






Causes and Consequences of Iranian Elite Athletes' International Migrations

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the causes and consequences of international migrations of Iranian elite athletes. This research was conducted using the qualitative method and Glaser grounded theory approach. The statistical population included senior managers in the Ministry of Sports and Youth and national sports federations, expert researchers in this field, professional athletes who have emigrated or were on the verge of emigration, and coaches in professional sports teams in Iran. Twenty-six people were selected through theoretical sampling and snowball methods. The data collection tool was a semi-structured individual interview. The Glaser approach was used to analyse the data, including two main stages of actual and theoretical coding. During the actual coding process, 468 primary statistical codes were identified, and 68 subcategories and 11 main categories were subsequently identified. The categories were divided into three general dimensions: “Factors affecting”, “Consequences”, and “Strategies” concerning “elite athletes’ emigration”; in the theoretical coding stage, the final model of the research was outlined. Identifying the causes and consequences of the emigration of elite athletes can significantly help the authorities to recognise problems in this area and provide appropriate solutions to retain adequate human capital in the country. We attempted to examine and present the causes and consequences of the emigration of Iranian elite athletes in the form of a model.

Keywords: Elite athletes, grounded theory, migration

Introduction

Elite and efficient human capital play a fundamental role in various economic, social, political and cultural fields in every society (Salimi & Khodaparast, 2018); Also, human capital is one of the essential factors in development, which depends on maintaining human capital. In other words, human capital is considered as both a means and a goal of development (Gruzina, Firsova & Strielkowski, 2021) and is defined as knowledge, skills, experiences, abilities and knowledge concentrated in people, which has

a positive effect on growth and performance improvement (He, Wang & Martínez-Fuentes, 2020); therefore, human capital is vital in order to improve innovation (Salimi & Khodaparast, 2019).

Currently, one of the crucial factors concerning poverty in developing countries is the lack of efficient and effective human capital. Moreover, a country that has a significant outflow of human capital will face major problems in the long term (Lulle, Janta & Emilsson, 2021). Emigration – crossing the political borders of countries and changing residence for a long time (more than one

year) (Castelli, 2018) – is a long-term decision that depends on many factors, such as income, politics, education and quality of life (Qin & Zhu, 2018). International migration is mainly related to the population that migrates from economically less developed regions to advanced regions (Chamie, 2020). This migration pattern, directly and indirectly, affects countries' economic and social development capabilities and often leads to more migration (Remeikiene & Gaspareniene, 2019). On the other hand, this phenomenon can hinder development and progress in these countries in three ways: costs of losing and replacing human resources, and damage to human capital and social capital (Ungruhe & Agergaard, 2020).

As development progresses, human capital is strengthened (Salimi & Khodaparast, 2021), connections with international networks increase, aspirations increase, credit constraints decrease, and all these changes lead to increased migration. It seems that the most important of these factors is the increase in the level of education and international communication, which both stimulates and facilitates migration (Clemens & Postel, 2018); most notably, empirical studies generally show that highly skilled people are more likely to migrate than unskilled people (Oleribe & Fuente, 2022). Therefore, the emigration of highly educated people from developing countries can have an impact on the total human capital in these countries. On the other hand, lack of job satisfaction and low quality of life in the country of origin increases the desire to migrate abroad (Torrise & Pernagallo, 2020). Also, the existence of opportunities and positions for career growth and the existence of incentives will directly affect the impact of brain drain (Wanniarachchi, Kumara & Jayawardana, 2022).

The phenomenon of elite emigration is formed by the competition of countries to benefit from people's knowledge. To the extent that, in some cases, they even give these people citizenship of the country in exchange for skills (De Haas, Natter & Vezzoli, 2018). The official and unofficial statistics presented regarding the extent of the phenomenon of elite migration from Iran indicate the fact that, currently, the departure of elite human forces is widespread and has become a problem in the country as people migrate to foreign countries in search of greater security or a better life (Jantan, Falahi & Seyfi, 2015). According to the latest official statistics provided by the United Nations, Iran ranks third among the 72 developing countries in the world for brain drain of its population (Javadzadeh, 2015).

