

# The Facilitating role of sport in foreign relations of the US and Iran



*O papel de facilitador do esporte nas relações externas dos EUA e do Irã*

*El papel del facilitador deportivo en las relaciones exteriores de EE. UU. E Irán*

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DOI: 10.5752/P.2317-773X.2020v8.n2.p103

Received in: December 16, 2019  
Accepted in: April 06, 2020

## ABSTRACT

Attractiveness and effectiveness are the two main global features of sport; The Islamic Republic of Iran's "soft power", after fourteen years of its revolution, has been influenced by various macro and micro concepts that have been repeatedly challenged by Western countries, especially the United States. So, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in light of recent years' successes in the international field of sports, including seventeenth among the 206 countries in the Olympic 2012 can use this capacity to expand its interactions in the international arena. The purpose of the present study was initially to explore the concepts of strengthening Iran's soft power through sport and to design a favorable paradigm for the development of diplomatic relations with Western countries, especially the United States. Then, SPSS and PLS software were used to investigate the correlation between variables based on Spearman's test, exploratory factor analysis and finally structural and interpretive modeling of independent and dependent variables. The findings showed that seven factors of financial development, devout, conversion, civilization, cohesion, governmental issues and friendship were in four levels influenced by Iran's international sporting environment.

**Keywords:** United States. Iran. West. Sports Diplomacy. Olympic.

## RESUMO

O *soft power* da República Islâmica do Irã, após catorze anos de sua revolução, foi influenciado por vários conceitos macro e micro que foram repetidamente desafiados pelos países ocidentais, especialmente pelos Estados Unidos. Assim, a República Islâmica do Irã, à luz dos sucessos dos últimos anos no campo internacional do esporte, incluindo o décimo sétimo entre os 206 países nas Olimpíadas de 2012, pode usar essa capacidade para expandir suas interações na arena internacional. O objetivo do presente estudo foi inicialmente explorar

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os conceitos de fortalecer o poder brando do Irã por meio do esporte e projetar um paradigma favorável ao desenvolvimento de relações diplomáticas com os países ocidentais, especialmente os Estados Unidos. Em seguida, os softwares SPSS e PLS foram utilizados para investigar a correlação entre variáveis baseadas no teste de Spearman, análise fatorial exploratória e, finalmente, modelagem estrutural e interpretativa de variáveis independentes e dependentes. As descobertas mostraram que sete fatores de desenvolvimento econômico, fluxo religioso, transformação e comunicação, intercâmbio cultural, unidade nacional, correntes políticas e construção da paz estavam em quatro níveis influenciados pelo ambiente esportivo internacional do Irã.

**Palavras-chave:** Estados Unidos. Irã. Ocidente. Diplomacia Esportiva. Olímpica.

## RESUMEN

El poder blando de la República Islámica de Irán, después de catorce años de su revolución, ha sido influenciado por varios conceptos macro y micro que han sido desafiados repetidamente por los países occidentales, especialmente los Estados Unidos. Por lo tanto, la República Islámica de Irán, a la luz de los éxitos de los últimos años en el campo internacional del deporte, incluido el decimosexto entre los 206 países en los Juegos Olímpicos de 2012, puede utilizar esta capacidad para expandir sus interacciones en el ámbito internacional. El objetivo del presente estudio fue inicialmente explorar los conceptos de fortalecer el poder blando de Irán a través del deporte y diseñar un paradigma favorable para el desarrollo de las relaciones diplomáticas con los países occidentales, especialmente los Estados Unidos. Luego, el software SPSS y PLS se utilizaron para investigar la correlación entre variables basadas en la prueba de Spearman, el análisis factorial exploratorio y, finalmente, el modelado estructural e interpretativo de variables independientes y dependientes. Los resultados mostraron que siete factores de desarrollo económico, flujo religioso, transformación y comunicación, intercambio cultural, unidad nacional, corrientes políticas y construcción de la paz estaban en cuatro niveles influenciados por el entorno deportivo internacional de Irán.

**Palabras clave:** Estados Unidos. Irán, oeste. Diplomacia Deportiva. Olímpico.

## Introduction

In the light of globalization, information technology has been rapidly developed and advanced, and using the aforementioned facilities and easy access to the technology has evolved the international circumstances. This structural and inherent evolution in international system converted the public diplomacy to a tool, to which the governments resort, to be able to better attain their national goals regarding other states (RAHMANI, 2015). That is, goals which essentially include political, economic, cultural, and social aspects (KESHAVARZ SHOKRI, 2013). Besides these goals, the nature of public diplomacy has also been changed. Unlike the past, where the nature of international system and its associated relationships were based on hard power and when the governments used military forces, army, conferrals, and international unities and liaisons to gain their international goals, today the countries worldwide are looking for alternative solutions and seeking a “softer” term to progress their diplomatic goals (SABBAGHIAN, 2016). Moreover, the governments try not to only focus their diplomatic system on the governing board of

the counterpart country and are trying to affect the social and mental structures of people. Thus, one of the most important characteristics of diplomacy arises. In modern diplomacy, people satisfaction and requirements have the topmost position, and the people's foreign decisions are dependent on people's opinions. Also, other alternative tools (other than hard power) are applied to realize foreign goals. Therefore, practitioners and politicians talk about sport diplomacy, because of its peacemaking and training functions, and due to the fact that sports are considered as a "soft power" (GRIX; HOULIHAN, 2014).

