

## **Designing Sports Diplomacy Development Model for Ardebil Province (with a Data-Based Approach)**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Diplomacy is the art of establishing and strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations with the aim of securing national interests. Sports as a tool of soft power in today's world play a significant role in strengthening the public diplomacy of countries. The aim of the present study was to design a model for the development of sports diplomacy in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Methods:** The statistical population of this study included specialized academic staff members (sports management, international relations, and international relations reporters). Purposeful sampling was carried out using the snowball method. In this study, data collection and analysis were carried out based on a variable sequence and with multiple revisions.

**Results:** The findings showed that; in the section of causal factors (the nature of sports, numerous spectators and audiences of sports, and sports endorsement), intervening factors, legal and legal requirements, facilities and equipment, and human resources; the most important role in determining the strategies and future success of Iran's sports diplomacy. Contextual factors (two important categories: social and cultural) have been included. Research strategies have included attention to infrastructure and attention to structure and framework, planning and management, media management, and specialization.

**Conclusion:** Also, the consequences of the development of sports diplomacy include strengthening international relations, cultural exchange, increasing revenue generation, increasing satisfaction within the country; strengthening peace and friendship, strengthening the country's branding, tourism development, economic development.

**Keywords:** Development, Marketing, Federation, Sports Management.

## Introduction

Shariati Feizabadi (2012) declares that one of the goals of establishing the Japan J League was the request of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this way, after 40 years of the Cold War, football can strengthen economic achievements and cause progress in Japan, and this league also brings together young players in its training camps (Horne, 2005).

Sports careers are among the few jobs where an athlete and coach can go from country to country and strengthen the national identity of their country. Valuable human resources are something beyond engineers, nurses, IT specialists, doctors, etc., and today, these athletes can serve a country as valuable human resources to advance its goals (Giulianotti, 2011).

In February 1998, for the first time since the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the United States national wrestling team was the first group from this country to compete against Iranian wrestlers in Iran. The media referred to this as wrestling diplomacy. During the event, the U.S. flag—once a symbol of protest in Iran—was carried by strong Iranian and American athletes, while Iranian spectators cheered. Although hardline groups in Iran attempted to disrupt the event and protest the presence of American wrestlers, the sporting atmosphere limited their influence and actions (Macur, 2017). However, unfortunately, many governments have not yet developed a sports diplomacy strategy (Murray & Pigman, 2014).

Sports have a distinct potential in peacebuilding (Levermore, 2008). For instance, China has a special program for sports diplomacy in cyberspace (Hong, 2011). In a rapidly changing international relations system, governments benefit from sports as a cost-effective and high-profile soft power asset (Nye, 2004). Germany was the first country to use sports as a political tool in developing countries and crisis areas (Allison & Monnington, 2002).

The power and potential of diplomacy through sports are growing. Kofi Annan and Nelson Mandela have pointed to the role of sports as a tool for policy development, and sports have been described as a phenomenon that can prevent war (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011). Korea has a special program and budget for the development of sports diplomacy (Cho, 2009). Thus, the past two decades have witnessed what can be called a diplomatic turn in the history of sports (Dichter, 2014). Major sporting events provide unique opportunities for host countries to strengthen their soft power by presenting their countries as vibrant (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

The world of sports provides an opportunity for natural cooperation between different countries, according to the natural participation of all countries and individuals in sports. Sport also covers all individuals and citizens of the global community, bridges different individuals and communities together across different cultures and ethnicities. It creates a framework for learning skills such as discipline, self-confidence, and leadership, and teaches people the basic rules of life such as cooperation, respect, and tolerance. It teaches people the value of effort and how to achieve victory as they also experience failure. In the meantime, governments use the positive aspects of sports as a powerful tool to achieve their goals (United Nations, 2003). Sport goes beyond politics, reducing tensions (Beacom, 2012). Major events can be very effective in developing diplomacy. Dubinsky states that the Olympic movement is entering a new era, and sports diplomacy is advancing

(Dubinsky, 2019). Sports diplomacy has also integrated actors, tactics, and tools, as well as soft power resources, which enable their interaction in sports diplomacy (Black & Peacock, 2013).