Elite emigration is not limited to lawyers, engineers or academics; it has also expanded in sports. Sports emigration refers to the departure of athletes and coaches from their countries to continue their professional careers abroad (Jansen & Engbersen, 2017). In recent years, the migration of elite Iranian athletes to developed countries has been on the rise, so much so that the emigration of 28

national team athletes from various disciplines, including individual sports, coupled with the emigration and asylum of national referees and coaches in 2019, is a matter of concern. This trend has continued in subsequent years (Zivari et al, 2023). However, it is essential to note that the migration of elite athletes is not always detrimental to the home country. Their participation in more extensive and significant sports arenas can bring valuable knowledge and experience back to their country of origin, enhancing the performance of national teams and inspiring young athletes. However, this only materializes when the athletes return to their home country, sharing what they have learned or achieving accolades for their homeland (Spaaij, Luguetti & Ugolotti, 2022). The current research delves into the permanent emigration of elite Iranian athletes, which has significantly increased in recent years, even leading to changes in their citizenship. Such a scenario could deprive Iran of these influential human assets, and by suggesting unfavorable conditions in Iran, it might weaken the country's national brand on a global scale.

Various social, political, economic, cultural and athletic factors lead elite Iranian athletes to consider migrating to other countries and, in some cases, even changing their nationality (Rojo, Marques & Starepravo, 2022). Among these, economic conditions play a particularly significant role. The financial challenges faced by Iran, much of which are related to the sanctions imposed in recent years, have had wide-ranging negative impacts across various sectors of the country. Sport is no exception to this, especially since the primary sports structure in Iran is state-funded, with most of its financial resources provided by the government. This situation has led many sports organizations in the country to face budgetary and financial constraints, affecting various aspects of professional sports, including the facilities and equipment provided, allowances, contract amounts, hiring foreign coaches and players, and so on. All of these factors have contributed to the dissatisfaction of elite Iranian athletes (Khodaparast, 2023). Additionally, Iran's political, social, and cultural environment can be another significant influencer on the migration decisions of these athletes; the country largely retains traditional and religious norms, which result in specific behavioral and speech restrictions on individuals. Notably, a significant portion of the emigration involves female athletes, who face even more important cultural and religious constraints in Iran, such as mandatory wearing of the hijab or certain sports being perceived as male domains. This issue is even more pronounced in the country's smaller towns and significantly influences the decision to migrate (Bagherzadeh & Shariati, 2021). Furthermore, these restrictions on women's sports have resulted in many discriminations compared to men's sports, leading to increased dissatisfaction among female athletes. Moreover, Iran's sports officials and managers

neglect many sports disciplines, even those that bring medals. Discriminatory and unfair allocation of resources, attention, opportunities, and financial and non-financial support is made primarily for a few popular sports, with soccer at the forefront. All these factors can significantly impact the migration decisions of elite Iranian athletes (Khodaparast, Soltan Hoseini & Salimi, 2018).

Existing research on refugees and forced migrants includes a wide range of issues, experiences and impacts and is closely related to political developments and policy-making (Spaaij et al., 2019). Ryba, Elbe and Darpatova-Hruzewicz (2020) believe that the liberalisation of immigration policies in many developed countries has facilitated the speed of transnational migration for people who want accommodation or temporary residence for work, a better lifestyle, and safer working and social conditions. In this way, the international migration of athletes in various sports fields has increased. Orłowski, Wicker & Breuer (2016) also believe that the work migration of athletes is affected by economic, social, political, competitive, geographical and cultural factors. Among these issues, we can mention financial issues, lack of meritocracy, problems in international laws and world federations, social freedoms, immigration laws of immigrant-receiving countries, the neglect of the athletes' conditions by the federations, the existence of non-sports managers, the indifference of officials, the inefficiency of managers and the lack of spiritual support. Also, Chao Lee, Mei Ko & Han Huang (2021) showed in their research that the combination of "attractive" factors such as financial benefits, job opportunities, similarities in language and culture, and self-improvement and "repulsive" factors, including institutional regulations, salary gaps, and lack of opportunities for career development, have driven the migration of Taiwanese professional baseball players.

Given the growing number of elite athletes emigrating from Iran in recent years, which has become a significant and widely discussed topic among officials, media, and the Iranian public, this study examines the reasons for and consequences of such migration. The emigration of a country's elite athletes, like the emigration of other professionals, is associated with various causes and outcomes. One cannot deem it an entirely negative or positive phenomenon because human capital, especially young and skilled labour, plays a crucial role in a country's economic, social, and cultural growth and development. Their migration to other countries can provide opportunities to participate in major sporting arenas, interact with different prominent sports personalities, achieve international recognition, acquire new training and experiences, enhance the performance and training of national teams, and motivate the country's young athletes. These are all positive outcomes of elite athletes' migration. However, the migration of Iranian elite athletes in recent years has

predominantly been for permanent departure, acquiring new citizenship, and representing another country in competitions. This means that, despite Iran investing heavily in nurturing these valuable human resources, other nations benefit instead when it is time to reap the benefits. Part of the country's national wealth and resources is transferred abroad, which has consequences in various sectors of the country and can potentially tarnish the national prestige and the global standing of the country's brand. On this basis, the study aims to explore the primary reasons for the emigration of Iranian elite athletes and the most significant implications it can have for the country. The findings will be presented in a conceptual model.

