Studying the Outcomes of Olympic Success from the Perspective of Stakeholders

Doctoral thesis

Fateme Zare

Doctoral School of Sport Sciences
Hungarian University of Sports Science

HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY
OF SPORTS SCIENCE
BUDAPEST

Supervisor: Dr. Gábor Géczi professor, PhD

Official reviewers: Dr. Bácsné Dr. Éva Bába professor, PhD
Dr. Tamás Dóczi associate professor, PhD

Budapest
2024

Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1.Introduction

Elite sport- the highest level of international competition especially in Olympic sports- is becoming increasingly important to nation states and their leaders, and success in elite sport is an important goal to achieve on behalf of the country. Increased rivalry and increased public investment in elite sport have resulted from nations' competition for success in international sporting events (Houlihan and Zheng, 2013). Outcomes or effects refer to the various reasons why countries might want to invest in elite sport, as well as how governments justify why winning more medals is necessary (De Bosscher et al., 2013). In addition, according to Dubinsky (2019), soft power refers to the ability to influence others' desires and persuade them to do what you want without resorting to bribes or military force.

Sport serves as a potent form of diplomacy, offering a more effective means to bring together estranged peoples, nations, and states compared to traditional diplomatic channels (Murray, 2012). In the realm of politics, soft power involves the ability to influence through attraction rather than coercion (contrasting hard power). In other words, soft power entails influencing others' preferences through allure (Nye, 2012). This has prompted various studies to explore the relationship between elite sport and soft power. For instance, Liu (2020) examined whether and how a country's elite sporting success affects its soft power. Results showing Olympic involvement as an antecedent to soft power impact through elite sports was suggested and validated. In another study, Carter and Sugden (2012) conducted a study analysing U.S. sport diplomacy, contrasting successful cases like 'ping pong' diplomacy with unsuccessful attempts like 'baseball diplomacy.' Smaller nations like Qatar have also harnessed sport to bolster their political influence, and this repositioning has become a focal point of research (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015; Dubinsky, 2019; Foley et al., 2012; Reiche, 2015).

While governments emphasize the positive societal impacts of elite sport to justify substantial public investments, the negative consequences are often overlooked. A large and growing body of literature has investigated the societal impacts of elite sport. These studies identified societal impacts that can flow from elite sport. Some of these societal impacts include strengthening national identity in Hungary, Israel, and Slovenia (e.g., Dubinsky and Dzikus, 2019; Topič and Coakley, 2010), pride in Germany (e.g.,

Gassmann et al., 2020; Storm and Jakobsen, 2020), enhancing international prestige in Germany and Iran (Haut et al., 2017; Zare and Géczi, 2022a), gaining diplomatic recognition in Brazil, China, Russia, North and South Korean and Iran (Luša, 2017; Merkel, 2013; Mohsenifar et al., 2022), feel-good factors in Germany (Wicker et al., 2012), increasing public interest in sports in the UK (Grix and Carmichael, 2012), and sport's growing popularity in relation to elite sport in different nations including Belgium, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Canada, Norway and Italy (De Bosscher et al., 2009; De Bosscher et al., 2013). Although extensive research has been carried out to identify the existing link between elite sport and political and societal impacts on different societies and nations, no single study exists that examines why and how these are expected to occur.

In light of the well-known effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports, such as the postponement of the Tokyo Olympic Games and EURO 2020, it was evident that lockdown restrictions and the pandemic had a global impact on sports and physical activity, transforming the sport industry at large. The holistic approach provided an opportunity to examine all aspects of the COVID-19 transformation, which often overlapped.

Throughout history, governments have benefited from and been assisted by the role and function of sports in politics. Sports have been used by individuals in the social arena as a means of pursuing their desires and demands. Sports have played a significant role in international relations, including matters of power, national interest, security, peace, government nation-building, prestige, foreign policy, diplomacy, and soft power (Shahrezaei and Shirzadi, 2019). As a subdivision of public diplomacy, sports and diplomacy have received much attention in recent years, but they have been associated since the 9th century BC. This was when kings signed an Olympic ceasefire during the first ancient Olympic Games. They agreed at the time to suspend all violent and hostile behaviour during the games to please spectators and athletes. Centuries later, the link between sports and diplomacy was strengthened, and the Olympic Truce was reminiscent of this relationship and the increasing importance of sports diplomacy in the 20th and early 21st centuries as theories, policies, and cultures have been taken into account in international relations (Deos, 2014).

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

The literature on sports diplomacy underscores the intricate relationship between sport and politics, particularly in the context of international sporting events. This review examines the multifaceted aspects of sports diplomacy, with a focus on the political and societal impacts of elite sports and their role as diplomatic tools.

In this regard, some scholars attempted to examine the varied impacts including social, political and economic impacts of hosting mega sporting events (e.g., Malfas et al., 2004) and non-mega sporting events (e.g., Djaballah et al., 2015; Taks et al., 2015; Zawadzki, 2020). The majority of studies have concentrated on the economic impacts on host cities (Crompton et al., 2001). Indeed, financial impacts are considered as one of the host cities' outcomes. Others, focused on the social (e.g., De Bosscher et al., 2021; De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2019, 2021) as well as political, sport as an element of soft power, outcomes of elite sport (e.g., Dubinsky, 2019; Liu, 2020; Nygård and Gates, 2013).

There is a large number of published studies (De Bosscher et al., 2019; De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2021; Dubinsky, 2019; Grix and Carmichael, 2012; Haut et al., 2020) that describe countries' efforts to invest money (*input*) and implement applicable policies (*activities*) in elite sport in order to be successful (*outputs*) on the international stage and to produce positive political and societal outcomes (*outcomes*) in order to improve their international image (*impact*).

Mapping Elite Sports' potential Societal Impact (MESSI) framework (De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2019) and Theory of Change (ToC) (how) provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for this thesis. A review of pertinent literature, the political and societal outcomes of elite sport were classified as either positive or negative.

2.1 Mapping Elite Sports' potential Societal Impacts (MESSI)

De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) describe MESSI as an underlying conceptual framework geared towards identifying the areas where elite sport can exert a significant societal impact. This framework integrates insights from critical theory to explicitly encompass both the positive and negative consequences of elite sport, as articulated by Coakley (2017). Additionally, the MESSI framework is based on a systematic literature review. This categorizes the existing literature regarding 'all' types of elite sport with

societal impacts. In their study, they meticulously scoured several electronic databases (SPORTDiscus, Web of Knowledge, and Google Scholar) to identify the diversity of topics under empirical study. The outcome of their efforts involved a review of 391 studies, which were thoughtfully classified into 79 distinct areas that reflect elite sport's influence on society. Indeed, just category 9 of the MESSI framework was used to represent political outcomes. In contrast, categories 1,2,4,7, and 8 of MESSI were used to describe societal impacts.

2.2 Theory of Change (ToC)

Theory of Change (ToC) describes 'how' and 'why' a series of logically linked events, known as change pathways, should lead to a specific result (Serrat, 2017). In particular, a Theory of Change (ToC) considers what happens (outcomes) as a result of interactions between context and processes (Pawson, 2013). A Theory of Change (ToC) is often referred to as a 'road map' or 'blueprint' for getting from 'here to there' (Stein and Valters, 2012, p. 3). A Theory of Change (ToC) is organized around cause-effect and if-then logic, focusing on how a program expects to achieve its goals (Vogel, 2012).

Weiss (1997) characterizes the Theory of Change as a theory that explains how and why an initiative works, beginning with a vision rather than a problem. In the context of this thesis, the vision is centred on bringing about positive societal and political changes. The main question of the Theory of Change pertains to how activities lead to changes in society. In this research, I consider political and societal changes that occur through Olympic success. It is crucial to differentiate between 'outcome' and 'impact'. While these terms have been used interchangeably in previous studies, it's important to remember that they are not synonymous. In this regard, whereas 'outcome' refers to the change in objective terms that has occurred as a result of a planned intervention, 'impact' refers to telling the story, experiences, and/or feelings of people or society due to the change (Pace, 1979). Therefore, I attempt to distinguish between 'outcomes' and impact in this thesis, 'outcomes' refer to the tangible changes resulting from elite sport policies, whereas 'impact' refers to the broader vision or goal.

Stein and Valters (2012) assert that the Theory of Change (ToC) is especially well-suited for addressing complex social and political change processes. This theory emphasizes the

relationships between goals, strategies, outcomes, and underlying assumptions, making research more impact-oriented. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of how the identified factors contribute to expected outcomes.

In the realm of sports policy, recent work by De Bosscher et al. (2021) has indicated a shift away from an output-oriented elite sport policy system and toward an outcome- or impact-oriented policy system. They confirm a shift in nations' perceptions of elite sport's societal influence and recognize that intended beneficial impacts must be deliberately pursued.

These studies underscore the importance of adopting a theory-driven and impact-oriented approach when dealing with complex social and political change processes in sports policy. In addition to highlighting the value of the Theory of Change (ToC) framework in capturing the intricate relationships between objectives, strategies, outcomes, and assumptions, scholars emphasize its suitability for addressing the challenges associated with achieving desired societal impact through elite sport interventions.

Theory of Change (ToC) offers a structured approach to comprehend how a series of logically linked events and change pathways lead to specific results. In this thesis, the Theory of Change helped trace the expected outcomes of Olympic success back to the actions and interventions associated with elite sport policies and their political and societal outcomes. The framework permitted me to investigate how these outcomes are expected to materialize. It enabled me to explore the cause-and-effect relationships between the identified factors and their influence on expected outcomes. Using this framework, I was able to scrutinize how the identified factors impact the anticipated political and societal outcomes from the perspective of stakeholders.

The MESSI framework categorizes the existing literature regarding the societal impacts of elite sports. It reflects both the positive and negative impacts of elite sport, thus providing a comprehensive view of factors influencing expected outcomes. By leveraging MESSI, I was able to identify specific factors within different categories, such as societal cohesion, international reputation.

2.3 Political outcomes of sport

Sport, as a manifestation of soft power, can engender both positive and negative political outcomes. While De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) have identified soft power, bad international image, war, and propaganda as potential negative impacts within the MESSI framework, they have not made a distinction between societal and political outcomes. Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter has been repeatedly emphasized by Thomas Bach and the International Olympic Committee. As per the rule: 'No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas' (IOC 2021, p. 90). This public message aims to maintain the neutrality of the Olympics, create a space free from political tensions, promote inclusivity and non-discrimination, and foster a sense of unity among participants and spectators. However, it has also ignited debates concerning freedom of expression, athletes' roles in advocating for social change, and addressing issues of discrimination and inequality. Dubinsky (2019) delves into the nuanced relationship between sports, soft power, and public diplomacy, culminating in a presentation of positive and negative political outcomes, as detailed in Table 1. Dubinsky (2019) delves into the nuanced relationship between sports, soft power, and public diplomacy, culminating in a presentation of positive and negative political outcomes, as detailed in Table 1. In his analysis, he provides a comprehensive overview of the ways in which sports can have a positive impact on international relations and politics.

Dubinsky (2019) highlights the promotion of collaboration as one of the positive outcomes. There is often a sense of global unity and mutual respect at sporting events, which bring together athletes and spectators from different countries. However, this positive outcome may be overshadowed by the negative consequences of propaganda. Host countries may use these events to create a controlled and often misleading impression of their political and social realities, deflecting attention from internal concerns.

A country's repositioning on the global stage is another positive outcome mentioned by Dubinsky (2019). The successful hosting of international sporting events can enhance the international prestige and reputation of a country. On the other hand, the same events can also result in war or conflict, as demonstrated in cases where competition exacerbates

existing geopolitical tensions or when significant financial burdens lead to domestic unrest.

Sports can have a significant impact on diplomatic leverage and soft power by enhancing international prestige and reputation. This can, however, result in a poor international image if the country does not address human rights concerns or if the event is marred by controversy. Corruption and doping scandals, for instance, can severely damage the reputation of the host country.

Peace-building through sports is another positive outcome, promoting understanding and dialogue between conflicting parties. According to Dubinsky (2019), such initiatives may sometimes merely serve as a façade for maintaining soft power without addressing the underlying causes.

Through international sports events, globalisation can facilitate cultural exchanges and economic development. However, these events can also serve as a platform for political boycotts, where countries refuse to participate as a way of protesting the host nation's policies.

International sports contribute to social cohesion and mutual understanding by fostering bridges between communities. However, such events can also result in political exclusion, as marginalized groups are excluded from the opportunities and benefits that such events can provide.

As a tool for public diplomacy, sports have dual edges, as demonstrated by Dubinsky's comprehensive and critical analysis. Despite the positive outcomes, the potential for negative outcomes cannot be overlooked. Based on the way these events are managed and perceived globally, they often reflect broader political dynamics that can either bridge divides or deepen them.

Table 1. Positive and negative political outcomes

Positive outcomes	Negative outcomes
Promote collaboration	Propaganda
Reposition the given country	War

Increase international prestige and reputation	Bad international image
Peace-building	Soft power
Globalisation	Platform for political boycott
Creating bridges between communities	Political exclusion
	Corruption
	Doping

Source: Factors extracted from De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) and Dubinsky (2019)

2.4 Understanding the societal outcomes

In a study conducted by De Rycke and De Bosscher (2021), it was attempted to see how the Belgian population views elite sport's negative and positive societal impact. The findings revealed that elite sport has a negative impact rather than a positive social impact on the Belgian community. Furthermore, De Bosscher et al. (2021) reviewed six papers within the European Sport Management Quarterly Special Issue and confirmed the difficulty and multifaceted nature of investigating and managing elite sport's societal impact. They concluded that all contributing authors of the reviewed papers showed that the societal impact of elite sport has become a significant concern for all stakeholders. As a result, they proposed two additional study avenues in the context of the societal impact of elite sport research. First, what are the most likely conditions for societal impacts to occur? and second, to figure out how the invested money can be put to better use for societal benefit? Table 2 shows the positive and negative societal outcomes that emerged from the MESSI framework.

Table 2. Positive and negative outcomes based on MESSI framework (De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2019)

Positive outcomes	**Negative outcomes**
Integration	Sexism

Social equality	Exclusion
Inclusion	Exploitation
Social justice	Discrimination
Socioeconomic equality	Opposition and rivalry
Community identity	Chauvinism
Community pride	Shame
Socializing opportunities	Disappointment
Pleasure	Failure
Special experiences	Pressure
Well-being	Injuries
Passion	Safeguarding issues
Fame	Post-career depression
Role model function	Discouragement effect
Quality of life	Doping
Life skills	Unhealthy lifestyle
Identification	Distorted body image
Sport participation	
Volunteering	
Adoption qualities	
Health awareness	

Source: Factors extracted from De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019)

2.5 Role of sports in public diplomacy and soft power

Another theoretical framework that underpins this work centres on sports diplomacy and the concept of soft power. Countries apply public diplomacy and soft power to achieve their national and international goals. Regarding 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, 2019) 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 2019; 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 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). 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).

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. Israel is used as an example solely because Dubinsky and Dzikus (2019) is the only study to date that has focused on the relationship between country image and the Olympic Games. 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 and Dzikus, 2019). 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. For example, Kramareva and Grix (2018) argue that the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics illustrate Russia's

emphasis on geopolitical goals through the use of hard power rather than soft power. The Russian government primarily used sports mega-events (SMEs) to achieve domestic soft power objectives. Consequently, the 1980 Olympics failed to capitalize on their potential to generate soft power and national unity for Russia.

Recently, more scholars attempted to scrutinize the societal impacts of elite sport (for example, De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2019). Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015) noted that during the early period of the modern Olympic Games, countries began to recognize the potential of the Olympics for nation branding. 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, 2019). Haut et al. (2017) claimed that not only losing, but even winning unfairly such as doping scandals in the Olympics, can harm a country's international image.

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 in the Canadian context. 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%) 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 (2015) 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 athletes' behaviour 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), are known as 'the biggest show on television' (Billings, 2008, p. 1) and attract

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). Nevertheless, 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 thesis, success was defined as the number of participants qualifying to participate in the Olympic Games.

2.6 Sports in diplomacy

Sports are increasingly recognized as an effective diplomatic tool, using international events to build cross-cultural understanding, improve bilateral relationships, and advance national interests globally (Murray, 2018; Grix and Brannagan, 2016). Metzger and Özvatan (2020) delve into the political dynamics between Germany and Turkey through football games, highlighting the role of national teams and their publicity in altering political boundaries.

e Castro (2013) underscores the importance of sport and mega-events in South Africa's foreign policy, enhancing soft power, prestige, and visibility. Grix (2013) analyse Brazil, China, and South Africa's success in hosting mega-sporting events, signalling their

transition to global powers. Zare and Géczi (2022b) argue that Olympic success contributes to Iran's international prestige.

In the context of Eastern Europe, Doupona Topič (2015) notes the intertwining of sports and politics after political changes post-1990. Rich (2018) provides an example of sporting politics between North and South Korea, demonstrating how sports can facilitate diplomatic thawing. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015) examine Qatar's use of global sport in its international strategy, particularly in successfully bidding for the 2022 football World Cup.

The Gulf states, including Qatar, UAE, and Bahrain, use sports as a method of global visibility. Bromber et al. (2013) highlight sports cooperation between Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, resulting in regional progress. However, diplomatic tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia hinder sports collaboration.

The issue of Iranian and Saudi football teams not hosting Asian Champions League matches against each other is analysed, with sports diplomacy proposed as a potential solution. This approach draws inspiration from the 1970s 'ping-pong diplomacy' between China and the United States, which helped to ease tensions and improve bilateral relations through sports. Expanding on the political implications of sports diplomacy, the literature underscores sport's role as a potent diplomatic tool. It offers an effective means to bridge political divides, as Murray (2012) suggests. Soft power, defined by Nye (2012) as the ability to influence through attraction, is explored in the context of elite sports' impact on a country's soft power, as examined by Liu (2020). Carter and Sugden (2012) analyse US sport diplomacy, highlighting successful and unsuccessful cases.

Sport's political outcomes as a manifestation of soft power are explored by De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019), who identify potential negative impacts. The Olympic Charter's Rule 50, prohibiting political demonstrations, raises debates on freedom of expression. Dubinsky (2019) delves into the nuanced relationship between sports, soft power, and public diplomacy, detailing positive and negative political outcomes.

The societal impacts of elite sports are also discussed, emphasizing positive aspects such as national identity, pride, international prestige, and diplomatic recognition. However, negative consequences and the societal impacts of elite sports, including their linkages, remain underexplored in the literature. The need for further research on the expected occurrences and mechanisms of societal impacts is highlighted.

2.7 Country image and reputation

Perhaps the most striking feature of the way that 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. 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 some countries 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.

2.8 Hungary's strategic utilization of sports diplomacy

The Hungarian government has undertaken extensive measures to establish Hungary as a leading sporting nation. This is achieved through the development of elite sports, mandatory daily physical education in schools, and significant infrastructure projects such as stadium construction (Bayer, 2017; Bita and Pető, 2020). These initiatives are not only aimed at fostering national pride but also at leveraging sports as a diplomatic tool to enhance Hungary's international reputation (Murray, 2018).

Hungary's sports diplomacy is structured around five key pillars (Garamvölgyi and Dóczi, 2021):

1. Improving the image of Hungary through the organization of international sports events and conferences

From 2010 to 2020, Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's leadership, focused on hosting numerous international sports events as a central aspect of its sports policy. Between 2012 and 2016, Hungary hosted 109 international events, demonstrating its capacity as a capable host and its ambition to bid for future mega-events, including the Olympic Games (Stocker, 2018). Hosting these events is part of a broader strategy to

enhance Hungary's international image. These efforts underscore Hungary's commitment to using sports diplomacy to enhance its international image and achieve broader political goals.

2. Sport as a tool for strengthening international relations

Sport is often viewed as a universal platform that transcends cultural barriers and ethnic divides. Over the past decade, Hungarian political leaders have frequently used sports events to conduct high-level diplomatic meetings in Budapest. Notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been a regular visitor, attending the 2017 World Judo Championships to meet with Orbán while watching Russian athletes compete. Similarly, Orbán visited the Kremlin before the 2018 FIFA World Cup Final in Moscow, commending Russia's organization of the event. Orbán also regularly hosts international sports leaders, such as Thomas Bach of the IOC and Aleksander Čeferin of UEFA, in Budapest (Garamvölgyi and Dóczi, 2021).

3. Representation of Hungarian sports interests in international sports federations

The Hungarian government has strategically enhanced its influence in international sports by supporting the nomination and election of Hungarian sports leaders to key positions in European and international federations, such as Dr. Tünde Szabó's election as vice president of the European Swimming League and Sándor Csányi's as deputy chair of FIFA (Vass, 2018). Despite a recent decline in representation, Hungary has aimed to counter this by focusing on continental federations and attracting international sports organizations to relocate to Hungary. Legal amendments and tax benefits facilitated the International Judo Federation and the International Federation of Teqball moving their headquarters to Budapest, reflecting Hungary's commitment to leveraging sports diplomacy to bolster its international presence (Vass, 2019; Fiteq.org, 2020).

4. Representing the interests of Hungarian sports companies and inventions abroad

In Hungary, the sports sector has gained strategic significance since 2010, emphasizing its economic and innovative potential. In order to enhance the country's global reputation, the Hungarian government actively supports the expansion of Hungarian sports companies and the promotion of Hungarian sports products abroad. There has been a notable development in Hungarian sports in the form of Teqball, a football-based game played on a curved table. As part of the 2019 Teqball World Championships in Budapest, the International Teqball Federation (FITEQ) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

Trade of Hungary agreed to donate 200 Teqball tables to philanthropic projects worldwide, thus promoting the sport and the image of Hungary (Fiteq.org, 2020). Hungarian embassies have been crucial in promoting Teqball and organizing international sports events. Hungarian National Chamber of Commerce's Sports Diplomacy Division supported the international development of Hungarian sports enterprises between 2015 and 2018, a role that was later transferred to the Hungarian Export Development Agency Nonprofit Ltd. Sports diplomacy advances Hungary's "Eastern and Southern opening" foreign policy, building investment ties with countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. As part of its inter-ministerial cooperation in sports and youth initiatives, Hungary established numerous bilateral sports agreements with countries such as Cuba, Iran, and Vietnam during the period 2010-2020 (Kormany.hu, 2017).

5. Ex-athletes and sports journalists in diplomatic positions

In recent years, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has increasingly leveraged the popularity of successful athletes by appointing them to influential positions in state administration and diplomacy. For instance, Péter Szijjártó, a former futsal player who has been the minister of foreign affairs and trade since 2014, uses Hungarian sporting achievements for public diplomacy and has appointed several former athletes to diplomatic roles. Among them are Miklós Gór-Nagy, a water polo world champion sent to New York in 2020, and Ottó Vincze, an ex-football player working as a sports diplomacy consultant in Barcelona (Fekő, 2020). In 2019, it was announced that former Olympic swimmer Dániel Gyurta had been appointed senior advisor for sports diplomacy and that footballer Balázs Dzsudzsák had been granted a diplomatic passport (Morgan, 2019; Fekő, 2020).

2.9 Evolution of sports diplomacy in Iran

Research on sports diplomacy and its use in advancing political goals and international relations has been conducted in Iran, highlighting its importance and necessity. Fazeli (2012) states that the interaction between sports and politics has become a significant topic in the modern era, with governments striving to utilize its capacities for various purposes. The most important political function of sports, especially football, is to control and direct public opinion, present an efficient image of the government, and ultimately nation-building (Hassanpourghadi and Dousti, 2021).

Iran has missed many opportunities to develop its international relations through sports diplomacy due to the lack of a unified strategy and viewing sports as a mere backyard activity (Shariati Feizabadi and Goudarzi, 2015). Moreover, sports, as a new actor in the international arena, and sports diplomacy, as a modern branch of public diplomacy, play a significant role in the political, economic, social, and cultural development of any country. Iran, as one of the democratic governments of the world that has faced unjust accusations and sanctions post-revolution, can use this tool to improve and strengthen its international image. Other functions of sports in this field include gaining international branding and prestige, presenting itself as a peace-loving and anti-racist country, facilitating cultural interactions and exchanges, preventing and reducing political isolation and sanctions, and increasing support for sports and its promotion, as well as enhancing national identity, pride, and cohesion (Bagheri et al., 2016).

Revising the executive regulations of sports institutions, coordinating between the Ministry of Sports and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the main bodies responsible for sports diplomacy, training political-sports managers in the basics of international interactions, developing and implementing a comprehensive and scientific program to expand and enhance sports diplomacy, and defining and explaining the concept of sports diplomacy to government agencies active in public diplomacy are crucial strategies for empowering and strengthening sports diplomacy in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Bakhshi Chenari et al., 2019).

Iran, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, mechanisms for guiding sports diplomacy were established. These include the founding of the Federation of Women's Islamic Solidarity Sports in 1991, the establishment of the West Asian Sports Federation in Tehran in 1997, and the creation of the International Zurkhaneh Sports Federation (IZSF) in 2004 at the National Olympic and Paralympic Academy.

The various policies of different Iranian governments after the Islamic Revolution in interacting with other countries have influenced public diplomacy and, consequently, sports diplomacy, leading to fluctuations. Each administration's sports diplomacy has followed its public diplomacy and foreign policy. A thorough examination reveals that different governments' policies towards other countries, especially Western nations and the United States, have varied post-revolution and have not followed a consistent approach. This variation is also seen in their sports diplomacy, indicating that Iranian

governments have not had a specific mechanism for leveraging sports diplomacy. However, there is a noticeable trend that as time passes from the early revolution years, sports diplomacy has shifted from being closed and conservative to being open and interactive. Even conservative governments have adopted an interactive approach towards sports and athletes from nations they consider adversaries, recognizing the positive impact of sports diplomacy on international relations and their legitimacy in international communities (Hassanpourghadi and Dousti, 2021).

