

Sport behind the Public Diplomacy; Functional Components of Sport Diplomacy in Iran

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(Received: Oct. 15, 2018 Revised: Dec. 7, 2018 Accepted: Jan. 14, 2019)

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the role of sport as a soft power for Iran to facilitate its diplomatic relations after the nuclear deal. The research method used in this study is mixed (qualitative and quantitative): in the qualitative part of the analysis, the study sample was selected via Snowball sampling based on participants' expertise in the sport diplomacy of Iran after two rounds of Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) exploratory factor analysis. Seven components of political currents, cultural exchange, peacemaking, national unity, economic development, transformation, communication, and religious currents were extracted. After identifying the study's research variables in a structural-interpretive modeling, the relationship between variables was examined through a structural equation modeling test. The results of the structural equation model indicated that political currents, cultural exchange, transformation and communication had a direct and significant effect on national unity. The relationship between political and peacebuilding was not confirmed, but national unity and excellence in peace diplomacy had a direct and significant impact on the economic development of societies.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Fuzzy Delphi Method, Iran, Peace, Sport

1. Introduction

Soft power, as defined by Murray (2018) refers to war minus shooting, the ability to shape others' preferences and convince them to do what one wants through attraction without the use of payments or military force. The three main sources of soft power are culture, political values and foreign policy. Cultural diplomacy refers to the way in which culture is used for public diplomacy and soft power purposes. Countries, cities, and communities have been using sports for public diplomacy and branding purposes to achieve social, political, and financial goals, and improve the image of the country. The international exposure, the focus on culture, and peaceful values in sports make it a useful tool for countries to use soft power to achieve international goals and improve their public diplomacy (Dubinsky, 2019).

From traditional diplomacy to new diplomacy, sports have had a 'beyond an entertainment' function, often exploited by ruling elites. Sport, as one of the key components of soft power, can be an efficient tool in determining diplomatic relations; many policy makers and experts support the belief that sport diplomacy is an easy, safe and gentle tool to improve international relations (Min & Choi, 2018). They have used large scale events as a political propaganda to serve as a way to advance host countries' diplomatic goals (Won & Chiu, 2019). The concept of "international community" considers different countries to be an independent group which, through dialogue and agreement, have established common rules and institutions for conduct and relations, and consider their interests in maintaining these arrangements (Shirkhani & Adeli, 2018). Governments have tried sport (especially international sports as well as major international sporting events such as the World Cup or the Olympics) for their broader diplomatic purposes (Cha, 2013).

At the beginning of the 20th century, by increasing leisure time in countries, the concept of sports and the development of sports and leisure centers became an important income-generating instrument for many countries (Ebrahimi *et al.*, 1389 [2011 A.D.]). As a growing phenomenon in practice, sport diplomacy plays an interconnected public role (Roberts, 2007). For instance, Pakistani and Indian governors engage in 'cricket diplomacy' to reduce tension over Kashmir (Khan & Ali, 2019). USA introduced 'sport united' plan as a way to bring young Muslims in Africa, Middle East and South Asia together (Murray, 2018). At this time, two related approaches became important: increasing international interactions and internationalization of sport (Ebrahimi *et al.*, 1389 [2011 A.D.]). The reasons to this were that sports can, first of all, strengthen inter-state relations, and secondly, the instrumental role of this phenomenon in comparing and evaluating countries has led researchers today to consider sport as an integral concept of political, economic, social, and cultural interactions among different countries (Feizabadi *et al.* 2013). The 2008 Summer Olympic, which was called 'the Century Olympic,' become a critical soft power asset for China and President Xi Jinping, which is now elevated to a strategic level (Pigman, 2014). Sports can in many ways have a direct and lasting impact on the relationship between governments and peoples, as they attract various peoples of different interests, cultures, preferences, etc. (Bagheri *et al.*, 1395 [2016 A.D.]). In addition, sport can prevent conflicts between countries, and reduce poverty, unemployment, and disease (Eltyami Niya & Mohamadi Aziz Abadi, 1394 [2015 A.D.]). For example, emerging economies like Brazil used sport in 2010-2020, hosting different sport events such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the 2016 Summer Olympic and the 2013 Track and Field Championship to cite itself on the global economic plan (Shariati

Feizabadi & Goodarzi, 1394 [2015 A.D.]). Sport has been a link to the athletic attitude and it seeks to foster moral values such as courage, justice, and rationality. As Nelson Mandela notes in an often cited quote (Murray, 2018), sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. Sport can awaken hope where there was previously only despair. Sport speaks to people in a language they can understand.

