

Perceived Effects of Olympic Success on International Policies and Prestige: A Case Study of Sports Actors from Iran

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For some nations where these events cannot be facilitated, Olympic success would be more significant. Governments often believe that winning medals enhances their image globally, which is their reason to invest and intervene in elite sports. Based on this belief, the researchers tried to determine how sports actors perceive the relationship between elite sporting success and prestige and its reflection on their related policies. To achieve this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Iranian sports officials and sport managers in charge of elite sports. The results identified four themes in interviewees' speeches related to the objective of the study, including (1) sporting success at the Olympic Games and international prestige, (2) fairness and international prestige, (3) sport and diplomatic relations, (4) media coverage and international prestige. Taken together, these results suggest that the concept of international prestige is notably essential when it comes to the country where the international image might not be positive toward that particular country. Sports as a soft power tool can play this role and build a positive image for that country in different ways. The findings contribute to elite sporting success, sports and country image research, sports international prestige, and sports diplomacy in Iran.

Keywords: *Olympic success, international prestige, fairness, diplomatic relations, media coverage*

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing attention toward elite sports. States intervene increasingly in the financing and organization of Olympic elite sport (Grix and Carmichael 2012, Haut et al. 2017), and governments frequently are motivated by a quest for international image and prestige (Hubbert 2013, Liu 2020, Park et al. 2012, Silk 2013, Tan and Houlihan 2013). In particular, having high prestige levels can be considered as a source of states' soft power through which states can convert resources into policy outcomes (Grix 2014, Nye 2008). In this context, soft power has been defined as the power of persuasion, whereby one actor in a non-coercive manner convinces another to want the same things he/she wants (Nye 2004, p. 8). Thus, government officials use international sports to establish their nation's legitimacy in the international sphere, and they often believe that winning medals enhances their image globally (Kidd 1991). Governments fund sports and sport facilities to boost the profile of a city or nation. Accordingly, they often become caught in a cycle where increased funding is regularly required to

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compete with other cities and countries doing the same thing with bigger budgets or newer facilities (Hall 2006, Topič and Coakley 2010).

Houlihan (2000) conducted a survey demonstrating that one of the purposes of government involvement in sports promotes the power and prestige of a group, community, or nation. This is especially the case for cities and countries that host mega sports events such as the FIFA World Cups and the Olympic and Paralympic Games (Booth 2011, Schausteck de Almeida et al. 2015). For others, where they do not have the prerequisites and opportunity of hosting sport mega-events (SME), gaining recognition and prestige through success at the Olympic Games is more important to governments and sport policymakers. Currently, Iran does not have the basic requirements for hosting sport mega-events. In the same vein, Eydi and Yousefi (2017, p. 171) identified some weaknesses including: transportation systems, infrastructures and sports venues, human resources, management, economic sanctions by western countries, unstable government support, and lack of international lobbying power. Meanwhile, their study found several strengths such as support of Iranian people, security, tourism attraction, geographic situation, infrastructure, and economic potential. Iran used to hold sport mega-events, but with the current conditions, it may not be able to host sport mega-events and benefit from hosting these events to enhance its image worldwide. As a result, success and exemplary performance in mega events like the Olympic Games have become more important to Iran. In other words, striving for success may be considered as the only option to increase international prestige. However, the fact that nations can raise their international prestige by performing well in the Olympics (Haut et al. 2017, p. 311) indicated that the formula of 'more success, more prestige' is overly simplistic. Indeed, in some cases, investment in the staging of sporting mega-events and athletic achievement can also result in reputational damage to nations like Qatar regarding the human rights and migrant workers (Al Thani 2021).

As noted by De Bosscher et al. (2009), elite sporting success can increase national pride, and the international prestige of a country as well. Successes in elite sports would be useful in the domestic and international contexts. In academic research, it is often argued that elite sports can be utilized for both 'soft power at home and abroad,' which means that sports as a tool of soft power is not limited to the realm of foreign policy; it can also be employed domestically to build peace and nationhood (Nygård and Gates 2013). Different nations in the early years of the modern Olympic Games considered the competition as an opportunity to shape their international image (Freeman 2012, Reiche 2013). For example, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were seen as a way for China to boost its soft power and a positive image to the rest of the globe (Manzenreiter 2010).

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the correlations of national pride and elite sporting success (Gassmann et al. 2020, Hallmann et al. 2013, Meier and Mutz 2018, Storm and Jakobsen 2020). However, there is a relatively small body of literature that is concerned with international prestige and soft power. For example, in relation to the roles of country image, nation branding, and public diplomacy, Dubinsky (2019a) examined them through the evolution of the modern Olympic Movement, and identified how countries used the Olympic Games to improve their image in different periods. Moreover, in terms of societal

outcomes, governments - in order to legitimize their policies and investments - believe that elite sport achievement encourages a wide range of good societal impacts that 'trickle down' (De Bosscher et al. 2021, p. 1).

Recent study by De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) also supports previous literatures. They reviewed the literature and have identified and clustered 79 societal impacts from the literature review into 10 categories. The categories represented: 1. Social equality and inclusion; 2. Collective identity and pride; 3. Ethics and fair play; 4. Feel good and passion; 5. Fans and (media) attraction; 6. International prestige and image; 7. Athletes' ability and quality of life; 8. Sport participation and health; 9. Sponsors and commercial activity; and 10. Local consumption and living conditions. The framework of their study has considered prestige and image in Category 6. What is new in their study was the identification of both potentially positive and negative impacts. Thus, compared to these rather extensively investigated aspects, the possible effects of sporting success on international prestige are under-researched and overestimated in many cases. The research problem derived from a thorough review of pertinent research associated with soft power, international image, prestige and elite sporting success. Reviewing the relevant literature revealed gaps in understanding the topic in our context. As a result, this research tries to fill this knowledge gap and determine if a similar study could be applied under research context (country Iran) with a different sample.

