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# Physical Recreation or Elite Sport? A Challenge to Meet Physical Culture Purposes in Iran

### Abstract

*Over the past years, physical culture has been considered for its role in promoting health and constructing identity in Iran. Physical education, recreation, and elite sports are identified as the main examples of physical culture by which these objectives could be achieved. Most studies on physical recreation are aimed at public health issues. After presenting a review of the relevant literature, a wide and diverse range of driving forces are categorized in social, technological, economic, environmental, political, value/cultural, and 'sport/sport sciences' domains, which may all influence Iranians' participation in leisure-time physical activities. Following these findings in another study, the economic and technological drivers are specified as the most important uncertainties contributing to developing possible scenarios of participation in health-oriented activities. In addition to public health promotion, however, there is also evidence indicating that physical recreation (leisure-time physical activities) and indigenous sports can also result in identity construction purposes.*

*Further the capacity of elite sports to contribute to participation in leisure-time physical activities in Iran is examined. Since the relevant literature did not strongly support this finding, it was scrutinized in a separate research on Iran's national soccer team in the 2018 FIFA World and the 2019 Asian Cups. The results indicated that elite sport successes can, indeed, lead to identity construction, which might have temporarily influenced Iranians' participation. In this paper, we question if elite sport can also propel people to engage in leisure-time physical activity (physical recreation) programs. Since the same and even more consistent benefits of physical culture could be obtained from participation compared to competition, it is suggested to relevant decision-makers to also consider the role of physical recreation and indigenous sports for the promotion of health and identity construction.*

**Keywords:** physical culture, Iran, physical recreation, elite sport, identity, health

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## INTRODUCTION

Both public health promotion and identity construction are identified as the main purposes of physical culture (Grant, 2012). The focus on physical culture specifically aimed at developing health (via physical education and recreation programs) has gradually shifted towards an understanding of elite sport to meet commercial and political goals (i.e. nation-building, national unity, etc.) (Lubysheva, 1996; Orwell, 1945; Stout, 2016).

A broad range of studies have been conducted to date in order to investigate how elite sport achievements can shape national identity (Bairner & Dong-Jhy, 2011; Bishop & Jaworski, 2003; Cho, 2009; Dóczy, 2012; Elling, van Hilvoorde, & van den Dool, 2012, 2014; Foot, 2016; Georgalou, 2009; Meier & Mutz, 2016; van Hilvoorde & Elling, 2014; van Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stokvis, 2010). However, it is indicated that physical education and recreation can also provide opportunities within which different identities are constructed (Walseth, Aartun, & Engelsrud, 2017). Haggard and Williams (1992) for example stated that people would be more willing to take part in the physical activities that can better represent their identity. In this regard, Kirk and Tinning (1994) studied the impact of physical education lessons on self-identity in Australia. They concluded that bodies can be considered normative symbols that define identities in society. It was further explained that physical recreation programs can also result in better interaction with others (*ibid.*). Moreover, Groff and Kleiber (2001) described in their research that participation in sport and physical recreation can form the identity of youth with physical disabilities, since they can have more opportunities to express their 'true' selves and feel more competent. Also, Jun and Kyle (2012) studied the role of identity in leisure behavior and the influence of gender on participation in recreational golf. They argued that participants who wanted to be identified with masculine characteristics such as 'independent', 'competitive', and 'superior', were more inclined to engage in golf-related identities as well (*ibid.*). The role of physical recreation/education in shaping 'individual' identities and improving social integration is emphasized in such a manner.

It is, however, argued that physical recreation can also result in constructing 'national' identity (Moser, 2010; Stout, 2016). More importantly, this contribution of physical recreation to construct and shape national identity can happen in a less aggressive way compared to elite sport, and it may include more social benefits for a nation as well (*ibid.*).

In this paper, we will clarify which of the elite sport and physical recreation activities could better meet physical culture goals (public health and identity construction) in Iranian society. In other words, which one of them should be prioritized in order to meet physical culture purposes? To answer this question, we will first describe the concept of physical culture, and then review the recent studies on physical recreation and elite sports in Iran.