Indeed, sports diplomacy is the efforts of countries sport ambassadors in various fields to boost a country's picture and its soft power; for example, the presence of Dennis Rodman, the American basketball player in North Korea, and watching basketball with North Korea's president indicates the power of this part of public diplomacy. Or embracing the picture of Iranian's leader by Melvyn Douglas, the American wrestler in the crowd of 7<sup>th</sup> Iranian presidential election is another representation of sport's soft power in developing the relationships between disputative countries; this kind of diplomacy is based on cultural and social values of different countries and targets the public opinions, politicians, as well as governments. Sports diplomacy act as an elixir which, as an ingenious and intact diplomatic tool is able to remove the discrepancies and can promote development, conversation and consistency. Firms which works in the field of sports and diplomacy can enhance positive values of sports, such as mutual respects, discipline, patience and tolerance, and compassion in the rough and sharp political relations, and thus soften such an atmosphere (LI, 2013).

Sport diplomacy is intentionally and consistently employed by governmental and non-governmental actors to advance politics, businesses, development, training, image, reputation, brand name, and people to people communications and it uses sport events in this regard (MURRAY, 2013). Indeed, as the diplomats sit around a desk, the athletes are also running around a runway to realize the national goals; sport diplomacy is mostly emphasizing on the peace which is created among governments and nations, and this is the factor that increases the tendency to hold sport events. For example, 2008 Olympic games in Beijing is an indication of understanding and friendship sense boosting, as well as removing the created borders due to the end of the Cold War (JANKOVIC, 2017). Therefore, the bond between diplomacy and sports is an effective solution which in companion can enhance a brighter and more effective horizon to attain international diplomatic successes (SABBAGHIAN, 2016).

Besides the cultural areas, sports as an important and effective dimension, has played a considerable role in countries' political and economic development (NAURIGHT; SCHIMMEL, 2005). Due to the political and cultural aspects, sport has been widely recognized among countries, and today the international sport is considered as an inseparable component of nations' interrelationships and campaigns (MURRAY, 2013). In this regard, can one claim that the share of each country from the sport or the sport industries is different, depending on the cul-

tural type and their policy makers' point of view? It can be seen that the financial turnover due to the sports is different in countries which considers sports as a means of entertainment, compared to the countries which addresses sports as a part of their macroeconomics (SHARIATI FEIZABADI, 2016). For example, in United Kingdom (UK) sports industries are placed among the first 15 biggest industries, while in some other undeveloped countries, sports are not even considered as a small productive industry.

However, what is evident is that a high share of revenues in developed countries is related to the sports' industries. In other word, professional sports are no longer considered as an entertainment, but also it is in fact, a highly profitable industry which has a high capability to absorb capitals. For example, by designing a sports' decade (between 2010 to 2020), Brazil, as one of the 5 powers of evolving economies of BRICS<sup>3</sup> tried to host various disciplines of sports, such as FIFA world cup of 2014 or the summer Olympics of 2016 in Rio. Besides using this heritage in economic development, Brazil, as such, tried to introduce itself as a standard country in international arena (SAJJADI, 2000). Thereby, paying attention to sports and sports' events can affect other employment areas as an umbrella, and can influence other people employments indirectly. Development and economic collaborations, accompanying with sports communications, cause the governments to promote the political and foreign cultures and learn lessons from each other (ŠTULAJER; ŠTULAJER, 2016). Besides this national profitability, sports diplomacy has now succeeded in making borders pale, and opening more ways to conversations, through which various people can gather altogether (KHABIRI, 2014). According to the aforementioned advantages, this kind of diplomacy causes the relationships between governments and nations to boost as time passes. As well, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, that diplomacy was considered a theory, policy and culture in which international relations are based on (DEOS, 2016).

Investigating the literature, we concluded that there has been a large attention and focus on sports diplomacy as an effective solution to remove between-countries' stresses. Bakhshi Chenari *et al.* (2019) in their study, "providing solutions to enable and enhance the sports diplomacy in foreign policy of Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)", taking a qualitative and quantitative approach, have concluded that the most important solutions to enable and boost sports diplomacy in foreign policy of IRI are, as follows, according to the experts' perspective:

- Reviewing the administrative directives in sports agencies (i.e. ministry of sports, the national committee of sports, etc.);
- Holding coordination meetings between ministry of sports and ministry of foreign affairs, as the two main administrators of sports diplomacy;
- Training the political-sports managers of the country, considering the primary principles of international interactions in a worldwide level; and
- The development and execution of a comprehensive and scientific program to enhance the sports diplomacy.

3. . BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa

Shariati Feizabadi and Nazemi (2017), in their study, titled “Designing the concepts of sports’ peacemaker culture in the development of international relationships” concluded that among various phenomena, sports is considered as one of the most prominent indications of peace in the 3<sup>th</sup> millennia, and could play a considerable role amongst the peace-making programs of BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). These countries have employed sports as a lever and a mean to appeal their requirements from the global society. Islamic Republic of Iran referred to the View Plan in 2013 at United Nations General Assembly, and now it is able to employ its national sports capacity in order to realize its goals and objectives in international arena. Also, the findings indicated that the 34 frequent concepts in the field of sports can play an explanatory role in creating a peacemaker culture concept. Among these locutions, “replacing the war and military diplomacy with sports, and creating international friendship” was the most frequent locution (SHARIATI FEIZ-ABADI; NAZEMI, 2017); In another research, titled “The place of sport in domestic and international politics for peace and friendship” which has been carried out by Mohammadi Aziz Abadi (2018), he concluded that sports plays the following considerable and strategic roles in the nations and governments’ relationships (AZIZ ABADI, 2018):

- Improvement and modification of a nations’ image;
- Boosting friendship;
- Increasing the peace and developing between-countries friendship;
- Developing the business and tourism;
- Encouraging the international development;
- Unifying minorities; and
- The most important, the improvement of international relationships in order to boost the between-nations’ friendship.

Bagheri, Shariati Feizabadi and Nazarian (2016), in their study titled “Soft modeling (ISM) of sports diplomacy components” analyzed data indicated that the components were categorized in three areas of: bonding (cultural development and amicability), independence (media interactions, national unity and identification, political development and fighting isolation), and dependency (dark dimension, economic development, branding and international prestige and the development of smart prestige). Shahrezaei and Shirzadi (2016), in their study titled “The role of sports in expanding the international terms of IRI”, indicated a more emphasis and focus on the sports’ role in developing friendly relationships and collaborations with other countries and international organizations, due to the role of cultural factors, soft power and interactions in foreign policies, as well as an attention to sports as a mean to enhance the country international prestige by attaining successes and honors in international arenas of sports and power presentation.

Jankovic (2017) in his study, titled “Boosting the solutions for international debates: the role of sports diplomacy”, indicates that not only the traditional Olympic games but also the football rules show that sports can work as a supplementary mean to resolve international debates. Schneider (2018), in his research, titled “Sports as a facilitator for international



positive relationships” indicated that sports can facilitate the resolution of global issues positively by improving the international relations. Among all people and governments, the sport is considered as a proper facilitator for positive relationships, regardless of the current situation. Sport is considered as an international joint activity, which can enhance international interactions, good faith between nations, friendship, and loyalty among different nations. Boyacioglu and Oguz (2016) suggested that sport was translated into a positive approach and a big mean of sanction in international relationships and yet it continues. Thereby, increasing its impacts on the most important items from the last century up to now, will have impact on sport games and approximately all over the world and before Olympic games, and then on other organizations (especially on football). In fact, sport has played an important role in the test of power and races between two poles in a warless environment, at that time; because sport games are considered as wars which do not end in death and indicate the economic effects of globalization in sports’ industry (BOYACIOĞLU & OĞUZ, 2016).

Fozooni (2014) in his paper titled “Religion, politics, and social class: conflicts and competition in Iranian football”, investigated the religion, class, sex and race developments via football in Iran. He knows football as the representation of IRI government national construct and considered it as a result of religion power in social classes. Munt (2015) in his study titled “Game, Set, Match: Sports and the Future of Diplomacy”, indicated that sports diplomacy is considered as a legitimate base to study international relations. In his study, he argues that countries sports diplomacy provide “soft” relatively opposing relationships. However, in this research, he tries to remove the objections against this concept and highlights it by providing some samples which sports diplomacy can have. Chehabi (2011), in his research titled “The sports diplomacy between USA and IRI”, knows the victory of Seyed Mohammad Khatami in Islamic Republic of Iran presidential election in 1997 as a starting point for friendly approach against different world countries.

Either in yesterday’s overwhelming atmosphere of pre- The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action period, or in the context of efforts of western countries of 5+1 today, in post-JCPOA era, Iran sports could keep alive some twinkles of hope in boosting diplomatic interactions among these countries, which can one name the presence of Iranian volleyball players in the final stage of volleyball world cup in 2019 in United States (USA), as the last sample; Since in the last decade, IRI has been attacked dramatically by media and advertisements in international public opinions (advertisements via projects such as Islamophobia, Shia-phobia, and Irano-phobia), because of its ideologies to foster revolutionary goals, ideological conflicts against the East and the West, as well as due to its behavioral differences in foreign policy field, developing an appropriate roadmap seems so necessary to frustrate these attacks and to modify the international image of IRI in the world population minds, especially in Western countries, more than ever (BAKHSHI CHENARI, GOODARZI, SAJJADI; JALALI FARAHANI, 2019). The position of USA in international system as well as the strategic role and position of IRI in the region arose mutual neces-

sities to create an appropriate relationship. IRI sports, as an Asian power could always gain a prominent position in international arena, especially in volleyball, wrestling, taekwondo, weight lifting and football, up to the point that in summer Olympic games of London in 2012, IRI stood at the 17<sup>th</sup> rank, which was upper than Brazil, Spain, Argentina, Turkey, etc. Therefore, in this study we aim to identify the diplomatic dimensions and capacities of IRI sports, and make use of this bed as a tool to start and boost the political relations with Western countries, especially USA.