Sometimes, the acceptance of a country's sport by other countries is considered a clear sign of the political independence of that country or that political regime and can be a prelude to the political acceptance and rights of that country officially. For example, the formation of the Algerian football team in the midst of the country's war of independence with France and the call of professional Algerian football players who played in the French national team by the Algerian National Liberation Front was itself a prelude to the independence of this country in 1962 (Darby, 2002). Sport is also an effective tool for bringing subcultures closer together. In world championships, waving the flag and playing the national anthem of a country following the victory of athletes belonging to different subcultures or the culture of that country reflects national unity in that country (Hobsbawm, 1992). Today, even in the most remote areas or villages in the heart of the Amazon jungle, you cannot escape sports news and discussions. People talk about the Italian league, the Brazilian Sao Paulo. The phenomenon of sport has created a new era.

#### Research Methodology:

This study aims to develop a conceptual model in the field of sports diplomacy with a particular focus on the impact of sports on psychological disorders. The intended "paradigm model" seeks to clarify how sports can contribute to both diplomatic engagement and psychological well-being at national and international levels.

To achieve this goal, a qualitative research approach based on Grounded Theory was employed. Grounded Theory is not only a theoretical framework for understanding social phenomena but also a systematic method for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. In this research, Grounded Theory was applied through three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This process enabled the extraction of a data-driven model grounded in participants' experiences and empirical realities.

The nature of this research is exploratory-fundamental, and its approach is qualitative, using a data-based strategy. The aim of the research is to achieve a paradigmatic model based on data collected using in-depth and systematic interviews and existing theoretical studies. The systematic design of the strategy has been used in this research. Strauss and Corbin (2011). The research method of "grounded theory" was invented by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1960. This approach has its roots in the interpretive school of symbolic interactionism or symbolic interactionism. This method is considered a type of field research. People who experience similar situations in common experience common meanings and behaviors that form the basis of grounded theory.

The main reason to use grounded theory is considered to be in relatively unexplored research that is developed in order to discover social processes and interactions and is able to explain the behavior under study in the form of a relevant theory. The theory derived from data is more like reality than a theory formed by putting together a series of concepts. Such a theory will be a guide for action by providing deep insight for the researcher. Using the grounded theory method, concepts can be inductively extracted from qualitative data and used in a meaningful way in the development of data-based theories. In addition, grounded theory has many advantages for developing countries

because the results of the research reflect the real conditions of those countries. The statistical population of this study includes expert faculty members (sports management, international relations, and international journalists). The grounded theory strategy has been used to conduct this study. In grounded theory, the purposive sampling method was used, which is also known as theoretical sampling. In this method, the samples were selected by the researcher according to specific criteria and initial findings. Initial data analysis identified issues that needed further elaboration, so the sampling process proceeded according to the theory development procedure. In this study, notes were taken, and the interviews were transcribed after each interview, and all interviews were audio-recorded with the interviewees' permission. Then, footnotes were added to these texts. Then, primary, axial, and selective codes were assigned. Then, the next interview was conducted. This procedure was sometimes continued with the next interview until the initial model development stage, and then revisions were made to the coding. In fact, the data collection and analysis processes were carried out simultaneously. In this study, data collection and analysis were carried out in a variable sequence and with multiple revisions.

## Results

After open coding to identify which condition each category is part of (contextual, intervening, and causal), considering that if a category is the cause of the formation of the main phenomenon, it is considered a causal condition, each of which is a general ground-breaking condition effective in strategies is considered an intervening condition, and each of which has a vital role in the main phenomenon which is selected and considered a contextual condition.

Table (1): Selective coding (causal factors

Question (1) what are the causal factors affecting the development of Iran's sports diplomacy?

| The main category | Subcategory                | Concepts                                                                              |
|-------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                   | The nature of sport        | Sports increase connections between countries.                                        |
|                   |                            | The world is a global village with sports being the most popular pastime              |
|                   |                            | Attracting tourism and interacting with people                                        |
|                   |                            | Due to the presence of optional spectators, the impact potential of sports is greater |
|                   | Many viewers and followers | Sports increase connections between countries.                                        |
|                   |                            | The world is a global village with sports being the most popular pastime              |
|                   |                            | Attracting tourism and interacting with people                                        |