To date, some empirical studies address a broader range of these aspects (Breuer and Hallmann 2011, Breuer et al. 2017, Haut et al. 2020, Haut et al. 2017, Haut et al. 2016). Accordingly, the main objective of this article was to investigate how sport actors including Iranian sports officials and sport managers perceive the relationship between elite sporting success and international prestige. Although some research has been carried out on elite sporting success and international prestige, no single study exists which would explicitly focus on our question. Nevertheless, previous research, like Haut et al. (2017) suggested multi-national studies in order to allow for a comparative perspective. The research question was derived from the other research suggestions. In particular, this study seeks to address the following research question: how do sports actors perceive the relationship between elite sporting success and international prestige, and how do they reflect that on the success/failure of their related policies?

Literature Review

The theoretical framework that underpins this paper centres on sports diplomacy and the concept of soft power. Countries apply public diplomacy and soft power to achieve their national and international goals. With regard to the role of soft power, Nye (2004) argued that the three main sources of soft power are culture, political values and foreign policy, and according to him, soft power is one of the key concepts in considering public diplomacy and country image. Sports have been used as a tool for public diplomacy by politicians for many years to attain their international goals (Boykoff 2016). Moreover, sports provide a platform for countries to participate in a 'global sporting arms race' (De Bosscher

et al. 2008) for international reputation through means other than military and economic power.

Public diplomacy refers to the process by which international organizations engage with foreign publics to attain foreign policy objectives (Dubinsky 2019b) and some scholars view public diplomacy as a mean of soft power (Hukil 2015). Countries utilize sports for their public diplomacy to achieve their goals in different aspects like society, politics and finance to improve the image of a given country. Previous studies (Dubinsky 2019a, 2019b, Dubinsky and Dzikus 2019) have explored the relationships between soft power and public diplomacy in the context of sports as an instrument to improve the image of country. Countries from the Western Bloc and the Soviet Union used the Olympic Games for public diplomacy to achieve international goals and showcase their power. Public diplomacy has a long history as a tool for enhancing a country's soft power. Indeed, public diplomacy can play an important role to create an attractive image of a country (Nye 2008).

According to sports diplomacy studies, on one hand, sports play a diplomatic role by promoting cooperation such as 'ping pong diplomacy' (Carter and Sugden 2012). The game of table tennis has led to formal relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China. Murray and Pigman (2014, p. 1115) stated that 'international sport is used as an instrument of diplomacy by governments can generate important prescriptive conclusions that can enable governments to apply sports for diplomatic purposes more effectively'. In contrast, Coakley (2017) has another attitude toward the connection between sports and diplomacy, he states that sports have no impact in the realm of 'serious' diplomacy, which consists of discussions and decisions about political issues of vital national interest.

On the other hand, sports became a platform for political boycotts such as those between the Olympic boycotts of the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1980s (Murray 2012, Murray and Pigman 2014) and political exclusions, like in the case of South Africa, which was excluded from the Olympic Movement while it was under the Apartheid Regime (MacLean 2014). As for boycotting the Olympic Games, Iran is the only country that boycotted two consecutive Olympics, the 1980 and 1984 Olympics. Another issue that can arise here is asylum seekers. Since World War II, athletes have applied for asylum in almost every Olympic Games in the host country. Cold War policies provided an opportunity for Western countries to welcome asylum seekers from the Eastern Bloc, in 1956 after the Melbourne Olympics 61 athletes decided not to return to their home countries. Another example would be, at the 2012 London Olympics, athletes from Cameroon, Sudan, and Ethiopia sought refuge there (Kenny 2018).

Improving country image, 'the cognitive representation that a person holds about a given country' (Kunczik 2003, p. 412), is one of the foreign policy goals. Research on country image is traced back to the 1970s. The study of country image is multidisciplinary (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015), impacted by a variety of fields, particularly sociology, psychology, political science, business management and communications. In terms of country image in the Olympic Games, Dubinsky and Dzikus (2019) identified two major themes including: national identity and sports and international politics regarding Israel's country image. It is not surprising

that the two biggest superpowers and their allies identified sports and especially the Olympic Movement as a tool to reach international goals and improve the country's image. Since the end of World War II, countries have used the Olympic Games for political purposes to rebuild their cities, infrastructure, and technologies, and to attain national and international goal (Dubinsky 2019a). During the decades after World War II, the political use of Olympic Games became more sophisticated, with countries using both hard power and soft power (Nye 2008) to achieve foreign policy goals through the Olympic Movement. Nye (2004) defined hard power as military and economic capabilities, since these are the main tools that can pose threats or incentives, while the existing literature on soft power and enhancing the country image is extensive and focuses particularly on political aspects of sport. Recently, more scholars attempt to scrutinize the societal impacts of elite sport (For example, De Rycke and De Bosscher 2019).

Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015) noted the potential of the Olympic Games for nation branding and image enhancement back to the first modern Olympic history. Freeman (2012, p. 1263) defined nation-branding, 'a practice used by states to build and manage their reputations'. Moreover, nation-building is defined by Cha (2008) as a sense of unity and identity. Regarding the difference between nation branding and place branding, Ginesta and de San Eugenio (2014) stated that the connection between nation branding, public diplomacy, and international relations is stronger than that of other place brands. In this light, Szondi (2008) stated that nation branding can be considered a special case of place branding.

Freeman (2012) emphasized that hosting multinational sporting events and international sporting success can simultaneously contribute to both nation building and national branding, and it creates a sense of self-importance, international recognition and prestige. Later, Arning (2013), in his study considered both hosting and participating in sporting events which lead to governments getting international exposure to the competitions and making sports an effective instrument for demonstrating soft power and improving public diplomacy. For instance, in the context of Qatar hosting 15th Asian Games, Khodr (2012) findings suggested that Qatar uses events to reimage and market itself as a destination, raise its international reputation, and acquire a competitive edge in the area.

The use of sports for country image purposes can lead to terrible outcomes in some cases (Dubinsky 2019a). Haut et al. (2017) claimed that not only losing, but even winning unfairly can harm a country's international image. For Iran, one example can be Kimia Alizadeh, taekwondo competitor, who made history after winning a bronze medal in the 57 kg category at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. She became the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal. Alizadeh, in January 2020, announced that she was leaving Iran permanently for Europe (News 2020). Also, she does not intend to compete for Iran in the 2021 Summer Olympics and expressed a desire to compete for her current country of residence, Germany. In 2021, she has received refugee status in Germany.

International sporting success also contributes to some societal impacts like wellbeing, happiness, life satisfaction, sport-related national pride (Hallmann et al. 2013, Pawlowski et al. 2014), and international prestige (Haut et al. 2017) as well. During the Cold War, the Eastern and Western Blocs fought to demonstrate the

superiority of their system through delivering sporting success (D'Agati 2013). Storm and Jakobsen (2020) contend that powerful nations in modern-day Olympics such as the US, China, and Russia still compete to obtain most gold, silver, and bronze medals. Based on this, both hosting sport mega-events and obtaining the most medals is of highest importance for hosting nations. Regarding the importance of international sporting success from the population's perspective, Humphreys et al. (2018) estimated the population's willingness to pay for sporting achievement. They revealed that willingness to pay is high and closely associated with Canadians' prestige and pride attached to their athletic performance. However, they concluded that their results do not necessarily mean the policies of improving the performance of elite athletes pursued by the Canadian government are economically efficient. Similarly, as they stated, their findings should not be used to support increased investment to improve the performance of elite athletes in other nations because that program is Canada's response to an international arms race.

In relation to international prestige, some researchers worked on this tangible effect and soft power. Liu (2020) examines whether and how a country's elite sport success would affect its soft power from an international audience's perspective. The results not only provided empirical evidence of whether Olympic achievement would have affected a country's soft power but offered insights on the mechanisms at work behind that effect. Furthermore, Breuer and Hallmann (2011) find that a substantial part of the German population (78.2 percent) regards athletic performance as important to Germany's reputation abroad.

The general assumption that sporting success positively affects a country's prestige has not often been specified theoretically. It seems clear that performance prestige can only be gained when international rules and standards are respected in line with Reiche (2013) notion. According to him, firstly, gaining prestige might not only require that athletes comply with the written rules, but also with the unwritten standards of fair play. To commit a minor infringement to get an advantage may be considered as clever in one country, but as dirty practice in another, or vice versa, extraordinary acts of fair play may lead to additional prestige. Secondly, concerning doping and corruption, compliance with rules refers not only to athlete's behavior in competition but also to the whole system behind the scenes (Emrich et al. 2014).

The Olympic Games, one of the enormous rituals on a global scale (Real 1996), is known as 'the biggest show on television' (Billings 2008, p. 1) and attracts billions of people worldwide who can watch televised games simultaneously. These global events expose viewers to new people, places, and events they are unfamiliar with. However, the Games are often criticized for repeating pre-existing biases against specific nations (Larson and Rivenburgh 1991). Specific countries or athletes generally receive increased amount of positive media coverage than others, similar to uneven coverage found in reporting international news (Chang 1998). de Moragas et al. (1995) argued that television commentators constructed other nations' images with familiar existing frameworks to their home audiences.

An analysis of NBC primetime telecasts and sports coverage in *The New York Times* found that foreign nations and their athletes were not significantly affected by any given nation's performance during the Olympics. Winning gold medals

does not guarantee higher media visibility for any given country (Hong and Oh 2020). The result that international images are not so easily changed by sporting success may partly reflect a nationalistic bias of sports media coverage (Schallhorn and Beck 2017).

It is necessary to clarify here exactly what is meant by success, De Bosscher et al. (2007) remarks that there are various indicators by which the outputs (success) of an elite athlete production system can be measured. For example, by counting the number of medals won during the Olympic Games or other events; by counting the number of finals achieved (top eight places); by determining the relative success or even the number of participants qualifying to take part in mega events. In this study, success was defined as the number of participants qualifying to participate in the Olympic Games. For Iran, participating in the Olympics and succeeding in it has always been a scene for gaining prestige (Zargar 2015). From the 1948 London Olympics to the 2016 Rio Olympics, Iranian athletes have won 69 medals (19 gold, 22 silver, and 28 bronze).