### Methodology

This research is considered a survey research in terms of data collecting method, while it is an applied research from its goal perspective. First, we tried to review the sports diplomacy literature and explore the most important locutions influencing the sports diplomacy by the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) and employing 10 experts. To this end, we developed a questionnaire and it was given to the experts, so that they could screen the components and identify their importance. Finally, 33 locutions were approved as indicated in Table 2. The statistical sample in the second section was based on Cochran formula to calculate the unknown population volume. The number of people was 170 according to the 5 question Likert scale. Considering the omissions, finally, 318 questionnaires were usable among the total 320 distributed questionnaires. In the next sections, we employ Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, Spearman correlation coefficient, exploratory factor analysis, as well interpretative structural models (ISMs) to find and determine the relations between components (which are converted to variables).

### Findings

In order to carry out tests in our software, the questionnaires were distributed among 318 people, whose demographics are depicted in table 1.

Table 1 - Descriptive statistics of quantitative part

No.	Demographical parameters	Choices	Frequency	Percentage
1	Sex	Male	176	55.3
		Female	142	44.6
2	Marriage status	Single	124	38.9
		Married	194	61
3	Education	BS	135	42.4
		MS	116	36.4
		PhD	67	21
4	Age	Under 30	81	25.4
		31 to 40	103	32.3
		41 to 50	75	23.5
		51 and above	59	18.5

Source: own elaboration

Before designing the conceptual model of research based on interpretative-structural modeling, first it is necessary to identify the interested components based on previous studies and experts' comments. To do so, in the first step (i.e. the identification of problem parameters), the decision-makers' comments were collected using the 5 Likert scale, and then a triangular fuzzy number was attributed to factors. Then, the suggested threshold in literatures was employed to determine each factor status (accept/reject). 33 locutions in sports were selected to design a questionnaire. Also, a free question was designed at the end of questionnaire in which the respondents were asked to mention all influencing factors that they think of them, as important factors for the research purpose. Second, the questionnaire was used to collect experts' comments in decision making groups in order to obtain the relative importance of influencing factors and their ranks. Therefore, data collection was carried out in 2 steps. In the first step, the questionnaire was given to the members of experts group, and they were asked to mention their ideas about each measure as oral parameters in the questionnaire. The fuzzy mean and the explicit fuzzy number were explored according to the mean calculation formula. Finally, the identified factors were named. In this step, we tried to answer the question "What are the influencing factors in sports diplomacy?" To name the factors, 2 general measures were used, that is "controllable/incontrollable", and "general/specific". First factor: It includes locutions 2, 3, 15, 17, 23, and 30 which constitute 13.357 percent of the total variance. These factors have the most variance. This factor includes 6 locutions, as follows:

#### *Step 1: Identifying the problem parameters*

The decision-making group comments were collected according to a 5-points Likert scale, and then the triangular fuzzy number were attributed to factors. Then, considering the threshold suggested in literatures, each item status (accept/reject) were determined. 33 locutions in sports diplomacy were selected to design a questionnaire. Also, a free question was designed at the end of questionnaire in which the respondents were asked to mention all influencing factors that they think of them, as an important factor for the research purpose. Second, the questionnaire was used to collect experts' comments in decision making groups in order to obtain the relative importance of influencing factors and their ranks. Therefore, data collection was carried out in 2 steps. In the first step, the questionnaire was given to the members of experts group, and they were asked to mention their ideas about each measure as oral parameters in the questionnaire. The fuzzy mean and the explicit fuzzy number were explored according to the mean calculation formula. Finally, 7 factors were identified and named. In this step, we tried to answer the question "What are the main factors in facilitating the relations of Iran and USA sports diplomacy?" To name the factors, 2 general measures were used, that is "controllable/incontrollable", and "general/specific". Finally, 7 factors were identified which are summarized in table 2.



Table 2 - Categorized factors using explorative analysis

Explored Factor	Locution
Civilization	Sports diplomacy is a tool to indicate a real picture of Iranians to the world.
	Sports can lead to boost world population interactions.
	Indigenous, local and traditional sports create an appropriate platform to develop revolution discourse.
	Sport is a tool with which one country people can stand against the other.
	Sport can develop the cultural relations between countries' population.
	Sport events play the main role to improve public diplomacy between IRI and USA.
	International sport events in USA are much less covered compared to IRI.
	Comprehensive and general understanding and interactions with western countries, is considered as a prerequisite for sports diplomacy development.
Governmental Issues	The governmental and state laws prohibit the realization of sports diplomacy goals in Iran.
	Sport is a tool to develop diplomatic relations.
	A country attendance in sport events can take a country out of political and geopolitical isolation.
	Sport can help to reconstruct internal agencies.
	Sport is a tool to promote power and dominance.
	Countries try to gain their broad goals via sports.
	Sport can create a platform in which the political geography can approximate natural geography.
Friendship	Sport helps to improve foreign relations and enhance between governments' understanding.
	Sports can be considered as an alternative for war and military diplomacy.
	Sports are a reason for psychological wars among governments.
	Sport is a tool against doping, race, tribal, regional and class diversity.
	Sports can soften and normalize the relationship between two countries which have cold opposing political atmosphere.
Cohesion	Sport is an appropriate atmosphere to influence public opinions.
	Sport is source for conflicts and discrepancies between countries.
	Sport diplomacy between countries requires a change in between-societies hostilities and mutual bonds.
	Sport teaches leadership, team working, respecting to rules, and mutual respects.
Financial	Sport can lead to countries' consistent development.
	Sport increases the economic outcomes.
	Sport can create mutual consistent relationships and leads to development.
Conversion	Sport is a reason for a revolution in communications and information.
	Sport plays an important role in political, social, and economic life of different countries' population.
	Sport's role is beyond a body activity and includes various social, educational, cultural, political, and economic functions.
Devout	Sports diplomacy is affected by religion and political ideology.
	Sport decreases the religion varieties.