Research Method

Current research uses the method of a descriptive survey. In this research, a qualitative approach and Grounded Theory method was used as the most scientific method of this approach, since in order to identify the indicators related to the subject of the research, it was necessary to analyze data that were collected in an unstructured form (Amin, Sukamdi & Rijanta, 2021). The Grounded Theory method includes three approaches: the 'systematic' approach associated with Strauss and Corbin, the 'emergent' approach related to Glaser, and the constructivist approach presented by Charmaz (Qureshi & Unlu, 2020). This research used Glaser approach, also called Classical Grounded Theory (Sing & Estefan, 2018).

The emergent approach in Grounded Theory is achieved by passing through three main steps of coding: open coding (freely coding the text of the interviews or other data to find the main category), selective coding (coding focused on the main category) – these first two steps are called substantive coding – and theoretical coding (connecting the main category to other selected categories) (Chun Tie, Birks & Francis, 2019). In the Grounded Theory method, data collection and open coding co-occur (Mokgohloa et al., 2021). In fact, the open coding process begins after the completion of the first interview; the data are analyzed and a label is considered for each one (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021); then they are conceptually grouped, and finally basic codes (categories and their characteristics) are produced as the output of this stage. In this coding stage, accessible data collection continues until the effects of the main category, which is the participants' main concern, appear. In order to choose a category as a main category, several criteria can be considered, the most important of which are: being central, being related to other categories, continuous repetition in data, and spending more time to reach saturation (Rieger, 2019).

In the selective coding stage, one of the open codes is chosen as the main category, and other basic codes

may be the characteristics of that main category or be related to it. At this stage, coding is done only for the main and related categories, and unrelated data are not considered (Biaggi & Mbaleka, 2018). In other words, this stage begins when the main category is determined, and subsequent sampling is carried out to develop the theory. This stage continues until the main category and related categories are saturated, and saturation occurs when more and newer features are not obtained from the data (Kosar & Kasapoglu, 2021). The theoretical coding stage also conceptualizes how categories relate to each other and usually occurs when sorting and integrating notes (Piet-erse, 2020). Note-taking takes place in all stages of basic research and includes the researcher's ideas about concepts, features and how they relate. After data saturation, the notes are sorted to provide a conceptual framework for the theory, so that the relationship between the main category and other categories is revealed. In general, two stages of open and selective coding deal with classifying the data; And the theoretical coding stage connects the categories obtained in the previous stages. Also, this stage determines the relationship of the categories with the central category, and thus the final theory is formed (Allen & Davey, 2018).

The statistical population of this research includes people who are experts, have opinions, or have experience in the field of the research topic, such as high-ranking managers in the Ministry of Sports and Youth and national sports federations, expert researchers in this field, professional athletes who have emigrated or are on the verge of emigrating and coaches of professional sports teams in Iran. Since in qualitative research, the goal is to find people with a wealth of information in the

field of the research topic, incidental sampling is usually avoided (Naderifar, Goli & Ghaljaie, 2017). In the current research, the theoretical sampling method (one of the main features of the Grounded Theory) (Foley et al., 2021) and the snowball sampling method were used. The researchers undertook the sampling with the theoretical saturation index in mind. To start, several managers related to the field of emigration of elite athletes and several elite athletes who have emigrated or are on the verge of emigration were selected through theoretical sampling, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with them. The interview method is used to collect data because, in Grounded Theory method, interviews provide the most desirable kind of data (Abdullah Alamri, 2019). Following this, those who were interviewed were asked to introduce other people who could provide additional data concerning the research subject (snowball sampling). These people were also interviewed. This process continued until the researcher discovered that the data received was becoming repetitive and more data would not be obtained. In qualitative research called the theoretical saturation index (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

In accordance with the steps and processes mentioned above, 26 research community participants were interviewed. During the interviews, repetition in the received information was observed from the 19th interview, and the data reached theoretical saturation from the 22nd interview. To be sure, however, the interview continued until the 26th person. Part of the data was also collected through articles, authoritative books, authoritative scientific and news sites, and library studies. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the statistical sample of the research.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the statistical sample of the research