The Structure of Sport in the Islamic Republic of Iran

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Ministry of Sports and Youth, the National Olympic and Paralympic Committee, and sports federations are involved in elite sports (Sadri Cheraghtape and Jalali Farahani 2020). The vision of sports in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the construction and development of sports in the country to promote health and social vitality, pride in national and international arenas, development of infrastructure, and assistance to the sports industry. Its mission is to promote the level of community health and social vitality, to train the spirit of sportsmanship, to support the scientific and professional development of elite sports with a justice-oriented approach, to organize the country's capacity to identify, support, and strengthen talents and promote their participation in the development of the country (Ghalibaf 2010). Table 1 shows the changes of the central government sport in Iran.

Table 1. *The Summary of Evolution/Changes to the Central Government Sport in Iran, 1935-2011 (Dousti et al. 2013)*

Year	Name of organization
1935	National Sports Association
1960	Integration into the Education Ministry
1971	Sports and Recreation Organization
1977	Dissolution and fusion with the Education Ministry
1979	Independent Physical Education Organization (part of the Government)
2011	The Ministry of Sport and Youth

Perhaps the most striking feature of the way the Iranian Government and politicians are involved in sports is the assumption that they can achieve such a wide variety of objectives through sports. According to Rein and Shields (2007), Chen (2012) and Storm and Jakobsen (2020), two specific factors can stimulate international prestige: one is hosting mega sport events, and the other one is being successful on the international stage. As Iran does not have the opportunity of

hosting sport mega-events, like the Olympic Games or Asian Games, another dimension of benefits, in this case, success, would be a matter which governments and people who are in charge of elite sport in Iran consider in their policies.

Together, the above studies indicate that research on international prestige has been primarily concerned with the effect of sporting success. Further, some of the contemporary evidence focuses on nations where they can host mega sporting events and be successful at the Olympic Games, such as China, Germany, USA. Based on this, there is a need for a country like Iran to investigate how important sporting success is and how this matter can affect the Olympic sports policies, where it cannot benefit from the advantages of hosting mega sport events, like the Olympic Games, to improve its international image.

Methods

Based on an interpretivist epistemological framework, a qualitative research design has been employed that draws on, and evaluates, the subjective perspectives of key stakeholders (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Sample

A total of 10 stakeholders in sports from Iranian sports officials and sport managers participated in this study, including Iran's national Olympic committee members, high-performance directors of summer Olympic federations, and sport managers in charge of the elite sport in Iran. The sampling technique was convenience sampling, in which members of the target population meet specific practical criteria, like easy accessibility, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate (Dörnyei and Griffee 2010). The interviewees were selected according to their position within the sport organizations that had at least 10 years of experience in elite sport management, and their availability and willingness to participate in this study. Further, the reason for the 10 samples was to reach saturation, which means the researchers noted that participants were talking about similar ideas and further interviews would not reveal new information. The following table shows the demographics of the interviewees.

Table 2. Demographics of the Interviewees

#	Participant's position	Level of education
Interview 1	Sport manager- former Vice Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports	Ph.D.
Interview 2	Member of NOC I.R IRAN	Ph.D.
Interview 3	Former member of the Executive Committee of the Asian Football Confederation and Sport manager	Ph.D.
Interview 4	Member of volleyball federation	Ph.D.
Interview 5	Sport manager- volleyball vice president	Ph.D.
Interview 6	Member of weightlifting federation	Master holder
Interview 7	Member of wrestling federation	Ph.D.
Interview 8	Member of NOC I.R IRAN	Ph.D.
Interview 9	Member of NOC I.R IRAN	Ph.D.
Interview 10	Member of track & field federation	Ph.D.

Procedures

The interview questions are derived from the previous relevant studies (Roberts 2020). After reviewing the literature to identify what has been explored before in the research topic and discussion with the researcher who had been working on the same topic, we have prepared questions to address the research goals. Besides, the interview questions were reviewed and modified twice to ensure the questions were unbiased and address the specific research question. The seven questions were, therefore, broadly formulated (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, Hsieh and Shannon 2005), for example, 'Do you think participating at the Olympic Games affects a country's prestige, and how?' The interview protocol was developed and pilot-tested by a panel of three academics with considerable expertise in the elite sport context to ensure content validity. Revisions in the interview protocol were made based on their feedback. Moreover, the questions were in Farsi (Persian), the interviewee's native language, to understand questions correctly. Interviews were conducted through Skype (call/chat), lasting from 15 to 25 minutes. The data were collected in 2020 by recording semi-structured interviews via Skype. The transcripts were translated from Farsi to English.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically, applying the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in order to identify common themes of meaning that come up repeatedly. Clarke and Braun (2014) define a thematic analysis (TA) as a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data. In our analysis to identify the themes, we utilised a theoretical or deductive or 'top down' approach (Boyatzis 1998) in the thematic analysis. Based on this approach, themes were generated by pre-interview information, insight, and the previous studies on the topic.

The researchers analysed the interview transcripts using Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis:

- (1) Familiarization with the data: in this step, we read the transcripts as a whole to get familiar with them. We also re-read the transcripts again one by one very carefully.
- (2) Generating initial coding: we labeled (code) relevant pieces, such as words, phrases, sentences in the transcripts called coding based on repetition in several places or perhaps, the interviewees explicitly stated that this is important and have read about something similar in previous published scientific articles
- (3) Generating themes: we looked over the codes that we created, and started coming up with themes. Also, we combined several codes into a single theme. At this stage, we decided that some of our codes are too vague or not relevant enough, so they were discarded.