Sport provides conditions for peace among governments and is a pretext for diplomatic dialogue and debate. For example, large events such as the Olympics and the World Cup can bring nations together and lead to closer and more friendly relationships (Murray, 2011). Therefore, it can be argued that the political and cultural dimensions of sports are widely recognized and international sports are an integral part of the dynamics of relations between nations (Roberts, 2007).

An examination of literature provided on the subject indicates that a great emphasis is on the “sustainable peace” that sports diplomacy could create between governments and nations, which further enhances the tendency for sporting events. Won and Chiu (2019) compared the functions of sport diplomacy in Taiwan and South Korea and illustrated that the geopolitical situation of Taiwan with respect to the Mainland China proves to be a negative point for Taiwan’s hosting of international sport events. On the other hand, since 1988, South Korea has hosted different sports events such as the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympic, the 2002 Soccer World Cup and the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. Rowe (2018) explained that the participation of North Korea just a month before the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympic in South Korea was a brilliant function of sport in international relations.

South Korean President Moon Jae-In and North Korean Leader Kim Jong-Un's meeting, Korean athletes marching under a unification flag and playing as unified women's ice hockey team in the winter Olympics are among the positive outcomes of sport diplomacy.

Abdi et al. (2019) believe that sport is the main source of soft power and governments use it as an attractive tool to achieve public diplomatic goals. Ditcher (2020) introduced the FIFA world cup for men, youth players or women as a space for numerous diplomatic opportunities. He explores the nexus of the world's most popular sport and diplomacy in subnational, national and transnational contexts. Cha (2013), points out in his research that the 2008 Beijing Olympics is an example of understanding and reinforcing the sense of friendship, and removing the boundaries created by the end of the Cold War. Moreover, this researcher considers sport as a means of enhancing international interactions and a national badge for governments to achieve their political goals; Grix and Houlihan (2014) also consider great sporting events as part of countries' soft power strategy. By comparing the case study of the German Soccer World Cup in 2006 and the 2012 British Olympics, the researchers conclude that Germany played an important role in the exercise of sport policy in the 20th century, as, was done in the Nazi era when West Germany and Communist Socialists took advantage of this diplomatic instrument. Britain also boosted its public diplomacy by hosting the 2012 London Games. Between 2009 and 2010, as it sought to prepare for the 2012 Olympics, Britain was ranked among the top six governments in the world in the six indicators of export, migration, investment, culture, tourism, and people.

Research by Ushkovska and Petroshevska (2015) entitled "Sports Diplomacy; Development and Performance" indicated that

sport is a valuable tool in realizing the political interests of governments. In this study, sports diplomacy is presented as part of public diplomacy in modern international relations. The results also illustrate that sport has a positive effect on improving the general situation and perceptions of countries, promoting the political influence of countries, expanding their culture and values, and fostering peace. Murray and Pigman (2014), in their study entitled "Designing the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy" seek to promote the best practices of governments based on facilitating the use of sport as a diplomatic tool and the effective use of diplomacy through sports-related activities and institutions. This study endeavors to provide a review of studies on sports diplomacy with an emphasis on ping-pong, soccer, and baseball. In a review entitled "International Sport and the Public Dimension of Diplomacy; Governments, Sport Federations and the World Community", while examining the concept of international sports competitions as diplomatic actors since the ancient Olympics, Pigman (2014) mentions the teams present at these events not only as representatives of the ministry of foreign affairs of countries, but also as representatives of all peoples and governments. The study points to the rapid growth of the number of international sporting events in the last 50 years and the increase of person-to-person exchanges in personal and virtual dimensions outside national borders. Zargar (1394 [2015 A.D.]), in another study entitled "Sport and International Relations: Conceptual and Theoretical Aspects" conclude that sports and their related dynamics are among the new topics that are of interest to international relations scholars. Sports such as soccer have been politically active for decades and their functions are taken into account in countries' macro-political managements. Today, political, social, economic, and cultural functions and their

significant impact on the highest level of interaction, namely, the relations between states and other international actors in international relations must be theorized and conceptualized. Therefore, it has been attempted in this study to explore the way in which sport inspire, influence, and shape international relations and provide research contexts for greater attention to the role of sport in international relations.