Specialty	frequency	Frequency percentage	Education			Work experience (years)		
			bachelor	master	PhD	1-10	11-20	>20
Migrated professional athletes	4	15.38	1	2	1	1	3	-
Professional athletes on the verge of emigration	6	23.08	1	3	2	2	4	-
Deputies of the Ministry of Sports and Youth of Iran	4	15.38	-	-	4	-	1	3
Presidents of National Sports Federations of Iran	2	7.70	-	-	2	-	1	1
Deputies of National Sports Federations of Iran	3	11.54	-	1	2	-	2	1
Coaches of Iranian professional sports clubs	3	11.54	-	2	1	1	1	1
Research professors in the field of athlete migration	4	15.38	-	-	4	-	1	3
Total	26	100	2	8	16	4	13	9

Trustworthiness is used to measure validity and reliability in qualitative research. It consists of four more detailed concepts: credibility, transferability, conformability and dependability (Coleman, 2021). In order to check the credibility, the research findings were studied by the research participants. They studied the presentation and the proposed model, and their opinions were applied. In order to check the transferability in the various stages of data coding, sufficient information regarding the applicability of the research findings in other scientific fields was determined. Also, to achieve conformability, the manuscripts and notes related to the research were given to another researcher, his findings were compared with the current research findings, and the necessary similarity was confirmed. Retesting methods and the percentage of agreement observation were also used to check the compatibility or dependability of the research. For this purpose, five interviews were selected from among the conducted interviews and, in the retest method, each of them was coded twice with a 15-day interval between tests by the researcher. In the percentage

of agreement observation method, two knowledgeable researchers in the field were invited to participate in the research as coders. In each interview, similar codes were marked as agreement, and dissimilar codes were marked as disagreement. Finally, with the help of the following formula, the accuracy and reliability of the research were evaluated. The results obtained are shown in Table 2.

According to Table 2, the reliability obtained in the retest method and the intrasubject agreement method using the mentioned formula is 85% and 80%, respectively, which is higher than 60%. Therefore, coding trustworthiness is confirmed.

Findings

In the open coding phase, 468 primary codes were identified. Table 3 shows parts of the text of several interviews and the primary codes extracted from them as examples.

$$\text{intra-subject agreement percentage} = \frac{\text{Number of times} \times 2}{\text{Total number of codes}} \times 100\%$$

Table 2. Calculation of reliability by retest method and intra-subject agreement method

row	Interview title	Number of codes		Number of agreements		Number of disagreements		Reliability (percentage)	
		Retest	Intra-subject agreement	Retest	Intra-subject agreement	Retest	Intra-subject agreement	Retest	Intra-subject agreement
1	second	41	38	18	16	5	6	87%	84%
2	ninth	28	26	12	10	4	6	85%	76%
3	eleventh	32	41	14	17	4	7	87%	82%
4	nineteenth	34	39	16	16	2	7	94%	82%
5	twenty-second	26	32	11	14	4	4	84%	87%
	Total	161	176	69	71	23	34	85%	80%

