

Branding of Small-Scale Sport Events

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ABSTRACT

Background: Although according to previous studies hosting major sport events contributes a wide range of economic, infrastructural, social, cultural, and sporting benefits to local communities, many countries cannot take the risk of providing initial funding for hosting. Small-scale sport events, with less financial and professional investment than mega-events, offer good opportunities and positive social consequences for the host communities. This is if such events are branded to become distinguishable and sustainable.

Methods: We used a mixed-methods and 360-degree perspective to analyse the branding of small-scale sport events. We conducted interviews with event organisers as well as experts in sport marketing and branding and subsequently collected data from event participants by utilising a questionnaire to create a model.

Results: The findings identify six key domains relevant to the branding of small-scale sport events in Iran: leadership and organising committees, event nature, venue features, brand orientation, media, and innovative technology.

Conclusion: Factors like media attention, public relations, promotions, social networks, social media, sponsorships, and celebrity involvement tend to exert more impact on smaller events than they do on larger ones. It is crucial to understand that in significant sport events, some items like technology and event management are vital for event branding, whereas these components are less critical for smaller events. Therefore, it is important to consider the relevance scores of the model factors identified in our research when planning and allocating budgets for branding small-scale events in Iran.

Keywords: Sports competitions, branding, sport marketing, hosting events

1. INTRODUCTION

A large part of people's free time today is devoted to holding events such as celebrations, carnivals, parades, concerts, and sports competitions. These events require substantial human resources, and a significant proportion of the public also devote their leisure time to attending or watching them. Mega sports matches and tournaments marketed and managed under the title of 'events' are good examples of this. Sport is inherently attractive; however, this attraction is realised through organised competitions that take place at specific times and locations and follow established rules. Sport events

can create powerful images and evoke emotional responses from spectators (Nauright, 2013). Recent studies indicate that even small-scale sport events can generate symbolic value, strengthen destination image, and foster stakeholder emotional engagement through strategic branding, without the high costs and risks associated with mega-events (Vila-López, 2024). Event management is one of the most diverse sectors that has controlled the presentation of these powerful images through strong communication with sports management. In addition to event and sport managers, governments also recognise the symbolic power of sport. Nauright



(2013) believes that major sport events, especially the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, have become high-demand focal points whose symbolic value goes beyond the results of sport events. Major sport events provide unique opportunities to pursue symbolic politics. Such events have the opportunity to demonstrate important changes such as changing and reframing narratives about the host or reinforcing key messages of change in the host country. These signals or narratives are vital tools of legitimacy for the host (Black, 2007). Hosting major sport events is often associated with acceptance, participation, and alignment with a socially constructed and internationally recognised system. Events are also considered a tool for pursuing goals of foreign policy, influencing the attitudes of foreign audiences, and accumulating the capacity of soft powers (Donos, 2012). Governments increase their credibility on the world stage by supporting commonly and universally admired sports norms in ways that show a positive image of them (Grix & Lee, 2013).

Today, many countries are competing to host sport events. They have linked their economic development strategies to attracting major international sport events as they hope to increase tourism revenue and foreign business investment. Such events also facilitate the rapid development of supporting infrastructure that continues to be used after the event (Nauright, 2013). Hosting sport events directly affects the standard of living of individuals in host communities (Taks et al., 2017). For local host communities, financial, infrastructural, social, and sports achievements are happening or continuing after the time of mega sport events (Ramchandani et al., 2015).

In most cases, the research literature on events and events tourism has been conducted around major events like the Olympics and World Cup games. A search for the word ‘mega’ not only speaks to the abundance of research in this field but also to the fact that event size matters (Nauright, 2013). This is despite the fact that many countries do not have the necessary economic and managerial capacity to hold large events, thus they will be deprived of its benefits such as earning money from tourism, advertising, international sponsors, and other. Some contemporary research, therefore, emphasises the need to shift scholarly attention towards small-scale sport events, as these events are more compatible with local contexts and offer greater potential for sustainable and place-based branding strategies (Rocksand, 2025). Kotze (2006) acknowledges that developing countries that lack the means or systems