A study of related literature revealed that the implementation of sports diplomacy in countries has several different actors and facilitators including: 1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the public diplomacy system of the country, 2. Athletes, 3. Sports managers, 4. Higher physical education universities, 5. Sports organizations or ministries, 6. The ministry or agency, which is responsible for the culture and art of the country, 7. Municipalities; 8. Mass media; 9. National Olympic Committee, and 10. Sectors related to tourism industry. It is clear from the roles of such actors that sports diplomacy follows and interacts with diverse fields such as culture, tourism, politics, and the media. These consequences manifest themselves in a variety of functions including comprehensive development in various economic, social, and cultural fields, a soft power criterion, a tool for dialogue and convergence in multicultural societies, and the provision of peace (Keshavarz Shokri *et al.*, 1392 [2013 A.D.]).

In addition to its sociocultural and sporting dimensions, sports diplomacy also provides the basis for economic growth and development. Paying attention to sports and sport eve-related events can, like an umbrella, affect other areas of employment, and indirectly influence the employment of people in related areas. Economic development and cooperation alongside sports communication make it possible for governments to promote their cultural and foreign policies and to learn from one another.

Evidence suggests that sports diplomacy is also directly related to religious trends. For example, the role of religion in the issue of women's presence in Iranian stadiums, which is currently the subject of debate by sports and non-sports experts, is rather prominent. Many jurists look at sports through the cover, and the issue of men not covering all parts of their body for some sports is perceived as limiting women's access to the stadium. It is therefore clear that in a country such as Iran, religious rules determine the type of sport policy in different sports.

Given the importance of diplomacy and sports in various respects, it seems that Iran has not been able to seize the opportunity. The Islamic Republic of Iran has not taken advantage of sports diplomacy as one of the tools and approaches of public diplomacy in important areas in countries and because of the resistance of the country's diplomatic apparatus to visualize and present diplomatic information to the media, this type of diplomatic tool has been used with delay (Soltanifar & Khanzadeh, 1392 [2013 A.D.]). Shariati Feizabadi and Goodarzi (1394 [2015 A.D.]), in their research entitled "Position of Sports Diplomacy in International Relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran; A Qualitative Approach Based on Content Analysis" argue that the following ten components are affected by sports diplomacy: international branding and prestige, cultural development, political development, economic development, fighting isolation and sanctions, exiting the dark side, peace and friendship, national unity and integration, media interaction, and smart power development. Unfortunately, the Islamic Republic of Iran has missed many opportunities to develop its international relations because of its lack of a unified strategy in sports diplomacy and a backyard approach to sports. In another study entitled "Soft Modeling (ISM) of Sports Diplomacy Components" by Bagheri *et al.* (1395 [2016

A.D.)), the authors found that the components of sports diplomacy are categorized into three areas of linked (cultural development, peace, and friendship), independent (media interactions, national unity and identity, political development and the fight against isolation), and dependence (dark dimension, economic development, international branding and prestige, and smart power development) in Iran. Shariati Feizabadi (1398 [2019 A.D.]), indicated in a comparative study that Australia is the first country in the world to officially codify every aspect of its formidable international sporting footprint into a comprehensive government sports diplomatic strategy; he reported that to adopt an efficient sport diplomacy, 11 out of 18 Iranian ministries should be involved in the Iranian sport diplomacy.

On the other hand, factors such as Shia phobia and Irano-phobia propagated in the Middle East have challenged Iran's establishment of sports diplomacy with other countries (Keshavarz Shokri *et al.*, (1392 [2013 A.D.])). Moreover, despite the importance of the concept of sports diplomacy, Iran has not been able to take its rightful place in the related intellectual and decision-making circles. On the other hand, it is important in today's high-pressure condition of economic and political sanctions to know how sports could be used as a lever to reduce pressure and to expand diplomatic relations in the light of the growing attention paid to sports worldwide. Therefore, while explaining the place of sports in the development of today's relationships and interactions among different countries in the world, the present study seeks to identify the most important components of sport diplomacy not mentioned in previous research, to name these components, and to draw the attention of Iranian political and non-political decision-makers to this important and applicable concept.

2. Method

The present study is applied in terms of purpose, survey, and data collection. It has been attempted to review the relevant theoretical literature (a total of 56 English and Persian studies, books and notes), through which the components (items) related to sports diplomacy have been extracted. A questionnaire was prepared based on the fuzzy Delphi Method to confirm the relevant items. The experts were allowed to sift through these components and identify their importance. Thus, fuzzy Delphi Method with 11 experts was used to confirm or reject the research items (They were selected via Snowball sampling until theoretical maturation). This research was conducted between September 2018 and August 2019.