Table 3. Examples of open coding of interviews

	Part of the interview texts	Extracted Initial Codes
Parts of interviews with elite athletes who have migrated or are on the verge of emigration	In Iran, the importance given to men's sports and the support they receive in various sectors is much less for women. For instance, the contract amounts for women in sports are significantly lower than for men. Training facilities and sports camp programmes for women are far more limited. The rewards that female athletes receive compared to their male counterparts are much lower; the television broadcast of women's matches is weak due to their dress code and hijab. Hence, fewer sponsors support women's sports in Iran. In many cities in Iran, due to traditional beliefs and specific religious and social conditions, active participation of women in some sports is impossible. All these issues are among the significant reasons that some elite female athletes in Iran are encouraged to migrate and acquire a new nationality.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lesser importance and attention by officials towards women's sports in Iran 2. Limited opportunities and advancement in some sports for women due to cultural, religious, and social conditions in Iran 3. The issue of female athletes' dress code and hijab in Iran 4. Discriminations related to training facilities, contract amounts, and television broadcasts of men's and women's sports events in Iran
	As an athlete, when I compare my personal and professional living conditions with those of athletes of the same discipline and level in a developed country, my motivation to migrate and leave Iran intensifies. This is because that individual's social position and personal and professional situation seem much better than mine.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Concerns of elite athletes regarding retirement and their living conditions in Iran 2. Officials' neglect of elite athletes and their feelings in Iran 3. The potential for further growth and progress of elite athletes by migrating to another country
	A professional athlete in Iran trains for years to participate in a significant sporting event. However, when faced with an Israeli opponent, the managers and officials compel him to withdraw from the competition, erasing the results of all his efforts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasis on strict political beliefs and tendencies in Iranian sports 2. Officials' neglect of athletes' efforts in Iran
	A professional athlete in Iran trains for years to participate in a significant sporting event. However, when faced with an Israeli opponent, the managers and officials force him to withdraw from the competition, rendering all his efforts fruitless.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasis on hardline political beliefs and tendencies in Iranian sports 2. Officials' negligence towards athletes' efforts in Iran
	Many of my athletic and non-athletic friends have migrated, even accepting citizenship of a new country, or are preparing for permanent migration. This could tarnish Iran's reputation in other countries, further motivate Iranian youths to migrate, and emphasize the incompetence of the country's managers and politicians.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Elite athletes' belief in the adverse political and managerial conditions in Iran 2. Negative impact of permanent emigration of elite athletes on Iran's national brand 3. Influence of friends on the issue of permanent migration of elite athletes from the country
Sections of interviews with sports coaches, heads and deputies of sports organizations, and research scholars on the migration of athletes	Sports in Iran depend heavily on the government, and the laws and conditions for privatization are pretty stringent and complicated. Moreover, the country's economic problems mean that the budget allocated for sports is insufficient. This situation results in the dissatisfaction of elite Iranian athletes and increases their inclination to migrate from the country.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. State control over Iranian sports and its heavy reliance on the government budget 2. Economic issues of the country and insufficient budget allocation to sports 3. Structural and legal problems concerning privatization of sports in Iran

Part of the interview texts	Extracted Initial Codes
Many countries aiming to strengthen their sports sector adopt policies to attract elite athletes from other nations, luring them with attractive offers. Meanwhile, international sports organizations also provide significant support concerning the migration and change of athletes' nationalities. This has further exacerbated the emigration issue among our country's athletes.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Policies of many countries to attract top athletes from other nations and develop their sports 2. Support from international sports organizations on the migration and change of nationality of athletes
In Iran, most of the budget and attention is directed towards football, neglecting other sports disciplines like Taekwondo, wrestling, etc., which also win medals. This inequality and discrimination can motivate athletes from these disciplines to migrate from Iran. Consequently, the country's sports talent pool and national sports prowess in these areas become weakened.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inequity and discrimination among different sports disciplines in Iran 2. Weakening of Iran's sports talent pool in some disciplines 3. Deterioration of national sports prowess in Iran

In the second coding phase, the overlapping codes obtained in the previous step were merged, and 68 sub-categories and 11 main categories were identified. The obtained categories can be divided into three general dimensions, the first dimension of which is “factors affecting the emigration of elite athletes”, the second

dimension is “the consequences of the emigration of elite athletes”, and the third dimension is “control solutions of elite athletes' emigration”. Next, Table 4 shows the categories and subcategories related to “factors affecting the emigration of elite athletes” in the selective coding stage.

Table 4. Categories and subcategories of “Factors affecting the emigration of elite athletes” in the selective coding stage

Category	row	Concept
Political-legal factors	1	Existence of simple and specific laws regarding emigration (facilitation of issuing visas, obtaining citizenship of countries, etc.) and the support of international sports and non-sports organizations for this issue
	2	The policy of developed countries in attracting elite athletes to strengthen the power of their national sport and weaken the national sport power of developing countries
	3	Applying political and economic sanctions against Iran by other countries and weakening the global status of this country's national brand
	4	Limited Olympic quota and other international competitions in some sports for each country
	5	Political instability in Iran
	6	The strong dependence of sports on the government in Iran, the allocation of insufficient funds for it, and the existence of complex and challenging laws regarding the transfer of various parts of sports to the private sector
	7	The ineffectiveness of the management system in Iran and the dominance of personal relationships, and the emphasis on political tendencies in the selection of managers and officials in sports and non-sports in the country
	8	Strict political and religious laws and pressures in Iran's social and sports environment (such as forcing Iranian athletes not to compete against opponents from Israel)
	9	The neighbourhoods of Iran with immigrant countries
	10	Failure of the Iranian government to provide the necessary support incentives to investors in the professional sports sector and elite athletes who start sports businesses in the country.