Overall, the use of sports diplomacy to advance political goals has been evident across various administrations post-revolution. No government has ignored it, but attention to it has increased after the Iran-Iraq war, with more international engagement over time. The research suggests that future governments should focus more on sports diplomacy as a suitable, necessary, and low-cost tool for achieving political and international goals. By developing clear and consistent regulations, a stable and goal-oriented approach to sports diplomacy can be maintained across different administrations, ensuring continuous progress towards peace and enhancing the country's credibility. Additionally, training political and sports managers in international sports laws can help advance and protect the country's sports interests (Hassanpourghadi and Dousti, 2021).

2.9.1 Football and sports diplomacy

Football, with its global popularity, serves as a significant exemplar of sport diplomacy. The sport transcends national boundaries, allowing for a unique form of cultural exchange and international engagement. The game's worldwide appeal and its potential to unite people from different nations is exemplified in instances such as the FIFA World Cup, where the hosting nation garners global attention, fostering a sense of unity and shared celebration across diverse cultures. This phenomenon is emphasized by Tomlinson (2014), who notes that the World Cup serves not only as a global sporting event but also as a stage for exhibiting national culture, values, and aspirations. Furthermore, football's role in diplomacy is not limited to hosting events but also extends to the participation and performance of national teams. As highlighted by Chalip (2006), a national team's performance can significantly influence the country's international image and diplomatic relations. The success of national teams in international tournaments often translates into a source of national pride and can be leveraged by states to bolster their international

standing, as observed by Giulianotti (2011) in the context of European football championships. This dual aspect of football, as both a host and a participant in international diplomacy, underscores its pivotal role in the broader context of sports diplomacy and the pursuit of soft power objectives.

Football, as the world's most popular sport, offers a unique avenue for nations to engage in 'soft power' tactics, enhancing their global influence and reputation through sports diplomacy. Murray (2018) defines sports diplomacy as the use of sport as an instrument to influence diplomatic, social, and political relations. Football, with its global appeal, provides countries a stage to not only showcase their cultural vibrancy but also to foster international relationships and dialogue.

Grix and Houlihan (2014) argue that football can act as a powerful tool in international relations to promote national interests, improve countries' image, and establish international cooperation. In their work, they explore how events like the FIFA World Cup are used by host nations to gain global visibility and assert soft power. This sentiment is echoed by Pegoraro and Coates (2019), who highlight the World Cup as an opportunity for nations like Brazil and South Africa to rebrand and reposition themselves on the world stage.

The effectiveness of football diplomacy is further illustrated in the works of Chalip (2006), who analyses the ability of major sporting events to generate effects, creating a favourable international perception of the host country. Similarly, Maguire (2011) delves into the 'global football village' concept, noting how the sport's international character can help bridge cultural divides and promote peace and understanding among nations.

However, football diplomacy is not without its challenges. As noted by Dubinsky (2019), leveraging football for diplomatic purposes can sometimes backfire, especially when political controversies or negative societal issues are highlighted during international events. Moreover, Black and Van der Westhuizen (2004) caution that the political capital gained from hosting major football events can be fleeting if not backed by sustained and strategic diplomatic efforts.

The societal impacts of football are also debated. While some scholars like Giulianotti (2011) contend that football can enhance national pride and unity, others, such as Tomlinson (2014), question the extent to which these societal benefits translate into long-term gains for the local communities.

In case of Iran, according to Monazzami et. al (2023), football in the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East can serve as a tool for convergence and act as a fundamental geopolitical code for both countries. With its soft power, football has the potential to pave the way for diplomatic efforts in re-evaluating and improving relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the role of football in sport diplomacy is evolving. With the advent of new media, the global reach of football has expanded significantly, allowing for more nuanced and widespread influence. Giulianotti and Robertson (2012) underscore the role of digital diplomacy in amplifying the impact of football as a tool for national branding and international engagement.

2.10 The impact of COVID-19 on international sports competitions and social dynamics

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the sports sector, notably in the areas of social dynamics and scheduling of international competitions. As highlighted by Ratten (2020 p. 633), this disruption is unprecedented, forcing sports organizations to adapt to new operational realities. The impact on scheduling is most apparent in the postponement of international mega-events, including the Olympics, Paralympics, and various professional leagues across Europe, Asia, and North America (NHL, NBA). These changes, necessitated by the pandemic's spread, have led to a comprehensive re-evaluation of competition calendars and preparation timelines, creating uncertainties about future events and athlete readiness.

Moreover, the pandemic has necessitated a shift in the social aspect of sports. With physical distancing measures and lockdowns, traditional methods of athlete training, team interactions, and fan engagement have been profoundly altered. Online platforms have emerged as essential tools for maintaining the social fabric of sports, enabling training, team meetings, and fan engagement in a remote setting (Ratten, 2020).

The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought substantial challenges to the sports industry and has affected football fans across the world by disrupting their typical spectating habits and social interactions. The restrictions on physical attendance at games and the shift to virtual spectating experiences have underscored the dual role of

sports as both a social phenomenon and a consumer product. As sports organizations adapt to these changes, the emphasis on enhancing fan engagement through new technologies has grown, with immersive and virtual experiences becoming integral to the future of sports. Thus, the pandemic has highlighted sports' critical social role while catalysing technological advances that may permanently shape the spectating experience (Glebova et al., 2023).

2.11 Stakeholders

The involvement of stakeholders is one of the growing concerns of good governance and democratization (Grigaliunaite and Eimontas, 2018). Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as individuals, groups, or organizations that can affect or be affected by the action of a focal organization. The stakeholder's theory has been frequently used in sport governance research. For example, Grigaliunaite and Eimontas (2018) conduct a study regarding athletes' involvement in the decision-making process. After analysing the literature, they conclude that while increasing democratization has resulted in athletes being more involved in decision-making, some issues remain unsolved. Aside from this, Parent et al. (2021) consider stakeholders in their governance design archetype analyses. They believe that an organization's stakeholders are important to its governance and play a significant role in its performance. Additionally, Hoye et al. (2020) argue that it would be impossible to understand an organization's governance and change processes without considering stakeholders. Accordingly, these studies emphasize the importance of stakeholders' involvement in governance.

3. Objectives

There are three primary sources of soft power including culture, political values, and foreign policy. Sports have been used by nations, regions, and communities for public diplomacy and branding to achieve social, political, and financial objectives, as well as to enhance the country's image. Countries use public diplomacy and soft power to boost their reputation and accomplish diplomatic goals (Cull, 2008; Gilboa, 2008). Sport can be used as a soft power tool for nations in two ways; first, hosting major sporting events such as the Olympic Games; second, success and winning medals at major sporting events like the Olympic Games. For certain countries that are unable to host major sporting events due to a variety of reasons, success and winning a medal may become increasingly necessary. The importance of success at elite sport in mega sporting events; increasing the amount of money flows toward elite sports; lack of improvement in summer Olympic medals table; lack of clear national sport policy factors; to be successful in specific disciplines at summer Olympic Games and lack of scientific work about the impacts of elite sport policy in my target countries (Hungary and Iran).

Governments have recognized the capability of sport to achieve broader objectives beyond sporting achievement, such as public health, social connection, and international prestige (Van Bottenburg, 2013). Nations use sport as a soft power tool (Arning, 2013) both abroad and at home (Nygård and Gates, 2013) and invest money in the elite sport sector to achieve social, political and financial goals (Chalip, 2006) to boost their image worldwide. Basically, 'soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment' (Nye, 2017, p. 1).

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in examining elite sport outcomes. The term outcomes can be defined as earlier indications of progress toward results. Among the above-mentioned outcomes, this thesis focuses on the political and social outcomes of Olympic success. The general objective of this thesis is to critically analyse the political and societal outcomes of elite sporting success and understand the complex interplay between Olympic success and national objectives as perceived by various Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders.

3.1 Specific goals:

1. To elucidate Hungarian stakeholders' expectations regarding the political and societal dividends of Olympic success.
2. To delineate the factors that Hungarian stakeholders believe impact the political and societal repercussions of Olympic success.
3. To investigate the extent and manner in which the identified factors influence expected political and societal outcomes of Olympic triumphs.
4. To examine the transformative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sports sector, with a focus on shifts in political and social dynamics.
5. To gain insight into Iranian stakeholders' perceptions of the nexus between elite sporting achievements and a nation's global standing and soft power.
6. To assess how Iranian stakeholder reflections on sports policy success or failure are shaped by Olympic outcomes and their wider implications for national prestige.
7. To explore the political challenges nations' encounter when leveraging popular sports as a tool for diplomacy and international influence.

This research goes beyond previous research on elite sport policy, for example by Andersen and Ronglan (2012), Bergsgard et al. (2007), Green and Houlihan (2005), Houlihan and Green (2009), De Bosscher et al. (2007), De Bosscher et al. (2015) and Valenti et al. (2020). These studies, each with their own approach, compare and explain national elite sport policies in order to better understand the policy-making process and the context in which elite sport operates.

3.2 Research questions

Recent studies have shown the political and societal outcomes can be both favourable and harmful (De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2019; Dubinsky, 2019; Krieger and Wassong, 2019). An example of this regarding the societal impact is the study carried out by De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) and Dubinsky (2019). For instance, when it comes to political outcomes, increasing international prestige, image and reputation, and repositioning the given country to be a significant political actor like Qatar (Dubinsky, 2019), Iran (Zare and Géczi, 2022b), peace building, globalization (De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2019) are considered as positive impacts of political goals. Nonetheless,

another line of research identifies several negative consequences. For example, when the governments use sports as a means of propaganda (Dubinsky and Dzikus, 2019; Lee and Bairner, 2009), mass boycott (Boykoff, 2016; Guttmann, 2002), systematic doping system (Guttmann, 2002; Read et al., 2019), corruption (Kihl et al., 2017; Masters, 2015) or exclusions (MacLean, 2014), and recently, diplomatic boycott of 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics by the USA, Australia, Canada, Britain, India, Lithuania, Kosovo, Belgium, Denmark and Estonia because of widespread allegations of Chinese atrocities against the Uyghur community. In this line, Boykoff (2016) notes that the desire of governments and other pressure groups to use sports to improve their public image and achieve political goals has resulted in unfavourable and even disastrous consequences.

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). However, researchers have recently criticized politicians too optimistic discourse and reasons for public subsidies in elite sport. Moreover, the majority of information emphasizing sport's 'dark sides' of elite sport is ignored (De Rycke and De Bosscher, 2021), such as doping, terrorism, gambling and corruption (Krieger and Wassong, 2019).

Researchers in sports diplomacy and policy agree that using sports for soft power and public diplomacy and measuring the political and social outcomes is controversial and ambiguous for various factors (Dubinsky, 2019; and Wicker, 2016). The pandemic has further complicated these dynamics, revealed differing responses and impacts across nations, which necessitates a deeper exploration into how different countries, each with their unique political and societal contexts, navigate these challenges.

Although extensive research has been carried out on political and societal impacts, no single study exists which examines both political and societal outcomes of elite sport in different nations. This gap is particularly evident in the context of the recent global upheaval, which encompasses various disruptions and challenges over the past several years, including the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions. Previous research attempted to determine two aims: first, whether certain societal impacts associated with elite sport exist, and second, whether public funding for elite sports can be justified. In this thesis, I aim at furthering our knowledge in this domain by answering research

questions that probe into the nuances of sports diplomacy and policy during pandemic world:

1. In what ways do Hungarian stakeholders perceive the success of the Olympics as a means to achieve political and societal goals for their country?

2. Which specific political and societal factors are influenced by the outcomes of Olympic success, according to the Hungarian stakeholders?

3. In what manner and to what extent do the identified factors influence the expected political and societal outcomes of Olympic success in Hungary?

4. To what degree has the COVID-19 pandemic altered the political and social of elite sports, particularly concerning international competitions?

5. How do Iranian sports policymakers and practitioners perceive the impact of Olympic success on a nation's international prestige and soft power?

6. How is Olympic success or failure reflected in the effectiveness of related sports policies and the international reception of Iranian elite sports?

7. What political challenges do nations face when attempting to utilize popular sports as a platform for international influence and diplomacy, from the perspectives of Iranian stakeholders?

These questions aim to delve into the nuances of how Olympic success is tied to broader national objectives, the intersection of sport with political and societal issues, and the implications of such success in the current global context, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3 Research hypotheses

H1: Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders perceive Olympic success as a crucial mechanism for achieving political and societal goals, such as bolstering national pride, enhancing international reputation, and increasing diplomatic influence.

H2: Specific political and societal factors, including national identity reinforcement, international diplomatic relations, and internal political stability, are significantly influenced by the outcomes of Olympic success.

H3: The extent and manner in which political and societal factors influence the outcomes of Olympic success are substantial, directly affecting national unity, international perception, and policy-making processes.

H4: The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the political and social dynamics of sports, especially international competitions, by reshaping priorities towards health and safety and affecting global sports diplomacy.

H5: The effectiveness of sports policies and their international reception are directly impacted by Olympic success or failure, with these outcomes shaping Iranian stakeholders' perceptions of national prestige and sports diplomacy effectiveness.

H6: Nations face complex political challenges in utilizing popular sports as a platform for international influence and diplomacy, including balancing national interests with global sportsmanship norms and managing international political relations.

These hypotheses aim to provide a framework for critically analysing the interplay between Olympic success and national objectives, exploring how elite sporting achievements intersect with political and societal issues in the current global context, including the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Methodology

In this thesis, a mixed methods research design is employed, integrating grounded theory, qualitative written interviews, and interpretivist qualitative research to holistically examine the impact of COVID-19 on sports. Grounded theory serves as the foundational framework, guiding the development of theories directly derived from empirical data (Charmaz, 2006). This approach is instrumental in constructing theoretical models that are deeply rooted in observed realities, particularly in the context of the dynamic and multifaceted world of sports during the pandemic.

Complementing this, qualitative written interviews are utilized to gain a broader global perspective on the impact of COVID-19. This method enables the gathering of diverse viewpoints from a wide range of international stakeholders, offering a global scope to the study's findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Such interviews provide nuanced insights into the experiences and perceptions of individuals involved in various facets of sports, from athletes and coaches to policymakers and fans.

Further, the interpretivist qualitative research approach offers in-depth, contextual understanding from the perspective of sports stakeholders. This method aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing subjective experiences and meanings constructed within specific socio-cultural contexts (Schwandt, 2000). It allows for an exploration of how individuals and groups within the sports sector make sense of and respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The mixed methods research design bridges these diverse methodologies, enabling a comprehensive analysis that leverages the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell and Clark, 2011). By integrating grounded theory, qualitative interviews, and interpretivist research, the study achieves a balanced synthesis of empirical data, global perspectives, and in-depth individual insights, providing a multifaceted understanding of the pandemic's impact on the sports world.

In mixed methods research, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analysed in this thesis. Over the past few years, mixed methods research has evolved rapidly, becoming a recognized research methodology with its own identity (Denscombe, 2008). Below table locates the different methods and their corresponding research questions and participants based on the thesis methodology.

Table 3. Mapping research questions to methods and participants

Research questions	Methods	Participants
1. In what ways do Hungarian stakeholders perceive the success of the Olympics as a means to achieve political and societal goals for their country?	Grounded theory, Qualitative written interviews	Hungarian sport managers, sociologists, and sports NGO members (identified by 'A' in results)
2. Which specific political and societal factors are influenced by the outcomes of Olympic success, according to Hungarian stakeholders?	Grounded theory, Qualitative written interviews	Hungarian sport managers, sociologists, and sports NGO members (identified by 'A' in results)
3. In what manner and to what extent do the identified factors influence the expected political and societal outcomes of Olympic success in Hungary?	Grounded theory, Qualitative written interviews	Hungarian sport managers, sociologists, and sports NGO members (identified by 'A' in results)
4. To what degree has the COVID-19 pandemic altered the political and social dynamics of elite sports, particularly concerning international competitions?	Grounded theory Qualitative written interviews	Global sport industry professionals, including athletes, coaches, managers, professors, and sport association employees (identified by 'B' in results)
5. How do Iranian sports policymakers and practitioners perceive the impact of Olympic success on a nation's international prestige and soft power?	Interpretivist Qualitative research	Iranian national Olympic committee members, high-performance directors of summer Olympic federations, sport managers in charge of elite sport in Iran (identified by 'C' in results)

6. How is Olympic success or failure reflected in the effectiveness of related sports policies and their reception of Iranian elite sports internationally?	Interpretivist Qualitative research	Iranian national Olympic committee members, high-performance directors of summer Olympic federations, sport managers in charge of elite sport in Iran (identified by 'C' in results)
7. What political challenges do nations face when attempting to utilize popular sports as a platform for international influence and diplomacy, from the perspectives of Iranian stakeholders?	Delphi method, Content analysis Likert-scale Questionnaire	Iranian sports science experts, political science professors, sociology scholars, coaches, referees, and athletes

4.1 Qualitative method

4.1.1 Grounded theory approach

To address the first three research goals, grounded theory was employed. To acquire a more comprehensive understanding of identifying and addressing research goals, literature review and data collection are used. Creswell and Poth (2016), contend that qualitative research stands out as the most effective approach for delving into research inquiries. In the context of this thesis, grounded theory was selected as the research sought to explore a substantive issue that had not previously been addressed in literature (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory involves the derivation of theories from empirical data, and the process of data collection and analysis unfolds iteratively.

4.1.2 Grounded theory framework

Grounded theory, as my chosen methodological framework, is distinguished by its capacity to generate theories from empirical data. The process of data collection and analysis takes place iteratively, allowing theories to emerge from the data itself. In this case, I employed the constructivist strand of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998; Charmaz, 2000) to comprehend how participants interpreted their perceptions of expected outcomes, circumstances, and policies. In the specific context of elite sport policy, where no existing theories addressed the perceived relationships between expected political and societal outcomes, circumstances, and sport policies, grounded theory was valuable.

4.1.3 The rationale for the grounded theory approach

The meticulous selection of the grounded theory approach was driven by the need to unravel the complexity of my research objectives. Qualitative research, as advocated by Creswell and Poth (2016), aligns naturally with my desire to deepen my understanding of the topic of my study. My study benefitted greatly from grounded theory's unique ability to develop theories from data, as well as its ability to foster iterative data collection and analysis.

4.1.4 The constant comparative approach

With the implementation of the constant comparative approach, I was able to reinforce my commitment to grounded theory methodology. As a result of this approach, which is fundamental to grounded theory, I was able to systematically analyse the data by comparing emerging themes.

4.1.5 Iterative data collection and analysis

In accordance with grounded theory principles, my research design featured an iterative approach. I continuously reviewed my research questions, survey instrument, and coding strategies as new data emerged, facilitating adaptations to evolving insights. My theoretical framework was refined through this iterative process.

4.1.6 The constructivist strand

In my research, I applied the constructivist strand of grounded theory in order to tailor a theory to the context and population of my study. Taking into account the works of Charmaz (2000); Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Strauss and Corbin (1998) I developed a theory designed to explain how stakeholders perceive societal and political outcomes in the context of Olympic success.

4.1.7 Data management and analysis software

For supporting my grounded theory approach, I used NVivo, a powerful qualitative research software tool. My research process was facilitated by NVivo, which aligned seamlessly with the requirements of grounded theory.

4.1.8 Data management and organization

The NVivo software provided a structured platform for organizing qualitative data, including transcripts, field notes, and documents. In grounded theory research, this feature was particularly valuable due to the large amounts of textual data that are generally handled (Cavana et al., 2001).

4.1.9 Coding and constant comparative analysis

The use of NVivo streamlined the systematic and adaptable coding of data, which is foundational to grounded theory. I created nodes (codes) to label and categorize data segments, enabling constant comparative analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

4.1.10 Iterative data collection and analysis

NVivo's capabilities support the iterative nature of data collection and analysis inherent in grounded theory. This software allowed me to revisit and refine my coding as data collection unfolded, consistent with grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2006).

To analyse open-ended responses, I used NVivo software. As one of the most widely used tools for computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS), NVivo allows researchers to analyse text, images, and videos within the same research study. An essential feature of NVivo is its ability to code and categorize diverse data formats.

NVivo, like other CAQDAS, allows researchers to minimize researcher bias (Woods et al., 2016) and increase confidence in the analysis (Davidson and Skinner, 2010).

According to Creswell (2012); Vitouladiti (2014), in a variety of fields, such as program evaluation, marketing, and management, open-ended survey responses questions are widely used to understand the experiences and perspectives of participants. In order to obtain further information and gain a deeper understanding of participant beliefs and perceptions, a survey with open-ended questions was conducted. The survey questions were extracted from the literature. The collection of data in this method is a continuous process until saturation is reached.

4.1.11 Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling, a common practice in grounded theory research, involves guiding data collection based on emerging concepts and categories. NVivo aided in identifying gaps in the data and directed further data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). Purposive sampling was initially utilized to recruit participants who were aware of concept including sport managers and sociologist experts. A theoretical sampling was then employed to saturate key concepts that emerged from the study's data. An innovative approach to grounded theory is theoretical sampling, which is a systematic method of constructing theories and concepts from data (Bryant, 2017). In theoretical sampling, data are collected and analysed to decide what data to collect next and where to find them to develop theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling was conducted in order to identify participants that could contribute to developing concepts or filling knowledge gaps (Robinson, 2014). The process of theoretical sampling followed the four standard steps:

Step 1: An open-ended survey was conducted. I opted for a broad approach to recruitment, searching for individuals with experience in the sports management and sociology sectors considering both political and societal facets. At this step, purposive sampling was implied. This step aimed to make initial decisions regarding the research questions. Six surveys were conducted at this stage with six participants.

Step 2: I analysed the initial data until theoretical ideas started to emerge and particular concepts arose. The results revealed that political and societal outcomes matter for my

sample. At this stage, they mentioned their concerns about negative political and societal impacts and the effect of COVID-19.

Step 3: At this step, I chose further participants based on the theoretical ideas and concepts revealed in the previous stage, including people who were active in sports management and sociology domains. The aim of this stage was to identify my sample concerns regarding the topic. The sample included sport managers, who are responsible for the administration, operations, and strategic planning of sports organizations. They contribute to sport's growth and development. They were working either in sports federations, national Olympic committees, or as sport management professors. Sports sociologists analyse sports' impact on society, and propose strategies for promoting inclusion, equality, and social change within the sporting arena. In my thesis sport sociologists were working in academia. As academics, they contribute to sports' future by conducting research, teaching, and mentoring students, publishing scholarly articles, and participating in the academic discourse. Sports NGO members, who promote the health and wellbeing-related benefits of sports, empower marginalized groups through sports, and advocate for social justice through sports. My sample was recruited from Hungary. 31 responses were collected. In Table 4, I present information regarding the demographics of the study participants.

Step 4: Data collection and analysis occurred iteratively until I reached theoretical saturation. The main aim of grounded theory is the generation of theories from data. A theory can emerged through saturation. At this point, I provided repeated evidence for my conceptual categories. Additional themes did not emerge at this stage. In this stage, interviewers will be identified by the letter **'A'** in the results section.

Table 4. Demographics information of study participants

Gender	Count
Male	19
Female	12

General Areas of Work	Count
Sport Managers	13
Sport Sociologists	10
Sport NGO	8

4.1. 12 Qualitative written interviews

To address the fourth research objective, the combined of literature review and data collection was used. The literature review carried out in the theoretical background with the objectives of the thesis; the selected methods are clearly perceptible as an extension of this rationale. A series of 147 unstructured, open-ended qualitative written interviews (Tharenou et al., 2007) were conducted mainly in English, using a grounded theory approach. The purpose was to describe the process of transformation, based on data that were systematically obtained and analysed using comparative analysis.

4.1.13 Participants

Given the large heterogeneous sample, all the data were collected by referring to the personal preferences of interviewees, and the questions list was personalized in every case, based on the experiences and professional background of each informant. The main criteria for inclusion were belonging to the sport industry and a commitment to sharing one's point of view about the current subject. The initial intention was to involve male and female participants equally, and it was observed that the final sample comprised 69 female and 78 male interviewees from Hungary, Iran and France, as indicated in Table 5. No age or other demographic criteria were applied. Codes were used as a substitute for the names of interviewees who preferred to participate anonymously (codes were composed of the letter **a** (amateur athletes, sport faculty students) / **b** (professional

athletes, coaches) / **c** (sport management post-graduate students) / **d** (top managers and academics) and a number in chronological order). In this stage, interviewers will be identified by the letter **'B'** in the results section.

Table 5: Study participants

Group	General Description	N	N Male/ Female
a	amateur athletes, sport faculty students	59	30/29
b	professional athletes, coaches	21	11/10
c	sport management post-graduate students	42	19/23
d	top managers and academics	25	18/7
All together	Sport managers and physical culture professionals from around the world	147	78/69

*Note: N – number

Source: Glebova E, Zare F, Desbordes M and Géczi, G. (2022)

4.1.14 Data collection

In the process of data collection, a broad sample was utilized, employing the quota sampling technique (Luborsky and Rubinstein, 1995). This encompassed a diverse range of sport industry professionals globally, with no specific geographical attachment. The sample included athletes, amateur and professional players, sport managers, university professors in the related field, coaches, sport association employees, sport management graduate students, and sport marketing professionals. All interviews (average duration is 35 minutes) were individually structured and conducted using an open-ended process to reveal attitudes or opinions. The written interview was often followed by a few clarifying open-ended questions. The main purpose of each interview was to collect data that clearly explained the personal/professional opinion and experiences of a particular informant concerning the impact of the extraordinary pandemic circumstances on the sport industry and physical culture. Data have been collected in September-December 2020. This study adopted a holistic approach to examining the research questions by including multiple perspectives from a diverse range of participants to collect versatile data and achieve multifaceted results. In 2006, Hesse-Biber and Leavy explained why extraordinary

complex phenomena should be holistically researched based on a qualitative paradigm, using the example of a 'sweeping the globe epidemic'. Therefore, their arguments seem fully applicable to the current study, which was focused on a profound understanding of the dynamic process of change in the sport industry, brought about by the 'sweeping the globe' COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, qualitative research involves a holistic approach, 'the practice of qualitative research is reflexive, and process driven, ultimately producing culturally situated and theory-enmeshed knowledge through an ongoing interplay between theory and methods, researcher and researched' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006 p. 5).