**Commented [N1]:** • ابهام در هدف تحقیق • در ابتدای متن فقط گفته شده هدف رسیدن به «پارادایم مدل» است، اما مشخص نیست این مدل قرار است چه مسئله‌ای را حل کند یا در چه حوزه‌ای به کار رود  
در بخشی از متن، مرز بین: اختلاط تئوری و روش • و روش اجرای (grounded theory) تعریف نظریه داده‌بنیاد آن مشخص نیست و به صورت در هم ریخته بیان شده است

|                   |                       |                                                                                              |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Causal conditions |                       | <b>Due to the presence of optional spectators, the impact potential of sports is greater</b> |
|                   | Communication factors | <b>Spectators and viewers follow the words and behavior of athletes</b>                      |
|                   |                       | <b>The potential of sports stars</b>                                                         |
|                   |                       | <b>The words of athletes are audible</b>                                                     |
|                   |                       | <b>Attention to positive sports figures</b>                                                  |

Contextual conditions: which include two important categories: social and cultural. The specific conditions that affect strategies (strategies) and the selection of strategies should be based on them are called context. These conditions are a set of concepts and categories or contextual variables. Two factors were considered as contextual conditions, which shows that these two factors play the greatest role in the development of Iranian sports diplomacy. This means that social factors and cultural factors are among the most important factors in the development of Iranian sports diplomacy and have a greater role.



Table (2): Selected coding (contextual conditions) Question (2): What are the contextual factors affecting the sports diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

| The main category     | Subcategory         | Concepts                                                                            |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                       |                     |                                                                                     |
| Contextual conditions | Social conditions   | Reducing global violence                                                            |
|                       |                     | Combating political isolation                                                       |
|                       |                     | The potential of sport to protect the environment,                                  |
|                       |                     | Building social capital                                                             |
|                       |                     | National pride                                                                      |
|                       |                     | Community dynamism,                                                                 |
|                       |                     | Building bridges between countries                                                  |
|                       | Cultural conditions | Sport is a means of promoting and familiarizing different cultures with each other. |
|                       |                     | Strengthening mutual cultural understanding.                                        |
|                       |                     | Promoting common human values.                                                      |
|                       |                     | Sports leads to increased respect for the law.                                      |
|                       |                     | Strengthening a positive image of a country.                                        |
|                       |                     |                                                                                     |

Table (3): Strategies and consequences affecting the sports diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

| The main category                                            | Strategies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Consequences                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Paying attention to infrastructure, structure, and framework | Investing in sports infrastructure<br>Proper management of sports facilities<br>Supporting sports federations<br>Using modern technology in sports<br>Forming a specialized diplomacy working group<br>Building an academy hotel or a commercial complex to achieve a sustainable income<br>Appropriate organizational structure of the federation and the diplomacy committee<br>Creating a detailed vision in the field of diplomacy by the Ministry of Sports<br>Implementing hosting agreements with countries | <b>Strengthening national image</b><br><b>Strengthening international relations</b><br><b>Cultural exchange</b><br><b>Increasing revenue generation</b><br><b>Increasing satisfaction within the country</b> |
| Planning and management                                      | Developing a priority program with regard to international relations<br>Having a comprehensive strategic plan<br>Striving to obtain international hosting rights<br>Establishing appropriate sports hosting rights<br>Investing in women's sports                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Strengthening peace and friendship</b><br><b>Strengthening country branding</b><br><b>Developing tourism</b><br><b>Economic development</b>                                                               |
| Media Management                                             | Increasing the presence of national media in international competitions<br>Using the capacity of virtual and internet networks to strengthen the country's image<br>Necessary training for media managers to enhance Iran's image                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Preventing discrimination and racism</b><br><b>Advancing political goals</b><br><b>Achieving set goals in target audiences</b>                                                                            |

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Core expertise | Using international relations experts in competitions familiar with international affairs<br>Attracting famous audiences and spectators for the Iranian national team and clubs<br>Lack of influence of politicians in sports and elections | <b>Scientificization of sports</b><br><b>Creating business and income</b><br><b>Reducing side costs</b><br><b>Enhancing national image</b><br><b>Improving the status of sports</b> |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### Discussion

Causal factors, including the nature of sport, large audience and followers, endorsement of sport, and opportunities have been identified for interaction. In fact, the potential of sport, the increasing power and attractiveness of international sporting events, and the transformation of sport as an industry and an economic actor are the most important factors that indicate the potential of sport for sports diplomacy in the Republic of Iran. The results of this study are in line with the results of the research of Peymanfar, Mehri et al. (2024), Karimi et al. (2024), and Zare et al. (2024). Many countries have sought to achieve their long-term political goals in sports through smart power in sports diplomacy, by presenting a coherent program regarding the use of athletes, coaches, referees, and sports companies; however, Iranian political officials have considered sports as a recreational activity and have not yet thought about the effectiveness of sports in the international arena. Therefore, attention to this matter is needed in advance.