- (4) Reviewing themes: in this step, we attempted to make sure that the themes are useful and accurate representations of the data. For this, we returned to the data set and compared our themes against it.
- (5) Defining and naming themes: we did this step to formulate precisely what we mean by each theme and figure out how it helps us understand the data.
- (6) Producing the report: finally, we conceptualized the data towards research results.

Concerning trustworthiness, we have reviewed data, codes, and themes throughout the data analysis process. This process helped to clarify the data and codes throughout the development of the themes. We then presented the final themes to the participants to obtain additional perspectives and help improve clarity.

Results

After the thematic analysis of data, four themes emerged in interviewees' speeches that were connected to the study's goals, which were about how sport actors perceive the relationship between elite sporting success and prestige and its reflection on the success/failure of their related policies: (1) sporting success at the Olympic Games and international prestige, (2) fairness and international prestige, (3) sport and diplomatic relations, (4) media coverage and international prestige. The themes are described below and supported by participant quotes. Some themes and their codes are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. *Codes and Themes of Data*

Interview extract	Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Both taking part and winning a medal will improve Iran's international prestige. (Interview1). •The more successful a country is in various economic, social, political, and sports fields, the better its international prestige will be among different countries. (Interview 9). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Winning medal and international prestige • Successful in sport sector in international stage 	Sporting success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ethics and fair play are essential in terms of international prestige. (Interview 4) •Fair play has a long-term effect on the opinions of people around the world compared to winning medals. (Interview 2). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair play and international prestige • Compete fairly 	Fairness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Winning medal increases the prestige of countries, and the better this position in the global arena, the more it can be used to develop diplomatic relations. (Interview1). •Participating in the Olympics and winning a medal can be very influential in a diplomatic relationship. (Interview 9). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop diplomatic relation with sporting success • Participation and its effect on diplomatic relationship. 	Diplomatic relation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The media is essential and has a great impact on international image. (Interview 10). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of media on international image 	Role of media

<p>•It seems unlikely that the media in the Olympics would want to present a positive image of Iran through Iranian athletes' performance. (Interview 8).</p>		
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Sporting Success at the Olympic Games and International Prestige

The interviewees emphasized the importance of soft power and its role in sports. In their opinion, a country's prestige is determined by factors such as media power, economic power, and sporting power.

The relations between governments in the international system are not like in previous decades and are not solely based on military power. Currently, the nature of the world's countries' prestige is in some areas such as sports power, media power, and economic power (Interview 2).

The interviewees noted that sporting success leads to international prestige and positive international image of the country among people around the world. 'Winning a medal can bring international prestige for a country, but this prestige is temporary'. (Interview 4). They mentioned that there is a relationship between sporting success and international prestige. 'Winning medals can be more important. It is more important for most participants to win a medal, because it will be both economically justified and very credible in terms of international prestige'. (Interview 7). 'The more successful a country is in various economic, social, political, and sports fields, the better its international prestige will be among different countries'. (Interview 9). Moreover, the interviewees mentioned that for Iran, which officially participated in the Olympic Games from 1948, just taking part is no longer a significant issue. Together they can increase the country's prestige.

Both taking part and winning a medal will improve Iran's international prestige. The purpose of presence means an impressive presence and earning as many Olympic quotas as possible. IOC gives countries that have not been able to qualify for the Olympics a few white cards to have individual athletes represent that country at the Olympic Games. Improving the final ranking, which relies more on winning a gold medal, is essential today. Because at the medal ceremony, the flags of the countries whose athletes are on the podium are raised, and especially the gold medal, in which the anthem of that country is also played, delights politicians and supporters. (Interview 1).

Participants also expressed that international prestige is one of the positive impacts of sporting success in Olympic Games. 'Demonstrating of the country, culture, and society with hosting sports mega-events and having good participants, we can increase our international prestige'. (Interview 3). 'International prestige is a national interest of any country'. (Interview 5). The first emerging theme is shown in Table 4 along with quotations from participants.

Table 4. *Sporting Success at the Olympic Games and Interviewees' Quotations*

Theme	Interviewees' quotations
1. sporting success at the Olympic Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ‘Winning a medal can bring international prestige for a country, but this prestige is temporary’. (Interview 4). – ‘Winning medals can be more important. It is more important for most participants to win a medal, because it will be both economically justified and very credible in terms of international prestige’. (Interview 7). – ‘The more successful a country is in various economic, social, political, and sports fields, the better its international prestige will be among different countries’. (Interview 9). – ‘Demonstrating of the country, culture, and society with hosting sports mega-events and having good participants, we can increase our international prestige’. (Interview 3). – ‘International prestige is a national interest of any country’. (Interview 5).

Fairness and International Prestige

The relevance of fair play in a country's image was underlined by interviewees. Fair play, as claimed has a long-term impact on people's perceptions of the country. ‘Ethics and fair play are essential in terms of international prestige. While winning a medal can bring international prestige for a country, but this prestige is temporary’. (Interview 4). ‘Fair play has a long-term effect on the opinions of people around the world compared to winning medals’. (Interview 2).

From some of the interviewee's perspectives, winning medals is their priority at any cost for some nations. ‘Today, sport has gradually become a lucrative industry. Even with doping, such as in Russia, professionalization and investment in the elite sports sectors make the cultural and moral aspects of sports less considered’. (Interview 10).