Individual interview questions were unstructured and personalized for all the participants (considering the wide range of the sample).

4.1.15 Data analysis

A qualitative approach allows for the collection of in-depth insights into a problem and the generation of new concepts through data synthesis and analysis. It was also seen as an opportunity to capture the changing attitudes within the sport industry. Moreover, a qualitative approach to research is not bound by the limitations of quantitative methods and can focus on the primary questions of 'how' and 'why' the COVID-19 transformed the sport industry (Kelle, 2006). Throughout the research process, there has been continuous engagement in reflexivity, with an evolving understanding of the problem. Recently, a series of similar studies have been conducted, striving for freedom from a priori assumptions and definitions. The analysis encompassed several stages, beginning with a thorough perusal, systematization, and inductive coding of the collected data. This process comprised different tasks: an overview, labelling, organization, and provisional identification of key themes and the relationships between them. After synthesizing this work with the literature, it is evident that the main themes are context-dependent. These themes include tentative multiple levels of impact (Figure 1), disadvantages and difficulties for the industry and stakeholders (challenges), and finally, unexpected new opportunities. Additionally, at this stage, it was ensured that all information was thoroughly considered, with no details left out, unnoticed, or ignored. The data have been analysed as a whole set, without consideration of participants' individual characteristics and roles. Secondly, all materials were iteratively read, and key points were outlined. Data

insights were systematized and organized. Subsequently, through iterative analysis, all theoretical and empirical insights were synthesized to produce the results. The verbatim nature of the responses aids in delivering data insights directly to the reader, thereby avoiding rephrasing and potential modification of information.
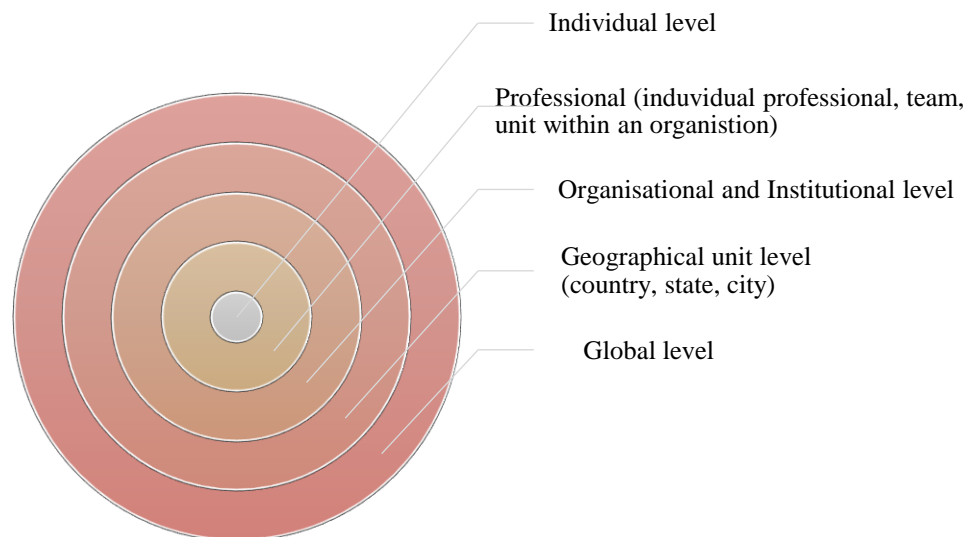
Figure 1: Multi-tier cake, view from above illustrating the multi-level nature of transformation

Source: Glebova E, Zare F, Desbordes M and Géczi, G. (2022)

4.1.16 Interpretivist qualitative research

To address the fifth and sixth goals, a qualitative research design has been employed based on an interpretivist epistemological framework. This design draws on and evaluates the subjective perspectives of key stakeholders (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

4.1.17 Sample

A total of 10 stakeholders in sports from Iranian sports officials and sport managers participated in this thesis, 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 met 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, who had at least 10 years of experience in elite sport management. Further, the reason for the 10 participants was to reach saturation, which means that it was 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. In this stage, interviewees will be identified by the letter **'C'** in the Results section.

Table 6. Demographics of the Iranian interviewees

#	Participant's position	Level of education
C 1	Sport manager- former Vice Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports	Ph.D.
C2	Member of NOC I.R IRAN	Ph.D.
C 3	Former member of the Executive Committee of the Asian Football Confederation and Sport manager	Ph.D.
C 4	Member of volleyball federation	Ph.D.
C 5	Sport manager- volleyball vice president	Ph.D.
C 6	Member of weightlifting federation	Master's degree
C 7	Member of wrestling federation	Ph.D.
C 8	Member of NOC I.R IRAN	Ph.D.
C 9	Member of NOC I.R IRAN	Ph.D.
C10	Member of track and field federation	Ph.D.

Source: Zare F and Géczi G. (2022b)

4.1.18 Procedures

The interview questions were 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, I have prepared questions to address the corresponding 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 interviewees' native language, to ensure that they 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.

4.1.19 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 my analysis to identify the themes, I 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 interview transcripts was analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis:

(1) Familiarization with the data: in this step, I read the transcripts as a whole to get familiar with them. I also re-read the transcripts again one by one very carefully.

(2) Generating initial coding: I labelled (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: I looked over the codes that I created and started coming up with themes. Also, I combined several codes into a single theme. At this stage, I decided that some of my codes are too vague or not relevant enough, so they were discarded.

(4) Reviewing themes: in this step, I attempted to make sure that the themes are useful and accurate representations of the data. For this, I returned to the data set and compared my themes against it.

(5) Defining and naming themes: I did this step to formulate precisely what I mean by each theme and figure out how it helps me understand the data.

(6) Producing the report: finally, I conceptualized the data towards research results. Concerning trustworthiness, I 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. I then presented the final themes to the participants to obtain additional perspectives and help improve clarity.

To address the seventh research objective, a mixed-method design comprising content analysis, interviews, and the Delphi method has been employed.

4.1.20 Delphi method

The research further utilized the Delphi method, a structured communication technique often employed in qualitative research, which involved a panel of 25 experts. This method was used to validate and refine the findings from the content analysis and interviews. The process encompassed two rounds of Delphi analyses, wherein factors identified were subjected to evaluation by the experts, with those receiving at least 70% positive responses being retained for subsequent analysis.

4.1.21 Sample

The sampling was conducted in accordance with a convenience sampling approach. The population included all sports science experts, political science professors and experts, sociology scholars, coaches, referees, and athletes in Iran.

4.2 Quantitative method

As part of the quantitative components of the study, a Likert-scale questionnaire was used, in conjunction with rigorous statistical analysis and a detailed classification of the games played between the representatives of the two countries on neutral grounds.

Through this approach, a comprehensive assessment of the variables in question was achieved, with Likert-scale questionnaires providing a structured and quantifiable method of capturing respondents' attitudes and perceptions. A multifaceted methodological approach was employed to assess the variables comprehensively. A key component of

this process was the use of Likert-scale questionnaires. Researchers use likert scales widely in social science research because they provide a structured and quantifiable way to capture respondents' attitudes and perceptions (Joshi et al., 2015). As part of these questionnaires, respondents indicate on a graded scale whether they agree or disagree with a series of statements. This permits a detailed assessment of subjective experiences and opinions (Likert, 1932). Statistical analysis further enhanced this methodological rigor by providing a robust framework for examining the collected data. Statistical analysis further enhanced this methodological rigor by providing a robust framework for examining the collected data. Through statistical techniques, I could test hypotheses and draw evidence-based conclusions. This approach ensured that the findings were not only reliable but also generalizable to a larger population, thereby strengthening the overall validity of the research (Cohen et al., 2011). In addition, the classification of games was crucial to contextualizing the data within specific gaming genres and formats, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the research findings.

4.2.1 Likert-scale questionnaire

In the final stage of research, a quantitative approach was adopted through the administration of a Likert-scale questionnaire. This instrument was designed to quantitatively rank the factors identified in the earlier qualitative stages. The development and refinement of the questionnaire were undertaken in consultation with six sports management scholars, ensuring its validity.

4.2.2 Statistical analysis

The reliability of the questionnaire was verified using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.86$), a commonly used measure of internal consistency in survey research. The quantitative data collected via the questionnaire were analysed using statistical software, including SPSS and EXCEL, and the DEMATEL model, an approach used for analysing complex causal relationships.

4.2.3 Classification of Games

Additionally, to enrich the quantitative analysis, data was gathered from the website of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) to classify the games played between the representatives of the two countries on neutral grounds. This classification provided a quantitative dimension to the political factors influencing the hosting of the football matches.
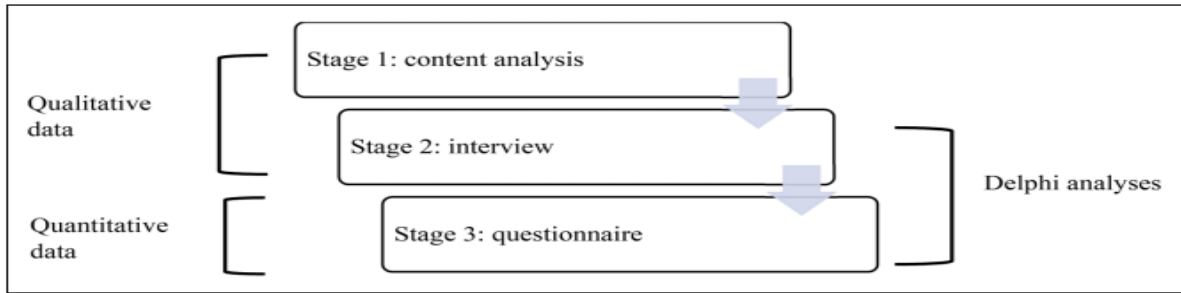
Figure 2. Data collection and data analysis procedure

Source: Mohsenifar, Dousti, Zare and Géczi (2022)

5.Results

After an iterative data analysis process, the analysis of the NVivo data pertaining to the first research question, which aimed to uncover the political and societal outcomes predicted by the sample as a result of Olympic success, identified 17 codes related to political outcomes and 27 codes associated with societal outcomes. Moreover, I identified three overarching themes mentioned by the participants in their responses to answer the second research question: (1) circumstances, (2) elite sport policies, (3) COVID-19.

For the process of theme identification, I employed a deductive approach following the framework outlined by Boyatzis (1998). Based on this approach, themes were generated from pre-interview information, insight, and the previous studies on the topic. A total of fifteen interviews, each lasting approximately 30-40 minutes, were conducted between January and April 2022. Therefore, after reviewing the literature I identified political and societal outcomes as two crucial changes resulting from Olympic success within society. In the survey, the first and second questions were designed to address the first research question, with the aim of soliciting participants' descriptions of the political and societal outcomes they envision resulting from Olympic success in their society.

5.1 Political outcomes

Figure 3 illustrates the extracted codes for the political outcomes theme.
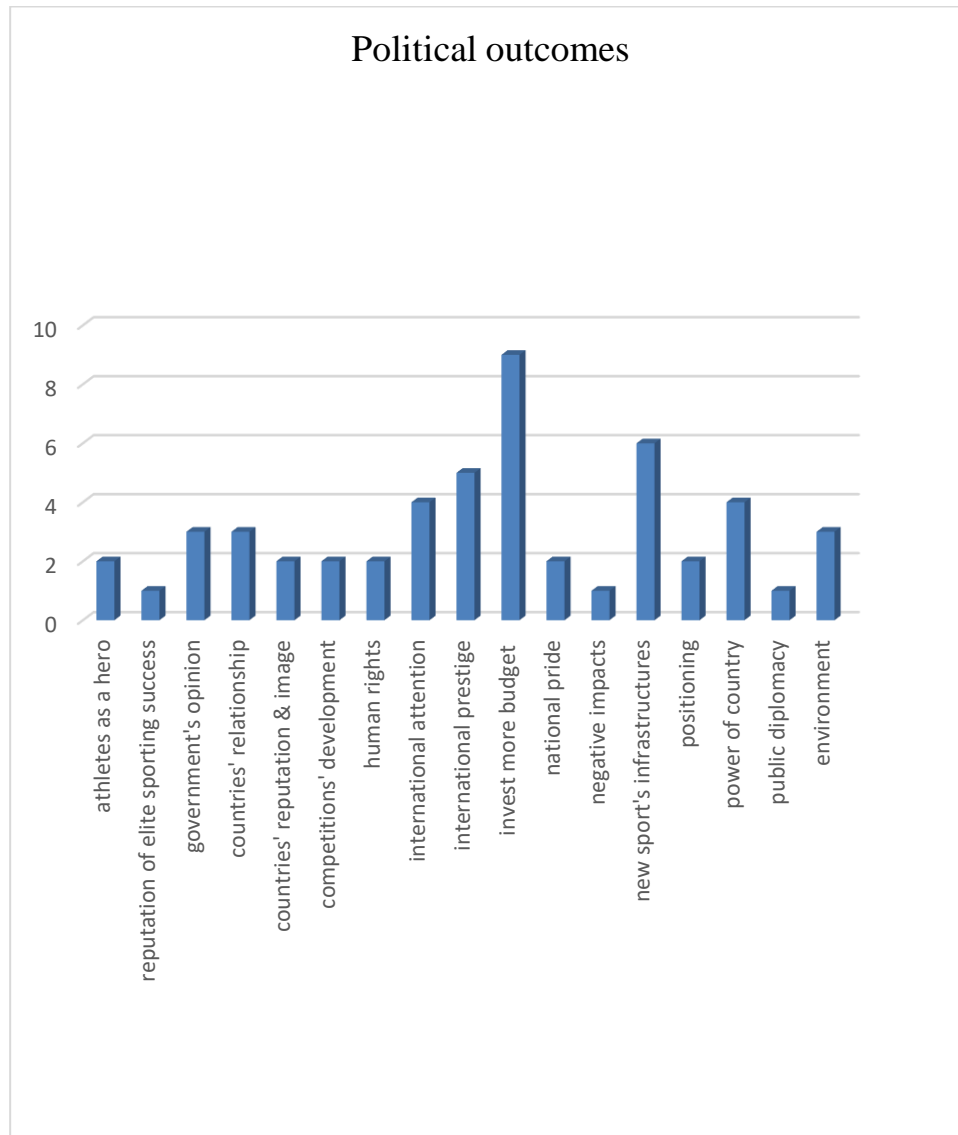
Figure 3. A visual representation of expected political outcomes

Figure 3 shows that, according to the participants, the most crucial factor is the allocation of more financial resources. Here are some participants' respondents regarding their expected political outcomes:

'In my opinion, increased financial investment in elite sports can promote national pride, promote unity, and boost a country's soft power through success in elite sports on the

global stage.' (A 4)- This aligns with 'Increase international prestige and reputation' and 'Creating bridges between communities' in Table 1.

'As a result of our athletes' victories, nations emerge as beacons of inspiration, attracting the attention of the world and increasing their international status.' (A 12)- This resonates with 'Fame' and 'Role model function' in Table 2.

'For me, elite sporting success can contribute to a country's repositioning through its enhanced image, influence, and unity. This is an opportunity for countries to demonstrate their strengths, values, and potential. As a result, perceptions will change, and a new position on the global stage will emerge.' (A 28)

'Sporting success can help build lasting bonds between nations, promoting cultural exchanges, dialogue, and cooperation.' (A 8)- This supports 'Promote collaboration' and 'Peace-building' in Table 1.

'It can have a domino effect. The construction of new sport facilities following elite athletic success promotes active lifestyles and fosters a sense of belonging and pride in our communities.' (A 19)- This supports 'Integration' and 'Community pride' in Table 2.

'...If public money from the state is put into elite sport, then there will be less money to develop other types of sport. For me is not the good solution…' (A 23)- This relates to 'Propaganda' and 'Platform for political boycott' in Table 1.

'...International sport events can provide networking opportunity to the representatives of the participant nations, but the final sporting result itself (e.g. Hungary will win the European Championship or not) is just secondary in this respect.' (A 30)- These touches on the potential 'Disappointment' and 'Failure' in Table 2.

'... sport is only seen as one aspect of soft power; we should not overestimate its role in international relations and international politics.' (A 31)- This underscores the potential 'Political exclusion'.

5.2 Societal outcomes

Figure 4 shows the extracted codes for societal outcomes theme.
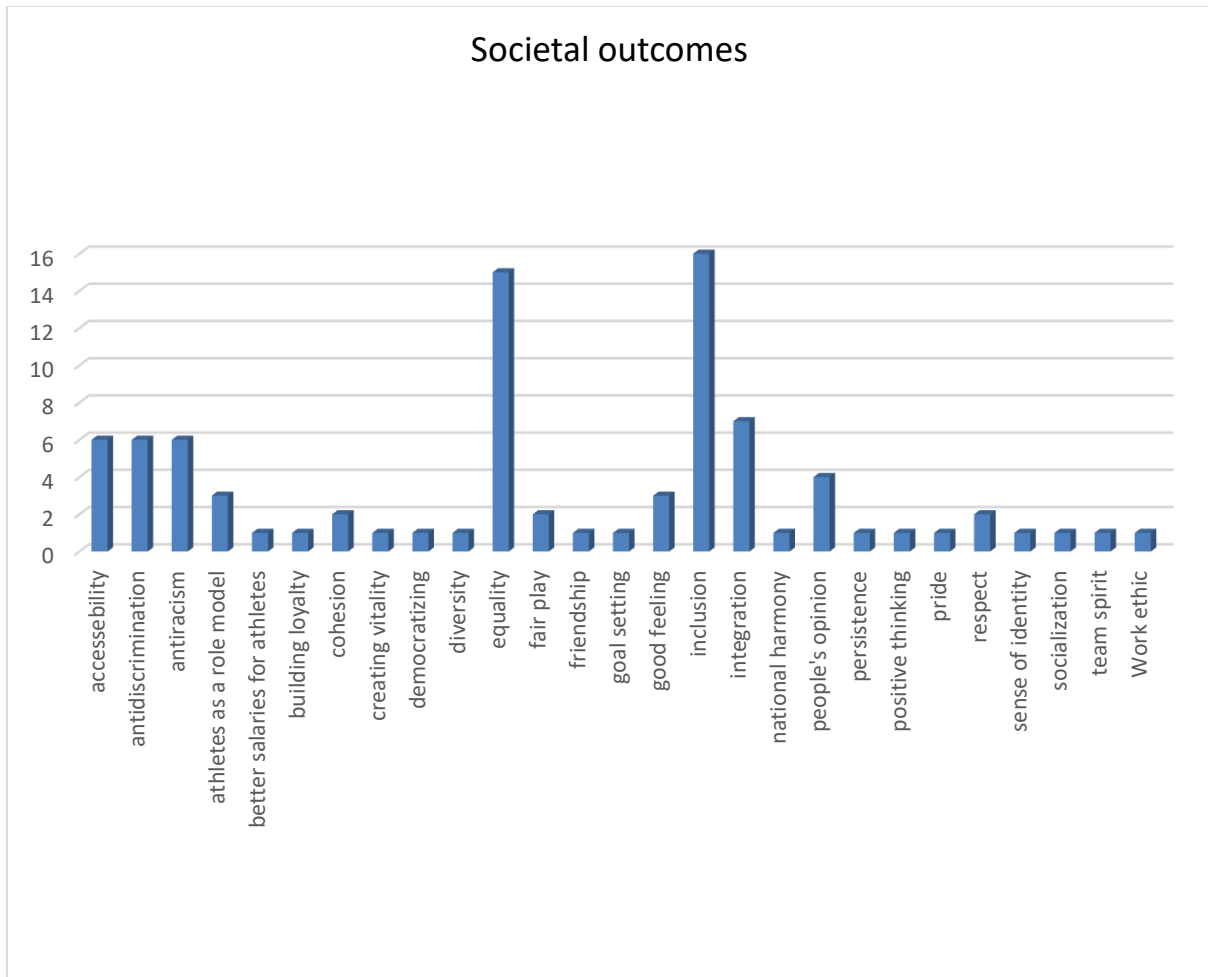
Figure 4. A visual representation of expected societal outcomes

In the figure above, 27 codes were identified from the data for the expected societal outcomes. For this theme, social inclusion and equality were the most repeated codes in the participants' responses. After that integration ranked as the third most significant expected societal outcome. Among respondents, accessibility, anti-discrimination, and anti-racism were the fourth most important outcomes. Additionally, people's opinions of sport and good feelings, athletes as a role model, cohesion, fair play, respect, better salaries for athletes, building loyalty, creating vitality, democratizing, diversity, friendship, goal setting, national harmony, persistence, positive thinking, pride, sense of identity, socialization, team spirit, work ethic were ranked accordingly.

'Sport can certainly do miracles and unite a society like little else does, but it should be given the right non-political framework to achieve social cohesion and integration. However, as long as sport will be an area of public interest, politics will always interfere.' *(A 27)* - This aligns with 'Promote collaboration' and 'Peace-building' in Table 1.

'Sport can also represent social and political messages to the large public (e.g. the fight against racial discrimination) and therefore it can contribute to spreading messages of integration, inclusion, non-discrimination or - on the other hand - hatred, exclusion and discrimination. (A 15)- This relates to 'Propaganda,' 'Bad international image,' and 'Platform for political boycott' in Table 1. Additionally, this relates to 'Sexism,' 'Exclusion,' 'Exploitation,' and 'Discrimination' in Table 2.

'...athletes are global stars nowadays and an opinion about a country is often reflected though them.' (A 1)- This supports 'Increase international prestige and reputation' and 'Creating bridges between communities' in Table 1.

'...Socially, success of elite athletes is expected to change the attitudes of diverse individuals.' (A 2)- This aligns with 'Integration,' 'Social equality,' and 'Community pride' in Table 2.

It has been identified that three factors may affect the expected outcomes of Olympic success:

5.3 Circumstances and its effect on societal and political outcomes

In order to answer the second research question, I identified three themes from the data. One of these themes is 'Circumstances,' which play a role in influencing societal and political outcomes. It has been found that success at international competitions emerged as the primary factor enhancing the impact of these outcomes. The second code under this theme was the increased government investment. Furthermore, circumstances during mega events and the sports system structure were identified as the next important codes. Additionally, factors such as fostering uniting among people, the events' environment, population's voice, increased coverage, human rights adherence, avoiding political and financial crisis, effective planning for events, equitable media representation, respect, real means of changing spectators' views, promoting peace and friendship, government

intervention, government support and attention, women's sports, and athletes' actions were also found to influence outcomes.

'As a result of the success at Olympics in the international level, the government should put more money into sport, so that it can be developed further and become even more successful.' (A 30)- This aligns with 'Promote collaboration' and 'Increase international prestige and reputation' in Table 1. Plus, this relates to 'Fame' and 'Role model function' in Table 2.

'In my opinion, by hosting mega sport events, countries can showcase their capabilities on the global stage and enhance their international reputation, yielding positive political and societal outcomes.' (A 9)- This supports 'Reposition the given country' and 'Creating bridges between communities' in Table 1, and 'Socializing opportunities' and 'Pleasure' in Table 2.

'Having elite sporting success while upholding human rights enhances a nation's reputation as a responsible global actor. A positive international image can benefit both society and the international community and can attract admiration and support from the international community.' (A 18)- This resonates with 'Increase international prestige and reputation' in Table 1. Also, 'Community pride' and 'Quality of life' in Table 2.

Figure 5 shows the codes that emerged for the circumstance theme.
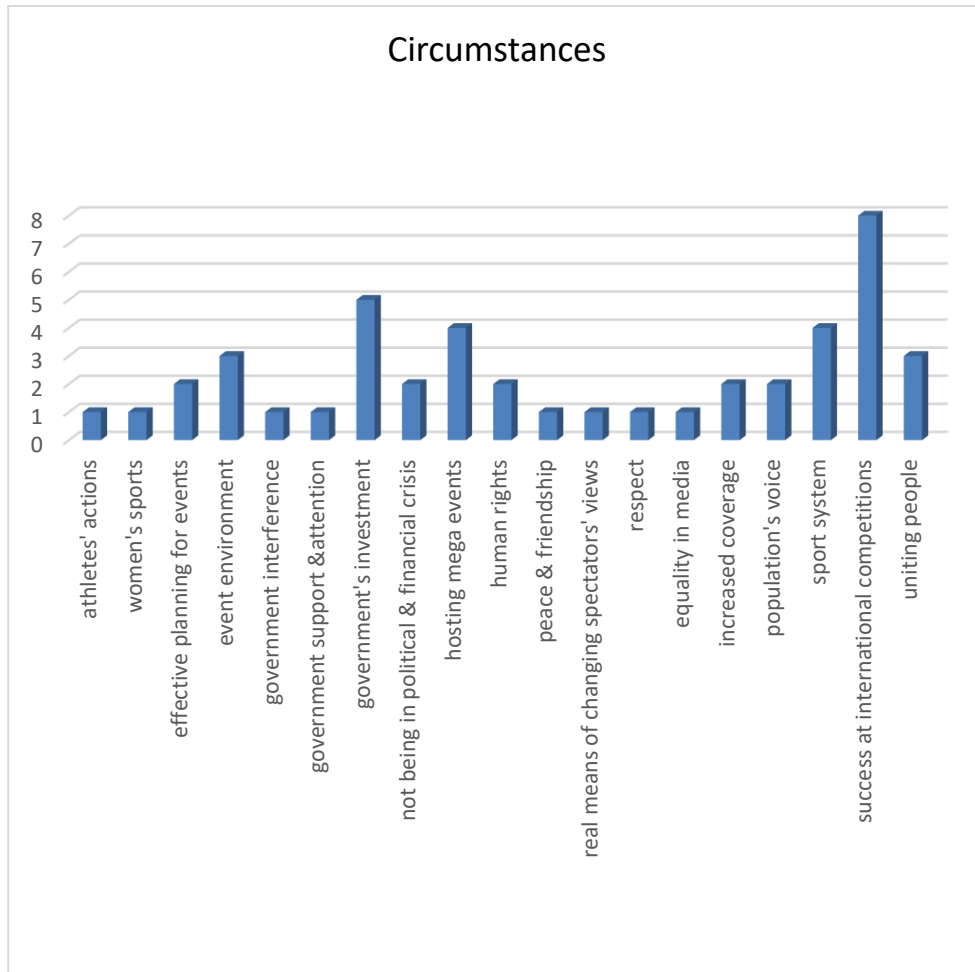
Figure 5. A visual representation of circumstance

5.4 Elite sport policies and its effect on political and societal outcomes

The second theme was the importance of elite sport policies on the effectiveness of societal and political outcomes in society. According to participants' responses, the role of athletes within the population is a significant factor. Several other factors were also identified, including engagement, sport values, athletes' social responsibility, gender equality, athletes' political activity, development of sports for inclusion and integration, dissemination of sports, federating population at national level, high-profile sports, increased funding, educational opportunities in sport studies, Para-sports, personal involvement, women sports.

