coach must manage a network of athletes, assistants, medical staff, executives, media actors, and supporters. Consequently, selection systems that focus only on previous match results may overlook essential dimensions of coaching capability.

The finding that individual characteristics are a causal condition is also supported by research on emotional competence and coach development. Lee and Chelladurai (2018) showed that football coaches encounter emotional triggers and need effective regulation strategies (7). In the Iranian Premier League context, where public and media pressure can be intense, the capacity to remain psychologically stable, motivate players, and interpret emotions may influence both performance and organizational continuity. Thus, psychological and ethical indicators should be included in coach assessment alongside technical and tactical indicators. The core category of hybrid rationality has practical significance. Many clubs collect information about candidates, but the information is often not integrated into a transparent decision process. Hybrid rationality suggests that clubs should combine objective indicators, such as coaching license, match record, tactical style, player-development history, and disciplinary record, with expert judgment from a qualified committee. This approach is compatible with the International Sport Coaching Framework, which emphasizes the need to map coaching capabilities according to roles, responsibilities, and context (2).

Situational flexibility is equally important. A club fighting relegation, a club rebuilding its academy pathway, and a club competing for a championship may require different coaching profiles. Therefore, the same checklist cannot be applied mechanically to all clubs and moments. However, flexibility should not become an excuse for arbitrary decision-making. The model suggests that flexibility must be documented: decision-makers should explain why specific criteria were weighted more heavily in a given situation and how the selected coach fits the club's immediate and long-term objectives.

The contextual conditions identified in the study confirm that coach selection is embedded in organizational and social systems. Organizational structure affects whether a club can evaluate candidates systematically, protect the process from impulsive decisions, and support the selected coach after appointment. Social context matters because fans and media can create pressure for rapid change. Research on coach turnover has shown that frequent coaching changes may be treated as quick solutions to performance crises, but such changes can produce broader organizational consequences (9). This reinforces the need for clubs to build selection systems that are both performance-oriented and sustainability-oriented. The intervening conditions are one of the most important parts of the model. Informal influence and competitive pressure do not necessarily disappear from professional football; they are part of the social reality of the industry. The managerial challenge is to prevent them from overriding professional criteria. Bradbury, Van Sterkenburg, and Mignon (2018) showed that professional clubs may rely heavily on networks rather than qualification-based frameworks (4). The present study suggests a similar risk in the Iranian context: hidden relations, intermediaries, and political considerations can affect coach selection. A transparent selection process with documented criteria, conflict-of-interest declarations, and committee-based evaluation can reduce this risk.

The strategies identified in the model are directly applicable. Structured evaluation requires the creation of a formal coach-selection form, weighted criteria, multi-stage assessment, and evidence collection. Professional decision-making requires a committee that includes technical, managerial, psychological, and legal/contractual expertise. Interaction management requires communication planning so that club executives, players, media, fans, and agents understand the rationale of the decision. These strategies transform coach selection from a personal decision into an organizational process. The consequences identified in the model extend beyond match results. Competitive quality is important, but organizational cohesion, professional credibility, and sustainable development are equally valuable. A coach who is selected through a transparent and evidence-informed process is more likely to receive organizational support and stakeholder legitimacy. Conversely, a coach appointed through unclear or heavily politicized processes may face distrust from the beginning, even before performance can be assessed. This finding is particularly important for clubs attempting to professionalize their governance and reduce repeated cycles of appointment and dismissal.

The study also contributes methodologically by showing the usefulness of grounded theory in sport-management research. Coach selection is not a simple variable that can be fully measured by surveys at the first stage of inquiry. It is a process built from meanings, experiences, negotiations, pressures, and organizational routines. Grounded theory allowed the study to identify not only selection criteria but also the conditions and mechanisms that shape how criteria are applied. Future quantitative studies can build on this model by developing and validating a coach-selection scale for Iranian professional football. Another implication concerns the distinction between coach selection and coach evaluation after appointment. Clubs sometimes use post-appointment results as the only evidence that the original selection was correct or incorrect. The present model suggests that this is insufficient. A selection decision may be well designed even if early results are unstable, especially when the club is rebuilding or when contextual constraints are severe. Conversely, a short sequence of positive results does not necessarily prove that the recruitment process was professional. Clubs should therefore evaluate both the quality of the decision process and the outcomes that follow it. This distinction can reduce impulsive dismissals and encourage more patient, evidence-informed management. This study was qualitative and context-specific. Although the sample included participants with direct expertise in coach selection, the findings should be interpreted as a grounded conceptual model rather than a statistically generalizable measurement scale. The model reflects the Iranian Premier Football League context and may require adaptation before use in other leagues or countries. Future research should validate the

categories quantitatively, examine differences between public and private clubs, and test whether structured selection practices are associated with performance stability, coach tenure, and organizational outcomes.

