

Studying the Outcomes of Olympic Success from the Perspective of Stakeholders

Abstract of PhD Thesis

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**HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY
OF SPORTS SCIENCE**
BUDAPEST

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Budapest
2024

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 (2019b), 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. 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) describe countries' efforts to invest money (input) and implement applicable policies (activities) in elite sport 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 Impacts (MESSI)

MESSI is the first theoretical framework used for this thesis. 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 (2009).

Theory of Change (ToC)

The Theory of Change (ToC), which describes ‘how’ and ‘why’ a series of logically linked events, known as change pathways, should lead to a specific result (Serrat, 2017), was used as a second theoretical framework. 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). Additionally 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).

Political outcomes of sport as a soft power tool

Sport can play both positive and negative roles in soft power from a political perspective. Mapping Elite Sports’ potential Societal Impact (MESSI) identifies a variety of potential impacts, such as a negative international image, war, and propaganda (De Rycke and De Bosscher 2019). The adoption of Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which advocates neutrality and non-political spaces in the Olympics, sparked a debate over freedom of expression and the role of athletes in social

change. Dubinsky (2019) provides an analysis of these political outcomes' positive and negative effects.

Societal outcomes of sport

While governments highlight the positive societal impacts of elite sport, they often overlook the negative aspects. De Bosscher et al. (2021) concluded that all contributing authors of the reviewed papers demonstrated 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 societal impact research in elite sport. First, what are the most likely conditions for societal impacts to occur? Second, how can the invested money be put to better use for societal benefit?

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.

Football and sports diplomacy

Football, the world's most popular sport, exemplifies sports diplomacy. It serves as a significant means for nations to exercise soft power and engage in international relations. The FIFA World Cup provides host nations an opportunity to gain global visibility and assert their soft power (Grix and Houlihan 2014). However, using football for diplomatic purposes has its challenges and complexities, especially regarding its societal impact.

2. Objectives

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.

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 the 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.

Research questions

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?

3. Methodology

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods is used in this study. The research involves the Grounded Theory Approach, qualitative written interviews, interpretivist qualitative research, content analysis, Delphi method for the qualitative part and questionnaire, statistical analysis, and classification of Games in the quantitative part with key stakeholders. This study focuses primarily on Hungarian and Iranian sports stakeholders. There are athletes, policymakers, and sports administrators affected by the pandemic who are involved in sports policy and diplomacy. Table 1 presents Mapping research questions to methods and participants.

Table 1. 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)

<p>5. How do Iranian sports policymakers and practitioners perceive the impact of Olympic success on a nation's international prestige and soft power?</p>	<p>Interpretivist Qualitative research</p>	<p>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)</p>
<p>6. How is Olympic success or failure reflected in the effectiveness of related sports policies and their reception of Iranian elite sports internationally?</p>	<p>Interpretivist Qualitative research</p>	<p>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)</p>
<p>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?</p>	<p>Delphi method, Content analysis, Likert- scale Questionnaire</p>	<p>Iranian sports science experts, political science professors, sociology scholars, coaches, referees, and athletes</p>

4. Results

The study presents its findings in a multi-layered approach, identifying and describing the expected political and social outcomes derived from Olympic success, which includes both athlete achievements and country representation at the Olympic Games from Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders' perspectives, and illustrates how COVID-19 impacts sport, how sports are perceived as a diplomatic tool, and how they are related to international prestige.

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, and (3) COVID-19.

To answer the third research question, I illustrate three roadmaps of how elite sport policies can lead to identified political and societal outcomes from Hungarian stakeholders' perspectives.

To address the four research goals, the data was analyzed, and the multi-tier cake metaphor was proposed to better visualize the results of the literature and data analysis. This metaphor illustrates the multi-level transformation in sports, affecting all stakeholders with varying sizes and positions of layers. Notably, the global level includes all others, each in turn: geographical unit (country, city), organizational, professional (e.g., individual professional, team, unit within an

organization), and finally, the individual (personal) level. Furthermore, based on interviews with participants, four main dimensions of transformation were identified, which may partially overlap: social aspects and rescheduling modifications.

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.

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.

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

Table 2. Comparative analysis of Hungarian and Iranian stakeholders' perspectives

Aspects	Hungarian stakeholders' perspective (A)	Iranian stakeholders' perspective (C)	Similarities	Differences
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Political factors influence d by Olympic success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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). - Builds lasting bonds between 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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 aspects of sports less 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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.
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	nations (A8). - Cautions against overestimating sports' role in international relations (A31).	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).	- 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)	- 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

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conveys social and political messages of inclusion and non-discrimination (A15). -Athletes influence national image (A1). -Changes attitudes towards social equality and community pride (A2). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -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 referee's decisions. (C6 and 7). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fair play for long-term prestige. 	
<p>Perception of Olympic success on international prestige and soft power</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increases international prestige and creates community bridges (A1). -Enhances national image and influence (A28). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improves international prestige through medal wins (C1, C9). -Promotes political relations and de-escalation (C1). -Media shapes international image (C10). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Both view Olympic success as a means to increase international prestige and enhance national image. -Both recognize the potential for sports to create communit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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

			y bridges and improve international relations.	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.

5. 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 our understanding of causal pathways and informs evidence-based policy and practice in elite sports.

Additionally, this thesis focuses 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. Furthermore, two key dimensions of transformation in 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, and positive light. The pandemic negatively impacted most sports activities at all levels, from individual to global; 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 research have implications for understanding how COVID-19 led to the transformation of sports in different aspects. 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.

Furthermore, this thesis focuses on Iranian sports stakeholders, revealing their perception of the link between elite sporting success and international prestige. The findings emphasize 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 Iranian 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.

6. List of own publication related to the topic

1. Zare F and Géczi G. (2023) 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 own 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, Daroghe 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).