Category	row	Concept
Socio-cultural factors	1	Weak patriotism of elite athletes
	2	Tendency to live in a modern environment (versus a semi-modern and traditional environment)
	3	Insufficient sports communities in Iran
	4	Cultural and religious restrictions and lack of social and civil liberties in Iran (issue of hijab, closed space and imposed patterns of behaviour)
	5	Low value of sports activities among people in the community
	6	The weak social status of elite athletes and the lack of attention of officials and mass media in Iran towards their achievements and honours
	7	Discriminating religious, ethnic and gender attitudes regarding elite athletes and not appreciating their feelings in Iran
Economic factors	1	The lack of stability and vagueness of the economic future in Iran and the budget and income problems of the country's sports organizations
	2	Lack of allocation of necessary facilities regarding the personal and professional life of elite athletes in Iran
	3	The difference in welfare and income status in Iran and advanced countries and the presentation of significant financial and non-financial offers by advanced countries to elite athletes
Professional factors	1	The lack of meritocracy and the existence of nepotism in different parts of professional sports in Iran
	2	Severe differences of opinion of elite athletes with the management structure of federations, national team coaches and other sports officials of the country
	3	Lack of knowledge and awareness of sports officials about the primary and vital needs of sports centres and elite athletes
	4	Injustice and discrimination inside and outside the field of sports (unequal distribution of facilities, opportunities and extreme attention of sports managers to popular media sports such as football and lack of attention to other medal-winning sports)
	5	Lack of access of elite athletes to coaches and training courses commensurate with the high level of championship sports
	6	Lack of distribution of sports facilities, equipment and technical infrastructure following the high level of championship sports and based on the real needs of elite athletes
	7	Have a better chance of participating in the Olympics and other world competitions in the destination country
	8	Lack of planning of federations concerning the presence of elite athletes in world tournaments
	9	Lack of professional and coherent leagues with the ability to generate income in some sports
	10	Inability of the country to host major sporting events such as the Olympics, World Cup, etc.
	11	Lack of an organized, purposeful and coherent system for talent identification and talent management following international standards and indicators in the country's sports
	12	Ambiguity in the future of sports and careers for elite athletes
Personal factors	1	Kinship relationships in the destination country
	2	Reduction of national interests and affiliations and dissatisfaction with the political and social structure of the country, and lack of feeling of freedom
	3	Proving sports abilities to others and ensuring a promising sporting future in the destination country
	4	Lack of development of individual life indices in the country
	5	Learning new experience
	6	Problems related to the national identity (citizenship) of elite athletes in the country
	7	Elite athletes' concerns about retirement and providing comfort and welfare conditions for themselves and their families in Iran
	8	Observing the favourable conditions of Iranian elite athletes in teams of other countries as an incentive to emigrate
	9	The difference between people in the degree of positivity to phenomena, the hierarchy of needs and the tendency to hedonism

Table 4 identifies five set of factors – political-legal, cultural-social, economic, professional and personal – as the main categories affecting the emigration of elite athletes, including 41 subcategories. Table 5 displays the categories and subcategories related to “consequences of elite athletes’ emigration” in the selective coding stage in the form of four main categories – sports consequences, economic conse-

quences, social-cultural consequences and security-political consequences, from a total of 12 extracted subcategories.

Table 6 also shows the categories and subcategories related to “elite athletes’ emigration control solutions” in the selective coding stage, in the form of two main categories of incentive solutions and policy solutions from 15 extracted subcategories.

Table 5. Categories and subcategories of “Consequences of emigration of elite athletes” in the selective coding stage

category	row	concept
Sports Consequences	1	Weakening the power of national sports in Iran
	2	Weakening the sports gene bank of Iran
	3	Impairing the popularity and acceptance of elite athletes and public dissatisfaction with this group in Iran
	4	Deprivation of opportunities from other domestic athletes through spending material and non-material resources to nurture elite athletes who have immigrated to Iran
Economic consequences	1	Loss of financial resources of the country of origin when investing in the upbringing of elite athletes and large sums of money leaving the country when using them
Social-cultural consequences	1	Inducing a sense of hopelessness and social frustration in the community and youth in Iran
	2	Increasing the emigration rate among elite youth through validation of the migration phenomenon in Iran
	3	Reducing the effect of athletes’ validation on cultural and social issues in Iran
	4	Placing athletes from one country against each other in a foreign tournament and creating psychological pressure on the people of that country
Security - Political Consequences	1	Inducing the feeling of inefficiency in the political and managerial system of the country
	2	Weakening the national brand of the country in the world through losing elite athletes as cultural ambassadors and identity-making tools of the community
	3	Political activities of elite athletes against their country when immigrating to a country with a political regime opposed to Iran