Comparative research would further strengthen the model. Studies comparing Iranian clubs with clubs in other Asian or European leagues could clarify which dimensions are context-specific and which are transferable across professional football systems. In addition, future research may examine how ownership structure, public versus private management, media intensity, and supporter culture change the weighting of coach-selection criteria. Longitudinal research is also recommended. The present study identifies the expected consequences of systematic coach selection, but future studies should test whether clubs that use structured selection procedures actually experience longer coach tenure, improved team cohesion, greater stakeholder trust, and more stable competitive performance. Such research could combine interview data with archival data on coach appointments, dismissals, league ranking, player turnover, and financial indicators. Future studies should operationalize the present grounded theory model into a quantitative instrument. Such an instrument could include measurable indicators for professional competence, individual characteristics, contextual fit, informal influence, competitive pressure, decision strategies, and expected outcomes. After expert validation, the instrument could be tested with larger samples of club executives, coaches, agents, and players to examine factorial validity and reliability.

For football clubs, the model suggests the need to institutionalize coach selection. Clubs should define a formal recruitment protocol before the need for a new coach emerges. This protocol should include a job analysis, minimum eligibility requirements, weighted criteria, interview procedures, background checks, evidence of player-development capacity, and a written justification for the final appointment. For the Football Federation and league authorities, the model can inform governance guidelines. Authorities can encourage clubs to use transparent evaluation procedures, declare conflicts of interest, and document decisions. Such guidance would not remove club autonomy but would raise the professional standard of decision-making. For coach education institutions, the findings show that development programs should cover not only technical and tactical knowledge but also leadership, communication, emotional regulation, ethical decision-making, media interaction, and organizational understanding. This is consistent with the wider coach-development literature, which emphasizes contextual and reflective learning rather than certification alone. In operational terms, the model can be used as a diagnostic checklist before appointment and as a reflective tool after appointment. Before appointment, it helps clubs ask whether the candidate fits the technical, psychological, organizational, and contextual requirements of the position. After appointment, it helps managers review whether the club provided the conditions and support that were assumed during selection.

The study identified a grounded theory model of factors affecting coach selection in the Iranian Premier Football League. The model includes 15 main categories, 28 subcategories, and 116 basic concepts organized into causal conditions, a core category, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The findings show that effective coach selection should begin with professional competence and individual characteristics, be interpreted through organizational and social context, and be protected from the distorting effects of informal influence and short-term competitive pressure. The core logic of the model is hybrid rationality and situational flexibility: clubs need structured evaluation, but they must also adapt criteria to their strategic circumstances. The proposed model can support more transparent, merit-based, and sustainable coach selection in Iranian professional football.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the participating football executives, coaches, agents, players, and sport-management experts whose professional experiences informed the study. The authors also acknowledge the academic support provided during the development of the doctoral dissertation from which this manuscript was derived.

AI Use Statement

Artificial intelligence tools were used only for language editing, academic structuring, and formatting support. The conceptual model, data, findings, and interpretations are based on the doctoral dissertation and authors' scholarly work. No artificial intelligence tool was used to generate or fabricate data, participants, results, or references.

Authors' Contributions

Maryam Tavakkoli: conceptualization, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, methodology, and original draft preparation. Arefeh Jamshidi: supervision, methodology, validation, critical review, editing, and correspondence. Mostafa Soltani: supervision, methodology, validation, critical review, editing, and correspondence. Seyed Sajjad Hosseini: validation, sport-management interpretation, critical review, and manuscript revision. Narges Ghelich Afshar: literature support, data organization, manuscript formatting, and revision assistance. All authors should review and approve the final version before journal submission.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

This manuscript was derived from a doctoral dissertation conducted at Islamic Azad University, Qazvin Branch. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and participants were informed about the research purpose, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw from the study. The study respected the principles of anonymity, informed participation, data protection, and responsible academic reporting.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out within a project for the Ministry of Education of Iran, according to official letter No. 1294/77465/602, dated 1396/10/25.

References

1. Côté J, Gilbert W. An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*. 2009;4(3):307-23. doi: 10.1260/174795409789623892.

2. International Council for Coaching E, Association of Summer Olympic International F, Leeds Metropolitan U. International Sport Coaching Framework, Version 1.2: Human Kinetics; 2013.
3. Galdino de Souza M, Lesch L, Wicker P. (Un)Sustainable human resource management in Brazilian football? Empirical evidence on coaching recruitment and dismissal. *Sustainability*. 2022;14(12):7319. doi: 10.3390/su14127319.
4. Bradbury S, Van Sterkenburg J, Mignon P. The under-representation and experiences of elite level minority coaches in professional football in England, France and the Netherlands. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. 2018;53(3):313-34. doi: 10.1177/1012690216656807.
5. Cushion CJ, Armour KM, Jones RL. Coach education and continuing professional development: Experience and learning to coach. *Quest*. 2003;55(3):215-30. doi: 10.1080/00336297.2003.10491800.
6. Stodter A, Cushion CJ. What works in coach learning, how, and for whom? A grounded process of soccer coaches' professional learning. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. 2017;9(3):321-38. doi: 10.1080/2159676X.2017.1283358.
7. Lee YH, Chelladurai P. Analyzing the components of emotional competence of football coaches: A qualitative study from the coaches' perspective. *Sports*. 2018;6(4):123. doi: 10.3390/sports6040123.
8. Strauss A, Corbin J. *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*: SAGE Publications; 1990.
9. Galdino M, Wicker P. A culture of constraints: How head coach turnovers affect the backroom staff and player development in professional football. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*. 2024;19(2):515-24. doi: 10.1177/17479541231207704.