to host large events such as the Olympics or the World Cup can consider hosting smaller events. Higham (1999) defines small sport events as “regular season sports competitions, international sports competitions, domestic competitions, disabled sports, and similar events” (Kotze, 2006, p. 286). Although small sport events are generally smaller than their big counterparts (Olympic Games, World Cup, etc.) in terms of size, scale, and scope, they are once-a-year and diverse like big events. Single-sport or multi-sport, one-day or multi-day events may attract residents or foreign visitors. Such events have a significant positive impact and impose a minimal burden on local budgets and resources. With adequate media coverage, they can contribute to host community recovery efforts and provide economic benefits without capital or resource reduction (Vallarde-Menary, 2019). Small events do not require the same risk, expertise, cost, and infrastructural requirements as large sport events. Small events often benefit local communities through identity building, local pride, and economic and health measures (Page & Connell, 2012). Such events promote sports tourism and provide economic benefit opportunities for host communities, often through accommodation and food expenses incurred by sports tourists from around the region, the country, and the world (Gibson et al., 2012). Sports have proven to be a powerful industry for tourism promotion (Tichaawa & Bama, 2012) and effective for positioning destination brands (Mohammadi & Jazaei, 2016). Small sport events allow the creation of stronger social networks and the connection of local people with these events (Taks, 2013). Researchers emphasise that small-scale sport events usually rely on their small local community to form their volunteer workforce, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the multipurpose nature of volunteer activities in these types of events. The latter creates a higher potential for personal growth (human capital) of the host community members in small sport events compared to large sport events (Taks et al., 2015). It seems that compared to large sport events, small sport events provide more opportunities for positive (or less negative) social impacts and outcomes for host communities. But it should be considered that such events will be less successful in attracting people and visitors and less able to benefit their host city and local people until they are recognised and find their values. In other words, the events should have a strong name (or brand) so that they can remain stable. It is a brand that distinguishes the product, service, event, and destination

and makes it identifiable, special, and unique. If holding a single-sport event can become a unique tourist product or a valuable brand in the form of a system with specific, correct, and integrated activities, it can attract the cooperation of officials and local people and captivate the attention of visitors and financial sponsors, increasing their loyalty. This is the reason why the government should cooperate with the organisers of these events (Kuusik et al., 2010). Strong brands benefit the brand owners, resulting in high loyalty and therefore stability of sales in the future (Kapferer, 2008). Converting small-scale sport events into a valuable brand is not only useful for the sports industry, but it can also be very effective as a tool to strengthen the brand of tourism destinations. Special events are used by destination marketers to strengthen the brand of the host destination (Chalip & Costa, 2005), and sport events attract millions of dollars in sponsorship and tourism, thus a strong event brand is required.

In Iran, international sport events are held every year, including Fajr Decade International Sports Competitions, Mazandaran Tour International Cycling Competitions, Azerbaijan International Cycling Competitions, and Gonbad Riding Competitions. These competitions are small in scale and have participants from European and neighbouring countries of Iran. To expand these competitions and attract more participants and benefit from their economic and social capital, such sport events need to become reliable and valuable brands. Considering Iran is one of the most unique countries in the world in terms of climate diversity, i.e. its four seasons occurring at the same time in the country in short distances, it holds one of the most important advantages for sports tourists (Fasih Mardanloo, 2018). Furthermore, the country has potential capacities such as sports professionals, current international sport events, the presence of eager, passionate and interested spectators, tourist attractions (historical and natural), and public interest to host major international sport events in the country (Loghman et al., 2015). Therefore, branding these events seems to be reasonable. In the current research, we intend to provide a model for branding such sport events in Iran.

Theoretical foundations

Mass media

In the field of marketing, we consider any method used to transmit information, especially advertising messages, as media. Media generally includes different communication channels. In the

basic terms, mass media channels are designed to attract large audiences (Karam & Saydam, 2015). In the traditional form, it includes tools such as television, mail, direct sales, radio, print advertisements (such as magazines and billboards), and printed materials for promotion (such as brochures or catalogues) (Percy & Rossiter, 1992), and in the new form, it includes modern mechanisms such as search engines, websites, social media, banner ads, and email marketing (Tan, n.d.). Brands can take advantage of the media. Websites, podcasts, and blogs are cheaper options to reach the target audience than others. However, social media can be much more effective because it not only introduces consumers to businesses but also helps develop brand communication. Social media especially conveys information from one customer to another, as the interactive features of social media help customers share their thoughts quickly and widely. Brands are also informed by the feedback of customers. Bond's Use and Satisfaction Theory shows that brand awareness is one of the results of customer behaviour in the context of social media (Bond, 2010). Social media marketing activities are known as an effective factor in brand image and brand loyalty. In addition, as indicated in the theoretical foundations, brand awareness and brand image have a significant impact on brand loyalty (Bilgin, 2018) because brand awareness serves as an easy prompt for decision-making (Hoyer & Brown, 1990).

In this context, Parent and Séguin (2008) argue that the media conveys brand messages between the executive board of the competition and its stakeholders. They believe that event coverage by the media is part of the nature and process of event brand creation (Parent & Séguin, 2008). This supports the claim of Emery (2010) who emphasises that the media is now the main part of the sports event management process. Recent empirical evidence further shows that digitally co-created narratives on social platforms significantly enhance event brand meaning and recognition, particularly for small-scale events seeking greater visibility (Rocksand, 2025). However, Holt (2016) states that a few brands have been able to create interest among consumers in online methods; in fact, it seems that social media has made brands less important. Therefore, the question would be whether the media will still maintain its role in branding or not when sport events are held on a smaller scale and attract a smaller crowd.