Table 6. Categories and subcategories of “Strategies to control the emigration of elite athletes” in the selective coding stage

Category	row	concept
Incentive strategies	1	Considering the appropriate facilities regarding military service (such as reducing the time or even eliminating it, etc.) for elite male athletes
	2	Providing professional facilities related to continuing education, employment, housing, etc. for elite athletes
	3	Development of individual and social life indices
	4	Membership of elite athletes in the general assemblies of the relevant sports federations
	5	Employing elite athletes in programmes related to the development of sports at the basic levels and improving the status of a sport

Category	row	concept
Policy strategies	1	Approving laws related to financial and non-financial support of the government to elite athletes of all sports and reassuring them
	2	Formulating long-term and structured programmes by the country’s sports managers regarding the development of sports talents in various fields
	3	Handing over a significant part of Iran’s sports to the private sector, providing special concessions from the government to investors in this area, and less involvement of politicians in sports decisions
	4	Codified plans for federations and sports clubs for more revenue and financial independence
	5	Focusing on and adhering to meritocracy in different parts of the country’s sports and avoiding family connections and personal decisions
	6	Familiarizing elite athletes with the rules, regulations and legal principles of professional sports
	7	Providing special privileges and facilitating the rules for starting a sports business through the elite athletes
	8	Providing programmes to strengthen the sense of patriotism of elite athletes
	9	More attention of mass media and officials to elite athletes and their involvement in the country’s sports decisions
	10	More justice among elite athletes in various sports and not focusing solely on football

In the third step of data analysis, which is the theoretical coding stage, the researcher seeks to combine and integrate the categories and subcategories obtained in the actual coding stage in a communication model. This coding stage allows the researcher to think analytically about the possible link between the categories.

In the Glaserian approach to the Grounded Theory method for combining actual codes, patterns have been introduced that are not unique and that even significantly overlap with each other. Also, one family can strengthen another family and create a new family. In fact, in each of the coding groups, without providing a specific schematic pattern, Glaser refers to a set of words, each of which can be a guide in combining the actual codes and leave the researcher free to combine the categories and model without determining the way the words are linked.

For instance, four examples of a coding family are:

1. The 6 C’s Family: a set of words related to causes or factors, results or consequences, contingencies, text, conditions and covariances.
2. Type family: a set of words that refer to types, such as forms, styles, classes, etc.
3. Process family: a set of words that refer to processes, such as stages, phases, chains, progressions, etc.
4. Cultural family: This family includes a set of words that refer to cultural phenomena, such as social norms, social values, social beliefs, etc. (Xudong & Liang, 2020).

With the investigations carried out by the researcher regarding the relationship of categories and subcategories with each other, it seems that in the current research, the “6C’s family” provides the possibility of integrating the

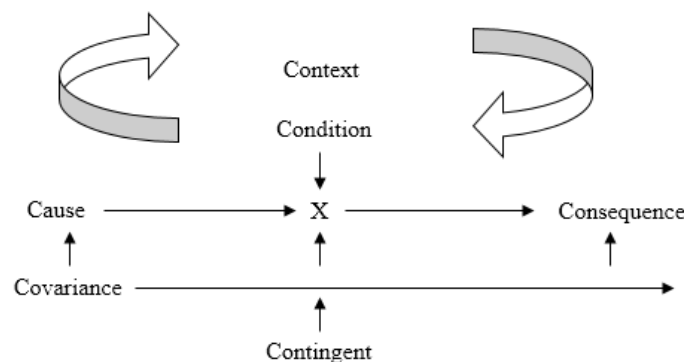


Figure 1. Glaser 6C family model (Neill & Coyne, 2018)



Figure 2. Pattern from data analysis in the theoretical coding stage

categories in the best possible way. The following figure shows this framework.

Finally, the model obtained from the research is demonstrated in Figure 2.

Discussion and Conclusions

The issue of the emigration of elite athletes, who are a symbol of a nation in international forums, as a sociological phenomenon is affected by various factors and will have various consequences and reflections on the growth and development process of countries. According to the current research findings, among the factors influencing the emigration of elite Iranian athletes, some factors are seen as more significant and prioritized by the interviewees. This is because most interviewees emphasized these factors and dedicated more interview time to them. These factors are, in order, economic factors, political-legal factors, socio-cultural factors, professional factors, and personal factors. With regards to each of these categories:

- For economic factors, the interviewees highlighted the “lack of stability and uncertainty of the economic future in Iran, as well as budgetary and revenue challenges faced by the country’s sports organizations.”

