



## **Analysis of the Impact of Sports Diplomacy and International Communication on the Professional Development and Global Standing of Football Referees**

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### **Abstract**

Sports diplomacy and international communication, as two strategic components, can play a decisive role in enhancing the professional development and global standing of football referees. Accordingly, this study aimed to identify the factors influencing the professional development and international status of Iranian football referees, with a specific emphasis on diplomacy and international communication. The research was qualitative in nature, employing a thematic analysis approach. The statistical population included international football referees, officials of the Football Federation (current and former), referee coaches and experts, sports media managers, specialists in international communication and sports diplomacy, as well as university professors in the fields of media and sport management, all selected through purposive sampling (20 participants). The criterion for concluding the interviews was reaching theoretical saturation. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and the validity of the instrument was confirmed

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through expert review and inter-coder agreement. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis. Based on the conceptual framework derived, the research model included four axial codes, ten categories, and sixty initial codes. The findings revealed that sports diplomacy directly facilitates international communication and, consequently, influences the professional development of football referees. Moreover, effective international communication contributes to elevating referees' global status and increasing their career opportunities worldwide. Diplomatic and cultural relations in the field of sports lead to the international recognition of referees and open new pathways for them. Finally, the study concludes that paying attention to the role of media in promoting and supporting referees can significantly enhance their global standing and ensure their more effective presence in international arenas.

## **Extended Abstract**

### **Introduction**

Refereeing is a challenging, exciting and important profession. This is especially true in sporting events due to the competitive nature and spirit of the sport. In contrast, referees at sporting events are often faced with incivility, disrespect, mistreatment and many negative consequences. The job of refereeing in all sports is also always accompanied by stress and anxiety. It often seems that refereeing is not popular. In fact, interpretation of refereeing by coaches and players has always been negative. Winning coaches and players rarely point to the quality of refereeing, but coaches and players who lose a match attribute at least part of their loss to poor refereeing. In addition, the lack of effective professional networking and the lack of training programs that meet international standards have prevented many talented referees from demonstrating their skills and capabilities at the world level. Therefore, the main issue of the present study is to understand how sports diplomacy and international communication can help in the professional development and promotion of the global status of Iranian football referees. Identifying the existing challenges and providing practical solutions for the optimal utilization of international capacities is a fundamental step to strengthen the position of Iranian referees in the global arena and increase the effectiveness of their presence in international federations and competitions.

### **Methods and Material**

The present study was qualitative and conducted with a thematic analysis approach. The thematic analysis method was based on the six stages of Braun and Clarke (2006). The statistical population included individuals and groups related to sports diplomacy, international relations, and football refereeing. Participants included:

International football referees: At least 5 years of refereeing experience in continental and global competitions.

Football federation officials (present and past): With managerial or executive experience in international affairs or refereeing.

Coaches and refereeing experts: With at least 5 years of teaching or analytical experience at the national/international level.

Sports media managers: Active in official or digital media who have covered and analyzed refereeing.

International relations and sports diplomacy specialists: Individuals with experience in official inter-country sports interactions, membership in international committees, or participation in diplomatic projects.

University professors in the field of sports management and media: With research or teaching experience in related fields.

According to the purposive sampling method, interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached (20 people). Selection criteria included at least 5 years of work experience in related fields, access to specialized information, and participation in international projects and events.

## **Results and Discussion**

Based on the conceptual framework extracted, the research model consisted of 4 core codes, 10 categories, and 60 initial codes. The results showed that sports diplomacy directly facilitates international communication and, as a result, has an impact on the professional development of football referees. Also, effective international communication enhances the global status of referees and increases their job opportunities at the global level. Diplomatic and cultural communications in the field of sports make referees known at the international level and open new paths for them. Finally, paying attention to the role of the media in introducing and supporting referees can help enhance their global status and more effective presence in international arenas.

## **Conclusion**

The main objective of this study was to analyze the impact of sports diplomacy and international communication on the professional development and global status of football referees. The results of this study showed that sports diplomacy plays a pivotal role in the professional development of referees by facilitating international communication and creating constructive interactions between referees, federations and sports institutions. This diplomacy can pave the way for referees to progress and enhance their position in the global arena by holding joint events, creating educational opportunities and exchanging experiences. Given these findings, it can be concluded that sports diplomacy and international relations are vital tools for facilitating the professional development of football referees and enhancing their position at the global level. Therefore, it is recommended that sports institutions and football federations help to enhance the global status of referees by creating appropriate infrastructure for international interactions, supporting the presence of referees in global training programs and using the capacity of the media. Ultimately, success in this area will not only lead to the professional development of referees, but will also play a significant role in improving the international image of the country's sport. Finally, it is worth noting that the present study faced some limitations, including that this study focused specifically on football and its referees, and the results and frameworks

extracted may not be directly generalizable to other sports with different structures, policies, and conditions. In addition, limited access to the actual interactions of Iranian referees with international federations and institutions due to political constraints and sanctions has limited the possibility of fully examining the role of sports diplomacy in professional development. The research sample mainly included well-known and active referees and did not include the experiences of young or lesser-known referees.

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**Keywords:** sports diplomacy, international communication, football referees, football federation