

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****Mapping Iran Sports Diplomacy Based on Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)**

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**EXTENDED A B S T R A C T****Introduction**

Today, sports have become an important aspect of the political influence of governments. Sports are a tool for international affairs that countries can use to strengthen relationships around the world. As a key component of soft power, sports can be an effective tool in determining diplomatic relations. Many policymakers and experts believe that sports diplomacy is an easy, safe, and gentle tool for improving international relations (Min and Choi, 2019). As an element of public diplomacy, also called soft power, sports have a significant contribution to peacebuilding (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020).

The results of the study by Raeissadat et al. (2022) indicate that sports competitions can provide a context for convergence and cooperation. In a study, Garamvölgyi & Dicz (2021) introduced the Hungarian sports diplomacy approach with a focus on the use of sports in public diplomacy. Emphasizing the investment of large amounts of public funds by the government to attract and organize international sports competitions, they stated that by institutionalizing sports in public diplomacy, Hungary has become a pioneering country in Central and Eastern Europe that can be an example for other governments and nations in the region. Dichter (2020) introduced the FIFA World Cup as a space for numerous diplomatic opportunities for men, players, youth or women and examined the link between the world's most popular sport and global diplomacy in national and transnational contexts. Sjyland (2020) showed in a study that the country has been able to use its sport in the best way to gain global appeal and soft power, and Qatar's domestic policies have worked well in this regard despite criticism. Won and Chiu (2020) compared the functions of sports diplomacy in Taiwan and South Korea and showed that Taiwan's geopolitical situation has a negative impact on hosting international sports events compared to mainland China.

Despite the effective role of sports diplomacy in increasing the identity, pride, and national cohesion of countries, presenting a favorable image of them in the international arena, and reducing political isolation, unfortunately, Iranian sports organizations have not taken an effective step in this regard and have not utilized the potential of sports to expand international interactions. This is despite the efforts made to impose economic and political sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran in recent years, the field of sports can be an effective way to present a true and favorable image of Iran in the international arena.

Since in Iran, various organizations and executive bodies are active in the development of sports at the championship and professional levels, and the reflection of their activities can lead to presenting a favorable image of Iran's sports

diplomacy at the national, regional and global levels, in order to develop sports diplomacy in Iran, each of the sports organizations and executive bodies must play a role and participate in the development of sports diplomacy. To achieve this, it is necessary to first determine the performance of each of these bodies and then, considering the status of each of them and their performance in the development of sports diplomacy, take steps to strengthen the dimensions of sports diplomacy in that specific body. Therefore, the question arises: what are the dimensions of sports diplomacy? And how is the performance of Iranian sports organizations in utilizing the capacities of sports diplomacy? Also, in order to develop the sports diplomacy efforts of Iranian sports organizations, in which of the dimensions does it need to be corrected or made fundamental changes? Therefore, the present work aims at mapping sport diplomacy in Iranian sport organizations.

### Methodology

The present study is descriptive-survey in nature and method, and field research in terms of data collection. The statistical population was composed of all professionals, experts, and authorities of major sport organizations of Iran, from whom the research sample was selected in a purposeful manner. The research instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire that was prepared using the library study method and was used after confirming content validity by CVI method. By conducting library studies, a list of 25 components of sports diplomacy in Iranian sports organizations was identified, which were organized into 5 main dimensions: "internal cohesion", "improvement and promotion", "international trust-building", "platform for dialogue", and "international imagery". Using DNAP method, the network relationships of components determined and the effective weight of each component calculated from the complete correlation matrix based on the basic concept of ANP.

### Findings

The description of the demographic characteristics of the experts participating in the study shows that in terms of gender, most of the experts were male (79.92%). In terms of education, most of them had a PhD (73.26%). In terms of age, most of them were between 41 and 50 years old (46.22%). Also, most of the experts had work experience between 21 and 30 years (59.94%).