Source: own elaboration

In the second step, we constructed the structural self-interactive matrix. It is constructed of sports diplomacy dimensions and components and their comparison, using four states of conceptual relationships.

Table 3 - Structural self-interactive matrix for factors influencing sports diplomacy

	<b>i</b>	<b>j</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
1	Governmental Issues		X	V	X	X	V	V	V
2	Devout		A	X	X	X	V	V	A
3	Conversion		X	X	X	V	V	V	V
4	Civilization		X	X	A	X	V	V	V
5	Cohesion		A	A	A	X	X	X	V
6	Friendship		A	V	A	X	X	X	X
7	Financial		A	A	A	A	A	A	X

Source: own elaboration

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> steps, the primal and final matrixes were built:

Table 4 - The primal and final matrixes

	<b>i</b>	<b>j</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Influence power</b>
1	Governmental Issues		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
2	Devout		1	0	1	1	1	1	1	6
3	Conversion		0	1	1	1	0	1	1	5
4	Civilization		1	1	0	0	1	1	1	5
5	Cohesion		0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4
6	Friendship		0	0	0	1	1	1	1	3
7	Financial		0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
The degree of correlation			3	4	3	6	5	6	6	30

Source: own elaboration

In the 5<sup>th</sup> step, following the determination of attainment set as well as the prerequisite of each parameter, the common elements in the attainment set and prerequisite for each parameter were identified. After determining the prerequisite and attainment sets as well as common elements, it was the time for determining parameters' (elements) levels. In the first table, those parameters have the highest level, whose attainment set is equal to the common elements. After determining this (these) parameter(s), we will eliminate them from the table and will form the next table by other remained parameters. Like the first table, we determine the 2<sup>nd</sup> level parameter in the 2<sup>nd</sup> table, and will continue until all parameters' levels are determined.

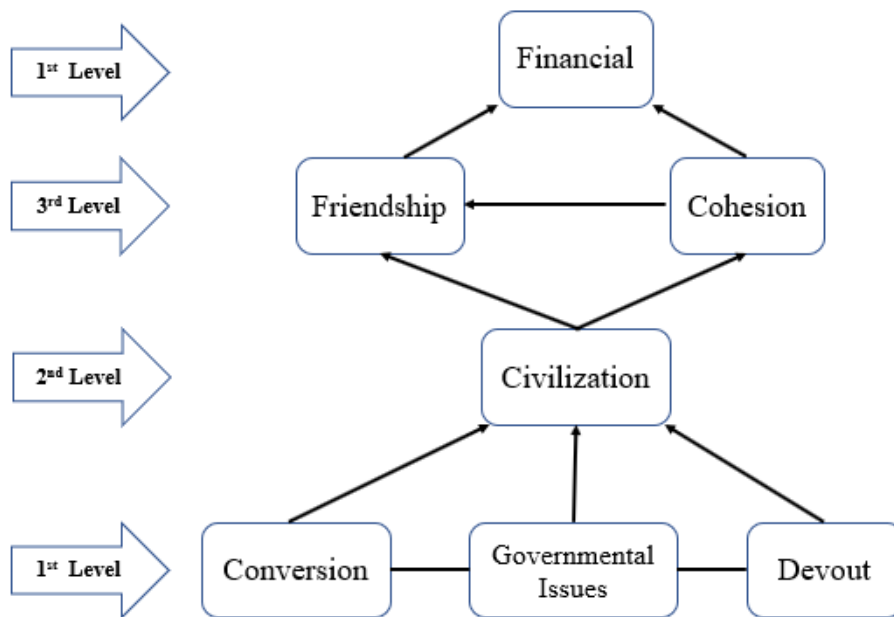
Table 5 - Determining the parameters' levels

Dimension(s)	Attainment set	Prerequisite set	Common elements	Leveling
1	7-6-5-4-3-2-1	4-2-1	4-3-2-1	3th level
2	7-6-5-4-3-2-1	4-3-2-1	4-3-2-1	4th level
3	7-6-5-4-3-2-1	4-3-2-1	4-3-2-1	4th level
4	6-5-4-2-1	3-2-1	4-3-2-1	3rd level
5	7-6-5-4	6-5-4-3-2-1	6-5-4	2nd level
6	7-6-5-4	6-5-4-3-2-1	6-5-4	2nd level
7	7	6-5-4-3-2-1-7	7	1st level

Source: own elaboration

In the next step, following the determination of relationships and parameters' level, the primary model was developed. To do this, first we sort the parameters according to their level, from the lowest to the highest. In the current model, the parameters have been classified in 4 levels. At the topmost level, the economic development model can be seen, which is affected most (correlation factor). At the lowest level, are located political circles, and reforms and communications, which act as the model base. The model starts with these parameters and then leads to other ones. At the next levels, are located other components, which can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1 - Extracted model from interpretative-structural modeling