## PHYSICAL CULTURE IN IRAN

Historically speaking, "Zourkhaneh" (literally translated as the "House of Strength") is identified as an indigenous sport in Iranian physical culture (Kiani & Faraji, 2011). It is rooted in ancient Iran's rich culture. In fact, the history of "Zourkhaneh" can be elaborated by dividing

its heritage into four main intervals: the Mystical Era (1065 BC), the Parthian Era, the Islamic Era, and the Contemporary Era (Daneshforouz, 2018). It is also documented that when partial peace ruled over Iran, warriors transformed the war equipment including maces, bows, and shields into exercise equipment to prepare their body for the future (Brockhaus, 1986). This is considered a starting point for a new form of “Zourkhaneh” in Iran. It consists of both physical and mental (psychological) characteristics. Physical aspects include elements such as muscular ability, muscular endurance, respiratory and heart endurance, flexibility, and body composition along with physical skills (speed, alacrity, strength, action speed, equilibrium, and coordination) (Kiani & Faraji, 2011). To prepare warriors for battle and protect their life and land against invaders, it was highly important for Iranians to develop these skills (Rouhi, 2008). In addition to fostering bodies, this exercise was valued because of its combination with ancient Iranian and later Islamic culture (Amirtash, 2008; Heidari & Dowlatshah, 2012). Indeed, the architecture, epic poetry and similar type of poems read during this physical activity could have an impact on the identity of the people participating in it (Aminizadeh & Boustani, 2014).

People engaging in these exercises are identified, first and foremost, with characteristics such as humility, chivalry, truthfulness, and kindness (Boostani & Zadeh, 2013). Moreover, because of its contribution to promoting the sense of patriotism, Islamism, wisdom and human rights principles, it is argued that “Zourkhaneh” helped Iranians find their identity. This was considered important, since Iran is situated at the crossroads of Iranian, Islamic, and Western identities (Mahabbati, 2003).

In addition to its contribution to public health, this is how physical culture has impacted identity formation, even in the early roots and origin of Iranian culture. It should also be noted that the role of “Zourkhaneh” as a traditional sport in protecting Iranians’ identity has been currently manifested in elite sports, such as weightlifting and wrestling (Fisher, 2012). This is because of training sessions in which a form of submission-grappling called “Koshti Pahlavāni” (literally translated as “heroic wrestling”) is included. Moreover, the main portion of Zourkhaneh is dedicated to weight training and calisthenics, notably using a pair of wooden clubs (mil), metal shields (sang), and bow-shaped iron weights (kabbādeh or kamān) (Fisher, 2012; Karimi, 2018). Nowadays, weightlifting and wrestling is playing an important role in representing Iranians in mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games.

Identity construction purposes have been examined in the literature of Iranian studies on physical culture as well. Most of these studies have investigated the concept of identity in the context of elite sport and the way that elite sport can influence Iranian national identity and pride (Ahmadi, Firouzi, & Navabi, 2016; Fadaei Deh Cheshmeh, Eidi, & Abbasi, 2014; Ghiasian & Labesh, 2015; Hashemi & Yeganeh, 2008). As for physical recreation, only a few studies have been conducted regarding the objectives of identity construction. For instance, Saroukhani and Malakian (2011) reported that the way in which leisure time is spent in Tehran province plays an important role in shaping individuals’ identity. Leisure activities (i.e. sport and physical recreation) can also remarkably influence Iranians’ social identity (Moharamzadeh & Nouri, 2016; Yousefi & Moghaddam, 2015). This is because participation in these activities is capable of bringing together people from different cultural, demographic and social backgrounds (ibid.).