It is important to pay attention to sports ethics, but since sports, especially at important levels such as the Olympics, have become a major economic industry, of course, winning medals can be more important. It is more important for most participants to win a medal, because it will be both economically justified and very credible in terms of international prestige. (Interview 7).

Besides, some interviewees mentioned that aside from the importance of competing in the Olympic Games with all potentials and having a long-term plan, the athletes' behavior is crucial, too. ‘We ask athletes to behave fairly with their opponents and respect them and not dispute the referee's decisions’. (Interviews 6 & 7). The table below shows the fairness theme and quotations from participants.

Table 5. *Fairness and Interviewees' Quotations*

Theme	Interviewees' quotations
2. fairness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 'Ethics and fair play are essential in terms of international prestige. While winning a medal can bring international prestige for a country, but this prestige is temporary'. (Interview 4). – 'Fair play has a long-term effect on the opinions of people around the world compared to winning medals'. (Interview 2). – 'Today, sport has gradually become a lucrative industry. Even with doping, such as in Russia, professionalization and investment in the elite sports sectors make the cultural and moral aspects of sports less considered'. (Interview 10). – 'We ask athletes to behave fairly with their opponents and respect them and not dispute the referee's decisions'. (Interviews 6 & 7).

Sport and Diplomatic Relations

With respect to the impact of sporting success, in this context, the Olympic Games success and diplomatic relationship interviewees expressed that 'Participating in the Olympics and winning a medal can be very influential in a diplomatic relationship'. (Interview 9). In addition, another participant stated the relation between sporting success and nation's prestige and their role in the development of diplomatic relations. 'Winning a medal increases the prestige of countries, and the better this position in the global arena, the more it can be used to develop diplomatic relations'. (Interview 1). 'Olympics can be considered an essential factor in de-escalation, development of political relations'. (Interview 2).

International sports may provide opportunities for political leaders to meet and talk about politics and foreign goals. 'Sport can be effective in achieving the political and foreign goals of countries. Sport has an accelerating role but does not act as a direct factor alone'. (Interview 5). Further, the interviewees who were policymaker concerning the importance of the international tournament and its impact on the international image and diplomatic relations stated that

We try to organize some international tournaments in other countries to show our improvement and willingness to interact with other countries. We were invited to go to the United States in 2014 to play four games against the US national team. So, we consider this issue in our policy as we believe it can increase our international image and diplomatic relations. (Interview 4).

In connection with sport and diplomatic relations, some of the interviewees stressed that Iranian players who have the opportunity to play in other countries' leagues can provide public manifestations of togetherness in cultural exchanges and generation among officials from various countries. However, they mentioned a new concern related to athletes' asylum issues in various sports disciplines.

Playing in foreign leagues, using new sports capacities, better interaction with other athletes from other countries, and such cases can be the basis to increase international relations. Of course, the danger of cultural transformation of athletes and their asylum issues in other countries should also be mentioned. Therefore, it seems that this issue has a positive and negative interaction at the same time. However, with the right

policy in the National Olympic Committee, the potential dangers of this issue can be reduced. (Interviews 1 & 2 & 8). Table 6 illustrates the sport and diplomatic relations theme and quotations from participants.

Table 6. *Sport and Diplomatic Relations and Interviewees' Quotations*

Theme	Interviewees' quotations
3. sport and diplomatic relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ‘Participating in the Olympics and winning a medal can be very influential in a diplomatic relationship’. (Interview 9). – ‘Winning a medal increases the prestige of countries, and the better this position in the global arena, the more it can be used to develop diplomatic relations’. (Interview 1). – ‘Olympics can be considered an essential factor in de-escalation, development of political relations’. (Interview 2) – ‘Sport can be effective in achieving the political and foreign goals of countries. Sport has an accelerating role but does not act as a direct factor alone’. (Interview 5).

Media Coverage and International Prestige

With regard to the role of media, it is obvious that media power is one of the most effective tools in the international arena today under soft power. The participants stressed the role of the media in the international image of nations. ‘The media is essential and has a great impact on the international image’. (Interview 10). ‘Media coverage has great potential for governments and countries to be recognized internationally, and any country can take advantage of this to its advantage’. (Interview 5).

With the proliferation of media, especially social media, any event in the world that is attractive will be easily available to the world. The link between business, people, and sports is made possible through the media. Today, broadcasting through the media, especially television, has become commercially important. (Interview 1).

Interviewees believed that ‘Various media formats, including visual, print, and online, can affect the international image in general’. (Interview 3). However, in their opinion, ‘the top media power in the world is mainly in the hands of powers such as Britain, Russia, the United States, and some European powers, accordingly, they expressed that media do not show a good image of Iran in the world’. (Interviews 6 & 8). ‘Currently, all media in the world are talking against us’. (Interview 4).

It seems unlikely that the media in the Olympics would want to present a positive image of Iran through Iranian athletes' performance because the Olympic is a pure sports venue. At the same time, the major international media focus more on Iran's security, political, economic and military aspects. (Interview 8).

According to some of the interviewees' opinion, ‘Iran does not have a good international reputation. Iran is considered as a country of terrorist defender and

violence'. (Interviews 4, 8, 10). As shown in the graph below, Iranian sports actors perceive four effects of elite sporting success and international prestige. The following table illustrates the theme of media coverage and quotations from participants.