"I think that Olympic success may influence society by demonstrating an ideal. I think that our modern society lacks heroes and exploits. That is obviously inherent to the

peacefulness of our society. However, the downside of this is that we don't really have models to aspire to anymore, apart from fiction and history. Elite athletes can somehow fill this lack by the values they carry on and spread through their public." (A 31)- This relates to 'Promote collaboration' and 'Increase international prestige and reputation' in Table 1 and supports 'Community pride' and 'Role model function in Table 2.

"I think there is a "domino effect" here. More and more athletes realize that if they take stand for an important and relevant case, it influences their own brand in a positive way. More athletes take action now, the more will do in the future.' (A 23)- This supports 'Peace-building' and 'Globalisation' in Table 1.

"Engaging athletes and fans in the development of elite sport policy promotes a democratic, inclusive, and participatory sport system in which all stakeholders' perspectives are considered, leading to better decisions and outcomes for the sport industry." (A 18)- This aligns with 'Social equality,' 'Inclusion,' and 'Social justice' in Table 2.

"...Elite athletes can somehow fill this lack with the values they carry on and spread through their public." (A 25)- This aligns with the avoidance of 'Bad international image' in Table 1.

"... today, the evolution of sports in social questions is very actual and more and more people want to see more equality in sports. So, in my opinion, a country which implements social action to fight against discrimination and inequalities will become an example for other countries." (A 28)- This resonates with avoiding 'Soft power' in Table 1.

Figure 6 shows the identified codes that emerged for the elite sport policies' theme.
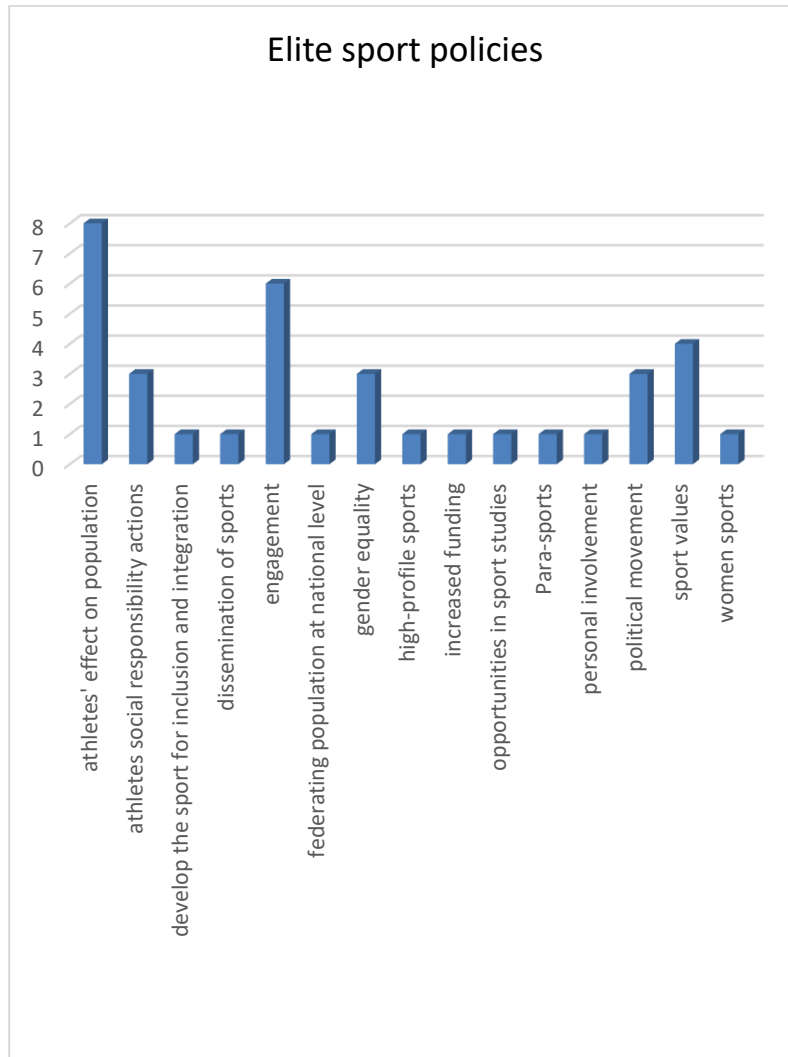
Figure 6. A visual representation of elite sport policies

5.5 COVID-19 and its effect on political and societal outcomes

The third and final identified factor is the impact of COVID-19 on expected outcomes. In the respondents' opinion, organizing sports events without spectators had the most significant effect on expected outcomes for society. Other factors include a lack of interest in investing and sponsorship, imitations on athletes and fans, and a general lack of interest in sports.

"...the inconsistent measures (e.g. almost empty arenas across Europe and full stadiums in Budapest during the football UEFA European Championship) divide the fans and could lead to the decline of popularity of elite sport." (A 31)- This excerpt emphasizes

the potential for 'Bad international image' due to inconsistent measures during sporting events in Table 1.

" ... the Hungarian government was not giving up on hosting international sport events and despite the pandemic a number of high profile events were delivered in the country. If COVID-19 had an impact it is more visible in the sport-for-all and public health sectors: the closure of sport facilities, decreasing activity rates has a major impact on the physical and mental health of the population. If "couch potato" see elite sporting success on TV, this will not necessarily lead to a more inclusive and healthier society." (A 30)- This passage highlights the potential 'Unhealthy lifestyle' and 'Failure' of promoting Olympic success as a solution to public health issues in Table 2.

Figure 7 shows the identified codes that emerged for COVID-19 theme.
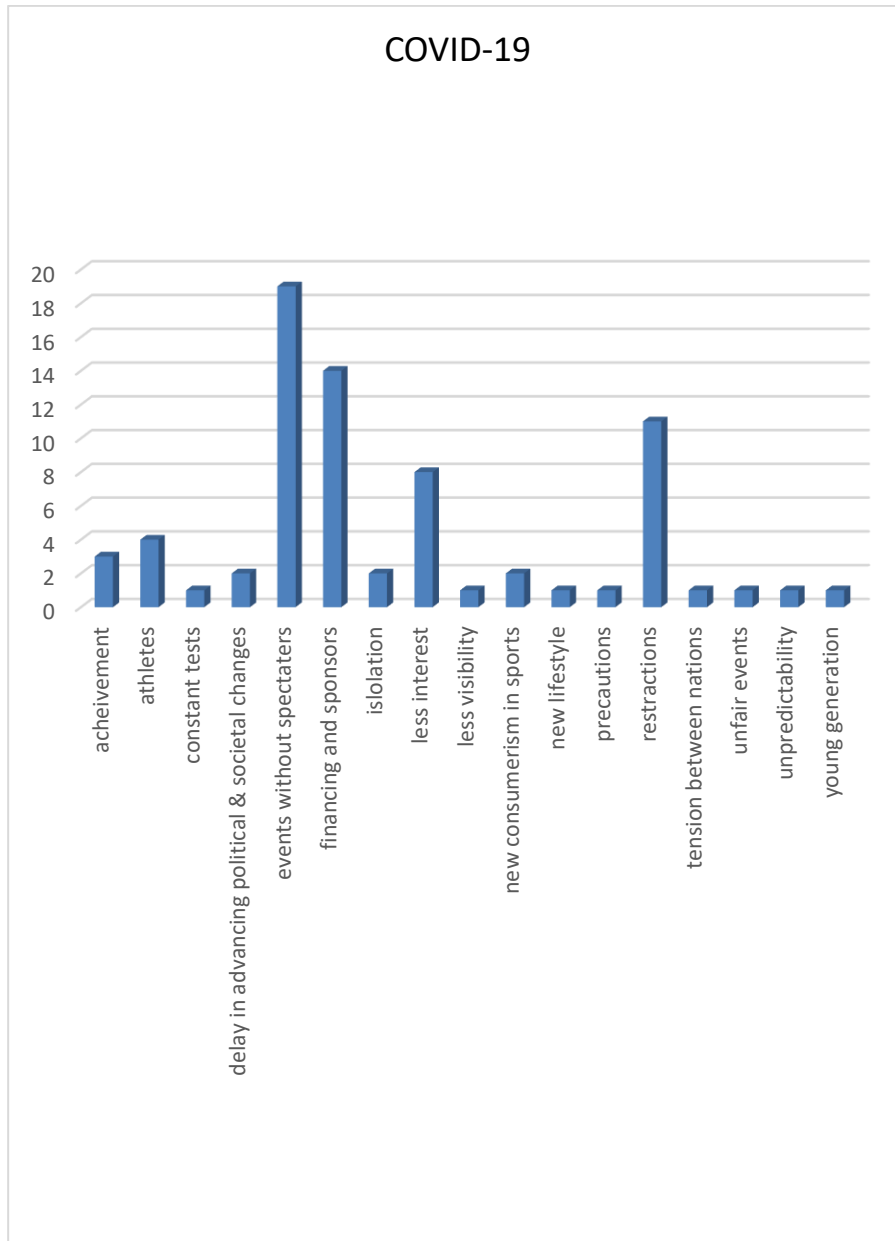
Figure 7. A visual representation of COVID-19

The following figures illustrate how elite sport policies, various circumstances, and COVID-19 can affect and lead to expected political and societal outcomes.
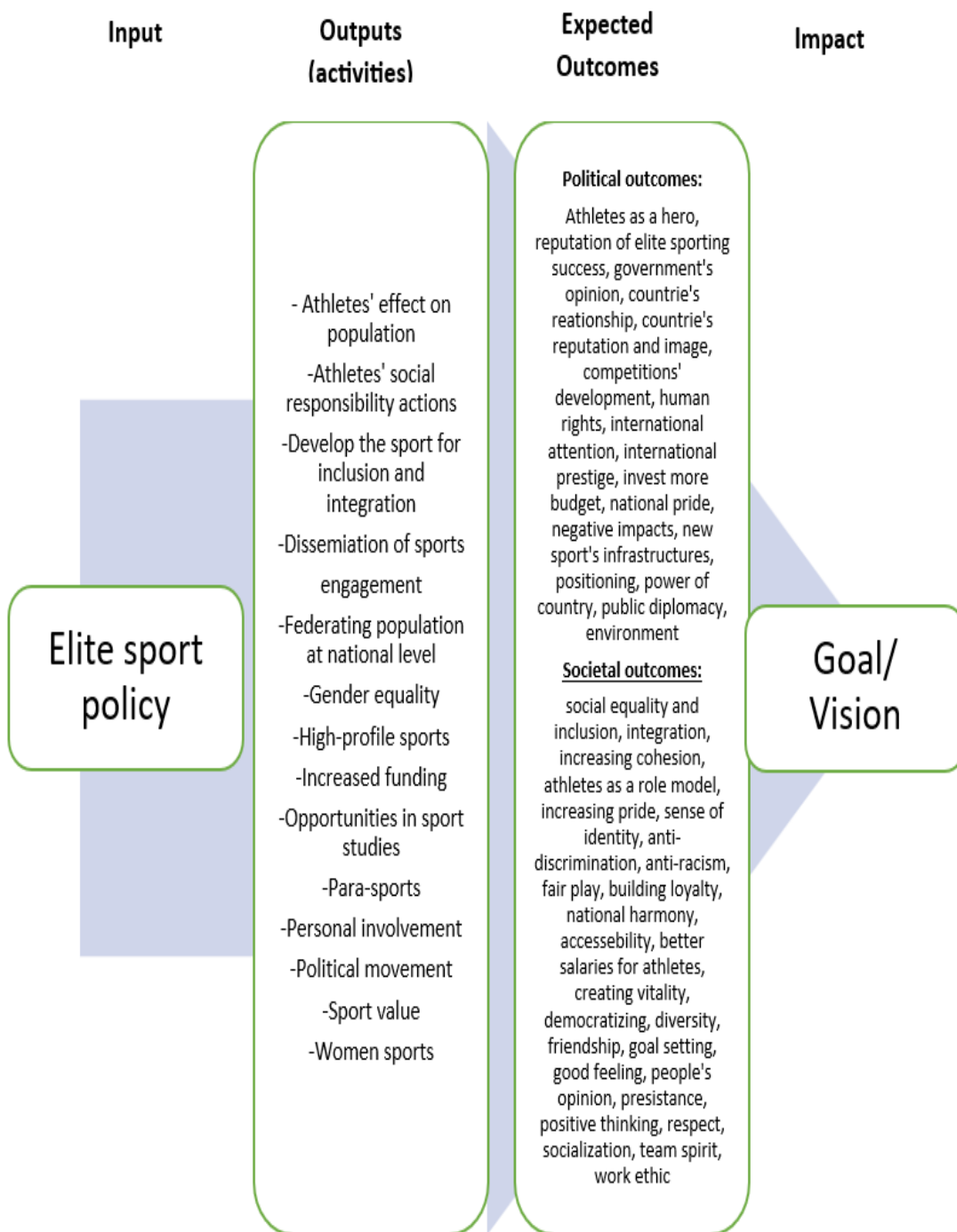
Figure 8. A roadmap illustration of how elite sport policies can lead to identified political and societal outcomes from Hungarian stakeholders' perspectives, using the MESSI framework and the Theory of Change.

Source: Zare and Géczi (2024)

Input

Outputs (activities)

Expected Outcomes

Impact

Circumstances

-Athletes' action

-Women's Sports

-Effective planning for events

-Event environment

-Govenment interface

-Government support and attention

-goverbment's investment

-Not being in political and financial crisis

-Hosting mega events

-Human rights

-Peace and friendship

-Real means of changing spectstors' view

-Respect

-Equality in media

-Increased coverage

-Population's voice

-Sport system

-Success at international competitions

-Uniting people

Political outcomes:

Athletes as a hero, reputation of elite sporting success, government's opinion, countrie's reationship, countrie's reputation and image, competitions' development, human rights, international attention, international prestige, invest more budget, national pride, negative impacts, new sport's infrastructures, positioning, power of country, public diplomacy, environment

Societal outcomes:

social equality and inclusion, integration, increasing cohesion, athletes as a role model, increasing pride, sense of identity, anti-discrimination, anti-racism, fair play, building loyalty, national harmony, accessebility, better salaries for athletes, creating vitality, democratizing, diversity, friendship, goal setting, good feeling, people's opinion, presistance, positive thinking, respect, socialization, team spirit, work ethic

Goal/ Vision

Figure 9. A roadmap illustrating the circumstances under which the identified political and societal outcomes, from Hungarian stakeholders' perspectives, can be achieved using the MESSI framework and the Theory of Change.

Source: Zare and Géczi (2024)

Input

Outputs (activities)

Expected Outcomes

Impact

COVID-19

-Acheivement
-Athletes
-Constant tests
-Delay in advancing political and societal changes
-Events without spectaters
-Financing and sponsors
-Isolation
-Less interest
-Less visibility
-New consumerism in sports
-New lifestyle
-Precutions
-Restrictions
-Tension between nations
-Unfair events
-Unpredictability
-Young generation

Political outcomes:

Athletes as a hero, reputation of elite sporting success, government's opinion, countrie's reationship, countrie's reputation and image, competitions' development, human rights, international attention, international prestige, invest more budget, national pride, negative impacts, new sport's infrastructures, positioning, power of country, public diplomacy, environment

Societal outcomes:

social equality and inclusion, integration, increasing cohesion, athletes as a role model, increasing pride, sense of identity, anti-discrimination, anti-racism, fair play, building loyalty, national harmony, accessebility, better salaries for athletes, creating vitality, democratizing, diversity, friendship, goal setting, good feeling, people's opinion, presistance, positive thinking, respect, socialization, team spirit, work ethic

Goal/ Vision

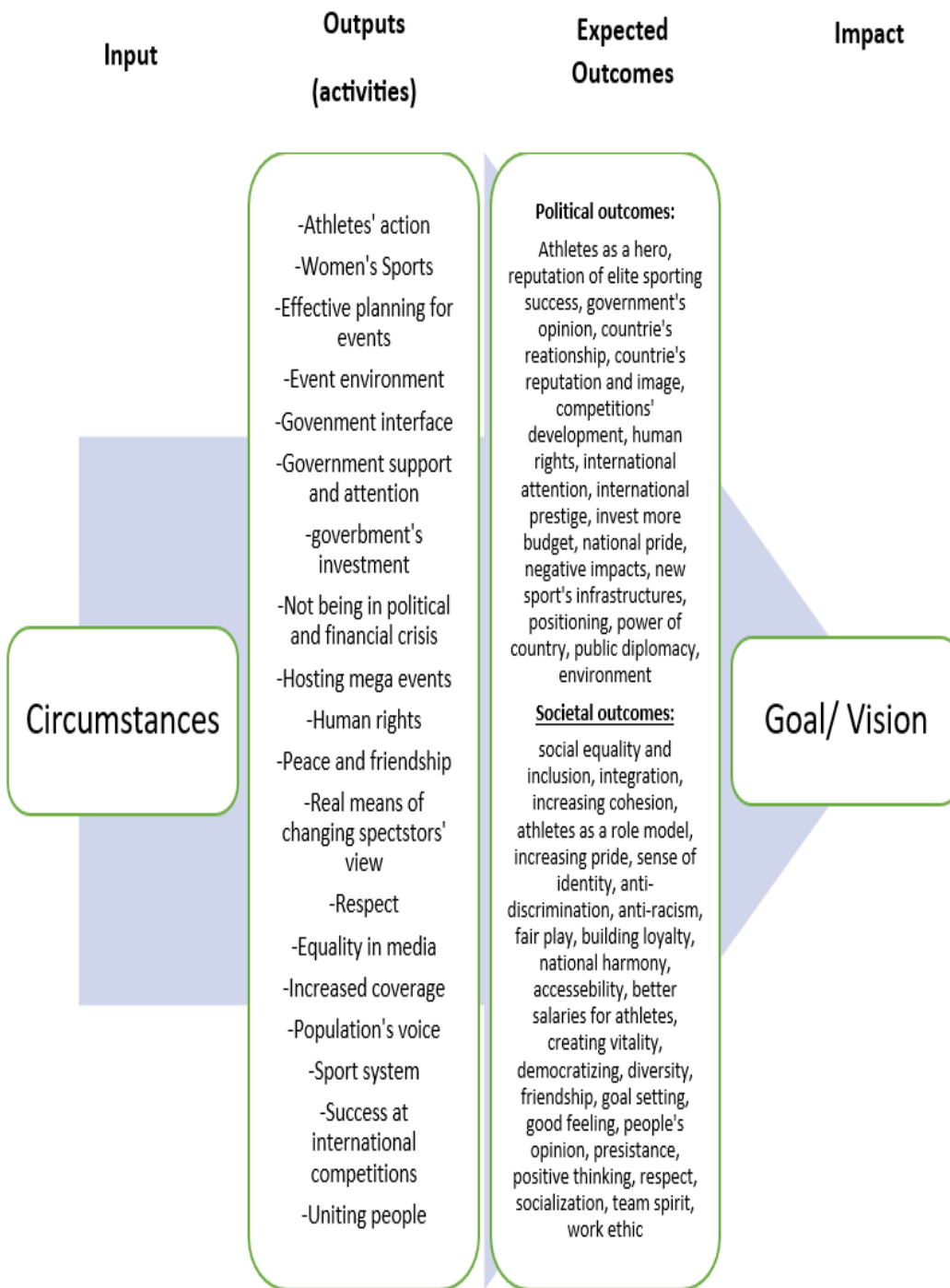**Figure 10**. A roadmap illustrating the COVID-19 under which the identified political and societal outcomes, from Hungarian stakeholders' perspectives, can be achieved using the MESSI framework and the Theory of Change.
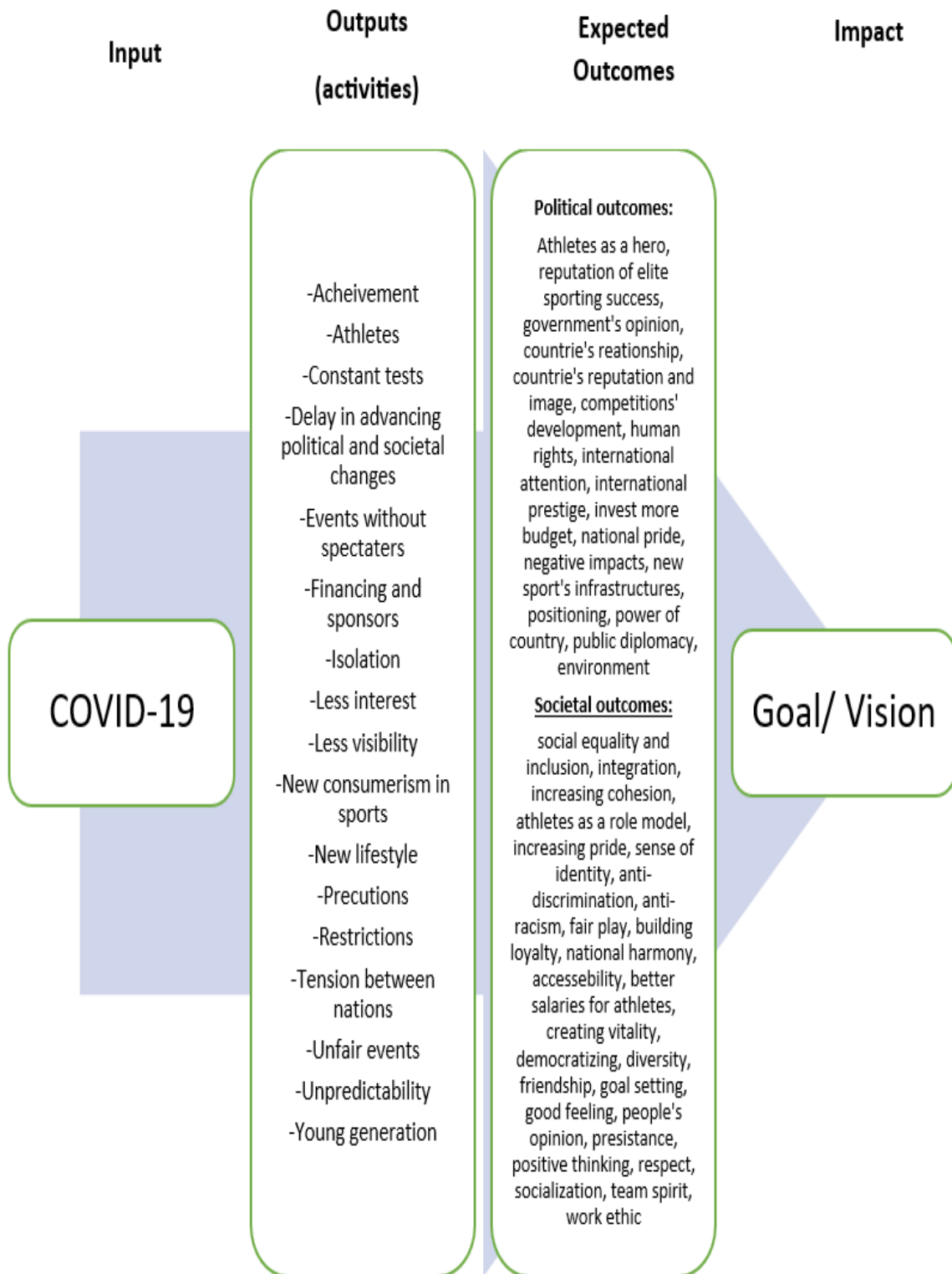Source: Zare and Géczi (2024)

5.6 COVID-19 sport transformation

To address the four research goal, the data was analysed and propose the multi-tier cake metaphor shown in Figure 1 to better visualize the results of the literature and data analysis. Firstly, the transformation in sports was multi-level, affecting all stakeholders, but with varying sizes and positions of layers. Figure 1 visually illustrates this metaphor with a top-down view of the multi-tier cake. All the tiers were 'baked' from the same 'dough'; moreover, larger levels encompass smaller ones. Notably, the global level includes all others, each in turn: geographical unit (country, city), organizational, professional (for example, individual professional, team, unit within an organization), and finally, the individual (personal) level. Furthermore, based on interviews with participants, we identified four main dimensions (which may partially overlap) of transformation: social aspects and rescheduling modifications (as illustrated in Figure 2 and Table 7).