Source: own elaboration

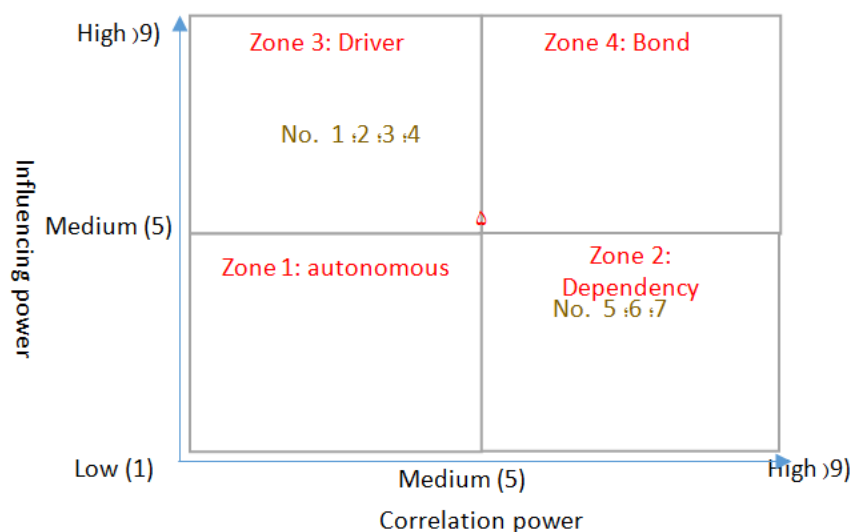
In the 7<sup>th</sup> step, the analysis of influencing power and the correlation degree has been carried out, using MICMAC diagram. We can define a coordinate system based on the correlation degree and parameters influencing power and divide it to 4 equal parts. In this study, some parameters are located under the driving subgroup, which has a high influencing power a low correlation power. Located in the next group are dependent parameters which are somehow the results of the product development process, and are less able to lead to other parameters. All the results are depicted in the following figure and table.

Table 6 - The level of influencing power and correlation of parameters

Parameters	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Influencing power	7	7	7	6	4	4	1
Correlation power	4	4	4	3	6	6	7

Source: own elaboration

Figure 2 - Influencing power and correlation of parameters



Source: own elaboration

#### Path analysis and Hypothesis tests

In order to investigate the relationship between research parameters, we first assess the relationship between these parameters using Spearman's correlation coefficient, in order to primarily investigate the relationships. Spearman's correlation coefficient can provide an overview of the relationship between the two main research parameters. The results of correlation test showed that all relationships are significant at 99% confidence level (0.01% error) and the change direction is the same. So, the Null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (i.e. a significant relationship) is confirmed, and each two research parameters are correlated positively and significantly.

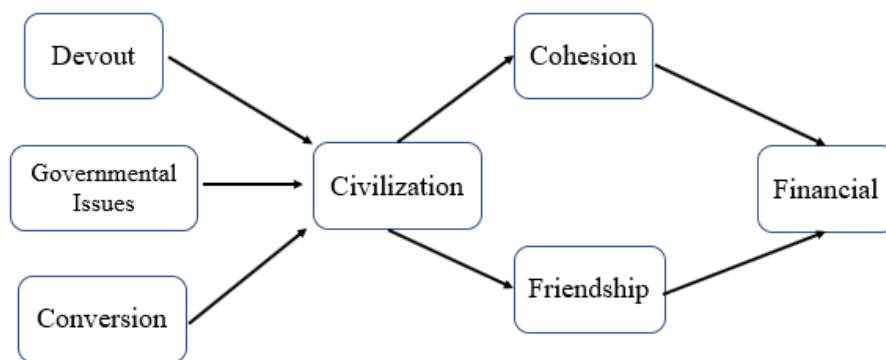
Table 7 - Correlation matrix for research parameters

Parameters		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Governmental Issues	correlation	1	----	----	----	----	----	----
	Significance		----	----	----	----	----	----
Conversion	correlation	0.318	1	----	----	----	----	----
	Significance	0.000		----	----	----	----	----
Devout	correlation	0.403	0.247	1	----	----	----	----
	Significance	0.000	0.000		----	----	----	----
Civilization	correlation	0.458	0.539	0.330	1	----	----	----
	Significance	0.000	0.000	0.000		----	----	----
Cohesion	correlation	0.617	0.416	0.362	0.479	1	----	----
	Significance	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		----	----
Friendship	correlation	0.34	0.566	0.375	0.571	0.405	1	----
	Significance	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		----
Financial	correlation	0.404	0.273	0.365	0.310	0.33	0.357	1
	Significance	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	

Source: own elaboration

After the identification of dependent and independent parameters, now we investigate the relationship between parameters, using structural equations model in PLS software. Codes can be seen in the software output, each of them indicates a parameter. The parameters are shown as follows: Governmental Issues as GI, Civilization as CI, Conversion as CO, Devout as DE, Cohesion as CO, Friendship as FR, and Financial as FI. The essential criterion for assessing the latent endogenous parameters is  $R^2$  deterministic coefficient. The value of  $R^2$  (0.67, 0.33, and 0.19) in path models of PLS is considerable, medium, and weak, respectively. As can be seen, this value is equal to 0.463 for friendship parameter, 0.445 for cohesion parameter, which are considerable. It is equal to 0.162 for financial which is categorized as weak. Figure 3 indicates the research conceptual model following the determination of between-parameters relationship.