Results revealed five dimensions of sport diplomacy in the organizations including "internal cohesion", "improvement and promotion", "international trust-building", "platform for dialogue", and "international imagery"; the first two of which were also categorized as causal (effective) dimensions, while the rest were of influential dimensions. The IPA analysis showed that "internal coherence" and "improvement and promotion" belong to the category of low-importance, high-performance dimensions requiring immediate attention. "International imagery" was also categorized as high-importance, high-performance dimension (requiring continuation). "International trust building" belongs to the high-importance, low-performance category (not requiring immediate attention); "platform for dialogue" also belongs to the low-importance, low-performance category.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The study of the relationships and importance of the dimensions of sports diplomacy in Iranian sports organizations showed that the dimensions of "internal cohesion", "improvement and promotion" are in the category of cause dimensions (influencing) and the dimensions of "international trust-building", "platform for dialogue", and "international imagery" are in the category of effect dimensions (influencing). In addition, the dimension of "internal cohesion" was the most influential and the dimension of "international trust-building" was the most influential dimension in terms of relationship. In terms of importance, the dimension of "international imagery" was the most important and the dimension of "platform for dialogue" was the least important dimension of sports diplomacy in the country's sports organizations.

In the dimension of internal cohesion (the most effective dimension of sports diplomacy), the components of national solidarity, social vitality and happiness, and elimination of discrimination and deprivation are in the category of influential

components, and the component of national solidarity is the most influential component. In other words, if the national solidarity component is improved, other components of the internal cohesion dimension will be improved and, as a result, the scope for sports diplomacy in sports organizations will increase.

In addition to the internal cohesion dimension, the improvement and promotion dimension also constituted another influential dimension on other dimensions of sports diplomacy. The improvement and promotion dimension consists of the components of improving political and legal relations, improving social and cultural conditions, promoting peace and friendship, and promoting moral standards and concepts, among which, the components of improving social and cultural conditions and promoting moral standards and concepts are included in the category of influential components. The results indicate that the component of improving social and cultural conditions is the most influential component in this dimension. In other words, if the component of improving social and cultural conditions is promoted, the other components of the improvement and promotion dimension are also promoted, and as a result, the field of sports diplomacy in sports organizations also increases.

Other findings of the present study showed that the dimensions of international trust-building, platform for dialogue, and international imagery are in the category of affected dimensions. In fact, it can be stated that these dimensions are the result of promoting the dimensions of internal coherence and improvement and promotion. In addition, the findings of the present study showed that the dimension of "international trust-building" is the most influential dimension of sports diplomacy and among its components, the component of lobbying and leveraging sports constitutes the most influential component.

Finally, the findings of this section showed that in terms of importance, the dimension of "international imagery" constituted the most important dimension of sports diplomacy in the country's sports organizations. In fact, it can be said that the most important goal of sports diplomacy is "international imagery" or, in other words, improving the country's image; because by improving the state of international imagery, it is expected that the country's cultural and media communications and interactions will be improved, a favorable image of the country will be created on the international stage, and the attractiveness and soft power of sports symbols will also increase.

Considering the findings of the present study, which shows that the dimension of "improvement and promotion" and its components are among the influential dimensions in the sports diplomacy of the country's sports organizations, it is suggested that, more than other components of this dimension, the issue of improving the country's social and cultural conditions should be placed at the top of the government's programs so that by promoting it, the ground for improving sports diplomacy and ultimately obtaining its numerous benefits for the country can be prepared.

Based on the results, it is suggested that the country's top sports managers, in addition to paying attention to the dimensions and components identified in this study, provide conditions to improve and promote sports diplomacy in Iranian organizations by promoting social vitality and happiness, promoting national solidarity and national identity, improving political and legal relations, improving social and cultural conditions, and promoting peace and friendship.

## KEY WORDS

Sport Diplomacy; Importance Performance Analysis; Sport Organizations; International Imagery; Internal Cohesion.