Table 7: COVID-19 Sport Transformation – on the crossing of dimensions and levels of transformation

Dimension/ Level	Individual	Professional	Institutional	Local/ National	Global
Social	Distancing, Isolation	Shift to digital communication	Restructuring and optimization of business processes	Coordination, exchange, and cooperation of different geographical and political zones for COVID-19 issues	Aggregation of all interrelations of national zones from the perspective of the epidemic on a worldwide scale; International mobility issues
Modifications	Routine rescheduling, mobility	Work from home, limitations in mobility,	Organizational Effectiveness, Financial issues, limitations in	Financial issues, limitations in mobility,	Financial issues, limitations in mobility,

65

| | limitations, hygiene rules | Hygiene rules, Events postponement, and rescheduling | mobility, Hygiene rules, Events post-ponement, and rescheduling | Hygiene rules, Events post-ponement, and rescheduling | Hygiene rules, Events post-ponement, and rescheduling |

Source: Glebova, Zare, Desbordes, and Géczi (2022)

5.6.1 Social

The pandemic changed our methods of communication and their intensity based on quarantine, confinement, and other restrictions. The 'global drama' of COVID-19 led to unemployment, isolation, and a serious reduction in wealthy strata consumption (Grigoryev 2020, p. 18). For the first time in modern history, people were limited in their local, regional, and international mobility on a global scale. Therefore, social aspects of sport were affected. From the social perspective, the pandemic provided further opportunities for diversity in sport, embracing all ages, genders, and abilities and opening up to a wider audience.

'The pandemic was an opportunity to rethink sports as a visual and viewing experience. The inclusion of women in sport was especially significant. For athletes, it also represented some much-needed downtime.' (Bc 9).

Digital tools of communication

The lack of face-to-face communication encouraged people's engagement with digital tools and interaction at a distance.

'Although the pandemic did not drastically cause our work commitment to a major earthquake, our activities required some rethinking. The most significant change was moving from personal contact to digital (online) contact. We replaced personal administration with digital administration and minimized face-to-face contact at work, which required and continues to require very strict rules (social distancing, mask, hand washing). Communication occurred digitally with the help of existing online platforms (applications).' (Bc1).

The question of the role of social media in times of social distancing and isolation has been raised by Glebova et al. (2021). Empirical data of the current study demonstrated

the significance of social media and various digital communication tools as ways to socialize, replacing face-to-face communication:

'I used applications to speak with friends, and I did not lose out on my social life' (Ca 28).

The social dimension of sport has a significant impact on the psychological dimension of sport; they partially overlap and influence each other.

5.6.2 Time re-framing, rescheduling, and other modifications

Bb 1 shared her professional experiences and the changes and trends in sport due to COVID-19:

'The possible cancellation or postponement of events is keeping the organizers in uncertainty, which definitely makes it harder to organize anything. Key people are falling off from the team at key moments, which causes insecurity. More planning is needed. Having a plan A and plan B is not enough anymore; we also need C and D. Sometimes, this uncertainty results in money being invested for nothing, as they cancel the event at the last minute, or decide to organize it behind closed doors but have already ordered some items, catering, and services. Athletes are kept in bubbles after testing for COVID-19, creating new logistics needs, such as more space in dining rooms and meeting rooms (four square metres per person is recommended). Moreover, testing must be organized before each meeting of the national team, invitation documents for border control must be issued, and there are limited time and people who can get together. If an event can be held, it is less sustainable, as organizers need to provide participants with masks every four hours, gloves, plexiglass, or face shields for specific jobs, such as when the employee meets with many people during the job; only pre-packed food can be served, which comes with a lot of single-use plastic.' (Bb 1).

The 'global drama' (Grigoryev 2020, p. 18) of numerous postponements and cancellations of sports events has touched all kinds of sports but in different ways. For example, the situation is complicated for swimming because the water and pool facilities are essential for training and performance:

'Because of the pandemic situation, most of the competitions were postponed or cancelled. Training could only take place at certain times and was sometimes impossible. Because swimming requires water, the closing of swimming pools resulted in dry land

preparation, which is not specific at all. The age group swimmers suffer more because the adult national team has priority; therefore, the disadvantages are more serious for them.' (Bb 2)**.**

Evidently, as athletes' professional routines became more complicated because of the pandemic, it inevitably caused 'barriers' to all kinds of sports consumption. Accordingly, Bd 2 (Sports manager – Hungarian Wrestling Federation) listed the following re-timing and modifications: (1) total uncertainty, both in terms of future events and in terms of preparation, which makes it difficult to maintain motivation, according to coaches, (2) it is much more difficult to organize a trip, as it must take into account, among other things, the limited travel options and the often-changing epidemiological regulations of the host country, (3) continuous testing, the uncertainty of tests, due to which the composition of the travellers and home team is constantly changing; (4) stricter and longer-lasting sports medicine examinations, both the examination itself and the appointment, which should otherwise be included in the examinations under normal circumstances (more thorough cardiological screening, troponin level). Moreover, Anett Fodor foresaw the long-term consequences of the pandemic (Grigoryev, 2020):

'It will take some time to recover the sport competition calendars. As many events/tournaments/championships were cancelled or postponed, the federations, clubs, sponsors, and athletes lost money and/or investments. The cancellation of mega sporting events can also lead to diplomacy issues. From some athletes' point of view, a one-year postponement is too long to be able to maintain their top performance. All of these effects will end within the next four years.' (Bb 1).

5.6.3 Challenges

According to Bb 2 the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the sport industry, especially the professional sports sector. However, the pandemic also had a strong impact on recreational, hobby, and leisure sports. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all industries and sports companies in general, including sport clubs. Several challenges must be faced, including suspension of tournaments and postponed events. Regarding the cancellation of sports events, as of mid-January 2020, isolated sports in Asia were postponed or cancelled. These postponements or cancellations related to the

pandemic later spread and affected organized sports at all levels and in almost all countries (Drewes et al., 2020). For instance, the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo were postponed to 2021. These sports events' postponements and cancellations represented the most severe market shock to sport in modern history (Parnell et al., 2020). The postponement and cancellation of sports competitions and the re-scheduling of sports events represented a major challenge for sport managers. Another challenge that could be mentioned was the limitation and/or suspension of training possibilities. For example, Dove et al. (2020) suggested new training rooms during COVID-19; in this respect, education was the first step to helping protect athletes and providers. All athletes needed to be aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 infection. Before athletes or essential personnel could enter the training room or facility, a screening assessment needed to be performed. Moreover, the pandemic situation provided some challenges and opportunities for sports psychologists, highlighting the importance and necessity of sports psychology. Ammar et al. (2020) conducted an international online survey (ECLB-COVID19) in seven languages to shed light on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on mental health and emotional well-being. They concluded that increased psychosocial strain was triggered by home confinement. A crisis-oriented interdisciplinary intervention was urgently needed to reduce the high risk of mental disorders and foster an active and healthy confinement lifestyle. In addition, the predictability of organized sports events was unclear. Lastly, motivation to continue training was a major challenge for sport managers.

5.6.4 Opportunities

'COVID-19 complicated the sport industry with its limitations. Now, as the number of infected people is increasing, the restrictions are becoming stricter. We are even more limited in organizing events, not just in professional sports, but also in grassroots sports. However, marketing can always find its way, if creative enough. The Coca-Cola 'Smile with your eyes' campaign is an example.' (Bb 2).

The COVID-19 outbreak, and related restrictions provided an opportunity to develop and deploy new technologies in sports. Accordingly, sport managers might capitalize on these new technologies through 1. The wider spread of digital sports applications; 2. The enhanced use of communicational tools, the development of networks and CPD on digital

platforms, and the learning of new ways to deliver training programs; 3. The enhancement of opportunities for learning on e-learning platforms and the development of online training; 4. The coaching and assisting of staff in their work (useful tools), and; 5. The hosting and organization of online sports competitions and other events and the strengthening of cost-efficiency. According to Bd 3, the pandemic provided new opportunities in online sports streaming that we had not seen before. It contributed to increasing digitalization in the sector. Sports activities were only impacted by the pandemic when severe restrictions were introduced; however, this year, we managed to develop and grow despite the situation. Some opportunities for sport management and marketing brought about by the pandemic included cost efficiency with wider implementation of digital tools for communication, coaching, streaming, and development of adequate communicational strategies for actual situations. These opportunities were also supported using social media. Coaching was also affected by the pandemic; for example, coaching took on a 'digital form', requiring educators' assistance to provide easy access to CPDs for coaches in remote areas. Further, the strengthening of community cohesion, communication, marketing, and good practices is considered an opportunity for sport managers and marketers. The pandemic is driving digitalization in the sports sector; however, it is also impacting traditional, club-based sporting structures. Some sports clubs that have been struggling to maintain their activities will probably cease to exist, while new digital sports ventures can take over their role. The pandemic contributed to the transformation of the sports sector:

'More innovative digital solutions will be introduced to keep the population fit and active.' (Bd 3).

5.7 Perceptions of sport stakeholders on elite sporting success and prestige

To address the fifth and sixth research goals, after analysing the data, four themes emerged from the thematic analysis, reflecting Iranian interviewees' perceptions related to the thesis goals. These goals concerned how Iranian sport actors perceive the relationship between elite sporting success, prestige, and the success or 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, and (4) media

coverage and international prestige. The themes are described below and are supported by quotes from participants. Some themes and their associated codes are depicted in Table 8.

Table 8. Codes and Themes of Data

Interview extract	Codes	Themes
– Both taking part and winning a medal will improve Iran's international prestige. (C1). – The more successful a country is in various economic, social, political, and sports fields, the better its international prestige will be among different countries. (C 9).	– Winning medal and international prestige – Successful in sport sector in international stage	Sporting success
– Ethics and fair play are essential in terms of international prestige. (C 4) – Fair play has a long-term effect on the opinions of people around the world compared to winning medals. (C 2).	– Fair play and international prestige – Compete fairly	Fairness
– 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. (C1). – Participating in the Olympics and winning a medal can be very influential in a diplomatic relationship. (C 9).	– Develop diplomatic relation with sporting success – Participation and its effect on diplomatic relationship.	Diplomatic relation

– The media is essential and has a great impact on international image. (C 10). – It seems unlikely that the media in the Olympics would want to present a positive image of Iran through Iranian athletes' performance. (C 8).	– Role of media on international image Role of media

Source: Zare and Géczi (2022b)

5.7.1 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.' (C 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.' (C 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'. (C 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.' (C 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.' (C 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.' (C 3).
'International prestige is a national interest of any country.' (C 5).

5.7.2 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'. (C 4). 'Fair play has a long-term effect on the opinions of people around the world compared to winning medals.' (C 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.' (C 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.' (C 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' behaviour is crucial, too. *'We ask athletes to behave fairly with their opponents and respect them and not dispute the referee's decisions.' (C 6 and 7).*

5.7.3 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.' (C 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.' (C 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.' (C 5).

Further, the interviewees who were policymakers 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 USA national team. So, we consider this issue in our policy as we believe it can increase our international image and diplomatic relations.' (C 4).*

Iranian wrestlers were invited to the United States in 2014 to compete against the USA national wrestling team. These wrestling competitions have often transcended political tensions between the two countries, as part of a long-standing tradition. As a consequence of these matches, there is a great deal of mutual respect and understanding as a result of sportsmanship and competition. 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 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.' (C 1 and 2 and 8).

5.7.4 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."* (C 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.' (C 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.' (C 1). Interviewees believed that *'Various media formats, including visual, print, and online, can affect the international image in general.' (C 3).*

However, in their opinion, the top media power in the world is mainly in the hands of powers such as Britain, Russian, North American, and some European powers, accordingly, they expressed that *'Media do not show a good image of Iran in the world.' (C 6 and 8).* It is possible that this perception is the result of a variety of factors, including political conflicts, sanctions, human rights issues, and other contentious matters that frequently attract media attention on a global scale. *'Currently, all media in the world are talking against us.' (C 4).* It implies a sense of being under siege by a global narrative

that is perceived as hostile or unfairly critical. It is possible that this reflects a broader perception within Iran that the international media landscape perpetuates negative stereotypes about Iran. *'At the same time, the major international media focus more on Iran's security, political, economic and military aspects.' (C 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.' (C 4, 8, 10).*

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.

5.8 Football and sports diplomacy

To address the seventh research objective, after preparing the conceptual research model, using a questionnaire and a comparison matrix, the model was implemented using the Dimatel technique. To calculate the weight in the process of analysing the elements of each level relative to its corresponding elements at a higher level, they were compared as a pair, and their weight was calculated. These weights are called relative weights, and then by combining relative weights, each option's final weight is determined. We call it absolute weight. All comparisons are made in pairs. In these comparisons, decision-makers use judgment. Suppose element i is compared to element j. In that case, the decision-maker will say that the importance of element i over element j is one of the cases in Table 9, which shows the range 4-0 through this questionnaire. For this purpose, the preparation has been obtained.

Table 9 categorizes various effects on a scale of 0 to 4, presenting numerical values corresponding to different levels of impact and their associated oral judgments. The following is a detailed breakdown:

- **Effect less (0):** This column represents cases where there is no observable effect. The numerical value assigned is 0.

- **Very little effect (1):** This column indicates a very minimal effect. The numerical value assigned is 1.
- **Low impact (2):** This column denotes low impact. The numerical value assigned is 2.
- **High impact (3):** This column signifies a high impact level. The numerical value assigned is 3.
- **Too much impact (4):** This column represents cases where there is a very high or excessive impact. The numerical value assigned is 4.

The table uses these numerical values to quantify the oral judgments of different effects, allowing for a standardized method to evaluate and compare the intensity of various impacts.

Table 9. Impact assessment scale and oral judgment

Effect less	Very little effect	Low impact	high impact	Too much impact	Oral judgment
0	1	2	3	4	number

Source: Mohsenifar, Dousti, Zare and Géczi (2022)

Table 10 illustrates the political reasons for not hosting the AFC Champions League football matches between the Iranian and Saudi football teams. The intensity of the influence of each element on the other elements is called the vector R. The sum of the columnar valves of each matrix component M (I-M)-1 The intensity of the effect of the component indicates the other elements, the intensity of the effect of each element of the other element is called the vector J.

Model evaluation based on Dimatel model
Calculate the normalized matrix:
First, based on the above steps, the M and M (I-M) -1 communication matrices were calculated by the EXCEL software, which is described below:

The resulting matrix of expert opinions $= {}^{-}\overline{M}$ $M = \alpha {}^{-} \overline{M}$

α the largest set of matrix lines M given that in the matrix $\overline{M}$ the largest total of the resulting line belongs to (B =16.1). Therefore, the elements of the matrix $\overline{M}$ and α – 1/16, 1 multiply the result by the matrix M. Now, having a direct relationship matrix, calculate the intensity of the relationship. $M(I-M)^{-1}$ the intensity of direct relationships and $M^2(I-M)^{-1}$ the intensity of indirect relationships is intense. Since the sum of the unlimited sequences of direct and indirect effects of the elements on each other is calculated as a geometric progression, the indirect effects along the continuous chain will be reduced and removed from the diagram.

The sum of the linear drives of each matrix component M(I-M)-1 Indicates the intensity of the effect of the component on other elements. The R + J vector shows the weight and significance of the criteria. The actual location of each element in the final hierarchy is determined by the (R-J) and (R + J) columns, (R-J) indicates the position of an element (along the axis of the arrays), and this position, if positive (R-J), is definitely a penetrator. If it is negative, it will definitely be under the influence (receiver). (R + J) indicates the total intensity of an element (along the longitudinal axis) both in terms of penetration and in terms of being affected.

Table 10. Table R, J

Political reasons for not hosting the AFC Champions League football matches between Iranian and Saudi football teams	R	J	R+J	R-J	ranking
Saudi Arabia fears Islamic Revolution in other Muslim countries	9.891216	9.512369	19.423585	0.358847	1
Iran's support for the Arab Spring or the Islamic Awakening in the Arab world	9.876514	9.413654	19.290168	0.46286	2

Foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in defense of the rights of all Muslims and the freedom movement and aggression against Israel and the West	9.846342	8.447120	18.293462	1.399222	3
The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in establishing an Islamic society based on Shiite principles	8.654782	8.210452	16.865234	0.44433	4
Attacks on Yemen by Saudi Arabia and its allies (including Egypt, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco and Sudan) that sparked war between Yemen and Saudi Arabia	8.579213	8.321458	16.900671	0.257755	5
The existence of the Sunni religion in Saudi Arabia, which basically considers the Shiite religion to be infidel and racist	8.512367	8.251685	16.764052	0.260682	6
Saudi Arabia expands destructive activities among Iranian tribes, especially Sunnis, and creates ethnic-religious conflicts in Iran	8.438751	7.201458	15.640209	1.237293	7

Saudi support for ISIS and al-Nusra	8.265014	7.325148	15.590162	0.939866	8
Iran's conflict with the United States and Israel and Saudi Arabia's support for the two countries	7.716435	6.431025	14.14746	1.28541	9
Saudi Arabia did not consider any nuclear deal between Iran and the West to be in its interests and saw it as part of a development that could help Iran expand and expand in the region.	7.662475	6.306214	13.968689	1.356261	10
Execution of Sheikh Nimr, a cleric opposed to the Saudi-backed government of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia)	7.653214	6.684125	14.337339	0.969089	11
Iran's support for Houthi Shiite forces in Yemen	6.762014	5.434101	12.196115	1.327913	12
Saudi cooperation with Israel to strike at the axis of resistance	6.692147	5.352157	12.044304	1.33999	13
Formation of a coalition of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on behalf of Saudi Arabia	5.716360	4.215815	9.932175	1.500545	14

and 41 other countries without Iran					
Suppression and execution of Saudi Shiites by this country	5.682530	4.302145	9.984675	1.380385	15
Saudi Arabia welcomes US government action to include Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in 2019 list of US terrorist groups	5.430215	4.213587	9.643802	1.216628	16
The holding of illegitimate meetings of Arab-Islamic organizations with the aim of threatening Iran and criticizing the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the tripartite meetings of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League meeting, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in May 2019 in Saudi Arabia	4.845630	2.719301	7.564931	2.126329	17
Destroying the historic centres of Qatif, where Shiites lived, and building mosques in these places for Sunnis	4.652149	2.645251	7.2974	2.006898	18

Tehran protesters attack Saudi embassy in Tehran in 1987, killing Saudi diplomat	4.365890	2.581325	6.947215	1.784565	19
Establishment of an Arab-Western NATO to counter the Iranian coalition	4.230148	2.152210	6.382358	2.077938	20
Saudi Arabia's efforts to reduce the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz	3.975031	1.893521	5.868552	2.08151	21
Preventing the pilgrimage of Iranian pilgrims to Saudi Arabia in 2016	3.752014	1.254151	5.006165	2.497863	22
Saudi support for the launch of Persian radio and television networks, Iran's opposition language, including (Iran International)	3.578931	1.325415	4.904346	2.253516	23
Migration of a number of sports reporters and elites to Persian radio and television networks, including (Iran International)	3.466582	1.358742	4.825324	1.10784	24
Saudi Arabia's withdrawal from the Muslim Brotherhood	3.341268	1.358125	4.699393	1.983143	25

coalition to form an anti-Iranian coalition					
Occupation of the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and Mashhad in 2016	2.995874	1.154125	4.149999	1.841749	26
Lowering oil prices by increasing production by Saudi Arabia to hit Iran's economy	2.987124	1.652145	4.639269	1.334979	27
Saudi Arabia's attempt to thwart Iran's nuclear talks and the P5 + 1	2.854260	1.124158	3.978418	1.730102	28
Termination of Saudi diplomatic relations with Iran	2.762351	1.112534	3.874885	1.649817	29
Saudi Arabia was at the forefront of supporting Iraq in its eight-year war with Iran	2.682034	1.132746	3.81478	1.549288	30
Emphasizing that the cradle of Arabism, Islamism and the land of revelation is trying to connect the two concepts of Islam and Arabism, Saudi Arabia	2.589201	1.254612	3.843813	1.334589	31
The formation of the Arab League in 1945 and the absence of Iran in it	1.210407	1.102541	2.312948	0.107866	32
Despite the two holy shrines in Saudi Arabia	1.352145	2.215866	3.568011	-0.863721	33

and its spiritual centre in the Islamic world, the country has always considered itself worthy of the leadership of the Islamic world.	84				
Geopolitical position and the special position of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East	1.354126	0.423696	1.777822	0. 93043	34
Iran's oil embargo on Western countries and Saudi Arabia's support	1.357541	0.541256	1.898797	0.816285	35
Rape of two young Iranians at Jeddah airport	0.351697	0.235565	0.587262	0.116132	36
Mena accident	0.368491	0.907451	1.275942	-0.53896	37
Saudi Arabia's interaction with Iran in extraditing bodies in the Mena incident	0.342368	0.595493	0.937861	-0.253125	38
The killing of the pilgrims of the Sacred House of God in 1988	0.335742	0.754057	1.089799	-0.418315	39
The renaming of the Persian Gulf into Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, into the Arabian Gulf	0.241785	0.825411	1.067196	-0.583626	40

Table 11. The Asian Champions League shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral grounds

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia-tractor Iran	19 April 2016	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
tractor Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	1 May 2016	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia-Sepahan Iran	20 April 2016	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Sepahan Iran- Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia	4 May 2016	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia-Zobahan Iran	4 May 2016	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Zobahan Iran- Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia	20 April 2016	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman

In the 2016 AFC Champions League, 6 matches of the football matches between Iran and Saudi Arabia were played on neutral ground.

Table 12. The Asian Champions League shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral grounds

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Esteghlal Iran- Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia	27 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia-Esteghlal Iran	9 May 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran-Al Fateh Saudi Arabia	20 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Fateh Saudi Arabia-Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran	25 April 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Zobahan Iran- Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	28 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia- Zobahan Iran	8 May 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Persepolis Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	21 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia- Persepolis Iran	24 April 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	23 May 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia- Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran	31 May 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Persepolis Iran-Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	22 August 2017	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia- Persepolis Iran	12 September 2017	Abu Dhabi's Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia- Persepolis Iran	26 September 2017	Abu Dhabi's Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium
Persepolis Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	17 October 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman

In the 2017 AFC Champions League, 14 soccer matches between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been played on neutral ground.

Table 13. The Asian Champions League shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral grounds

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
tractor Iran- Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	12 February 2018	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia- tractor Iran	3 April 2018	Emirates Stadium Al Ain
Esteghlal Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	20 February 2018	Oseib Stadium Oman

Al Hilal Saudi Arabia- Esteghlal Iran	16 April 2018	Kuwait Stadium

In the 2018 AFC Champions League, there have been 4 matches of the football matches between the representatives of Iran and Saudi Arabia on neutral ground.

Table 14. The Asian Champions League shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral grounds

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Zobahan Iran-Al Nasr Saudi Arabia	29 May 2019	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Al Nasr Saudi Arabia- Zobahan Iran	11 March 2019	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Esteghlal Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	8 April 2019	Qatar's Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia- Esteghlal Iran	23 April 2019	Emirates Stadium Mohammed bin Zayed
Persepolis Iran-Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	9 April 2019	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia- Persepolis Iran	22 April 2019	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia- Zobahan Iran	26 July 2019	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Zobahan Iran- Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia	12 August 2019	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium

In the Asian Champions League in 2019, 8 matches of the football matches between Iran and Saudi Arabia were played on neutral ground.

Table 15. The Asian Champions League shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral grounds

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Esteghlal Iran - Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	5 May 2020	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia - Esteghlal Iran	17 February 2020	Jabr al-Ahmad Stadium Kuwait
Shahr Khodrou Iran - Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	21 April 2020	Al Rashid Stadium Dubai
Persepolis Iran - Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia	30 September 2020	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Persepolis Iran - Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia	2 March 2020	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia- Persepolis Iran	7 April 2020	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Sepahan Iran- Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia	2 March 2020	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia - Sepahan Iran	6 April 2020	Bahrain Isa Stadium

In the Asian Champions League in 2020, there are 8 matches of football matches between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the group stage.

According to the results of the tables above, a total of 40 Iranian and Saudi football players have played neutral matches in the AFC Champions League until the end of the 2020 Group Stage.

6.Discussion

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between sports, particularly Olympic success, and their multifaceted effects on societal and political dynamics, this analysis brings together multiple perspectives from Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders. It is important to emphasize the subjective nature of these outcomes, as perceived by stakeholders, rather than presenting them as objective facts in the analysis below. These outcomes reflect the beliefs and attributions of the Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders involved in the thesis.

6.1 Political outcomes

When examining the political outcomes, the results underscored the pivotal significance of advocating for increased elite sports budgets. An interesting facet of this finding was the presence of a difference in opinions among respondents regarding investment in elite sports. While most participants advocated for increased investment in the elite sport sector, a few expressed opposing views. Importantly, this outcome resonates with prior research, exemplified in studies by De Bosscher et al. (2021); Grix and Carmichael (2012); Reiche (2015). De Bosscher et al. (2021) suggest that the focus needs to shift from determining whether public investment in elite sport can be legitimized, to determining 'how' that money can be used more effectively. This underscores the value of the MESSI framework, which, while not explicitly dissecting social and political outcomes, offers a structured approach to comprehending the broader societal influence of elite sports.

Additionally, respondents expected new sports infrastructures to result from Olympic success, underscoring the expectation that success should lead to the development of advanced sporting facilities. Prior studies have indeed explored the relationship between hosting the Olympic Games and sports infrastructure construction (e.g., Brown and Cresciani, 2017). However, this thesis uniquely identifies the construction of new sports infrastructures as an expected political outcome of Olympic success.