3. Results

To perform quantitative tests as well as exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis tests, a questionnaire was distributed among 218 individuals whose descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. The quantitative sample was determined by Cochran Formula. All participants were students in sport sciences, international relations or political sciences; the main reason for selecting this population was students' taking courses in sport diplomacy or public diplomacy.

Table 1. Participants' Quantitative Descriptive Statistics

Row	Demographic variables	Options	Frequency	Percent
1	Gender	Male	126	58
		Female	92	42
2	Marital status	Single	74	34
		Married	144	66
3	Education	BSc	95	43
		MSc	86	40
		PhD	37	17
4	Age	Younger than 30	56	26
		31 to 40	78	36
		41 to 50	50	23
		51 and older	34	15

Before examining the model in interpretive modeling, the components were analyzed by reviewing past studies and obtaining an expert opinion. The following steps were taken in the completion of this study:

Step One: Identifying Variables Related to the Problem

At this stage, the opinions of the decision-makers were collected using a five-point Likert spectrum, and according to the experts' opinions, a triangular fuzzy number was assigned to the factors. Then, using the threshold value proposed in the literature, the status of each factor (confirmation/rejection) was determined. Thirty-three items related to sports diplomacy were used to design the questionnaire. In addition, an open-ended question was included at the end of the questionnaire, asking respondents to list any effective factors that they consider important for the study. In the second stage, the questionnaire was used to collect the opinions of

experts in the decision-making group to obtain the relative importance of effective factors and their ranking. Data were collected at two stages. In the first step, the questionnaire was given to the expert group and they were asked to comment on each criterion in the form of verbal variables in the questionnaire. According to the formulas of calculation of mean, a fuzzy mean and an absolute fuzzy number were extracted. Finally, the factors identified were named. At this point, an attempt was made to answer the question of which factors are effective in sports diplomacy. There are two general criteria for naming factors: "controllable and/or non-controllable" and "generality or specificity".

Factor 1: Factor 1 contains items 2, 3, 15, 17, 23 and 30, which explain 13.357% of the total variance. These factors have the greatest variance. Factor 1 consists of the following six items:

1. Governmental and state laws prevent the realization of the goals of sports diplomacy in Iran (2).
2. Sport is a tool for developing diplomatic relations (3).
3. The presence of a country in sporting events can drive a country out of political and geopolitical isolation (15).
4. Sports help rebuild internal institutions (17).
5. Sport is a tool to promote power and domination (23).
6. Through sports, countries try to achieve their broader goals of gaining power (30).

These items have two distinct characteristics; they are in control of a country and are dedicated to political processes and currents. Based on the literature and the nature of the items, it can be argued that these themes will occur like a political factor and refer to politics. For this reason, these items are named "political currents".

Factor 2: This factor contains items 4, 6, 8, 14 and 26, which explain 12/407% of the total variance. These five factors are as follow:

1. Sports diplomacy is a tool for presenting the real image of the Iranian people to the world (4).
2. Sport enhances the interactions of people around the world (6).
3. Native, local, and ancient sports are a good base for developing a revolution discourse (8).
4. Sport is a tool for people in one country to compete against people in another country (14).
5. Sport develops cultural communication between nations (26).

These factors are in the control of societies and are specific to the culture of a society. Due to the characteristics and commonalities between these factors, they are referred to as "cultural exchange".

Factor 3: This factor contains items 12, 13, 18, 21 and 25, which explain 12.142% of the total variance. These factors consist of the following five elements:

1. Sport helps improve foreign relations and increase understanding between governments (12).
2. Sport can be an alternative to war and military diplomacy (13).
3. Sport causes psychological warfare among governments (18).
4. Sport is a tool against doping as well as racial, ethnic, regional, and class diversity (21).
5. Sport can stylize and normalize countries' relationship between nations with cold political interactions (25).

Depending on the nature of the factors, these factors are in the control of the countries; they are also specific to the peace process and are related to the way in which peace is created in the world. As a result, this factor was named the "peacemaking factor".

Factor 4: This factor contains items 7, 19, 24 and 28, which explain 9.368% of the total variance. These four factors are the following:

1. Sport creates a good atmosphere for influencing public opinion (7).
2. Sport is a source of conflict for countries (19).
3. Sports diplomacy between nations requires a change in hostility between the two communities and the establishment of bilateral ties (24).
4. Sport teaches leadership, teamwork, respect for the rules, and respect for one another (28).