The background factors in this study include: two important categories: social and cultural. Among them, sports people, international events, and international seats have been able to better contribute to the country's sports diplomacy. Hosting and party etiquette, religious and cultural ceremonies and programs, language, local values and norms, national and international sports organizations, international sports events, and international seats were mentioned. The results of this study were in line with the results of the research of Peyman Forou and colleagues (Ebrahimi et al. (2024), Abbaspour et al. (2024), Rahmaniyan et al. (2025), Salahi Kajur et al. (2024), and Bagheri et al. (2025). Cultural exchange in the media, the production of theoretical foundations in the media, the diplomatic nature of the media, and the enrichment of leisure time are one of the basic needs of countries in order to advance sports diplomacy, its coordination and complementarity with the

media; Therefore, the media and its role in today's world in sports diplomacy are essential for the interaction between the media and sports diplomacy. In the last years of the 20th century and the beginning of the current century, various terms and concepts were added to the literature of international relations and communication sciences, including terms such as media diplomacy 2, cyber diplomacy, etc., which all refer to the role of the media in various fields. In general, it can be said that paying attention to the development of the media is very important. Intervening factors are general conditions that create obstacles in the process of implementing strategies and strategies are affected by them. Which includes two cases: human resources and facilities. In this case, we can mention things such as. Creating suitable conditions for the presence of international players and coaches, hosting a stadium, modern equipment that is a positive advertisement for the country, not equipping the hall for public sports, lack of hardware facilities, lack of safety equipment. In the United States, sports have gradually become an efficient and flexible tool in foreign policy, paving the way for the "resumption" of relations between states. According to many experts in the field of diplomacy, if sports have found their current position and have penetrated all strata of society as a pervasive phenomenon and play a facilitating role between statesmen and citizens, the results of this study are in line with the results of studies by Sharai et al. (2024), Kalashi et al. (2024), Agha Seydi et al. (2024), Rezanejad (2024), and Molidooost (2024). Strengthening the hardware and software capabilities of the media plays a key role in the field of sports diplomacy, and in this context, the media is usually present in several areas alongside events and helps events to flourish. The pre-event stage, the during-event stage, and the post-event stage, where the media, with its presence in these three stages, promotes that event and helps to attract more attention to it and find more value for that event. Sometimes, the media even pay a fee in the form of broadcasting rights to attend international events and reflect them. This increases the desire of governments and media managers to support sports programs and events to improve the quality of sports events.

The consequences of developing diplomacy can be attributed to issues such as messages including increased productivity, developing the country's brand image and personality, developing peace, and developing the country's soft power. Sports diplomacy has an impact on gaining international seats by mediating political behavior. Sports have the potential to improve foreign policy and international relations in a new tool role; deeper, more positive, and more effective access to foreign audiences; supporting foreign policies; and strengthening mental imagery and foreign influence. In this regard, the role of government agencies such as the Presidential Institution, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the Iranian Radio and Television, and non-governmental organizations in supporting sports diplomacy, making maximum use of sports diplomacy capacities alongside governmental and non-governmental institutions responsible for managing the country's sports by using the successful experiences of other countries, seems extremely vital. It seems that at the current juncture, increasing the knowledge, awareness, and understanding of political decision-makers, along with their interest in sports disciplines and the status of sports in the Islamic Republic of Iran, can encourage them to have a specific and strategic plan for sports diplomacy within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## Conclusion

According to the results of the research, it can be suggested that sports diplomacy requires maximizing global communications, so global communications should be interpreted based on fundamental symbols and signs in mutual communication action. In order to achieve international seats in this way. Also, the requirements of policy-making synergy in the field of international initiatives of sports diplomacy are suggested to improve political behaviors in the field of international sports. Having an appropriate program in the country's political apparatus and the absence of rapid changes in the country's prominent sports heads will make us have a coherent program in the field of obtaining international seats and will encourage strategic sports decision-makers to have a special program for sports diplomacy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and use sports as a tool for diplomatic development. Also, the limitations of the research can be mentioned as; in the qualitative part, there is the possibility of different interpretations of the phenomenon under study and naturally, the interpretation made of the phenomenon under study in this research is only one of the possible and acceptable interpretations of it, and the present research has no exception to this rule.

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