 Furthermore, another expected outcome of Olympic success involves the enhancement of a country's international prestige and image. This discovery aligns with existing

research, notably the work of De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019); Zare and Géczi (2022b), which elucidated how Olympic success can elevate international prestige and image. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that the notion of 'more success, more prestige' is overly simplistic, as highlighted by Haut et al. (2017, p. 311). While elite sports success can indeed boost a nation's international prestige, we must exercise caution not to overstate this correlation.

Although no single study has explored the effect of Olympic success on governments' opinions, previous research has delved into public attitudes towards the societal impacts of elite sports, such as those by e.g., De Rycke and De Bosscher (2021); De Rycke et al. (2019). Intriguingly, my respondents presented contrasting perspectives on Olympic success's political outcomes. While some participants highlighted the interconnectedness of sport and politics, others held opposing beliefs, asserting that Olympic success has minimal influence on international politics. The diversity in these viewpoints underscores the complexity inherent in assessing Olympic success's political impact. While some argue for tangible political consequences, others reject sport and politics integration, deeming its impact negligible. According to this perspective, political decisions are largely shaped by factors unrelated to sporting achievements, which, in their view, exert little influence on international politics.

Additionally, my thesis revealed two novel political dimensions associated with Olympic success: environmental issues and human rights. On the environmental front, sports events and facilities can trigger significant impacts, including resource consumption, land use, water utilization, and waste generation, along with pollution. Sports can also promote environmental awareness, conservation, and contributing to sustainable development. In terms of human rights, sports play a role in upholding human rights through their ability to foster inclusivity, diversity, and awareness of critical issues. However, it is essential to recognize that sports can also be mired in human rights abuses. These abuses include discrimination and exploitation of athletes, workers, and local communities. Accordingly, my thesis underscores the need for sports organizations, governments, and stakeholders to adopt a comprehensive and responsible approach when addressing the environmental and human rights impacts of sports. This is done by promoting sustainable and ethical practices within the domain of elite sports.

6.2 Societal outcomes

In relation to societal outcomes, participants repeatedly identified codes related to social equality and inclusion as the most expected outcome. Previous research has extensively explored these themes in sports. For instance, in the context of gender equality, Ekholm et al. (2022) examine the challenges for inclusion policies of excluding girls from ethno-cultural minorities from sports participation. The authors conclude by emphasizing that the participation in community sports can empower girls and lead them toward emancipation. Other prominent societal outcomes identified include integration, accessibility, anti-discrimination, and anti-racism aligned with Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter (IOC, 2021). Simultaneously, people's opinions of sport and good feelings were ranked together in next place. In addressing anti-discrimination and anti-racism, Mauro (2017) discusses some measures taken against racism and discrimination in grassroots sports. The findings indicated an expectation that Olympic success would contribute to a reduction in discrimination and racism within society.

The MESSI framework provides analysts with a framework for understanding the potential social and political impacts of elite sports. Although the framework itself does not analyse social and political outcomes directly, it offers a structured approach for exploring how elite sports may have a wider impact on society. The analysis includes evaluating impacts, taking into account context, and assessing intended and unintended consequences. The MESSI framework was used to answer the first and second research questions, and three factors were identified that may affect the expected political and societal outcomes. There is one notable difference between the results of this thesis and those of MESSI, which is that there are no negative outcomes. Possibly, this is because the study focused on expected outcomes, and participants expected positive results. Despite this, participants expressed that it is essential to consider negative impacts when identifying political outcomes. In this thesis, another novel finding was the identification of factors that could affect societal and political outcomes.

6.3 Circumstances and its effect on political and societal outcomes

According to sports stakeholders' opinions, success in international competitions is the factor most likely to increase the impact of societal and political outcomes in society.

6.3.1 Success at international competitions

According to responders, to be successful at different international competitions can brought some advantages for their country. In accordance with previous research by Liu (2020) then Zare and Géczi (2022b), the responders suggest that countries may benefit from sporting success at international competitions. There are several positive outcomes associated with such success, including national pride, international reputation, and social cohesion. Sporting success is recognized as having a positive impact not only within the sports domain but also in a broader societal context.

6.3.2 Increasing governments' investment

As per participants, there is a correlation between increasing government investment in sports and success at the Olympic Games. According to the previous studies, for example Reiche (2015) also Grix and Carmichael (2012) countries that allocate more resources to sports and athlete development tend to perform better at the Olympics. This is because government investment often goes towards better facilities, training programs, and support for athletes, all of which can help improve their performance. However, it's important to note that simply increasing government investment in sports is not a guarantee of success at the Olympics. Therefore, it is important to investigate how money can be used effectively and what policies are needed.

6.3.3 Hosting mega sport events

Sporting events can have positive and negative societal and political outcomes. Positively, hosting a sporting event increases a country's international visibility, boosts tourism, and promotes national pride and unity. However, hosting a sporting event can also be problematic. Events such as these can be expensive, and the infrastructure required to host them can cause displacement and destruction of local communities. In addition,

sporting events can also have political implications. Some governments have used these events to showcase their political ideologies and advance their political agendas while distracting from political and social issues.

The result of current study is in line with existing literature including De Bosscher et al. (2021); De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019, 2021); Dubinsky (2019); Liu (2020); Nygård and Gates (2013); Woodward (2020).

6.4 Elite sport policies and its effect on political and societal outcomes

In elite sport policies, the following factors should be taken into account, according to respondents:

6.4.1 The effect of athletes on the population

According to responders' opinion the role of athletes on the population is important and should be considered in the elite sport policies. A number of scholars have conducted research in this area (e.g., see Reid, 2017; Ronkainen et al., 2019). As an example, De Rycke and De Bosscher (2019) identified 'role model function' as a positive impact. While, Lovin et al. (2019) state that sometimes they are negative role models. Therefore, it can say that putting more attention toward the role of athletes on the population in elite sport policy is one way to increase the expected outcomes.

6.4.2 Engagement of athletes and fans

Engagement is another code that has been identified. In accordance with respondents, on the one hand, increased involvement of athletes and fans in elite sport policy could have a significant impact on expected political and societal outcomes.

On the other hand, a few respondents believe that it is not as easy as it sounds to increase engagement.

It should be noted that there is a debate about the effectiveness of involving athletes and fans in the formulation of sports policies. There has been no specific study conducted on this topic; however, the conflicting views highlight the need for further research and

examination of the potential outcomes and challenges involved in increasing engagement in sport.

6.4.3 The importance of sports values in elite sport policy

Among respondents, it was believed that sports values such as fairness, equality, inclusion, respect, etc. can be spread through athletes in society.

Harmon (2020) in his study discusses the value of sport in culture, as it provides opportunities for physical and social development. Nevertheless, it also raises concerns about unequal treatment based on gender identity and gender expression, particularly for women and transgender athletes. This paper presents examples of Canadian policies that address these issues but argues that more needs to be done.

In this regard, UNESCO (2016) showcases how sport brings people together and promotes values such as fair play, equality, respect, and solidarity. It is shown that how physical education fosters citizenship, fosters solidarity, and promotes peace. These photographs highlight the transformative power of sport as seen through the determination and achievements of young athletes. As the authors believe, sport is a source of hope and positive change. Therefore, the result of this thesis is in line with the existing literature.

6.3.4 Political movement, gender equality, and athletes' social responsibilities

Political movements, gender quality, and social responsibilities of athletes are also factors that are considered important by the responders and should be taken into account by elite sport policy in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

In order for sports organizations to remain relevant and supportive of societal changes, policies should be aligned with broader political contexts and athletes should be supported in their political engagement. Athletes should be encouraged to express their views and educate the sporting community about the impact of political movements. Promoting gender equality requires ensuring that women have equal opportunities and resources, implementing strong anti-discrimination measures, encouraging women's participation in leadership roles, and developing programs that focus on the specific needs of female athletes. To embrace athletes' social responsibilities, community engagement programs

can be implemented, athletes can be encouraged to advocate for social justice, ethical guidelines and training can be established, and athletes' contributions to social causes can be recognized and rewarded. By integrating these elements, elite sport policies can promote excellence while contributing to societal goals.

Regarding the athletes political and social movements, some research has been conducted. For example, there have been numerous protests by American professional athletes against racism throughout the years. One of this protests was about 'Black Lives Matter' by Colin Kaepernick (Towler et al., 2020). Athletes have a significant role to play as role models, and their actions can have a positive impact on society. There has been an increasing demand for equality in sports as sports' influence on social issues becomes more prevalent. According to responders, a country that takes action to combat discrimination and inequality in sports can serve as an example for others to follow. These statements emphasize the importance of athletes and the role they play in promoting positive social change. So, the current result is in accordance with Towler et al. (2020).

6.5 COVID-19 and its effect on political and societal outcomes

6.5.1 Events without spectators and restrictions

Holding events without spectators as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has likely had an impact on the expected political and societal outcomes of sporting success. Tamir (2022) by examining this unique situation, he gained an understanding of fans' beliefs about spectators and their presence in stadiums. Moreover, the results of Glebova et al. (2022) demonstrate that COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on sports by affecting all aspects, levels, and stakeholders. In their findings several dimensions of transformation are identified and explained: social, psychological, rescheduling, and new products/services/technologies. So, the result is in line with the existing literature.

6.5.2 Financing and sponsors
Sports organizations have been affected by the economic impact of the pandemic, including loss of revenue from ticket sales, concessions, and merchandise sales. There are several scholars who have addressed this issue (e.g., Alam and Abdurraheem, 2021; Drewes et al., 2021; Glebova et al., 2022). In their research they examined different

factors which were affected by pandemic like social and economy impacts. Stakeholder responses were consistent with previous studies.

6.5.3 Less interest

There has been a decline in interest in elite sports due to the cancellation or postponement of competitions, inability of athletes to compete or train normally, and the closure of stadiums and arenas to fans. The attitudes of some respondents toward the interests of the population are different. According to responders, Sport for All sector in Hungary was more adversely affected than elite sports.

In this context Grix et al. (2021) examine three aspects of sport affected by Covid-19: first, the nature of elite sport played without spectators; second, the impact Covid has on the provision of sport in less well-off areas, based on a case study of Oldham during the pandemic. Lastly, the severe economic and social impact of the pandemic on grassroots sports, including the relationship between mass and elite sports. So, in our study, our focus is on elite sport while Grix et al. (2021) consider both mass and elite sports.

COVID-19's profound impact on sports, revealing both challenges and opportunities, such as digitalization and innovation, is consistent with the findings of Tamir (2022), Glebova et al. (2022), Alam and Abdurraheem (2021), and Grix et al. (2021). Considering the pandemic, sports models and approaches have been reevaluated.

Furthermore, the thesis examines themes related to elite sporting success, prestige, and policy success or failure, focusing on Olympic achievement, fairness, diplomatic relations, and media coverage. The significance of these themes is reinforced by the research by Breuer and Hallmann (2011), Freeman (2012), Humphreys et al. (2018), Storm and Jakobsen (2020), and Liu (2020).

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, I 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 compared 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 my 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 (2019) 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 is 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 my findings, Emrich et al. (2014) argued not only athletes' behaviour in competition but also the whole system behind the scenes are responsible. By analysing the data, I found interviewees' awareness of their international image through athletes' conduct 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 the countries involved. 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, it was 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 (BBC News, 2020). 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 research including (Billings, 2008; Chen, 2012; Rein and Shields, 2007). However, this finding is contrary to Hong and Oh (2020) results. 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, not even at the Olympic Games. There is a lack of information and knowledge about Iran among the foreign public. The media can play crucial role in introducing Iran to global audience.

Additionally, this thesis highlights sports' involvement in public mobilization, economic development, and media propaganda, as reported by Fazeli (2012) and Noori et al. (2018). Sport has a wide range of influence on international relations and community culture, as noted by Mohammadi Azizabadi (2017).

This thesis demonstrates the complex and extensive relationship between sports and their political and societal outcomes, in particular Olympic success. This thesis emphasizes the necessity for a holistic understanding of the role of sports in shaping societal norms, international relations, and political discourses, especially in light of current global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Below table includes the comparative analysis of Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders' perspectives on Olympic success, highlighting both similarities and differences:

Table 16. Comparative analysis of Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders' perspectives

Aspects	Hungarian stakeholders' perspective (A)	Iranian stakeholders' perspective (C)	Similarities	Differences
Political factors influenced by Olympic success	- Allocation of financial resources (A4). -International prestige and reputation (A12). - Cultural exchanges and cooperation (A8). - Political overreach in sports (A31). - Promotes national pride, unity, and soft power through increased financial investment in elite sports (A4). - Enhances international status and reputation (A12).	- Diplomatic relations and political influence (C1, C9. - Long-term international prestige through fair play and ethics (C4, C2). - Enhances international prestige and reputation through winning medals (C1, C9). - Develops diplomatic relations and political influence (C1, C9). - 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	- Both emphasize enhancing international prestige and reputation. - Both recognize the role of sports in fostering international cooperation and cultural exchanges. - Both acknowledge the influence of sports on national pride and unity.	- Hungarian stakeholders focus on financial resource allocation and caution against political overreach in sports. - Iranian stakeholders highlight the role of sports in developing diplomatic relations and the ethical aspects of sports. Iranians also mention the commercialization and moral challenges in elite sports.

	- Builds lasting bonds between nations (A8). - Cautions against overestimating sports' role in international relations (A31).	aspects of sports less considered. (C 10).		
Societal factors influenced by Olympic success	- Social cohesion and integration (A27). Inclusion and non-discrimination messages (A15). - Athletes as national image influencers (A1). -Social equality and community pride (A2). -Unifies society and promotes social cohesion and integration, needing a non-political framework (A27). -Conveys social and political messages of inclusion and non-discrimination (A15).	- The more successful a country is in various economic, social, political, and sports fields, the better its international prestige will be among different countries. (C 9). -Demonstrating the country, culture, and society by hosting sports mega-events and having good participants can increase international prestige (C 3). - International prestige is a national interest of any country (C 5). -Emphasizes fair play and ethics for long-term prestige (C4, C2). -Asking athletes to behave fairly with their opponents and respect them and not dispute the	- Both recognize the role of sports in enhancing international prestige and reputation. -Both see athletes as influential in shaping national image. -Both emphasize the importance of social messages and ethical conduct in sports	-Hungarian stakeholders focus on unifying society and promoting social cohesion and integration through a non-political framework. Emphasize social equality, inclusion, and community pride. - Iranian stakeholders highlight the broader impact of success in various fields on international prestige. Emphasize the importance of hosting mega-events and fair play for long-term prestige.

	-Athletes influence national image (A1). -Changes attitudes towards social equality and community pride (A2).	referee's decisions. (C 6 and 7).		
Perception of Olympic success on international prestige and soft power	- Increases international prestige and creates community bridges (A1). -Enhances national image and influence (A28).	- Improves international prestige through medal wins (C1, C9). -Promotes political relations and de-escalation (C1). -Media shapes international image (C10).	- Both view Olympic success as a means to increase international prestige and enhance national image. -Both recognize the potential for sports to create community bridges and improve international relations.	- Hungarians emphasize community bridges and national image. -Iranians highlight the importance of medal wins and the role of media in shaping international image. Stronger focus on using sports for de-escalation of political tensions.
Reflection of Olympic success in sports policies and international reception	- Reflects effectiveness of sports policies (A30). -Influences societal attitudes towards sports and integration (A2).	- Maintains positive international image through ethical sports conduct (C4, C2). - Leads to better diplomatic relationships and political influence (C9).	- Both see Olympic success as reflecting the effectiveness of sports policies. - Both acknowledge the influence on societal attitudes and integration.	- Hungarians focus on societal attitudes and policy effectiveness. - Iranians emphasize diplomatic relationships and political influence.

Note: 'A' represents Hungarian responses, and 'B' represents Iranian responses.

There is a common subculture among elite sport leaders in Hungary and Iran that can be attributed to the similarity in perspectives between these two stakeholders. Both groups recognize the universal value of international prestige and reputation that successful sports can create. This shared understanding reflects a global elite sports culture that places an emphasis on international recognition and the diplomatic advantages of sports success (Green and Houlihan, 2005; Grix and Carmichael, 2012). Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders agree that sports can play an important role in promoting inclusion, eliminating discrimination, and building national pride. According to both groups, Olympic success has the potential to build community bridges and improve international relations. Both also view Olympic success as a reflection of the effectiveness of their respective sports policies and their broader societal impact.

However, the differences between Hungary and Iran can be attributed to their distinct sports cultures, Olympic traditions, and levels of institutionalization. Hungarian stakeholders focus more significantly on the allocation of financial resources and caution against political overreach, reflecting a more established sports infrastructure and a history of political misuse of sports. They emphasize a non-political framework and social cohesion due to their historical experiences with the politicization of sports and a long tradition of community-focused sports programs. Additionally, Hungarian stakeholders prioritize community building and national image, reflecting their historical emphasis on sports as a form of cultural diplomacy and a means of promoting national unity. Conversely, Iranian stakeholders place a high value on diplomatic relations and ethical considerations, reflecting the strategic use of sports for international diplomacy and the challenges associated with maintaining ethical standards amid commercialization. Iranian stakeholders also highlight the importance of medal wins and media influence, demonstrating their strategic use of sport to deescalate political tensions and enhance their international image.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis collectively provides a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between sports, politics, and diplomacy, offering insights into both global and country-specific contexts.

The Theory of Change and MESSI framework were used to explore the expected societal and political outcomes of Olympic success, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach. The thesis sheds light on stakeholders' perspectives, introduces new political dimensions, and highlights potential societal benefits, such as enhanced social equality. Integrating the Theory of Change into the MESSI framework enhances my understanding of causal pathways and informs evidence-based policy and practice in elite sports.

Additionally, this thesis also focused on the transformation of sports brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring, and describing the challenges and opportunities in the field. In line with the famous words of Albert Einstein, amidst multiple difficulties for the sports industry, the pandemic opened up and revealed new opportunities and perspectives. The literature review and empirical data set show that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on sports and the sports industry, affecting all aspects, levels, and stakeholders; it has been an extraordinary period. The pandemic's impact on sports was found to be multi-tiered, like layers in a cake (Figure 1). Furthermore, two key dimensions of transformation including sports social aspects and modifications (time re-framing and policy changes) were identified and explained. For all participants in this thesis, this period seemed complicated, difficult, and challenging. However, most recognized the opportunities brought about by the pandemic and viewed COVID-19 global problems in a bright, constructive, and positive. The pandemic negatively impacted most sports activities at all levels, from individual to global (Figure 1); on the other hand, it opened up new positive perspectives. For example, it provided the opportunity to stream sports activities online and focus more on social media-based communication. The new reality of the pandemic necessitates new rules for sports at all levels, from amateur to elite, affecting many stakeholder groups. The findings of this thesis have implications for understanding how COVID-19 led to the transformation of sports in different aspects. Moreover, they provide insights for adapting to an unanticipated situation. This thesis adds to the growing body of research on the positive and negative impacts of COVID-19

on sports and the transformation of sports. Taken together, the results suggest that sports policymakers should consider the different levels and dimensions affected by the pandemic.

Furthermore, this thesis focuses on Iranian sports officials and managers, revealing their perception of the link between elite sporting success and international prestige. The findings emphasize how policy makers perceive the role of sports in shaping a country's image and its diplomatic relations. The thesis underscores the significance of fairness, positive media coverage, and proper behaviour in influencing international prestige, while also addressing challenges such as athletes seeking asylum. It positions sports diplomacy as a potential tool, drawing parallels with historical examples like 'ping-pong diplomacy' to establish relations between countries.

Lastly, this thesis delves into football diplomacy, highlighting the challenges in resolving complex political issues through lengthy decision-making processes involving diverse stakeholders. It emphasizes the overdependence of football on government and structural problems, necessitating cooperation between authorities and administrators. The thesis proposes public diplomacy, including sports diplomacy, as a potential solution to the Saudi–Iranian problem, drawing on historical examples to advocate for dialogue between elites and politicians.

Collectively, this thesis contributes to a broader understanding of the multifaceted role of sports in shaping societal, political, and diplomatic outcomes at both global and national levels. It offers insights for stakeholders, policymakers, and sports officials to inform decision-making, promote positive images, and foster diplomatic relations through sports.

7.1 New results

In summary, this thesis collectively contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how Olympic success is tied to broader national objectives, the intersection of sport with political and societal issues, and the implications of such success in the current global context, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Societal and political outcomes through stakeholders' perspectives: to address the first three research goals, Theory of Change and MESSI framework employed to explore the expected societal and political outcomes of Olympic

success from the viewpoint of sports stakeholders. It introduces new insights into factors contributing to political and societal outcomes, emphasizing the complexity of the relationship between sports and politics. The results highlight the importance of addressing environmental concerns and human rights within the context of elite sports.

2. COVID-19 sport transformation: New challenges and new opportunities in elite sport from different stakeholders' perspectives: to address the fourth objective, I have aimed to identify, describe, and visualize the process of sport transformation as radical internal and external industry changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings have implications for the understanding of how COVID-19 as one of the recent global contexts gave rise to the transformation of sports in different aspects, especially performance. Also, my results add to the growing body of research on the positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 on sports.

3. Sports stakeholders' perception of elite sporting success and international prestige: to address the fifth and sixth goals, I have focused on Iranian sports stakeholders, providing insights into their perceptions of the link between elite sporting success and international prestige. The findings underscore the belief that sports are integral to a country's policy, especially when diplomatic relations are strained. The study reveals that international sporting achievements, fair play, and positive media coverage can enhance a nation's image. Notably, the study emphasizes the role of sports as a soft power tool and suggests that addressing issues like athletes seeking asylum is crucial for maintaining a positive international image.

4. Football diplomacy and public diplomacy to resolve political issues: The address the seventh objective, I have explored football diplomacy and public diplomacy as potential tools to address political issues, specifically focusing on the Saudi–Iranian relationship. The findings suggest that resolving soccer diplomacy issues involves complex decision-making processes and requires collaboration among diverse stakeholders. The results of my investigation recommend public diplomacy, including sports diplomacy, as a strategy to break

political blockades and foster communication between nations, drawing parallels with historical examples like 'ping-pong diplomacy' between China and the United States.

Together, this dissertation offers insight into the multifaceted relationship between sports, politics, and diplomacy. They highlight the intricate interplay of factors and the potential of sports as a tool for positive societal and political outcomes, as well as for international relations and diplomacy.

7.2 Limitations

This thesis has several limitations that need to be considered. The key limitation is the absence of perspectives from the general population, which could lead to results that reflect socially desirable views emphasizing the benefits of Olympic success and advocating for the use of research findings in planning and decision-making processes. As a result of this limitation, different perspectives must be considered in order to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding. It is possible that the findings, which are largely based on the opinions of sports stakeholders, are not applicable to other contexts or populations, raising concerns regarding potential biases in the findings.

In addition to the limitations, this thesis primarily focuses on Hungarian and Iranian sports stakeholders, which could further limit its generalizability. As a result of their unique cultural, political, and economic contexts, these countries may be unable to fully capture the global dynamics of sports. Additionally, the study may not have adequately captured the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic due to its ongoing nature. In the future, further research may reveal more extensive or different effects as the situation continues to evolve. Additionally, the possibility for bias in responses, particularly in qualitative interviews involving stakeholders with vested interests, poses a challenge to the objectivity of the analysis. Some findings may become less relevant over time as the landscape of international sports and diplomacy rapidly changes. Research in these fields should continue in order to stay abreast of their evolving nature and to consider broader population perspectives in future studies, since they represent a key component of society when addressing research questions.

7.3 Suggestions and practical implications

7.3.1 Practical implications

- The findings of this thesis can serve as a guide for policymakers in developing strategic investments in sports infrastructure and programs. In light of the multifaceted impact of sports on societal and political dynamics, governments can allocate resources more efficiently by emphasizing areas such as elite sports development and hosting international sports events. For example, targeted investments in training facilities, coaching, and athlete development programs can contribute to sustained success at international competitions. Upgrading existing infrastructure and building new, multipurpose venues that meet international standards can enhance our ability to host events, stimulate the local economy, and create jobs.

- A framework for sports diplomacy is presented in the thesis, providing guidelines for leveraging sports as a tool in international relations. Countries can utilize sports events and athletes' successes to enhance their international prestige, improve diplomatic relations, and promote their national interests. Sports events can provide a neutral ground for diplomatic engagement, facilitating diplomatic dialogues and cultural exchanges. By using international sporting events to promote national culture, values, and achievements through cultural exhibitions and tourism promotion, countries can enhance their image abroad. Developing programs that enable athletes to serve as ambassadors for their countries can maximize their impact as representatives on the international stage. To ensure the effectiveness of sports diplomacy initiatives, long-term strategies that align with foreign policy objectives should be implemented, along with regular assessments of their impact.

- In sports, the emphasis on social equality and inclusion can have a significant impact on organizational practices. Sport's governing bodies can implement policies and programs that promote diversity, gender equality, and inclusion at all levels of sport.

- A study that examines COVID-19's impact on sports can provide insight into how to adapt to future crises. Despite unforeseen challenges, sports organizations can develop contingency plans and innovative strategies, such as digitalization.
- Athletes are recognized as key influencers in sports, and this research suggests that athletes should play a more active role in formulating sports policies. Sports organizations can provide athletes with opportunities to participate in policy discussions and engage in community and social activities.

7.4 Checking the hypotheses

H1: Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders perceive Olympic success as a crucial mechanism for achieving political and societal goals, such as bolstering national pride, enhancing international reputation, and increasing diplomatic influence.

The results of the thesis clearly indicate that H1 is fulfilled. Both Hungary and Iran perceive Olympic success as important for achieving political and societal goals. This is supported by multiple statements emphasizing the increased national pride, international prestige, and diplomatic influence resulting from Olympic success.