Research hypothesis: Media plays a role in branding small-scale sport events.

Brand attitude

An attitude is a way of thinking or feeling about something or someone. Brand attitude is defined as the consumer's general evaluation (good or bad) of a brand name (Keller, 1993; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). It can be defined as the audience's emotional response to the advertised brand. This means to what extent the audience feels the purchase of the brand is good, bad, desirable, undesirable, and wise or foolish (Lutz et al., 1983). The findings from O'Cass & Grace's (2003) research show notable connections between brand dimensions and attitudes. There are two main views regarding the attitude structure. First, we can view the attitudes as evaluative responses that are influenced solely by belief (Wyer, 1970). Second, based on the three-component model, consider attitudes as a set of beliefs (the cognitive component), and emotional and behavioural components (Maio et al., 2004). A recent meta-analysis confirms that brand-event fit significantly influences consumer brand responses at both cognitive and affective levels, offering updated empirical support for the inclusion of brand attitude in event branding models (Liu & Liu, 2025). Thus, creating a positive attitude towards the brand in consumers can help the business in many ways.

Newer definitions add that brand attitudes correspond to consumer evaluations of brand associations and beliefs that affect brand trust and reputation (Foroudi, 2019). Certainly, previous experience and perceived usefulness have always played a role in attitude adjustment, even though individuals hold varying attitudes regarding a range of events (Solberg & Ulvnes, 2016). Some studies showed that brand attitude does not affect brand loyalty in the field of sport services (Alguacil et al., 2021). According to those studies, only for some events the attitude of the brand played a role and increased the value of the brand. While the mediating role of brand attitude has been confirmed for some types of events, namely trade fairs and street events, the mediating effect has not been confirmed for sponsored events (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). Therefore, the next hypothesis is:

Research hypothesis: Brand attitude plays a role in the branding of small-scale sport events.

Leadership groups and organising committees

Parent and Séguin (2008) and Parent et al. (2012) believe that leadership is the first key component in creating a brand for large-scale sport events, and various managerial, networking, and sports skills can be effective for them in this way.

A local research in Iran also indicated that the management aspect is an important influential factor of hosting sport events in the local community (Taghipour Jahromy et al., 2013). However, the effect of leadership skills on brand building depends on the context of the event (Parent et al., 2012; Parent & Séguin, 2008). Thus, the characteristics of the leader or leadership groups must match the identity or brand of the event. Moreover, the nature of the event also plays a role in creating the brand of the event. Nevertheless, the aforementioned research findings are related to big events. Considering that in smaller events the local and locational factors of the venue will play a greater role (for example, local businesses) and also the nature of the event, which is usually a single discipline in smaller events, the question arises whether the leadership groups and the organising committees still maintain their key role in branding?

Research hypothesis: Do the leadership groups and event organising committees play a role in branding small-scale sport events?

The nature of the event

The nature of a sport event includes all the features of the discipline in question. The sport field, its history, star player, head coach, team successes, and the level of interest of people in the specific discipline, as well as other factors (Biscaia et al., 2013; Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Ross et al., 2008), are all effective backgrounds that can determine the nature of the event. The nature of the event is known as a key component in event branding (Parent et al., 2012). But considering that small-scale events are usually held only in one sport discipline and may not have some of these backgrounds, will the nature of the event be effective in branding of small sport events?

Research hypothesis: The nature of the event plays a role in the branding of small sport events.

Venue

Contemporary research in sports tourism highlights that infrastructure adequacy, accessibility, and promotional effectiveness directly influence sports destination image formation, underscoring the strategic branding role of venue and location features even for small-scale events (Rocksand, 2025). In their 1999 study on the value of brand equity in professional sports, Gladden and Milne noted how the team's location affects its growth (Gladden & Milne, 1999). This is particularly relevant for enhancing brand recognition and fostering customer loyalty (Calysta & Wono, 2025). The stadium, its design

and routes to and from the stadium, and the organisation of the stadium are important elements. The venue is a tangible and visible representation of the team's brand (Underwood et al., 2001), often creating intimate relationships between the location and fans around the world. The venue may even evoke a sense of nostalgia among sports fans everywhere.

Some researchers introduced different areas for event planning, including the cultural and strategic appropriateness of events with the location, also, the competitive differentiation of cities (Jago et al., 2003). In addition, according to Parent and Séguin, the effect of organisers' skills is moderated by the context factor, which shows that the actual place (especially in the core of the city) and size of the venue have a direct impact on the brand of the event. Furthermore, in a case that the venue is not ready for a great and distinctive show to attract attention, instead of being a strong point, the venue becomes a weakness for the host and the event. Considering that this research is in the field of smaller sport events, the question will be whether the stadium and the city, their size, their facilities, their security have a significant role in the branding of the sport event?