## RECENT STUDIES ON PHYSICAL CULTURE IN IRAN

As mentioned earlier, prior to identity construction purposes, sport and physical culture have been contributing to public health promotion over the past years (Stout, 2016). Many researchers have investigated the health effects of physical culture, due to the growing trends of physical inactivity worldwide (da Silva et al., 2014; Eurobarometer, 2017; Juneau & Potvin, 2010; Monda, Adair, Zhai, & Popkin, 2008; Stamatakis, Ekelund, & Wareham, 2007). The level of physical inactivity is also increasing among the Iranian population (Statistical Center of Iran, 2015). Moreover, it was recently argued that 65% of Iranians do not meet the standard level of PA (Ostovar, 2017). It is, therefore, required to develop new public health policies. In fact, developing leisure-time physical activity programs is one of the ways through which public health can be considerably improved.

It is argued that various factors determine regular participation in health-oriented physical activities (including sports). For instance, Torkildsen (2012) divided the influential factors of partaking in leisure activities into political, social, and personal ones. Additionally, van Bottenburg, Rijnen, and van Sterkenburg (2005) introduced a quadruple taxonomy of environmental, personal, interpersonal, and social indicators to explain conditions in which people would be more likely to participate in sport activities.

To identify the influential forces from broader domains, a comprehensive framework has been used, called the STEEPV framework (Loveridge, 2002; Nazarko & Kuźmicz, 2017; Schwartz, 1991). Interviews and literature review are used as methods through which so-called drivers can be collected from social, technological, environmental, economic, political, and cultural dimensions (*ibid.*). These drivers are macro factors, conditions, trends or events which can influence behavior in a constantly-changing environment (Schwartz, 1991).

In line with this framework, Ziaee and Hilvoorde (2018) explored driving forces that could manage and influence physical inactivity in Iran. Since some of the detected factors could not be classified by the STEEPV, the ‘Sport/Sports Sciences’ domain was added as an additional domain. Results revealed forces from social, environmental, economic, technological, and ‘sport/sport sciences’ domains as the most important drivers (*ibid.*).

Based upon these findings, scenarios of Iranians’ participation in LTPA were developed in a follow-up study. After the data analysis process, driving forces from technological (changes in technology and the amount of free time, development of the entertainment industry) and economic (purchasing power and change in the living standards, economic infrastructure) domains were specified as the most important drivers, on which scenarios were constructed (Ziaee, Aghaei, Saffari, Zenouz, & Hilvoorde, 2019). With regard to the generated scenarios, it was suggested to relevant decision-makers to formulate resilient strategies such as developing the indigenous sports and exercises, increasing the quality as well as the duration of physical education lessons, using technological advancements such as virtual reality to develop PA, encouraging participation in LTPA through the media, etc. for the efficient promotion of health-related physical activities (Ziaee, 2019). To this end, it was advised to improve the collaboration at a macro level between media, municipalities, sport, health, and education organizations (*ibid.*).

As mentioned, a wide and diverse range of driving forces are determining Iranians' participation in LTPA programs (Ziaee & Hilvoorde, 2018). Elite sport achievement was also considered as one of those drivers (ibid.). This is in line with the so-called 'virtuous cycle of sport' whereby elite sport successes in international tournaments are supposed to result in boosting mass sport participation, creating a healthier society, and shaping national identity (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Pawlowski, Downward, & Rasciute, 2014). Elite sports are considered an instrument to facilitate social integration, promote health, facilitate social development, and foster national identity in Iran's sport structure as well (Dousti, Goodarzi, Asadi, & Khabiri, 2013).

The claim that elite sport success contributes to the (lasting) experience of national pride was investigated in a separate research project. The 2018 FIFA World Cup and the 2019 AFC Asian Cup were considered as examples of major sporting events. This is because soccer is a popular sport amongst Iranian people and these mega events are important and influential opportunities for representing them worldwide (Ziaee, Adib-Moghaddam, Sterkenburg, Elling, & Hilvoorde, 2019). The performance of Iran's national soccer team is broadly covered by the media during these events. So, the question was how mediated soccer can result in constructing Iranian national identity during major sporting events (i.e. the World and Asian Cup).