Figure 3 - Research conceptual model plotted by the software



Source: own elaboration

In order to assess the validity of measurement tool, we have used the converging validation by Fournel and Larker measure (i.e. the variance mean has been explored). The least AVE of 0.5 indicated sufficient convergence. That is, a latent parameter can explain more than a half of its defining dispersion. The mean values of explored variance are reported as civilization (0.732), financial (0.809), cohesion (0.735), friendship (0.685), governmental issues (0.647), conversion (0.710), and devout (0.849). As can be seen, the explored mean value for the latent parameter in reflective model is higher than 0.4, which indicates the desired converging validity of the measurement model.


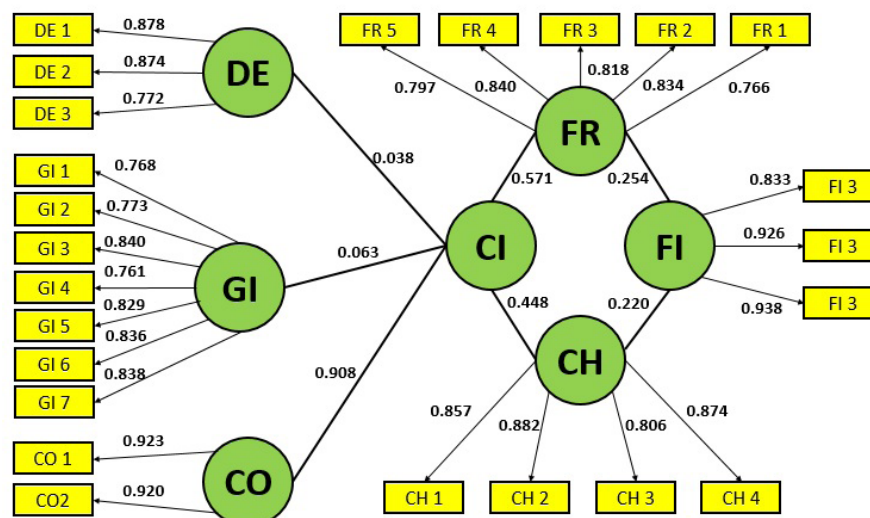
Finally, we used the PLS software  to assess the research model. We have also used non-parametric test of bootstrap (TENENHAUS *et al.*, 2005) with 500 repetitions to estimate the standard errors and testing hypothesis. The essential criterion for assessing the latent endogenous parameters is  $R^2$  deterministic coefficient. The value of  $R^2$  (0.67, 0.33, and 0.19) in path models of PLS is considerable, medium, and weak, respectively (AZAR *et al.*, 2012). As can be seen, this value is 0.919 for civilization, which is considered considerable, and is 0.326 and 0.2 for friendship, and cohesion parameters, respectively which are considered as medium. As well, it is equal to 0.16 for financial which is considered as weak. Each path coefficient in PLS structural model can be considered equal to a standardized beta coefficient in usual least squares regressions.



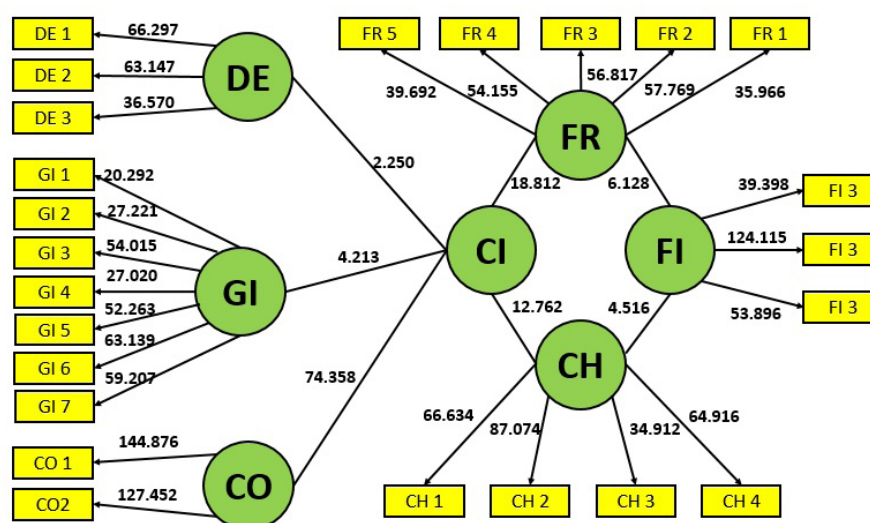
Figure 4 - Model in structural path coefficients state



Source: own elaboration

\*CI: Civilization, DE: Devout, GI: Governmental Issues, CO: Conversion, FE: Friendship, CH: Cohesion, FI: Financial

Figure 5 - Model in significant numbers state



Source: own elaboration

\*CI: Civilization, DE: Devout, GI: Governmental Issues, CO: Conversion, FE: Friendship, CH: Cohesion, FI: Financial

As can be seen from the research structural model, there exists a positive and significant relationship between governmental issues, devout, conversion parameters, and the cohesion parameter, according to the significance numbers and between-parameters' relationships structural coefficient. In addition, there also exists a positive and significant relationship between civilization and friendship parameters and cohesion parameter. Finally, there is a significant and positive relationship between the two parameters of cohesion and friendship, with financial.