Research hypothesis: Venue and location features play a role in branding small sport events.

Innovative technology

Recent studies indicate that digital transformation and technological innovation have become integral components of modern sports brand strategies, enabling event organisers to extend brand reach, enhance experience quality, and compete symbolically despite limited event scale (Liang, 2025). Advancements in technology have enhanced both the communication and economic opportunities associated with sport events (Petrović et al., 2015). Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2010) state that service brand value is created by combining two traditional approaches including all branding efforts and a new approach including consumer experience while using the service. An important point they point out is that the consumer experience is influenced by the employees and the technologies used by the organisation (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). Some publications also recognise the significance of athletes and the digital landscape as a medium for sport organisations to establish their brands (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). However, Loghman et al. (2015) considered the lack of modern and up-to-date technologies in Iran as one of the weaknesses of hosting major international sport events. But

since major events such as the Olympics and the World Cup use new technologies such as quadcopters in the opening and closing ceremonies of events and the multi-dimensional transmission of competition images to different parts of the world, can these innovative technologies be used to play a role in branding of smaller events?

Research hypothesis: Innovative technologies are relevant to the branding of small-scale sport events.

2. METHODS

We employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design with a 360-degree perspective to examine the branding of small-scale sport events in Iran. In this design, a qualitative phase was first conducted to identify key branding dimensions, followed by a quantitative phase aimed at instrument development and model testing.

The qualitative phase consisted of a library review and a modified classical Delphi process involving experts in sport event management, sport marketing, and branding. Initial branding factors were identified through a review of relevant literature on sport event branding and brand orientation. These factors were then refined through semi-structured expert interviews, which constituted the first round of the Delphi process.

Interviews were conducted with event organisers and academic and professional experts in sport events and marketing. Participation was voluntary. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview procedure, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data were treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes.

Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive thematic coding approach within the Delphi framework. Responses from the first round were coded and thematically grouped to generate preliminary categories. In subsequent Delphi rounds, items were refined, merged, or eliminated based on expert feedback until conceptual stability and consensus were achieved. The final set of agreed-upon factors constituted the qualitative output and served as the basis for instrument development in the quantitative phase.

Based on the factors extracted from the qualitative phase, an anonymous, researcher-developed questionnaire was designed. Participation in the

survey was voluntary, and electronic informed consent was obtained prior to completion. No identifying or personal information was collected, ensuring full respondent anonymity. All data were analysed in aggregated form and handled in accordance with ethical standards for social science research.

The questionnaire was administered to spectators, athletes, coaches, and event officials attending selected Iranian sports competitions during the year of data collection, thereby incorporating the consumer perspective alongside expert viewpoints and fully operationalising the 360-degree approach.

Content validity was assessed using the content validity ratio (CVR) based on expert judgement. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct and for the overall instrument.

Construct validity was examined through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Prior to EFA, data suitability was confirmed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. Factor loadings of 0.40 or higher were retained. CFA was conducted to test the measurement model, with sample size deemed adequate based on recommended item-to-respondent ratios. Model fit indices were evaluated using AMOS software (version 21).

Sample

In the qualitative phase, a purposive non-random sampling strategy was employed to recruit experts in sport event branding and management. The initial Delphi panel consisted of 15 academics and practitioners with documented research and executive experience in sport events and branding. To enrich domain coverage, six additional experts were recruited through snowball sampling, resulting in a final qualitative sample of 21 participants.

In the quantitative phase, stratified random sampling was used to recruit respondents from spectators, athletes, coaches, and event officials attending small-scale sports competitions in Iran, including national leagues and international tournaments. These people participated in competitions such as: Taekwondo League, Chaharmahal

and Bakhtiari Provincial Fajr Cup Competitions in bouldering and rock climbing, the 8th Asian Alborz Indoor Athletics Championships, Fajr Zanjan International Badminton Competitions. A total of 175 valid questionnaires were collected, which meets recommended thresholds for exploration and confirmatory factor analysis, and is only slightly below the recommended sample size for structural equation modelling (SEM). According to the findings, 39.7% of the sample consisted of spectators as the most respondents. Besides, the sample average age was 34 years (standard deviation 10) and the range was 16 to 67. Also, 43.7% of the research sample are women and the rest are men. In this way, we applied the consumers' point of view about the effect of effective factors in the branding of Iranian sport events.

Instrument

The quantitative research instrument was developed through an exploratory sequential process grounded in the qualitative findings and existing sport event branding literature. First, themes and factors identified through the modified Delphi interviews were reviewed alongside established conceptual frameworks in sport event branding (e.g. brand orientation, media, venue, and leadership). Based on this synthesis, an initial pool of items was generated to operationalise each construct.