Table 7. Media Coverage and Interviewees' Quotations

Theme	Interviewees' quotations
4. media coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="580 472 1362 539">– 'The media is essential and has a great impact on the international image'. (Interview 10). <li data-bbox="580 539 1362 629">– 'Media coverage has great potential for governments and countries to be recognized internationally, and any country can take advantage of this to its advantage'. (Interview 5). <li data-bbox="580 629 1362 696">– 'Various media formats, including visual, print, and online, can affect the international image in general'. (Interview 3). <li data-bbox="580 696 1362 819">– 'the top media power in the world is mainly in the hands of powers such as Britain, Russia, the United States, and some European powers, accordingly, they expressed that media do not show a good image of Iran in the world'. (Interviews 6&8). <li data-bbox="580 819 1362 853">– 'Currently, all media in the world are talking against us'. (Interview 4). <li data-bbox="580 853 1362 913">– 'Iran does not have a good international reputation. Iran is considered as a country of terrorist defender and violence'. (Interviews 4, 8, 10).

Discussion

In order to address the research aim, four themes have emerged by pre-interview information, insight, and the previous studies on the topic including: 1. Sporting success, 2. Fairness, 3. Diplomatic relations, and 4. Media coverage. These themes were considered as important factors in relation to international prestige.

The results of the study are congruent with the existing research literature. For example, align with the first theme of the present study, sporting success at the Olympic Games, prior studies (Breuer and Hallmann 2011, Freeman 2012, Humphreys et al. 2018) have demonstrated the relationship between sporting success and international prestige. The Olympics have often been a stage for countries to gain honour and prestige. This prestige can result from the hosting the event and glorious execution. In accordance with that, Storm and Jakobsen (2020) concluded both hosting sporting mega-events and winning a medal are significant in international prestige. Similarly, Liu (2020) examined how a country's elite sport success would affect its soft power from the perspective of an international audience. Whereas in the present study, we underpinned Iranian sports officials and sport managers' opinion about the topic, they focused on German and Canadian population.

International sporting success, whether by national teams and athletes competing abroad or by the effective staging of a sports mega-event, provides arenas for the deployment of soft power through which states seek to 'attract' others with their values and culture and persuade them to want what they want by projecting a specific 'image' to foreign publics (Grix and Houlihan 2014, p. 576).

However, the findings of the current study regarding the role of sporting success in international prestige do not support the previous research by Haut et al. (2017), they concluded that ‘more success, more prestige’ is an extremely simplified formula. For some countries, success at the Olympics, even by winning a bronze medal, is an opportunity to introduce themselves to the world (Zargar 2015). For Iran, with the current political situation and restriction to access other aspects to present the country’s image for foreign audiences, this aspect might play a more vital role compare with other nations which have access more opportunities on international stages.

Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted the importance of fair play in international prestige. In terms of the second theme, fairness, the results based on our interviewees’ opinions showed both fairness and winning medals can play an important role in the country’s international image. Some studies support our results, including Reiche (2015). His study revealed that sport offers an arena for countries to compete in order to gain international prestige by means other than military and economic power. Therefore, in Iran, since the country is no longer able to compete in economic power, sports is seen as a tool to show the country’s image. Additionally, Murray (2018) and Dubinsky (2019a) mentioned through the political period, big countries, small countries, democratic and non-democratic countries, communities, non-governmental organizations, and private citizens, all see the potential of hosting the Olympic Games to improve their images. From the interviews, it can be concluded that Iranian sports officials and sport managers shared the same beliefs as those in other countries. For example, according to Haut et al. (2016) most Germans perceive Olympic medals important; however, obeying sporting values and fair play rules were valued higher. In other research, in contrast with the importance of fair play rather than just winning the medal, Haut et al. (2020) showed although fairness and Olympic spirit are appreciated internationally, better performance given more importance. Other forms of unfairness such as doping is frequently remembered by the international audience compared with actual performances. This finding aligns with our result, as the interviewees emphasized that sports has evolved into a lucrative industry in recent years. For some countries such as Russia, professionalization and investment in elite sports sectors are more important than moral aspects. In accordance with our findings, Emrich et al. (2014) argued not only athlete's behavior in competition but also the whole system behind the scenes are responsible. By analysing the data, we found interviewees' awareness of their international image through athletic behaviour in international competitions. According to their statement, they expect athletes to treat their opponents properly, show natural respect, and accept the referee's decisions. Interestingly, the participants pointed out that while winning a medal can boost a country's global prestige, it is only transitory. In comparison to winning medals, fair play has a long-term impact on people’s perceptions globally.

Participating in international sporting events, especially the Olympic Games, has always been prestigious for participating countries. Earning Olympic quotas, medals, and championships in these competitions has increased international prestige and greatly impacted the country’s international relations. The third theme was diplomatic relations in the context of international prestige. Interviewees

expressed that both participating in Olympic Games and winning medals can affect diplomatic relations and development of political and diplomatic relations by sporting success. In this line, Rofe and Dichter (2016) and Luša (2017) confirmed an increased interest in considering sports as a potential tool of diplomacy in international relations. Moreover, this finding is consistent with that of Carter and Sugden (2012) and Murray and Pigman (2014). They have found that sport is employed as a diplomatic tool by governments, which enables them to use sports for diplomatic purposes more effectively. A possible explanation for this might be that in the 1990s, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami called for breaking the 'wall of mistrust' between Iran and the United States through sports and other citizen diplomacy forms.