Given the nature of these elements, they are in the control of societies and are specific to the subject of sport and the unity of the nation. As a result, this factor is named "national unity".

Factor 5: This factor contains items 5, 16 and 27, which explain 8.540% of the total variance. These three factors include the following:

1. Sport contributes to the sustainable development of countries (5).
2. Sport increases economic output (16).
3. Sport contributes to sustainable relation and development between two countries (27).

Given the nature of these factors, they are in control of countries. They are also specific to economic issues. Consequently, according to the literature and the convergence of these factors, they are referred to as "economic development".

Factor 6: This factor contains items 22, 29 and 31, which explain 6.673% of the total variance. These items include:

1. Sports drive a revolution in communication and information (22).
2. Sports have an important role in the political, social and economic life of people in different countries (29).
3. The role of sports has gone beyond physical activity to different social, educational, cultural, political and economic functions (31).

These factors are in control of societies and the people, and are specific to the communications of the people. As a result, according to the literature, this factor was named "transformation and communication".

Factor 7: This factor contains items 10 and 20, which explain 6.496% of the total variance. These items include:

1. Sports diplomacy is influenced by religious and political ideology (10).
2. Sport reduces religious diversity (20).

These factors are in the control of the people and societies and are specific to their religion. According to the literature, this factor was named "religious currents".

Step Two: Forming the Structural Self-Interaction Matrix

The structural self-interaction matrix is composed of the dimensions and components of sports diplomacy and their comparison using four modes of conceptual relationships, as illustrated in the following table.

Table 2. Structural Self-Interaction Matrix of Factors Affecting Sports Diplomacy; Reference: Experts

	i	j	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Political currents		X	X	X	X	V	V	V
2	Cultural exchange		X	X	X	X	V	V	V
3	Transformation and communication		X	X	X	X	V	V	V
4	Religious current		X	X	X	X	V	V	V
5	National unity		A	A	A	X	X	X	V
6	Peacemaking factor		A	A	A	X	X	X	V
7	Economic development		A	A	A	A	A	A	X

Step three: Creating the Primary and Final Access Matrix

Table 3. The Final Access Matrix of Factors Affecting Sports Diplomacy

i	j	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Influence Power
1	Political currents	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
2	Cultural exchange	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
3	Transformation and communication	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
4	Religious current	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
5	National unity	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4
6	Peacemaking factor	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4
7	Economic development	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Dependency Rate	4	4	4	6	6	6	7	37

Table 3 indicates the most important affecting factors of sport diplomacy in Access Matrix. In this matrix, the researcher asked the qualitative sample to give a score (0 or 1) to compare the two variables together.

Step Four: Level Segmentation

After determining the set of achievement and prerequisite for each variable, common elements in the set of achievement and prerequisite for each variable were identified. After defining the set of achievement and prerequisite as well as common elements, the level of variables (elements) were determined. In table 2, the variable has the highest level, in which the achievement set and its common elements are the same. After specifying this variable or variables, they are removed from the table and the table 3 will be created with the remaining variables. In table 4, as in the table 2, the second level variable will be determined and the process will be continued to determine levels of all variables.

Table 4. Determining the Levels of Variables

Dimension	Achievement Set	Prerequisite Set	Common Elements	Leveling
1	1-2-3-4-5-6-7	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	Third level
2	1-2-3-4-5-6-7	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	Third level
3	1-2-3-4-5-6-7	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	Third level
4	1-2-3-4-5-6-7	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	Third level
5	4-5-6-7	1-2-3-4-5-6	4-5-6	Second level
6	4-5-6-7	1-2-3-4-5-6	4-5-6	Second level
7	7	1-2-3-4-5-6-7	7	First level

Step five: Draw a Model

After determining the relationships and the levels of variables, they can be drawn as a model. For this purpose, the variables are first adjusted from bottom to top according to their level. In the present model, the variables were classified into five levels. Competitive advantage and a competitive performance are placed at the highest level of the model, as they are the most affected (coefficient of dependency) items. Strategic management capability and market orientation are placed at the lowest level of the model and act as the model's foundation; the model starts from these two variables and leads to other variables. At the next levels, the other components follow as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