Each factor was measured using a minimum of three items to ensure construct identification, except for innovative technology, which emerged as a single-dimensional construct in the qualitative phase. Items were refined through expert review for clarity and relevance, and then rated on a five-point Likert scale. Content validity was assessed using the content validity ratio (CVR) with a panel of 12 experts, all exceeding the acceptable threshold ($CVR > 0.56$).

Following content validation, a pilot administration was conducted to assess internal consistency, yielding an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.98. Construct reliability and distinctiveness were supported through EFA and CFA, confirming that the survey is reliable. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 19 and AMOS version 21.

Table 1. Factors and items

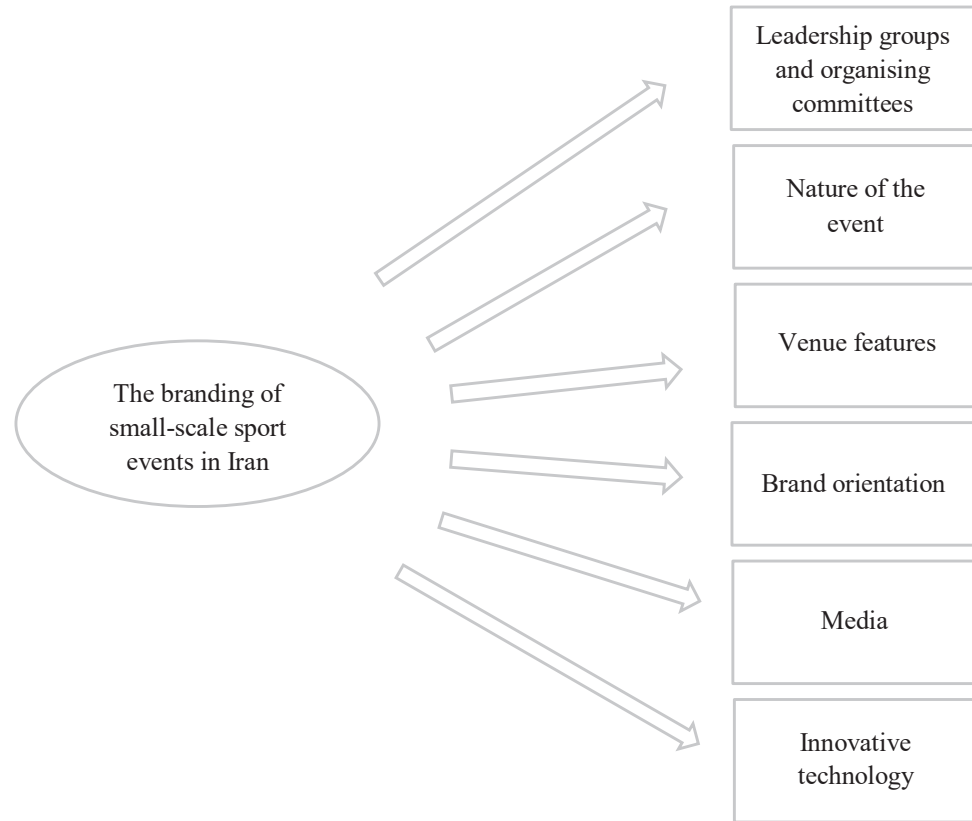
Factors	Items	Reliability Statistics
Leadership groups and organising committees	Master plan	0.93
	Human resources training	
	Communication and networking	
	Political-legal context	
	Hard and soft standard equipment and facilities	
The nature of the event	Event features	0.92
	The nature of the present sports	
	Branding strategy	
	Event history	
Venue features	Host city brand	0.93
	Safety and security	
	Socio-cultural context	
Brand orientation	Brand elements	0.94
	Brand associations and satisfying experiences	
	Brand reputation	
	Service quality	
Media	Media coverage	0.86
	PR and promotion	
	Social networks and social media	
	Sponsorships	
	The presence of celebrities or stars	
Innovative technology	Information and communication technology (ICT) and application of new technologies	0.92

3. RESULTS

The qualitative findings revealed six core dimensions that shape the branding of small-scale sport events: leadership groups and organising committees, nature of the event, venue features, brand orientation, media, and innovative technology. These dimensions represent the main outcomes

of the qualitative phase and capture the dominant themes consistently emphasised across expert insights. Based on these qualitative results, a conceptual model was developed to examine the relationships between these dimensions and event branding. Figure 1 presents the resulting model, which was subsequently tested through quantitative analysis.

Figure 1. **Research conceptual model**



To assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis, two standard tests were applied; for explanatory factor analysis, we used two primary tests: Kaiser–Meyer–Elkin measure (0.89) for sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s Test (0.00). To measure the number of factors, values of eigenvalues greater than one and a scree diagram were used, and factor loadings of 0.40 or higher were retained.