As mentioned in the literature review, scholars have studied the connections between soft power and public diplomacy in the context of sport as a tool for improving a country's image. According to interviewees, the current study confirmed that sports have the potential to help countries achieve their domestic and foreign political goals. This statement can be close to Coakley (2017), which states that international sports provide opportunities for political leaders to meet and talk, but they do not influence the content of their discussions or their policy decision.

Another important finding was the asylum seeker issue. While participants believed organising tournaments abroad and having players who can play in other foreign leagues can demonstrate the progress and desire to collaborate with other nations and help create a positive image worldwide. Others expressed their concerns about the asylum, which is now a significant issue for the Iranian sports officials and sports managers. This finding is in line with (Kenny 2018). Regarding the importance of this issue in their policy, they suggested that with the right policy in the National Olympic Committee, the potential dangers of this issue can be reduced. These findings cannot be extrapolated to all nations.

The study was referring to all sports including the summer Olympic Games. However, the authors expected that the interviewees express the role of women in the Olympic Games and the importance of their success in the international image of Iran. For example, Kimia Alizadeh who was the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal.

The last finding in respect to the media coverage theme showed that countries can benefit greatly from media coverage in terms of international prestige. This finding was in congruence with other researcher including (Billings 2008, Chen 2012, Rein and Shields 2007). However, this finding is contrary to Hong and Oh (2020). Interviewees also stressed that the top media power in the world is primarily in the hands of some powerful nations and claimed that in their opinion the media do not show a positive image of Iran. This finding was also reported by Schallhorn and Beck (2017). This result may be explained by the fact that Iran does not have sufficient and proper interaction with the international media in order to show its face well, especially in the Olympic Games. There is a lack of information and knowledge about Iran among foreign public. Media can play crucial role in introducing Iran to global audience.

Conclusion

The purpose of the interpretivist study was to examine how Iranian sports officials and sport managers perceive the relationship between elite sporting success and international prestige. This study has shown that all interviewees undoubtedly believed that sports is a crucial part of each country's policy. In their opinion, the international diplomatic relations between Iran and other western countries are not as good as before; therefore, sports can play a vital role in the country's relations and its image. Interviewees emphasized that people and governments do not have the favorable image of Iran. According to our results, taking part in international competitions like the Olympic Games, earning more quotas and more qualified athletes and teams can increase Iran's international prestige. While some interviewees believed that not only taking part in the Olympic Games but also winning medals can play a major role in improving the international image of the country. Interestingly, none of the interviewees mentioned the importance of women at the Olympic Games. Currently, Iran does not possess the favorable record regarding women's attendance.

The second major finding was that the success of compatriot athletes and teams, winning a medal, playing fairly with the written rules and the unwritten fair play standards simultaneously enhance Iran's image. The participants claimed that although winning medals is an essential factor in increasing Iran's international prestige, this recognition is temporary. Fairness, showing the country's positive image and proper behavior can altogether affect international prestige more. Thirdly, according to the research results, attending international competitions can improve interaction and enhance diplomatic relations among Iran and other nations. Sports can be considered as an accelerating factor for developing diplomatic relations. In this regard, all interviewees' concerns were the issue of Iranian athletes' asylum in recent years. The participants claimed, recently, athletes seeking asylum were reported in many western media, which can harm Iran's image. Since athletes express the issues that they have been facing in Iran. Athletes seeking asylum abroad is not a new issue; when many people attend an international sporting event, not all of them are expected to return home.

In addition, the findings from this study about media coverage and international prestige suggests that while the media coverage can be considered a tool that leads to an improving international image of nations in the Olympic Games, this advantage needs more effort and attention in Iran. The interviewees' opinion is that the media do not show Iran's positive image at the Olympic Games, which can damage Iran's international image. Moreover, interviewees in charge of making policy believed that sporting success at international competitions increases the prestige of that specific discipline first and then the country's prestige as well. As a result, in their policy, they consider this factor. It was also essential for them to ask athletes to behave fairly with their opponents and respect them and not dispute the referee's decisions.

The results of this study suggest that the concept of international prestige is notably essential when it comes to a country where foreign public may not have a positive attitude toward that country. As a soft power tool, sports can play this role

and build a positive image for that country. This study adds to the growing body of research that contribute to elite sporting success, sports and country image research, international prestige, and public diplomacy in Iran. According to Ghalibaf (2010), one of the missions of sports in Iran is to train the spirit of sportsmanship. Based on this mission for Iranian sports officials and policymakers, fairness and moral aspects have been included in their sports policy. For example, Goudarzi and Honari (2009) found that in wrestling federation, moral and characteristic empowerment and preventing doping and zero tolerance severely against this phenomenon are in their policy. This study result emphasises that apart from sportsmanship other three factors could be in the policy of Federations to improve the positive image of the country. Indeed, policymakers may need to consider the other three factors more than before in their given organisation policy to promote the positive image of Iran.

The limitations of this study include the small number of participants, who are mostly living in Iran and the lack of access to other stakeholders in sports. Further study needs to be carried out to include more samples, like the international population, and examine their opinion about Iran's image. Also, another study would be the examination of how athletes' asylum issues can affect Iran international prestige. Finally, this study helps Iranian sports policymakers to understand that international prestige can be affected with different aspects and provides several implications for stakeholders involved in the sports policy and policymakers to consider the importance of international prestige through Olympic Games.

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