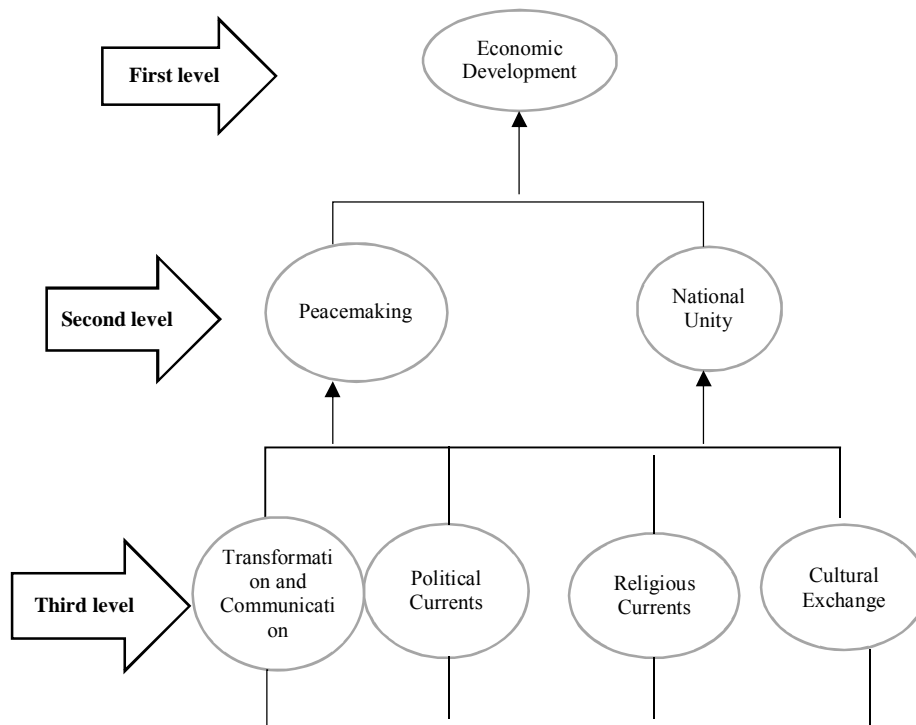


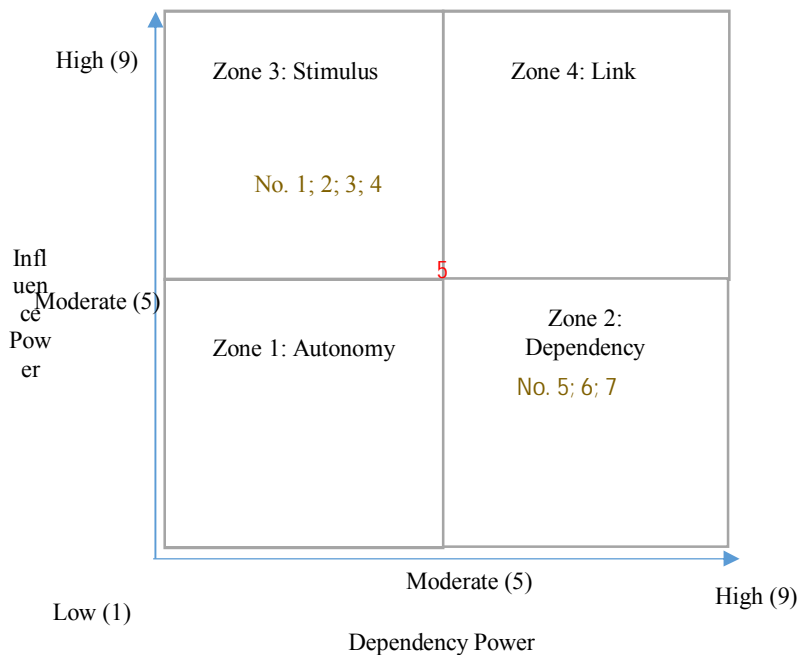
Figure 1. Model Extracted from Interpretive Structural Modeling Process

Step Six: Analysis of the Influence Power and Dependency Rate (MICMAC Diagram)

Depending on the dependency power and the influence power of the variables, a coordinate system can be defined and divided into four equal parts. In this study, a group of variables was subdivided into stimulus subgroups, which have high influence power and low dependency power. The next category was the dependent variables that were the result of the product development process, and were less likely to underlie other variables. The results are illustrated in the figure and table below.