We analysed the effect of hypothesis factors through SPSS V19. The goodness of fit was also analysed by using the aforementioned sample questionnaire and the correlation matrix by AMOS V21 software.

According to the index values presented for each factor, the Chi-Squared Index was smaller than

5 for its degree of freedom (1/45, 0/175, 0/00, 0/065, 1/28, 0/00), which confirmed the fit of the model. Also, TLI (0.991, 0.999, 0.999, 0.999, 0.995, 0.999) and CFI (0.997, 0.999, 0.999, 0.999, 0.999, 0.999) fit indices were greater than 0.9, RMSEA (0.050, 0.0000, 0.0000, 0.0000, 0.039, 0.0000) and SRMR (0.018, 0.005, 0.000, 0.003, 0.0000, 0.013) were smaller than 0.08 and 0.05, respectively, which means that the validity of this model was confirmed. As a result, this model has achieved a good level of fit, and the structure of the six factors could be confirmed.

To test the measurement indicators, we used exploratory factor analysis to further refine the new measurement indicators.

Table 2. **Total variance explained (TVE)**

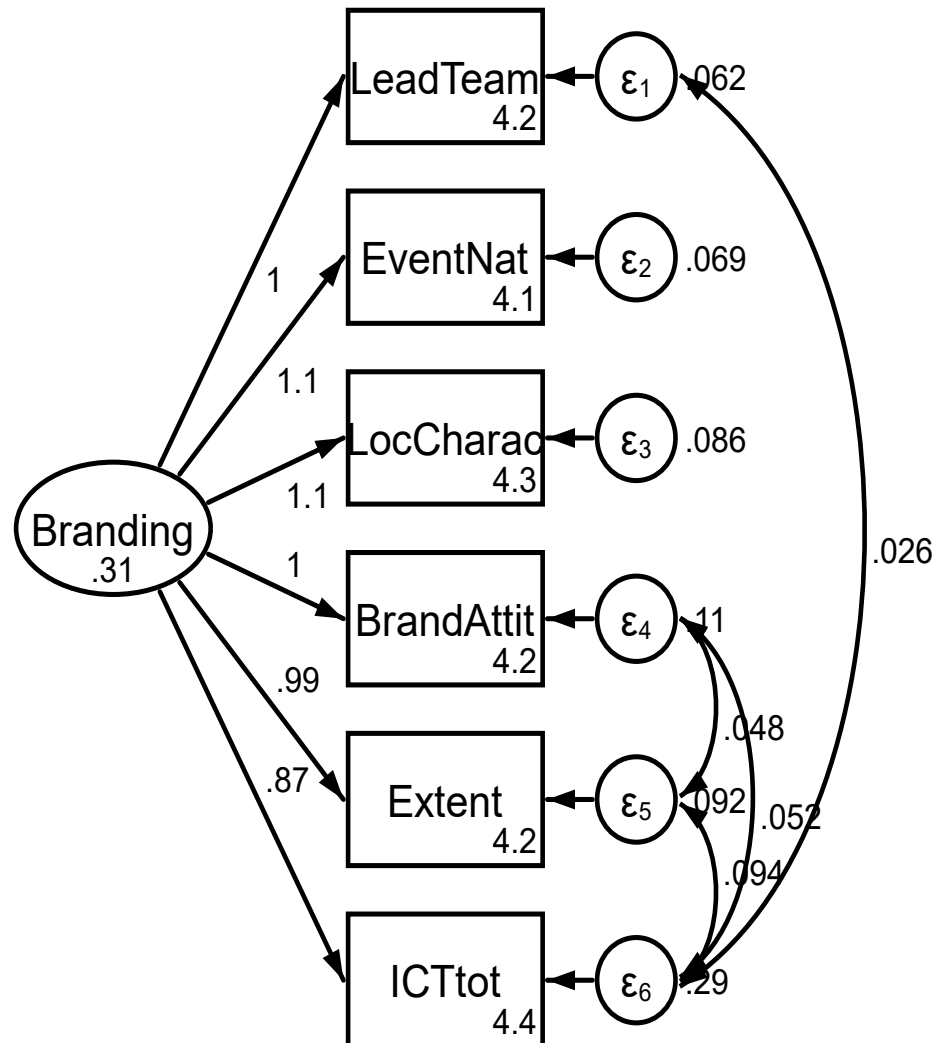
Factors	TVE
Media	0.939
Brand orientation	0.920
Leadership groups and organising committees	0.912
The nature of the event	0.902
Venue features	0.897
Innovative technology	0.805
KMO	0.890
TVE	80.41
Bartlett’s Test	<0.001
Cronbach’s alpha	0.98

As can be seen in Table 2, these factors were loaded in the concept of the whole questionnaire and KMO values obtained for them were higher than 0.6. Also, the TVE was calculated as 80.41. In addition, the results of Bartlett's Test also confirmed the adequacy of exploratory factor analysis for the extractive factor (KMO and Bartlett's Test

were examined by SPSS V19). Factor-level Cronbach's alpha values and the results of EFA and CFA confirmed that items within each construct are distinct and internally consistent.