To answer this question, the media coverage of the national team during these sporting events in both Persian and English languages, through online and print newspapers, was inspected. In addition to selecting relevant material from newspapers, a Google alert with the title of "Iran men's national soccer Team" was applied one month before the first match (Iran against Morocco) until two weeks after the last match in the World Cup (15<sup>th</sup> of May-14<sup>th</sup> of July 2018). A similar data collection process was undertaken for the Asian Cup as well (5<sup>th</sup> Dec-11<sup>th</sup> of Feb 2018/2019). Additional investigation of relevant posts on the most popular social networks (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) was conducted during the research periods by using keywords such as "we", "Iran", and "Iranian identity". After reviewing all relevant articles, the extracted texts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (TA). This analysis resulted in the following four main themes around Iranian national identity:

### ***1. Sympathetic/united***

Being represented as "sympathetic/united" appeared in various ways in the domestic media. Both the national players and Iranian people tried to show the national bonding in their arguments during these events. For instance, before the World Cup, Mehdi Taremi, the national team's striker said: "if we win the game it can be great. And if not, we will fight for the country and people. If we only think of the national flag aside from clubs' color, together we can do everything" (Iran-e-Varzeshi: 19.6.2018). In another argument during the Asian Cup, an Iranian Arab leader stated that "it does not matter which ethnic group we belong to or which language we speak, we are all Iranian, and therefore, must support the national team wherever we are" (Iran-e-Varzeshi: 15.1.2019). These statements obviously manifested a mutual connectedness between Iran's soccer fans and the national team's players.

## ***2. Ambitious/conscientious***

Apparently the difficult group that the national team had been drawn in with Spain (the former World and European champion), Portugal (the former European champion), and Morocco (the former African champion), played an important role in developing discourses around Iranians' ambition and conscientiousness. It was also related to challenges such as wars in which Iranians have been involved many times in their history. For example, Iran's sport minister argued that "Iranians have always proven that they can obtain valuable achievements in difficult conditions with their strong determination" (Iran-e-Varzeshi: 12.6.2018). Moreover, some media sources indicated Iranians' ambitions as such "a typical example of Iranians identity making the impossible possible with their diligence and strong determination" (Iran-e-Varzeshi: 12.6.2018). This implies that facing difficult situations in history contributed to the image and construction of Iranians' determination over the past years. Thus, the national team was also presumed capable of facing strong teams in the World Cup.

## ***3. Oppressed but great and appreciative***

Iranians were framed as a nation that despite having made valuable contributions to the world's history, are now being marginalized in the international media. It seems that political conflicts have resulted in this isolation. Iran's president stated in a meeting with the national team before the World Cup that "Billions around the world will be watching you as the representatives of a country with a rich culture and proud history. So, your good performance can amplify our national pride as well as the name of Iran as it has been great for a long time". (Abrar-e-Varzeshi: 21.5.2018). The performance of the national team appeared even in the statements of some foreign politicians that do not have diplomatic ties with Iran. For instance, in reaction to Iranians' celebration after the victory against Morocco in the World Cup, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued that "you showed courage on the playing field and today you showed the same courage on the streets" (The Jerusalem Post: 27.6.2018). Moreover, when the World Cup was finished, the selected quotes illuminated mutual respect between people and the national team: "Iranians played with the sense of patriotism and thought of winning the games to maintain their people's respect", Iran's former player, Hosein Kalani said (Abrar-e-Varzeshi: 24.6.2018). In a similar way, the national team's midfielder, Omid Ebrahimi pointed out: "We wanted people to know that we put in all effort and played to the best of our abilities to make them happy and satisfied" (Iran-e-Varzeshi: 28.6.2018). Political tensions and the history of Iran contributed to the emerging discourses on Iranians' identity during these major sporting events.