Table 5. Degree of Influence Power and Variables Dependence;

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Influence Power	7	7	7	7	4	4	1
Dependency Power	4	4	4	6	6	6	7

**Figure 2. Influence power and dependence of variables**

Investigation of the Structural Equation Model

After the independent and dependent variables have been identified, the relationship between the variables is investigated using the structural equation model of PLS software. The software

output contains codes that represent a variable. In the software analysis, political currents are indicated by (PC), cultural exchange by (CE), transformation and communication by (TC), religious current by (RC), national unity by (NU), peacemaking factor by (PM), and economic development by (ED). The basic criterion for evaluating endogenous latent variables is the coefficient of determination R^2 . The R^2 values (0.67, 0.33, and 0.19) in PLS path models are significant, moderate and weak respectively. As illustrated, this value is equal to 0.463 for the peacemaking variable, and 0.445 for the national unity variable, which are both significant. The variable “economic development” is equal to 0.162, which is a weak value. Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual model of the research after determining the relationship between the components.

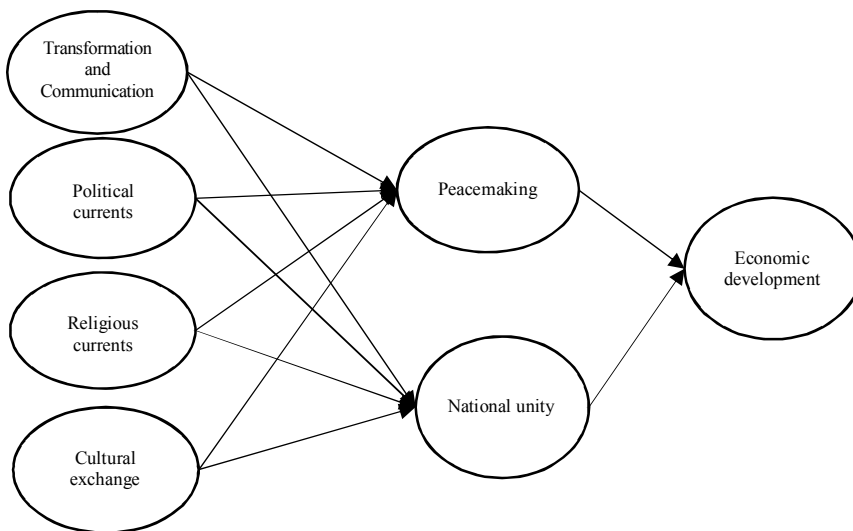


Figure 3. Conceptual Model of Research

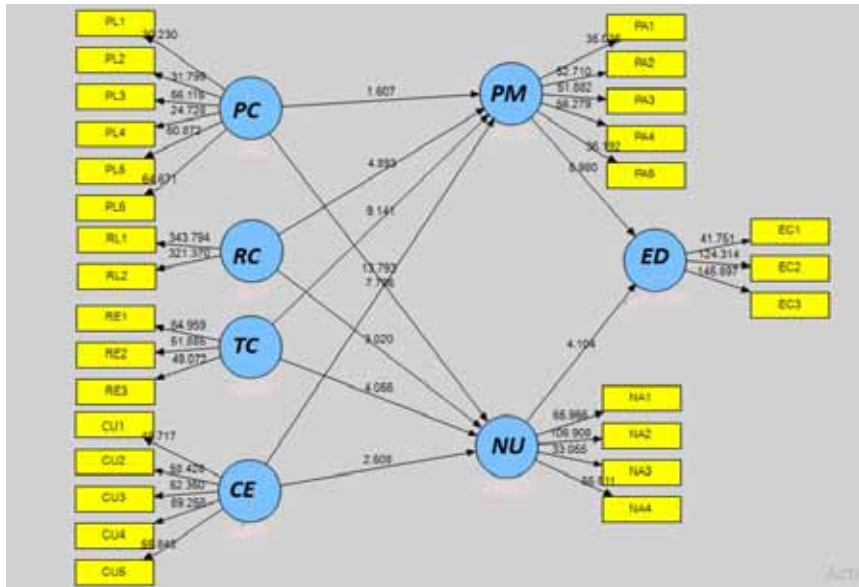


Figure 4. Structural Model of Research in Significant Numbers Mode (TC: Transformation and Communication, PC: Political Currents, RC: Religious Currents, CE: Cultural Exchanges, NU: National Unity, PM: Peace Making & ED: Economic Development)