Then we examined the confirmatory factor analysis and the test of the six hypotheses proposed in the research literature.

Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis



Once the confirmatory factor analysis was carried out, the data indicated a good fit of the model: $\chi^2_{ms}(5) = 6.585$, $\chi^2/df = 1.35$, $p > \chi^2 = 0.253$, RMSEA = 0.043 90% CI = (0.000 to 0.120), CFI = 0.999, TLI = 0.996, SRMR = 0.008, R² = 0.949. Given the parsimonious structure of the

model, the absence of correlated error terms, and the non-saturated solution ($df > 0$), the high CFI and TLI values showed good model fit rather than model overfitting. Therefore, research hypotheses could be checked based on this model. The findings are available in Table 3.

Table 3. Coefficient

Structural	Stan- dardised Coefficient	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z	P > z	[95% Conf. In- terval]
LeadTeamF						
BrandingF	.0104441	.0030828	3.39	0.001	.0044018	.0164863
EventNatF						
BrandingF	.0099974	.0029576	3.38	0.001	.0042006	.0157942
LocCharacF						
BrandingF	.0102714	.0030491	3.37	0.001	.0042953	.0162474
BrandAttitF						
BrandingF	.0110992	.0032803	3.38	0.001	.00467	.0175284
ExtentF						
BrandingF	.0120755	.0035724	3.38	0.001	.0050738	.0190772

Note: The path from ICTF (innovative technology) to BrandingF is not reported here because it was included in the AMOS model only as a fixed reference for scale identification. It appears in the software output, but it is not a freely estimated effect and should not be interpreted as a regression coefficient.

Therefore, a significant relationship was observed between the factors of ‘Leadership groups and organising committees’ and ‘Small-scale sport events in Iran’, thus the first research hypothesis was confirmed. A significant relationship was also observed between the factor ‘The nature of the event’ and ‘Small-scale sport events in Iran’, thus the second research hypothesis was confirmed. The third hypothesis was also confirmed because a significant relationship was observed between ‘Venue features’ and ‘Small-scale sport events in Iran’. A significant relationship was observed between the field of ‘Brand orientation’ and the main field of ‘Small-scale sport events in Iran’, which led to the confirmation of the fourth hypothesis of the research. Furthermore, a significant relationship was observed between the field of ‘Media’ and the main field of ‘Small-scale sport events in Iran’, and the fifth hypothesis of the research was confirmed. Finally, the innovative technology factor was retained in the model based on its conceptual relevance and its role in scale identification. Although its direct path to BrandingF was not freely estimated in the structural model, the factor demonstrated acceptable measurement properties in the factor analysis, supporting the inclusion of the sixth hypothesis at the conceptual level.

4. DISCUSSION

According to the participants’ viewpoint in the research, mass media channels have the greatest effect on the branding of a small event. This finding aligns with recent evidence showing that social

media engagement mediates the relationship between event attributes and destination image, suggesting that media influence operates through narrative co-creation rather than simple information dissemination (Rocksand, 2025). Media plays a vital role in brand awareness. In Bond’s model, the Theory of Use and Satisfaction shows that brand awareness is one of the results of customer behaviours in the context of social media (Bond, 2010). However, the result is not consistent with Taghipour Jahromy (2013), who considers management to be the most important factor in holding an event. Nevertheless, mass media and social media remain critical channels for brand development (Karam & Saydam, 2015). Brands that have a higher level of image and awareness among consumers are likely to be purchased by them many times (Hoyer & Brown, 1990), and mass media as one of the marketing tools can facilitate this path. In line with contemporary branding research, digitally driven storytelling on social platforms appears to amplify event brand perception, particularly for smaller events that depend on media visibility to compensate for limited physical scale (Rocksand, 2025).

Brand attitude is another important factor whose role has been confirmed in the branding of a small-scale sport event. Researchers state that there are three components of knowledge, attitude, and action in the four known types of consumer behaviour, only their order is different. In rational behaviour, there is knowledge, attitude, and then action, while in unconscious behaviour, there is first attitude, then knowledge and action (Karam & Saydam, 2015). From the research of Keller (1993),

who proposed attitude at the heart of brand associations to the research of Q'Cass and Grace (2003), who reported the role of attitude in the intention to use the brand, brand attitude has always played a crucial role in branding (Keller, 1993; O'Cass & Grace, 2003). In research to investigate people's attitude towards major sport events, three large and small events were investigated, as a result of which the smaller event received more support from the public. Therefore, the researchers acknowledge that there is no need to make significant investments in facilities and enhancing infrastructure to allow citizens to experience sport events (Solberg & Ulvnes, 2016). Moreover, recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that brand–event fit strengthens both emotional and cognitive consumer responses, which may explain the robust role of brand attitude observed in small-scale event contexts (Liu & Liu, 2025). Our research also shows that brand attitude is effective in branding of a small-scale event.