## ***4. Emotion-ridden***

The 3-0 defeat against Japan in the semi-final stage in the Asian Cup was criticized immensely. This failure was attributed to emotional factors. "We become super happy when we win and super upset when we lose. We have not been taught how to confront problems in order to come back to the game again after receiving a goal" (Tabnak: 29.1.2019). Furthermore, some domestic soccer experts accused the media of adding to the emotional tension as well. For example, Ali Parvin, the former Iranian soccer player argued that the media emphasized the

critical nature of the match so much that the players were faced with a psychological collapse and could not focus and perform as usual.

In sum, the contribution of elite sport achievements to Iranians participation in LTPA programs should be, regarded as a two-edged sword and an unreliable indicator for public health promotion. The performance of the national soccer team showed a positive image of Iranian national identity in the World Cup but turned into feelings of disappointment after a failure in the Asian Cup (Ziaee, Adib-Moghaddam, et al., 2019). Elite sport successes might indirectly lead to participation because of positive perceptions arising from achievements. But still, evidence of this correlation is weak.

## CONCLUSION

The importance of physical culture in developing health and identity construction has been indicated in the context of physical recreation and elite sport. In regard to physical recreation, previous Iranian studies have mainly considered public health as the main issue. A wide and diverse range of drivers from social, economic, environmental, technological, cultural, political, and 'sport/sport sciences' domains could prompt Iranians to participate in health-related physical activities. The economic and technological dimensions were specified as the most important uncertainties, on which possible scenarios of participation could be based.

Moreover, it was found that also elite sport successes can drive Iranians towards participation in sport and PA. The contribution of this driver was further examined in a separate research on Iran's national soccer team in the 2018 FIFA World Cup and later in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. The results showed that elite sport achievements can, indeed, play an important role in expressing Iranian national identity. In other words, even though elite sport successes can help construct a more robust image of national identity, they cannot contribute to regular participation and public health promotion, not in the least because of their inconsistency.

Nevertheless, it seems that political and prestige-oriented goals such as social integration and national pride and identity protection have resulted in high attention for elite sports in Iran's sport system, resulting in less attention for recreational sports. For instance, "Zourkhaneh" as an Iranian indigenous sport, which is capable of both identity construction and health promotion throughout society, has been replaced by elite sports such as "wrestling" and "weightlifting" in order to meet nation-building goals.

This political focus on elite sports and Olympic medals is a worldwide phenomenon. Indeed, elite sports have contributed to a strong focus on "soft power" after the cold war, for obtaining political goals (Nye, 1990). In other words, states use elite sport achievements as a "soft power instrument" to showcase their nations, culture, and ideology (Grix, 2019; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Furthermore, Grix and Lee (2013) argue that hosting major sporting events is currently playing an important role in global communication and diplomatic strategies. In the same way, soccer and Olympic sports have been highly regarded over the past 10 years in Iran's sport policy as well (Dousti et al., 2013). It becomes more important for Iranian people to be mentioned and represented in 'soft atmospheres', including mega sporting events, as the

keyword “Iran” usually shows up in a harsh environment on the international media sources with issues such as “nuclear agreement” “war”, and “sanctions”.

## FUTURE DIRECTION

Nowadays, elite sports are particularly favored over physical recreation in Iran’s sport policy. National identity and pride protection are mentioned as the main reasons for this exclusive focus on elite sports. In fact, it is used as a “soft power” to gain political goals. However, it should be noted that elite sports are unlikely to result in more participation in health-related physical activities (including sports). Even though the development of elite sports can facilitate the achievement of political purposes, it may result in unpleasant consequences as well, such as growing trends of physical inactivity along with feelings of disappointment after poor results obtained by Iranian national athletes. Therefore physical recreation development is a vital necessity because physical recreation programs are also able to lead to identity construction even in a more consistent and less political way.

Despite the contribution of elite sports to nation-building purposes, a suggestion for the relevant Iranian decision-makers is to develop physical recreation programs as well. This is because more consistent benefits of physical culture could result from broad participation as opposed to simply watching elite sports competitions.

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