## Discussion and conclusion

According to the research findings, we explored 7 factors related to Iran sports diplomacy. Among these 7 factors, the governmental issues and civilization are inseparable components of sports diplomacy, that if are accompanied, could be considered as “*soft power*” generating factor against USA. Although some believe that sports act as a tool for politicians (NAURIGHT; SCHIMMEL, 2005), sports diplomacy can move in a separate way, so that avoid political challenges. Sports diplomacy can mitigate the political stress between IRI and USA through its valuable and popular nature, as sports promote a sense of respect and mutual happiness, *per se*. Sports diplomacy can also play a role in the evolution of micro-cultures and civilization values between the two countries. Not only by gathering different countries people altogether, and the evolution of such micro-cultures, the constructive and effective interaction between IRI and USA governments are formed, but also it provides conditions for “civilization” between the two countries’ people, and as Sabbaghian (2016) suggested, after a short while, political and cultural successes will arise between the two countries. In this regard, it seems that IRI must try to use various civilization methods and tools to take appropriate actions to distress, remove its negative images, make positive images of itself, and recognize itself for American people. With regard to sports diplomacy critical role in making peace and friendship among countries, IRI must reduce its tendency to use military and threatening tools, and open direct conversation doors in the light of sports diplomacy. On the other hand, having friendly relationships with other countries can smooth the way for the other important tool for implementing the sports diplomacy, that is hosting sports events.

Another important point of this research is that different sports diplomacy components are interrelated, and as the results of Spearman’s correlation test verified the significant and positive relationships between components, in the case of a change in one, the other will also be changed. For example, the passion of Iranians to wrestling was a key element for US policy makers to send the first Americans in a shape of wrestling team after Islamic revolution in 1997 that was concluded to “Sport Diplomacy”. Therefore, sports diplomacy may lead to gain a wide range of social, political, and economic goal in IRI.

Next, the result showed that financial factor is known as one of the most important components of sports diplomacy. Sports can be a part of Iran macro-economy and have a large share of the country revenue. Today, sport is not only considered as a body activity and entertainment, but also can boom a profitable industry. Theoretical literature indicated that many countries that holds sport events, make a lot of money for themselves besides introducing their countries to others (SAJJADI, 2000). Therefore, in the light of sports, IRI can provide opportunities to extend her collaborations with USA and so, she could exploit her right to host sport events. In this way she could partly create employment to resolve some of her economic issues, and create a positive commercial balance. Brazil, Germany, South Africa, and Russia are sample who hosted cred-

ible world games, not long time ago and as such they tried to introduce themselves as standard countries. One of the research's interested components was national unification. This parameter can both affect other parameters and can be also affected by them. Sport games are an indicative of the cohesion and empathy of different countries' people. Playing national anthems during games, especially in the case of victories, is an indicative of athletics and participants' empathy which induce the sense of national pride and patriotism. Sports diplomacy indicated that governments decide their foreign policies according to their people opinions, and only if people are satisfied, they could reach unification and integrity. Thus, one can say that not only sports diplomacy creates empathy and unification between people, but it also changes the relationship between the governments and their population.

Evidences indicate that sports have advanced the relationship between IRI and USA. For example, the USA wrestling team attendance in Takhti wrestling cup in 1998 for the first time after the interruption of the two countries' relationships, the football match between IRI and USA in the same year -which was since referred to as football diplomacy, and with the USA president message led to the nations closeness- and/or American wrestler attendance in Khalij Fars cup in 1385 -in which Iranian students welcome them- are all samples which show some opportunities to improve the relationships between these two countries. Therefore, one can say that sports diplomacy in Iran must act as a diplomatic and cultural mean to build trust, convince, and attract American athletics and people, instead of being as an advertising weapon to create credits to reach the country political objectives and goals (KHABIRI, 2014). Moreover, considering the huge negative advertisements forced by USA against IRI, leveraging sports diplomacy promotion tools, such as sports messengers, holding exhibition games as well as sports tourism can somehow reduce this huge amount of negative advertisements, and links both people and governments of these two countries. By creating a sense of peace and friendship between USA and IRI, sports diplomacy can provide opportunities to reduce stresses and negative advertisements against Iran. It can even convince world public media to induce a positive perspective to the world, in the light of sports and their valuableness and popularity.

At the end, the present study suggests to address the assessment of these two countries activities during the past 40 years, so that it could be clear that how much were these activities and actions succeed in meeting IRI goals, national interests and Islamic expedience, to realize Iran diplomatic goals. At the next step, is located the development of a roadmap for IRI sports diplomacy with regard to USA, in order to evaluate capacities, challenges, goals and Iran's foreign policy preferences as well as the current situation of sports diplomacy. At the 3<sup>rd</sup> step, it is necessary to establish an organization to organize Iran's sports activities regarding the USA and, finally, resuming formal diplomatic relationships between the two countries and employing professional and capable sports diplomats in the form of embassies, dependents, or sports consultants in these countries.

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