H2: Specific political and societal factors, including national identity reinforcement, international diplomatic relations, and internal political stability, are significantly influenced by the outcomes of Olympic success.

The results indicate that H2 is partially verified. Olympic success does influence national identity as well as international diplomatic relations. On the other hand, the evidence regarding internal political stability is less clear. It is stressed that the country has enhanced its international reputation as well as its national pride, but internal political stability is not prominently mentioned.

H3: The extent and manner in which political and societal factors influence the outcomes of Olympic success are substantial, directly affecting national unity, international perception, and policy-making processes.

The results indicate that H3 is partially verified. A substantial impact on national unity and international perceptions. In spite of this, there is limited direct evidence that this influence is having on policy-making processes. In addition to the impact on national

unity and international perception, there is also evidence of the link to policymaking, but this needs to be more explicitly emphasized.

H4: The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the political and social dynamics of sports, especially international competitions, by reshaping priorities towards health and safety and affecting global sports diplomacy.

The results demonstrated H4 is fulfilled. The COVID-19 had led to significant changes in sports, including the rescheduling of events, the increased use of digital communication tools, and altered social dynamics. Clearly, the pandemic had shifted priorities and affected sports diplomacy for a few years by limiting international travel, postponing or canceling major sports events that serve as diplomatic platforms, and reducing face-to-face interactions between sports officials and athletes from different countries.

H5: The effectiveness of sports policies and their international reception are directly impacted by Olympic success or failure, with these outcomes shaping Iranian stakeholders' perceptions of national prestige and sports diplomacy effectiveness.

It has been shown that H5 is partially verified. The success of the Olympics in Iran significantly impacts stakeholders' perceptions of national prestige and sports diplomacy. However, the direct impact on the effectiveness of sports policies is not adequately discussed. Clearly, perceptions are influenced, but more specific evidence of policy effectiveness is needed.

H6: Nations face complex political challenges in utilizing popular sports as a platform for international influence and diplomacy, including balancing national interests with global sportsmanship norms and managing international political relations.

It is partially verified that the results acknowledge challenges such as managing international relations and balancing interests, but the complexity of these challenges has not been fully explored. References are made to international relations and political dimensions, but the complexities of these issues need to be clarified in more detail.

8. Summary

This thesis examined the complex relationship between sports, politics, and diplomacy, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It investigated the impact of sports on political and social aspects, the effects of the pandemic on sports, and the ways in which sports could be used as diplomatic tools.

The thesis included a thorough review of existing literature on theories of change, MESSI frameworks, sports diplomacy, and the impact of COVID-19. It also explored previous research concerning the societal and political outcomes of Olympic success and the role of sports in international relations.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was used in this thesis. The qualitative methods included the Grounded Theory approach, qualitative written interviews, interpretivist qualitative research, content analysis, and the Delphi method. The quantitative methods involved questionnaires, statistical analysis, and the classification of games. The research focused primarily on Hungarian and Iranian sports stakeholders, including athletes, policymakers, and sports administrators affected by the pandemic and involved in sports policy and diplomacy. The analysis process was multi-stage, utilizing NVIVO software, Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis, and the Delphi method.

The thesis presented its findings in a multi-layered approach. It identified and described the expected political and social outcomes derived from Olympic success, which included both athlete achievements and country representation at the Olympic Games from stakeholders' perspectives. It illustrated how COVID-19 impacted sport, how sports were perceived as a diplomatic tool, and how they related to international prestige. The study highlighted the need for increased funding for elite sports and the development of new sports infrastructure to enhance a country's international image and prestige. Societal impacts were centred on social equality and inclusion, with success in international sports affecting societal and political outcomes.

Additionally, the thesis emphasized the importance of government investments in sports and discussed the mixed effects of hosting mega sports events. It underscored the role of athletes as key influencers in the political and social spheres. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports was also analysed, highlighting challenges, innovations, and the

need to re-evaluate sports models and practices. Furthermore, the thesis examined themes of elite sports success, prestige, and policy successes and failures, as well as their importance in shaping diplomatic relations and media coverage. Sports were shown to play a crucial role in public mobilization, economic development, media propaganda, and influencing international relations and community culture in a broad sense.

Összefoglaló

Jelen dolgozat a sport, a politika és a diplomácia összetett kapcsolatát vizsgálta, különös tekintettel a COVID-19 világjárványra. Tanulmányozta a sport politikára és társadalomra gyakorolt, valamint a világjárvány sportra gyakorolt hatását, továbbá a sport diplomáciai eszközként való felhasználásának lehetőségeit.

A szakdolgozat betekintést adott a változáselméletekkel, a MESSI keretrendszerekkel, a sportdiplomáciával és a COVID-19 hatásával kapcsolatos szakirodalomba. Emellett bemutatta az olimpiai sikerek társadalmi és politikai hatásaival, és a sport nemzetközi kapcsolatokban betöltött szerepével kapcsolatos korábbi kutatásokat is. A dolgozat a kvalitatív és kvantitatív kutatási módszerek kombinációjára épült. A kvalitatív módszerek között a Grounded Theory megközelítés, a kvalitatív írásbeli interjúk, értelmező kvalitatív kutatás, tartalomelemzés és a Delphi-módszer jelent meg. A kvantitatív módszerek közé tartoztak a kérdőívek, a statisztikai elemzés és a mérkőzések osztályozása. A kutatás elsősorban a magyar és iráni sportszereplőkre, köztük a járvány által sújtott és a sportpolitikában, sportdiplomáciában érintett sportolókra, politikai döntéshozókra és sportigazgatókra összpontosított. A többlépcsős elemzési folyamat az NVIVO szoftver, Braun és Clarke hat fázisú tematikus elemzése és a Delphi-módszer alkalmazásával zajlott.

A szakdolgozat többrétegű megközelítésben mutatta be megállapításait. Azonosította és az érintettek szemszögéből írta le a – mind a sportolók eredményeit, mind az országok olimpiai játékokon való képviseletét magukba foglaló – olimpiai sikerektől várható politikai és társadalmi hatásokat. Bemutatta a COVID-19 járvány sportra gyakorolt hatását, továbbá a sportot, mint diplomáciai eszközt és annak kapcsolódását a nemzetközi elismertséghez. A tanulmány rávilágított arra, hogy az ország nemzetközi megítélésének és presztízsének javítása érdekében növelni kell az élsport finanszírozását és új sportinfrastruktúrát kell kialakítani. A feltárt társadalmi hatások középpontjában a társadalmi egyenlőség és befogadás állt, a nemzetközi sportban elért sikerek pedig hatással voltak a társadalmi és politikai eredményekre. A dolgozat emellett hangsúlyozta a kormányzati sportberuházások fontosságát, és megvitatta a nagyszabású sportesemények megrendezésének vegyes hatásait. Hangsúlyozta a sportolóknak a politikai és társadalmi szférában betöltött kulcsfontosságú befolyásoló szerepét. A COVID- 19 világjárvány sportra gyakorolt hatását is elemezte, kiemelve a kihívásokat,

az újításokat és a sportmodellek és -gyakorlatok újraértékelésének szükségességét. A dolgozat körüljárta továbbá az élsport sikereinek, presztízsének, valamint a politikai sikereknek és kudarcoknak a témakörét, csakúgy, mint ezek jelentőségét a diplomáciai kapcsolatok és a médiamegjelenése alakításában. Megmutatkozott, hogy a sport döntő szerepet játszik a közvélemény mozgósításában, a gazdasági fejlődésben, a médiapropagandában, valamint a nemzetközi kapcsolatok és a tágabb értelemben vett közösségi kultúra befolyásolásában.

9.References

1. Alam MM and Abdurraheem, II. (2021) COVID-19 and the financial crisis in the sports sector around the world. Sport in Society, 1-14.

2. Ammar A, Mueller P, Trabelsi K, Chtourou H, Boukhris O, Masmoudi L, Bouaziz B, Brach M, Schmicker M and Bentlage E. (2020) Psychological consequences of COVID-19 home confinement: The ECLB-COVID19 multicenter study. PloS one, 15(11), e0240204.

3. Andersen SS and Ronglan LT. (2012) Nordic elite sport: Same ambitions, different tracks: Copenhagen Business School Press DK.

4. Arning C. (2013) Soft power, ideology and symbolic manipulation in Summer Olympic Games opening ceremonies: a semiotic analysis. Social Semiotics, 23(4), 523-544.

5. Bagheri, Y., Shariati Feizabadi, M., and Nazarian, A. (2016) Interpretative structural modeling (ISM) of sport diplomacy components. Sport Management Journal, 8(5), 797-821.

6. Bairner, A. (2001) Sport, nationalism, and globalization: European and North American perspectives. Suny Press.

7. Bakhshi Chenari, A. R., Goodarzi, M., Sajjadi, S. N., and Jalali Farahani, M. (2019) Solutions for Empowering and Promoting Sport Diplomacy in Foreign Policy of Islamic Republic of Iran. Communication Management in Sport Media, 6(3), 15-22.

8. Bayer, L. (2017) Viktor Orbán looks to sport to boost Hungary's prestige. Politico. Retrieved December 10,2020, from https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-sport-hungary-prestige/Bita, D. and Pető, P. (2020, May 11). Felcsút töretlenül szívja fel a közpénzt, de már *(1) (PDF) Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352032336_Sport_as_a_tool_for_public_diplomacy_in_Hungary [accessed Jun 12 2024].

9. Bergsgard NA, Houlihan B, Rommetvedt H, Mangset P and Nødland SI. (2007) Sport policy: A comparative analysis of stability and change: Routledge.

10. Billings A. (2008). Olympic media: inside the biggest show on television. Routledge.

11. Bita, D. and Pető, P. (2020) Felcsút töretlenül szívja fel a közpénzt, de már Orbán másik kedvenc klubját is mil-liárdos összeggel gazdagítják a cégek (Felcsút keeps absorbing public money, but companies are already enrichingOrbán's other favorite club with billions). 24.hu. Retrieved December 2, 2020, from https://24.hu/sport/2020/05/11/tao-tamogatas-2020-felcsut-labdarugas-kezilabda-fehervar *(1) (PDF) Sport as a tool for* public diplomacy in Hungary. Available from:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352032336_Sport_as_a_tool_for_public_diplomacy_in_Hungary [accessed Jun 12 2024].

12. Black DR and Van der Westhuizen J. (2004) The allure of global games for 'semi-peripheral' polities and spaces: A research agenda. Third World Quarterly, 25(7), 1195-1214.

13. Boyatzis RE. (1998) Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development. sage.

14. Boykoff J. (2016) Power games: A political history of the Olympics. Verso Books.

15. Brannagan PM and Giulianotti R. (2015) Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals. Leisure Studies, 34(6), 703-719.

16. Braun V and Clarke V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology 3(2): 77–101.

17. Breuer C and Hallmann K. (2011) Die gesellschaftliche relevanz des spitzensports in deutschland. (The social relevance of elite sport in Germany.) Sportverl. Strauß.

18. Bromber K, Krawietz B and Joseph M. (2013) The United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain as a modern sports hub. Sport across Asia: Politics, cultures, and identities:189-211.

19. Brown LA and Cresciani M. (2017) Adaptable design in Olympic construction. International Journal of Building Pathology and Adaptation, 35(4), 397-416.

20. Bryant A. (2017). Grounded theory and grounded theorizing: Pragmatism in research practice. Oxford University Press.

21. Buhmann A and Ingenhoff D. (2015) The 4D Model of the country image: an integrative approach from the perspective of communication management. International Communication Gazette 77(1): 102–124.

22. Carter TF and Sugden J. (2012) The USA and Sporting Diplomacy: Comparing and Contrasting the Cases of Table Tennis with China and Baseball with Cuba in the 1970s. International Relations, 26(1), 101-121.

23. Cavana R, Delahaye B and Sekeran U. (2001) Applied business research: Qualitative and quantitative methods. John Wiley and Sons.

24. Cha VD. (2008) Beyond the final score: the politics of sport in Asia. Columbia University Press.

25. Chalip L. (2006) Towards Social Leverage of Sport Events. Journal of Sport and Tourism, 11(2), 109-127.

26. Chang TK. (1998) All countries not created equal to be news: world system and international communication. Communication Research 25(5): 528–563.

27. Charmaz K. (2000) Looking backward, moving forward: Expanding sociological horizons in the twenty-first century: 2000 presidential address to the pacific sociological association. Sociological Perspectives, 43(4), 529-547.

28. Chen H. (2012) Medals, media and myth of national images: how Chinese audiences thought of foreign countries during the Beijing Olympics. Public Relations Review 38(5): 755–764.

29. Clarke V and Braun V. (2014) Thematic analysis. In T Teo (ed.), Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology, 1947–1952. Springer New York.

30. Coakley J. (2017) Sports in society: issues and controversies. 12th Edition. McGraw-Hill Education.

31. Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research methods in education*. Routledge.

32. Corbin JM and Strauss A. (1990) Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. Qualitative sociology, 13(1), 3-21.

33. Creswell JW and Clark VP. (2011). Mixed methods research. Sage Publications.

34. Creswell JW and Poth CN. (2016) Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches. Sage publications.

35. Creswell JW. (2012) Educational research: planning. Conducting, and Evaluating, 260, 375-382.

36. Crompton JL, Lee S and Shuster TJ. (2001) A Guide for Undertaking Economic Impact Studies: The Springfest Example. Journal of Travel Research, 40(1), 79-87.

37. Cull NJ. (2008) Public diplomacy: Taxonomies and histories. The annals of the American academy of political and social science, 616(1), 31-54.

38. D'Agati P. (2013) The cold war and the 1984 Olympic Games: A Soviet-American surrogate war. Springer.

39. Davidson L and Skinner H. (2010) I spy with my little eye. Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 13(4), 441-459.

40. De Bosscher V, Bingham J and Shibli S. (2008) The global sporting arms race: An international comparative study on sports policy factors leading to international sporting success. Meyer and Meyer Verlag.

41. De Bosscher V, De Knop P and van Bottenburg M. (2007) Sports policy factors leading to international sporting success. VUBPress.

42. De Bosscher V, De Knop P, Van Bottenburg M, Shibli S and Bingham J. (2009) Explaining international sporting success: An international comparison of elite sport systems and policies in six countries. Sport Management Review, 12(3), 113-136.

43. De Bosscher V, Shibli S and De Rycke J. (2021) The societal impact of elite sport: positives and negatives: introduction to ESMQ special issue. European Sport Management Quarterly, 21(5), 625-635.

44. De Bosscher V, Shibli S and Weber AC. (2019) Is prioritisation of funding in elite sport effective? An analysis of the investment strategies in 16 countries. European Sport Management Quarterly, 19(2), 221-243.

45. De Bosscher V, Shibli S, Westerbeek H and Van Bottenburg M. (2015) Successful elite sport policies: an international comparison of the sports policy factors leading to international sporting success (SPLISS 2.0) in 15 nations: Meyer and Meyer Sport.

46. De Bosscher V, Sotiriadou P and Van Bottenburg M. (2013) Scrutinizing the sport pyramid metaphor: an examination of the relationship between elite success and mass participation in Flanders. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 5(3), 319-339.

47. De Bosscher V. (2007) Sports policy factors leading to international sporting success: VUBPress.

48. De Moragas M, Rivenburgh NK and Larson JF. (1995) Television in the Olympics (Vol. 13). James F. Larson.

49. De Rycke J and De Bosscher V. (2019) Mapping the potential societal impacts triggered by elite sport: a conceptual framework. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics 11(3): 485–502.

50. De Rycke J and De Bosscher V. (2019) Mapping the potential societal impacts triggered by elite sport: a conceptual framework. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 11(3), 485-502.

51. De Rycke J and De Bosscher V. (2021) The cure or the cause? Public opinions of elite sports' societal benefits and harms. Sport in Society, 24(7), 1070-1092.

52. De Rycke J, De Bosscher V, Funahashi H and Sotiriadou P. (2019) Public Perceptions of the Societal Impact of Elite Sport: Scale Development and Testing. Journal of Sport Management, 33(6), 560-571.

53. Denzin NK and Lincoln YS. (Eds.). (2011) The Sage handbook of qualitative research. Sage.

54. Deos A. (2014) Sport and relational public diplomacy: the case of New Zealand and Rugby World Cup 2011. Sport in Society 17 (9):1170-1186.

55. Djaballah M, Hautbois C and Desbordes M. (2015) Non-mega sporting events' social impacts: a sensemaking approach of local governments' perceptions and strategies. European Sport Management Quarterly, 15(1), 48-76.

56. Dörnyei Z and Griffee DT. (2010) Research methods in applied linguistics. TESOL Journal 1(1): 181–183.

57. Doupona Topič M. (2015) Assessing the sociology of sport: On sport and the challenges of post-socialist countries. International Review for the Sociology of Sport 50 (4-5):424-429.

58. Dove J, Gage A, Kriz P, Tabaddor RR and Owens BD. (2020) COVID-19 and review of current recommendations for return to athletic play. Rhode Island medical journal, 103(7), 15-20.

59. Drewes M, Daumann F and Follert F. (2021) Exploring the sports economic impact of COVID-19 on professional soccer. Soccer and Society, 22(1-2), 125-137.

60. Drewes M, Daumann, F and Follert F. (2020) Exploring the sports economic impact of COVID-19 on professional soccer. Soccer and Society, 22(1-2), 125-137.

61. Dubinsky Y and Dzikus, L. (2019) Israel's country image in the 2016 Olympic Games. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 15(3), 173-184.

62. Dubinsky Y. (2019) From soft power to sports diplomacy: a theoretical and conceptual discussion. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 15(3), 156-164.

63. e Castro, AS. (2013) South Africa's Engagement in Sports Diplomacy: The Successful Hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The Hague Journal of Diplomacy 8 (3-4):197-210.

64. Ekholm D, Dahlstedt M and Rönnbäck J. (2022) Problematizing the absent girl: sport as a means of emancipation and social inclusion. In The Potential of Community Sport for Social Inclusion (pp. 164-182). Routledge.

65. Emrich E, Pierdzioch C and Pitsch W. (2014) Die "Marke" Olympia und die besondere Bedeutung von Vertrauenskriterien-eine Geschichte von Markt, Macht und Moral. (The Olympia "Brand" and the special importance of trust criteria - A story of market, power and morality).

66. Fazeli H. (2012) Sport and Identity Politics. Research Letter of Political Science 7 (226).

67. Fekő, Á. (2020) Egyre több sportoló van a külügy körül, és egyre titokzatosabb, mit csinálnak (There aremore and more athletes around foreign affairs, and it is becoming increasingly mysterious what they are doing).Hvg.hu. Retrieved December 2, 2020, from https://hvg.hu/itthon/20201022_sportolok_kulugyminiszterium_szij-jarto_peter (PDF) Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary. Available from:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352032336_Sport_as_a_tool_for_publ ic_diplomacy_in_Hungary [accessed Jun 13 2024].

68. Fereday J and Muir-Cochrane E. (2006) Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. International Journal of Qualitative Methods 5(1): 80–92.

69. Fiteq.org. (2020) Interview with Gergely Murányi, head of diplomatic relations of FITEQ. Retrieved December4, 2020, from https://www.fiteq.org/news/79Fiteq.org. (2020b, November 10). FITEQ approv (1) (PDF) Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary. Available from:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352032336_Sport_as_a_tool_for _public_diplomacy_in_Hungary [accessed Jun 12 2024].

70. Flyvbjerg B. (2006) Five misunderstandings about case-study research. Qualitative inquiry 12(2): 219–245.

71. Foley M, McGillivray D and McPherson, G. (2012) Policy pragmatism: Qatar and the global events circuit. International Journal of Event and Festival Management, 3(1), 101-115.

72. Freeman K. (2012) Sport as swaggering: utilizing sport as soft power. Sport in Society 15(9) 1260-1274.

73. Frick B and Wicker P. (2016) The trickle-down effect: how elite sporting success affects amateur participation in German football. Applied Economics Letters, 23(4), 259-263.

74. Garamvölgyi, B., and Dóczi, T. (2021) Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary. Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research, 90(1), 39-49.

75. Gassmann F, Haut J and Emrich E. (2020) The effect of the 2014 and 2018 FIFA World Cup tournaments on German national pride. A natural experiment. Applied Economics Letters, 27(19), 1541-1545.

76. Gilboa E. (2008) Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616(1), 55-77.

77. Ginesta X and de San Eugenio J. (2014) The use of football as a country branding strategy. Case study: Qatar and the Catalan sports press. Communication and Sport 2(3): 225–241.

78. Giulianotti R and Robertson R. (2012) Globalization and Football: A Study in the Glocalization of the 'Serious Life'. The British Journal of Sociology, 63(2), 216-235.

79. Giulianotti R. (2011) Sport, Transnational Peacemaking, and Global Civil Society: Exploring the Reflective Discourses of 'Sport for Development and Peace' Organizations. Sociology of Sport Journal, 28(1), 50-71.

80. Glaser BG and Strauss AL. (2017) The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Routledge.

81. Glaser BG and Strauss, AL. (1967) The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research New York: Aldine Transaction.

82. Glebova E., Zare F, Desbordes M and Géczi G. (2022) COVID-19 Sport Transformation: New Challenges and New Opportunities. Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research, 95(1), 54-67.

83. Glebova E., Zare F, Desbordes M and Géczi G. (2023) 'If there is no football, then we have nothing to discuss': a phenomenological study on football fandom and COVID-19 pandemic. International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing, 23 (5), 373-390.

84. Green M and Houlihan B. (2005) Elite sport development: Policy learning and political priorities: Routledge.

85. Grigoryev LM. (2020) Global social drama of pandemic and recession. Population and Economics, 4, 18.

86. Grigaliunaite I and Eimontas E. (2018) Athletes' involvement in decision making for good governance in sport. Baltic journal of sport and health sciences, 3(110).

87. Grix J and Carmichael F. (2012) Why do governments invest in elite sport? A polemic. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 4(1), 73-90.

88. Grix J and Lee D. (2013) Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction. Global Society, 27(4), 521–536.

89. Grix J and Houlihan B. (2014) Sports mega-events as part of a nation's soft power strategy: The cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012). British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 16(4), 572-596.

90. Grix J and Brannagan PM. (2016) Of mechanisms and myths: conceptualising states' "soft power" strategies through sports mega-events. Diplomacy and Statecraft 27 (2):251-72.

91. Grix J, Brannagan PM, Grimes H and Neville R. (2021). The impact of Covid-19 on sport. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 13(1), 1-12.

92. Grix J. (2013) Sport politics and the Olympics. Political studies review 11 (1):15-25.

93. Guttmann A. (2002) The Olympics: A history of the modern games (Vol. 14). University of Illinois Press.

94. Hallmann K, Breuer C and Kühnreich B. (2013) Happiness, pride and elite sporting success: What population segments gain most from national athletic achievements? Sport Management Review 16(2): 226–235.

95. Harmon SHE. (2020) Gender inclusivity in sport? From value, to values, to actions, to equality for Canadian athletes. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 12(2), 255-268.

96. Hassanpourghadi, R., and Dousti, M. (2021) The Position of Sports Diplomacy in Iran's Foreign Policy after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Sport Management Journal, 13(2), 581-616.

97. Haut J, Gassmann F, Emrich E, Meyer T and Pierdzioch C. (2020) Heroes at Home, Suspects Abroad? National and International Perceptions of Elite-Sports Success. Sociology of Sport Journal, 37(2), 133-142.

98. Haut J, Grix J, Brannagan PM and Hilvoorde I. v. (2017) International prestige through 'sporting success': an evaluation of the evidence. European Journal for Sport and Society, 14(4), 311-326.

99. Haut J, Prohl R and Emrich E. (2016) Nothing but medals? Attitudes towards the importance of Olympic success. International Review for the Sociology of Sport 51(3): 332–348.

100. Hesse-Biber SHN and Patricia L. (2006) The practice of qualitative research. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

101. Hong SC and Oh KS. (2020) Determinants of sports coverage: newsworthiness in US media coverage of foreign athletes during the London 2012 Olympic Games. Journalism 21(7): 933–949.

102. Houlihan B and Green M. (2009) Modernization and sport: The reform of Sport England and UK Sport. Public administration, 87(3), 678-698.

103. Houlihan B and Zheng J. (2013) The Olympics and Elite Sport Policy: Where Will It All End? The International Journal of the History of Sport, 30(4), 338-355.

104. Hoye R, Paren, M M, Taks M, Naraine M L, Seguin B, and Thompson A. (2020). Design archetype utility for understanding and analyzing the governance of contemporary national sport organizations. Sport Management Review, 23(4), 576-587.

105. Hsieh HF and Shannon SE. (2005) Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. Qualitative Health Research 15(9): 1277–1288.

106. Hukil S. (2015) Is public diplomacy inherently a manifestation of 'soft power'? Glendon Journal of International Studies 8(1–2).

107. Humphreys BR, Johnson BK, Mason DS and Whitehead JC. (2018) Estimating the value of medal success in the Olympic Games. Journal of Sports Economics 19(3): 398–416.

108. IOC. (2021) IOC extends opportunities for athlete expression during the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-extends-opportunities-for-athlete-expression-during-the-olympic-games-tokyo-2020.

109. Joshi, A., Kale, S., Chandel, S., and Pal, D. K. (2015) Likert scale: Explored and explained. British journal of applied science and technology, 7(4), 396-403.

110. Kelle U. (2006) Combining qualitative and quantitative methods in research practice: purposes and advantages. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(4), 293-311.

111. Kenny MA. (2018) Athletes seek asylum at almost every games, as is their right. Retrieved from: https://theconversation.com/athletes-seek-asylum-at-almost-every-games-as-is-their-right-94986. [Accessed 13 April 2018].

112. Khodr H. (2012) Exploring the driving factors behind the event strategy in Qatar. International Journal of Event and Festival Management 3(1): 81–100.