In the significant numbers model of research, with the exception of the relationship between the political current and the peacemaking factor, whose significance has not been confirmed, the significance of relationships have been confirmed between the variables of political current, cultural exchange, transformation and communication, and religious current with national unity and peacemaking in Iranian sports diplomacy. In addition, national unity and peacemaking had a significant relationship with the economic development of sports diplomacy.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the most important components of sports diplomacy in Iran. The results indicate that given Iran's current stressful conditions and the sheer volume of international pressure due to international sanctions, in order to create a favorable and acceptable image for Iran at the international arena, sports diplomacy could play an important role. Sports diplomacy could redefine the views and perceptions of others about the goals and policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and promote peace between states and nations (Pigman, 2014). As a result, the policy of maximum pressure on Iran, imposed by certain Western countries, will be diminished, along with negative publicity by the mass media. Therefore, Iran will no longer have a security face. Sports, as a cultural and non-security issue, can lead to encouragement, trust and desensitization, clarification, and mass persuasion of major regional and international actors, and influence the pattern of interaction between actors in the field of international relations. In this way, sports bring prestige for Iran and present a favorable face for the country at both regional and international levels (Grix & Hpulihan, 2014). The impact of the cultural component of sports diplomacy is that it engages people from different countries and develops new types of discourse through indigenous, local, and ancient sports. Sports diplomacy brings people from different countries together and promotes cultural communication. Sports diplomacy has tools to increase external audience trends. For example, the history of holding and hosting the World Cup and the Olympics Games illustrated the way in which these events brought governments and people together and while creating a sense of friendship and peacemaking, provided the grounds for broader diplomatic goals between countries (Eltyami Niya & Mohamadi Aziz Abadi, 1394 [2015 A.D.]).

International sports can pave the way for sports diplomacy and peacemaking (as the greatest achievement of sports diplomacy) among regional actors (Pigman, 2014). The results obtained in this study indicated that one of the most important components of sports diplomacy is religious currents. Looking at the ban on women's entering the stadiums in Iran, it is clear that sports diplomacy needs to conform to Islamic and jurisprudential traditions in Iran. The achievement of diplomatic interactions in Iran through sports is influenced by religious and political ideologies. Alongside these factors, sports diplomacy guarantees economic prosperity for societies, and accelerates development plans. It will help expand sports facilities in the society of Iran and take advantage of opportunities to use the facilities equally. In the following section, the structural model will be discussed.

The results of the structural model test indicated that the relationship between the political currents and the peacemaking factor has not been confirmed in this study. With regard to the items studied in the research questionnaire, and the results of the structural equation model in this study, it can be argued that despite the importance of sport in the development and realization of diplomatic relations with Iran, and the removal of the country from political isolation, sport has not been able to contribute to the improvement of Iran's foreign relations and with other countries. Therefore, the political events surrounding Iran have challenged the existence of a peacemaking factor in sports diplomacy and have not confirmed the relationship between these two components. Another result of the structural equation model was that cultural exchange, transformation and communication, and religious currents had a positive and significant effect on the factor of peacemaking. In fact, given that sports are a means of presenting the true image of Iranians to others, and that they can be a factor in developing the

cultural discourse of nations, sports could provide the basis for lasting peace with Western countries. Sports are also closely linked to information and communication developments, and this exchange of information in the light of sport has helped accelerate the peacemaking process.

In addition, national unity and the factor of peacemaking have a positive and significant relationship with economic development. If Iran develops friendly and constructive relations with the international community, it has a better chance of hosting important sporting events and by hosting these events, indirect employment needed for such occasions increases.

In general, it can be argued that in an era when the volume of negative publicity in all matters is against Iran, and when ordinary people are influenced by such process and events, one of the best tools to change people's viewpoints, which form the core of sports diplomacy, is to use sport and pay particular attention to the exchange that takes place in the light of sports. Considering the elements extracted in this study, Iran can disseminate a new insight into the establishment of sports diplomacy in cooperation with the relevant organizations to respond to the psychological warfare against the Iranian state, providing a basis for changing the viewpoints of other countries. From this point of view, sports and diplomacy will be closely linked to the other aspects of the country. For example, the cooperation between tourism and sports organizations, while reducing political tensions between countries, leads to positive cultural interactions and more constructive interactions at international levels. Another point is that diplomacy through sport and subsequent improvement of relations with foreign countries could remove Iran from isolation and increase the opportunity to invest in sports and non-sports fields through the

growth of positive cultural trends and the psychological security of foreigners. In turn, it contributes to the economic development of the country, which is one of the positive components of sports diplomacy. Today's situation in Iran is such that, in addition to national unity, the country requires an active foreign policy that can meet the economic, diplomatic, political and security needs of Iran by entering non-security areas such as sports.

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