The organising and planning committees of events, as the management groups of sport events, face a range of issues during the progress of an event, thus they must use all their skills and coordinate all the resources they have available. Like the results of Parent and Séguin's research (2008), the effect of sport event management in branding the event was also confirmed in our research, although the role of the organising committees was more prominent in their studies. In the current research, although the effect of the event management factor in branding of small-scale events was high, its priority was placed after the media and attitude factors. Parent et al. (2012) suggest that the importance of the leadership groups varies depending on the situation.

Event branding also depends on its nature (Parent et al., 2012). All features of the events or sports of those events can be included in the nature of the event. The familiarity of the people of the host city with the sport and its popularity, the existence of a global brand for that sport, and the history of the sport show the nature of the event (Parent et al., 2012). The nature of the event also plays a role in branding small-sized events.

The venue of the event and its features are also effective in branding the event, particularly when it comes to increasing brand visibility and fostering customer loyalty. Although Parent et al. (2012) supported the direct influence of the venue and its size on the brand of the event, they introduce the geographical location and media coverage as sub-components of the nature of the event. However, the

title of the autonomous agent has been emphasised in both items in the present study. The features of the event venue are composed of sub-fields such as the security of the venue, the brand of the host city, the social and cultural backgrounds, and all what can be included in the 'contexts' of the event. It seems that in the branding of small-scale events, the features of the place are very interesting to the consumers of such events. In other words, the context factor plays a greater role in small-scale events than in large ones. This interpretation is supported by recent studies demonstrating that infrastructure quality and locational branding significantly shape sports destination image, reinforcing the importance of contextual and place-based factors in small-scale event branding (Rocksand, 2025).

The last factor examined in this study was the use of innovative technologies in small-scale sport events. Although this factor was included in the model primarily for conceptual completeness and scale identification, the findings highlight its growing relevance in the contemporary sport event environment. The findings align with recent research on sports brand globalisation, which emphasised that digital transformation enables event organisers to construct interactive brand ecosystems, suggesting that technology increasingly functions as an indirect but essential branding enabler (Liang, 2025). Technological developments have facilitated broader access to events, enhanced communication with distant audiences, and supported event organisation and control. Innovations such as live broadcasting technologies, digital interaction platforms, and decision-support technologies (e.g. Video Assistant Referee Technology) have contributed to improving spectators' experiences and operational efficiency. Consistent with previous studies, technology provides event organisers with new opportunities to strengthen brand-related interactions, even though its direct structural effect on branding was not freely estimated in the present model (Petrović et al., 2015).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The primary aim of this study was to identify and empirically test the key factors influencing the branding of small-scale sport events in Iran from a 360-degree perspective, integrating expert insights and consumer evaluations. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the study sought to develop and validate a context-sensitive branding model tailored to small-scale sport events. The results provide a structured framework for understanding how

branding mechanisms operate in non-mega sport event contexts.

The number of small-scale sport events is much more than large-scale events, and they are held not only in big cities but also in small and medium-sized cities. Since there are many types of small-scale sport events, there should be a recognisable and valuable brand to provide the host city with economic, social, and cultural benefits. A differentiation strategy should be set up to distinguish a considered event from other relatively similar events that the local population, stakeholders, and the government can understand. Overall, it is important to identify the factors influencing event branding. While previous studies have mainly examined the issue from the perspective of organisers (Parent et al., 2012), it is clear that following the audience's point of view can increase the range of knowledge in this field.

The study first examined factors identified by experts in sport event management and subsequently evaluated these factors from the perspective of event consumers. Then the consumers of the sport events approved or rejected the factors. A structural model with six hypotheses tested the effect of six factors on the branding of small events. The results of our research confirmed many of the factors proposed by Parent et al. (2012) for large sport events were applicable in the case of small events. Although, the role of media coverage, PR and promotion, social networks and social media, sponsorships, and the presence of celebrities or stars in small-scale events are more effective than large events. It is noteworthy that while technology and event management are often considered critical drivers of branding in mega sport events, their role in small-scale events appears to be more contextual and supportive rather than structurally dominant. In small-scale events, media-related factors, brand attitude, and contextual elements tend to play a more central role in shaping event branding. Therefore, planning and budgeting for small-scale sport events in Iran should prioritise these factors, while considering innovative technologies as complementary tools rather than primary branding drivers.

It should be noted that the quantitative sample size ($N = 175$) was slightly below the commonly recommended threshold for SEM analyses; future studies could use larger samples to further validate the structural model.

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