113. Kihl LA, Skinner J and Engelberg T. (2017) Corruption in sport: understanding the complexity of corruption. European Sport Management Quarterly, 17(1), 1-5.

114. Kormany.hu. (2017) Sportügyi megállapodást írt alá Szabó Tünde Kubában (Tünde Szabó signed a sportsagreement in Cuba). Retrieved December 10, 2020,

from https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/emberi-eroforrasok-miniszteriuma/sportert-felelos-allamtitkarsag/hirek/sportugyi-megallapodast-irt-ala-szabo-tunde-kubaban (PDF) Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary. Available from:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352032336_Sport_as_a_tool_for_public_diplomacy_in_Hungary [accessed Jun 13 2024].

115. Kramareva, N., and Grix, J. (2018) 'War and Peace' at the 1980 Moscow and 2014 Sochi Olympics: The Role of Hard and Soft Power in Russian Identity. The International Journal of the History of Sport, 35(14), 1407–1427.

116. Krieger J and Wassong S. (2019) Dark Sides of Sport. Common Ground Research Networks.

117. Larson JF and Rivenburgh NK. (1991) A comparative analysis of Australian, US, and British telecasts of the Seoul Olympic opening ceremony. Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media 35(1): 75–94.

118. Lee JW and Bairner A. (2009) The Difficult Dialogue: Communism, Nationalism, and Political Propaganda in North Korean Sport. Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 33(4), 390-410.

119. Likert, R. (1932) A technique for the measurement of attitudes. Archives of psychology.

120. Liu D. (2020) Signaling soft power through medal success: China as an example. Sport in Society, 23(11), 1827-1840.

121. Lovin D, Căpățînă A and Cristache N. (2019) The management of romanian's elite sport and its public value. InProceedings of the International Management Conference 2019 (Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 350-356). Faculty of Management, Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania.

122. Luborsky MR and Rubinstein RL. (1995) Sampling in Qualitative Research: Rationale, Issues, and Methods. Research on aging, 17(1), 89–113.

123. Luša Đ. (2017) Olympic diplomacy and the emerging states: striving for influence in the multipolar world. Croatian International Relations Review 23(79): 73–102.

124. MacLean M. (2014) Revisiting (and Revising?) Sports Boycotts: From Rugby against South Africa to Soccer in Israel. The International Journal of the History of Sport, 31(15), 1832-1851.

125. Maguire J. (2011) Globalization, Sport and National Identities: The Empires Strike Back?. Sport in Society, 14(7-8), 907-920.

126. Malfas M, Theodoraki E and Houlihan B. (2004) Impacts of the Olympic Games as mega-events. InProceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers-Municipal Engineer 2004 Sep (Vol. 157, No. 3, pp. 209-220). Thomas Telford Ltd.

127. Masters A. (2015) Corruption in sport: From the playing field to the field of policy. Policy and Society, 34(2), 111-123.

128. Mauro M. (2017) Tackling racism and discrimination in grassroots sport: The case of football. In Sport and Contested Identities, 228-244. Routledge.

129. Merkel U. (2013) Flags, Feuds and Frictions: North Korea and the London 2012 Olympics. The International Journal of the History of Sport, 30(15), 1810-1822.

130. Metzger S and Özgür Ö. (2020) Games of Belonging: Football, Boundaries and Politics between Germany and Turkey. Nationalities Papers 48 (4):737-751.

131. Mohammadi Azizabadi M. (2017) The Position of Sport in Domestic and International Politics for Peace and Friendship. Journal of Politics 14: 113-123.

132. Mohsenifar A, Dousti M, Zare F and Géczi G. (2022). Study of Iran–Saudi Arabia Sports Relations. International Area Studies Review, 25(4), 338-353.

133. Monazzami, A., Shariati Feizabadi, M., and Ranjbar, S. (2023) Anti-Diplomacy of Football in the Middle East: The Geopolitical Challenge of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Communication Management in Sport Media, 10(4), 15-28.

134. Morgan, L. (2019) Olympic gold medallist and IOC member Gyurta takes political role following retire-ment from swimming. Insidethegames.biz. Retrieved December 2, 2020, from https://www.insidethegames.biz/artic-les/1075130/olympic-gold-medallist-and-ioc-member-gyurta-takes-political-role-following-retirement-from-swim-ming (PDF) Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352032336_Sport_as_a_tool_for_publ ic_diplomacy_in_Hungary [accessed Jun 13 2024].

135. Murray S and Pigman GA. (2014) Mapping the relationship between international sport and diplomacy. Sport in Society 17(9): 1098–1118.

136. Murray S. (2012) The Two Halves of Sports-Diplomacy. Diplomacy and Statecraft, 23(3), 576-592.

137. Murray S. (2018) Sports diplomacy: origins, theory and practice. Routledge.

138. BBC News. (2020) Kimia Alizadeh: Iran's only female Olympic medalist defects.

139. Noori D, Ghadim Bi and Shojaei M. (2018) Designing the Model of Iran's Football Diplomacy Based on Grounded Theory. Strategic Studies on Youth and Sports17(41).

140. NVivo. (2022) What is NVivo? https://www.qsrinternational.com/

141. Nye J. (2012) China's Soft Power Deficit To catch up, its politics must unleash the many talents of its civil society. The Wall Street Journal, 8.

142. Nye J. (2017) Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. Palgrave Communications, 3(1), 17008.

143. Nye JS. (2004) Soft power the means to success in world politics. Public Affairs.

144. Nye JS. (2008) Public diplomacy and soft power. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 616(1): 94–109.

145. Nygård HM and Gates S. (2013) Soft power at home and abroad: Sport diplomacy, politics and peace-building. International Area Studies Review, 16(3), 235-243.

146. Pace CR. (1979) Measuring Outcomes of College. Fifty Years of Findings and Recommendations for the Future.

147. Parent M M, Hoye R, Taks M, Thompson A, Naraine M L, Lachance E L, and Séguin B. (2023) National sport organization governance design archetypes for the twenty-first century. European sport management quarterly, 23(4), 1115-1135.

148. Parnell D, Bond AJ, Widdop P and Cockayne D. (2020) Football Worlds: Business and networks during COVID-19. Soccer and Society, 22(1-2),19.

149. Pawlowski T, Downward P and Rasciute S. (2014) Does national pride from international sporting success contribute to well-being? An international investigation. Sport Management Review 17(2): 121–132.

150. Pawson R. (2013) The science of evaluation: a realist manifesto. Sage.

151. Pegoraro A and Coates D. (2019) Sports mega-events: Rhetoric and reality. Thunderbird International Business Review, 61(1), 65-75.

152. Ratten, V. (2020) Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and sport entrepreneurship. International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 26(6), 1379-1388.

153. Read D, Skinner J, Lock D and Houlihan B. (2019) Legitimacy driven change at the World Anti-Doping Agency. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 11(2), 233-245.

154. Real MR. (1996) Exploring media culture: a guide (Volume 22). Sage Publications.

155. Reiche D. (2015) Investing in sporting success as a domestic and foreign policy tool: the case of Qatar. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics 7(4): 489–504.

156. Rein I and Shields B. (2007) Place branding sports: strategies for differentiating emerging, transitional, negatively viewed and newly industrialised nations. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy 3(1): 73–85.

157. Rich M. (2018) Olympics Open With Koreas Marching Together, Offering Hope for Peace. New York Times. February 9.

158. Roberts RE. (2020) Qualitative Interview questions: guidance for novice researchers. Qualitative Report 25(9).

159. Robinson OC. (2014) Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 11(1), 25-41.

160. Rofe JS and Dichter HL. (2016) Prologue: diplomacy and sport. Diplomacy and Statecraft 27(2): 207–211.

161. Ronkainen NJ, Ryba TV and Selänne H. (2019) She is where I'd want to be in my career: Youth athletes' role models and their implications for career and identity construction. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 45, 101562.

162. Schallhorn C and Beck C. (2017) Unsere Jungs bei der EM: Eine ländervergleichende Studie zur Fotoberichterstattung bei der Fußballeuropameisterschaft 2016. ("Our boys" at the EM: a country-comparative

study on photo reporting at the 2016 European football championship). Journal für Sportkommunikation und Mediensport 2(2): 138–150.

163. Schwandt TA. (2000) Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism. In Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 189-213). Sage Publishing.

164. Serrat O. (2017) Theories of change. In Knowledge Solutions (pp. 237-243). Springer.

165. Shahrezaei F and Shirzadi R (2019) Sport, politics and international relations. International Studies Journal 15(59): 185–220. https://www.isjq.ir/article_91345.html

166. Shariati Feizabadi, M., and Goudarzi, M. (2015). The Position of Sport Diplomacy in International Relation departments of Islamic Republic of Iran. Qualitative approach based on content analysis. *Journal of Political Science*, *11*(2), 95-127.

167. Stein D and Valters C. (2012) Understanding theory of change in international development.

168. Storm RK and Jakobsen T. G. (2020) National pride, sporting success and event hosting: an analysis of intangible effects related to major athletic tournaments. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 12(1), 163-178.

169. Stocker, M. (2018) A hazai rendezésű nemzetközi sportesemények hatásai (The effects of international sporting events organized in Hungary). Presentation at the Mihály Nyerges Conference. Retrieved December 10, 2020, from http://mstt.hu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Stocker_Nyerges-emlékkonferencia_MSTT_20180123.pdf

170. Strauss A and Corbin JM. (1990) Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Sage Publications, Inc.

171. Strauss A and Corbin JM. (1998) Basics of qualitative research techniques. Sage Publications, Inc.

172. Szondi G. (2008) Public diplomacy and nation branding: conceptual similarities and differences. JSTOR.

173. Taks M, Chalip L and Green BC. (2015) Impacts and strategic outcomes from non-mega sport events for local communities. European Sport Management Quarterly, 15(1), 1-6.

174. Tamir I. (2022) There's No Sport Without Spectators - Viewing Football Games Without Spectators During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Front Psychol, 13, 860747.

175. Tharenou P, Donohue R and Cooper B. (2007) Management research methods. Cambridge University Press.

176. Tomlinson A. (2014) FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association): The men, the myths and the money. Routledge.

177. Topič MD and Coakley J. (2010) Complicating the Relationship Between Sport and National Identity: The Case of Post-Socialist Slovenia. Sociology of Sport Journal, 27(4), 371-389.

178. Towler CC, Crawford NN and Bennett RA. (2020) Shut Up and Play: Black Athletes, Protest Politics, and Black Political Action. Perspectives on Politics, 18(1), 111-127.

179. UNESCO. (2016) The Power of sport values https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245433

180. Valenti M, Scelles N and Morrow S. (2020) Elite sport policies and international sporting success: a panel data analysis of European women's national football team performance. European Sport Management Quarterly, 20(3), 300-320.

181. Van Bottenburg M. (2013) Managing Social Issues. In 'Passion alone is no longer enough': the reframing of elite sport from a private trouble to a public issue. Edward Elgar Publishing.

182. Vass, Á. (2018) Hungarian banking magnate Sándor Csányi to become vice president of FIFA. Hunga-rytoday.hu. Retrieved December 10, 2020, from https://hungarytoday.hu/sandor-csanyi-become-vice-president-fifa-62260/ (1) (PDF) Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352032336_Sport_as_a_tool_for_public_diplomacy_in_Hungary [accessed Jun 12 2024].

183. Vass, Á. (2019) International Judo Federation moves HQ to Budapest. Hungarytoday.hu. Retrieved December 12, 2020, from https://hungarytoday.hu/international-judo-federation-ijf-moves-hq-budapest.

184. Vitouladiti O. (2014) Content Analysis as a Research Tool for Marketing, Management and Development Strategies in Tourism. Procedia Economics and Finance, 9, 278-287. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(14)00029-X.

185. Vogel I. (2012) Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development. London: DFID.

186. Weiss CH. (1997) Theory-based evaluation: past, present, and future. New directions for evaluation, 76, 41-55.

187. Wicker P, Prinz J and Von Hanau T. (2012) Estimating the value of national sporting success. Sport Management Review, 15(2), 200-210.

188. Woods M, Macklin R and Lewis GK. (2016). Researcher reflexivity: exploring the impacts of CAQDAS use. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 19(4), 385-403.

189. Woodward R. (2020) Sport and UK soft power: The case of Mount Everest. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 22(2), 274-292.

190. Zare F and Géczi G. (2022a) The International Prestige of Non-Hosting Olympic Nations 2022 EASS and ISSA World Congress of Sociology of Sport, Tübingen, Germany https://issaeass2022.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/eass-ISSA-2022-Congress-Abstract-Book-2022.05.26.pdf.

191. Zare F and Géczi G. (2022b) Perceived Effects of Olympic Success on International Policies and Prestige: A Case Study of Sports Actors from Iran. The Athens Journal of Sports, 231.

192. Zargar A. (2015) Sport and international relations: conceptual and theoretical aspects. Political Science Quarterly 11(31): 48–47.

10.List of publications related to the topic of the thesis

1. Zare F and Géczi G. (2024) The influence of Olympic triumph: exploring societal and political outcomes through sports stakeholder views. Sport in Society, 1-28.

2. Glebova E, Zare F, Desbordes M and Géczi G. (2023) 'If there is no football, then we have nothing to discuss': a phenomenological study on football fandom and COVID-19 pandemic. International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing, 23(5), 373-390.

3. Glebova E, Zare F, Desbordes M and Géczi, G. (2022) COVID-19 sport transformation: New challenges and new opportunities. Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research, 95(1), 54-67.

4. Mohsenifar A, Dousti M, Zare F and Géczi G. (2022) Study of Iran–Saudi Arabia Sports Relations. International Area Studies Review, 25(4), 338-353.

Other publications

1. Glebova E, and Zare F. (2023) Career paths in sport management: trends, typology, and trajectories. Journal of Physical Education and Sport, 23(2), 463-468.

2. Zare F and Géczi G. (2022) Perceived Effects of Olympic Success on International Policies and Prestige: A Case Study of Sports Actors from Iran. The Athens Journal of Sports, 231.

3. Glebova E, Zare F, Book R, Desbordes M and Géczi G. (2023) Sport tourism in times of the VUCA world. In Routledge Handbook of Trends and Issues in Global Tourism Supply and Demand (pp. 459-468). Routledge.

4. Motahari Nezhad H, Zare F, Akbari H and Sadeghdaghighi A. (2022) Health outcomes of Fitbit, Garmin or Apple Watch-based interventions. Baltic Journal Of Health And Physical Activity, 14(4).

5. Sarlab R, Darooghe Arefi N, Seidler M and Zare F. (2024) The Role of the Authenticity of Iranian Brands on the Emotional Attachment of Sports Goods Consumers, with Customer Bias as a Mediator. Sports Business Journal, 4(1).

11.Acknowledgments

My journey to finish this PhD thesis has been an important one, and I am extremely grateful to all the people who have supported and encouraged me along the way.

First and foremost, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Gábor Géczi. His expertise, patience, open-mindedness, and guidance have been invaluable throughout this research. Your insightful feedback and unwavering support have been fundamental to my academic growth.

I am also thankful to my opponents, Dr. Dóczi Tamás and Dr. Bácsné Dr. Bába Éva, for their valuable suggestions and constructive critiques. Your input has greatly enriched my work.

Additionally, I appreciate the Hungarian University of Sports Science, School of Doctoral Studies, for offering an excellent environment for academic growth.

I would like to extend my appreciation to my colleagues and peers in the different publications for their camaraderie and intellectual exchange.

To my boyfriend and friends, thank you for your encouragement and for always being there to lend an ear.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my family. To my parents, your unconditional love and support have been my anchor. To my mother, Parvin Keshavarz, and my father, Golamreza Zare, and my brother Ramin Zare thank you for your patience, understanding, and constant encouragement.

This thesis is dedicated to all of you. Your contributions have been instrumental in completing this work, and for that, I am profoundly thankful.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview questions for the first three thesis questions

The following are written interview questions.

1. What societal changes do you want to see as a result of elite sporting success in your country?

2. What political changes would you expect to occur as a result of elite sporting success
   at the international level?

3. Under what circumstances do you think more positive societal and political change is likely to occur?

4. How do you think activities (elite sport policies) can lead to social and political changes at the national and international levels? Could you please explain?

5. How do you think COVID-19 impacts the political and societal changes you expect to occur? (e.g., by comparing Tokyo 2020 to the previous Games).

Appendix B : Interview questions for the fourth thesis question

The following questions are written interviews questions.

1. What types of changes has the pandemic brought to sport in your own professional experience? What is completely new in the sport industry due to COVID-19?

2. The pandemic is temporary, but are there any fundamental effects of COVID-19 on sports that will remain after it is over?

3. What opportunities does the pandemic provide for sport management? Are there are any positive points at the intersection of COVID-19 and sport?

4. How has COVID-19 affected the sport industry and physical culture globally?

5. Have the COVID-19 extraordinary circumstances brought about any kind of transformation?

Appendix C

The following are semi-structured interview questions for the fifth and sixth thesis questions.

1. Do you think participating in the Olympic Games affects a country's prestige, if yes, then how?
2. In what ways do you believe that success in Olympic Games impacts a country's international image?
3. What do you do to show a good country's international reputation?
4. How important do you think ethical behaviour and fairness in sports are to a country's international reputation?
5. What role do you think media coverage plays in shaping the international perception of a country's sports achievements?
6. How do you think Olympic Games influence diplomatic relations between countries? Can you share any specific examples?
7. What do you do to increase diplomatic relations with other countries through sport?

Appendix D

The following are the questionnaire and information regarding the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia in different Asian Championship Leagues during the period of 2016-2020.

Factors	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Saudi fear of exporting the Islamic Revolution to other Muslim countries	□	□	□	□	□
Massacre of pilgrims in Mecca in 1988	□	□	□	□	□
Iran's support for the Arab Spring or Islamic Awakening in Arab countries	□	□	□	□	□

Oil sanctions on Iran by Western countries and Saudi support	□	□	□	□	□
Assault on two Iranian youths at Jeddah airport	□	□	□	□	□
Mina incident	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi Arabia's interaction with Iran in returning bodies from the Mina incident	□	□	□	□	□
Execution of Sheikh Nimr, a Saudi cleric, which Iran was highly sensitive about	□	□	□	□	□
Attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and Mashhad	□	□	□	□	□
Lowering oil prices by increasing production by Saudi Arabia to damage Iran's economy	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi efforts to thwart Iran's nuclear negotiations with the P5+1	□	□	□	□	□
Diplomatic break between Saudi Arabia and Iran	□	□	□	□	□
No hosting of AFC Champions League matches in both countries	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi Arabia at the forefront of countries supporting Iraq in the eight-year war with Iran	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi Arabia, emphasizing its role as the cradle of Arabism and Islam and the land of revelation, tries to link the two concepts of Islam and Arabism	□	□	□	□	□
Formation of the Arab League in 1945 without Iran's presence	□	□	□	□	□
With the presence of the two holy mosques in Saudi Arabia and its spiritual center in the Islamic world, this country always considers itself deserving of leading the Islamic world	□	□	□	□	□
Iran's foreign policy in defending the rights of all Muslims and the liberation movement and aggression with Israel and the West	□	□	□	□	□

Iran's foreign policy in establishing an Islamic society based on Shia principles	□	□	□	□	□
Geopolitical position and special status of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East	□	□	□	□	□
Iran's conflict with the US and Israel and Saudi support for these two countries	□	□	□	□	□
The existence of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, which essentially considers the Shia sect as infidels and rejectionists	□	□	□	□	□
Expansion of destructive activities among Iranian ethnic groups, especially Sunnis, and creating ethnic-religious conflicts in Iran by Saudi Arabia	□	□	□	□	□
Changing the name of the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Gulf in Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi support for ISIS and Al-Nusra	□	□	□	□	□
Attack on Yemen by Saudi Arabia and its allies, including (Egypt, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan), leading to war between Yemen and Saudi Arabia	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi Arabia abandoning the Muslim Brotherhood coalition to form an anti-Iranian alliance	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi Arabia viewed any nuclear agreement between Iran and the West as contrary to its interests and saw it as part of a development that could lead to Iran's rise and expansion in the region	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi support for launching Persian-language radio and TV networks opposing Iran, including (Iran International)	□	□	□	□	□
Migration of several reporters and sports elites to Persian-language radio and TV	□	□	□	□	□

networks, including (Iran International)	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi support for separatist and terrorist attacks in Iran, including the massacre in Ahvaz on September 22, 2018, in an ISIS attack on the armed forces parade	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi security services behind the suicide attack on a police station in Chabahar in 2018	□	□	□	□	□
Assassination of General Qasem Soleimani by US forces supported by Saudi Arabia	□	□	□	□	□
Iran's support for Shia Houthi forces in Yemen	□	□	□	□	□
Murder of Jamal Khashoggi by the Saudi embassy in Iraq	□	□	□	□	□
Preventing Iranian pilgrims from traveling to Hajj by Saudi Arabia in 2016	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi-Israel support and several Kurdish-Arab and Baluch groups to fight against Iran and Iraq in 2016	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi support for the Jaish al-Adl group in Baluchistan	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi and Al-Arabiya network support for the Democratic Party and Komala in Kurdistan	□	□	□	□	□
Terrorist attack by Saudi supporters on the Iranian Parliament	□	□	□	□	□
Terrorist attack by Saudi supporters on Imam Khomeini's shrine	□	□	□	□	□
Formation of a political and military coalition against the Islamic Republic of Iran and the resistance axis by Saudi Arabia	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi cooperation with Israel to damage the resistance axis	□	□	□	□	□
Formation of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation coalition by Saudi Arabia and 41 other countries without Iran	□	□	□	□	□
Holding illegitimate meetings of Arab-Islamic organizations to	□	□	□	□	□

threaten Iran and criticize the Islamic Republic of Iran, including (Tripartite Cooperation Gulf Meetings, Arab League Meetings, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation Meetings) in May 2019 in Saudi Arabia					
Diplomatic break between Bahrain, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, and Comoros with Iran during the attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi efforts to reduce the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz	□	□	□	□	□
Suppression and execution of Saudi Shias by this country	□	□	□	□	□
Establishment of Arab-Western NATO to counter the Iranian coalition	□	□	□	□	□
Destruction of historical centers in Qatif, where Shias lived, and building mosques for Sunnis in these locations	□	□	□	□	□
Non-recognition of Shia Islam by the Al Saud government	□	□	□	□	□
Saudi Arabia's welcome and support for the US government's action in listing the IRGC as a terrorist organization in 2019	□	□	□	□	□
Attack by Tehran protesters on the Saudi embassy in 1987 in Tehran, resulting in the death of a Saudi diplomat	□	□	□	□	□
No issuance of visas for pilgrims and returning some Hajj flights to Iran by Saudi Arabia in 2015	□	□	□	□	□

The Asian Champions League 2016 shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral ground.

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia - Tractor Iran	19 April 2016	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Tractor Iran - Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	1 May 2016	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia - Sepahan Iran	20 April 2016	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Sepahan Iran - Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia	4 May 2016	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia - Zobahan Iran	4 May 2016	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Zobahan Iran - Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia	20 April 2016	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman

The Asian Champions League 2017 shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral ground.

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Esteghlal Iran - Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia	27 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia - Esteghlal Iran	9 May 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran - Al Fateh Saudi Arabia	20 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Fateh Saudi Arabia - Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran	25 April 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Zobahan Iran - Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	28 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia - Zobahan Iran	8 May 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Persepolis Iran - Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	21 February 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia - Persepolis Iran	24 April 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium

Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran - Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	23 May 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia - Esteghlal Khuzestan Iran	31 May 2017	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Persepolis Iran - Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	22 August 2017	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia - Persepolis Iran	12 September 2017	Abu Dhabi's Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia - Persepolis Iran	26 September 2017	Abu Dhabi's Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium
Persepolis Iran - Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	17 October 2017	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman

The Asian Champions League 2018 shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral ground.

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
tractor Iran- Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	12 February 2018	Sultan Qaboos Muscat Stadium in Oman
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia- tractor Iran	3 April 2018	Emirates Stadium Al Ain
Esteghlal Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	20 February 2018	Oseib Stadium Oman
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia- Esteghlal Iran	16 April 2018	Kuwait Stadium

The Asian Champions League 2019 shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral ground.

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Zobahan Iran-Al Nasr Saudi Arabia	29 May 2019	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Al Nasr Saudi Arabia- Zobahan Iran	11 March 2019	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Esteghlal Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	8 April 2019	Qatar's Hamad Bin Khalifa Stadium
Al Hilal Saudi Arabia- Esteghlal Iran	23 April 2019	Emirates Stadium Mohammed bin Zayed
Persepolis Iran-Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	9 April 2019	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia- Persepolis Iran	22 April 2019	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia- Zobahan Iran	26 July 2019	Zubail Dubai Stadium

Zobahan Iran- Al-Atihad Saudi Arabia	12 August 2019	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium

The Asian Champions League 2020 shows the football teams of Iran and Saudi Arabia played in neutral ground.

Club name	Date held	Stadium venue
Esteghlal Iran -Al Ahly Saudi Arabia	5 May 2020	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Al Ahly Saudi Arabia- Esteghlal Iran	17 February 2020	Jabr al-Ahmad Stadium Kuwait
Shahr Khodrou Iran- Al Hilal Saudi Arabia	21 April 2020	Al Rashid Stadium Dubai
Persepolis Iran - Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia	30 September 2020	Qatar's Jassim bin Hamad Stadium
Persepolis Iran -Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia	2 March 2020	Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai
Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia- Persepolis Iran	7 April 2020	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Sepahan Iran- Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia	2 March 2020	Zubail Dubai Stadium
Al-Nasr Saudi Arabia -Sepahan Iran	6 April 2020	Bahrain Isa Stadium