- Concerning the political-legal factors, the interviewees pointed out the “imposition of political and economic sanctions against Iran by other countries and the diminishing of Iran’s national brand on the global stage.”
- Regarding socio-cultural factors, they mentioned the “cultural, religious, and spiritual restrictions, the diminishing of social and civic freedoms, such as issues related to the hijab, the restrictive societal environment, and imposed behavioral patterns.”
- For professional factors, the interviewees emphasized the “lack of meritocracy and performance orientation, as well as the prevalence of nepotism across various sectors of professional sports in Iran.”
- In terms of personal factors, they spoke of the “desire to prove one’s athletic abilities to others when placed in the right conditions and the assurance of a bright sports future in the destination country.”

A detailed examination of these factors has been carried out in the continuation of the research.

As mentioned, the most critical component related to economic factors is the “lack of stability and uncertainty of the economic future in Iran and the budgetary and

income issues of the country's sports organizations" as this issue weakens and reduces the income opportunities, welfare and facilities related to the scientific and sports elites of this country. Also, bad economic conditions can broadly indicate the unfavourable state of the country in other political, social and cultural dimensions, because if a country is economically in a suitable growth condition, it shows less corruption among the rulers and politicians, more cultural and social development of the society and the correct implementation of the laws. It also shows the efficiency of the various organizations and institutions of the country, which can significantly reduce the desire of elite athletes to emigrate from the country. In addition, the country's economic stability is an important issue in the phenomenon of the emigration of Iranian elite athletes. In countries like Iran, where the economy is in an unstable state, prices and inflation increase and purchasing power and the level of well-being decrease, causing dissatisfaction among different sections of society, including elite athletes. Moreover, in the country's inflationary conditions, the value of the national currency decreases with the increase in the exchange rate. Therefore, instability in the economy increases the risk of different economic activities in different sectors, including sports, after which the volume of production activities, services, and investment in various sports sectors will decrease and lead to more dependence of sports on government budgets and job insecurity for Iranian elite athletes. This causes their unemployment and lack of sufficient income, both at working age and in retirement. They take jobs that are lower status than they expected, which, in addition to the economic effects, has a damaging psychological effect. The athletes in this study believe unemployment or having a low income is a significant deterrent in Iran. Especially in disciplines with no organized league, athletes cannot consider sports their primary source of income and see their professional future as unstable. Additionally, they stated that during their presence in training camps and competitive trips to other countries, they distinctly feel the difference in welfare conditions. The inadequate financial and economic infrastructure in Iran also diminishes the limited financial support from the government for sports. In such circumstances, they tolerate economic pressures to a certain extent, but when they reach a point where continuing in these conditions no longer seems logical, deciding to migrate becomes the most logical solution.

Political-legal factors are among other factors affecting the emigration of Iranian elite athletes. For example, sanctions have created problems for this country in various sectors, including professional sports and related actions. Problems such as not being able to issue bank guarantees and transfer money abroad, problems in issuing visas for the participation of Iranian athletes in some world tournaments, the suspension or unclear status of important

sports contracts and memorandums with other countries, problems related to the import or export of sports goods, and the termination of cooperation of many companies or organizations with the country's sports are all issues that can lead to a decline in the quality of Iranian sports. Along with the negative publicity in the international media, this adds to the weakening of Iran's national brand at the global level and creates more motivation for the emigration of Iranian elite athletes. In addition, to strengthen or improve the state of their national sports, some countries have sought to establish more accessible rules and policies regarding the acceptance of elite immigrant athletes and granting them citizenship. Also, international sports organizations, such as the International Olympic Committee or international sports federations, also support this issue in many cases.

The incompetence and inefficiency of Iran's management system can be another essential political-legal factor affecting the emigration of elite athletes in this country. This factor, along with the harmful effects it will bring to various aspects of the country's administration, has led to the presence of politicians and their political tendencies in the country's sports and their interference in the elections of sports organizations and boards. In doing so, politicians try to appoint people follow their demands and policies, rather than considering the needs of the athletes of that discipline. This issue can threaten the professional future of elite athletes with poor decisions, such as banning participation in an important and global event or not competing and facing an athlete from a country with policies contrary to their own country. As a result, some athletes prefer to migrate to other countries and compete for those countries in order to maintain and improve their professional future. Indeed, according to the views of some sports directors, deputies and research professors who participated in this study, what leads to the dominance of strategic thoughts in the field of sports and its further growth and progress is managerial stability and the elimination of political interference, which are rarely seen in Iran's sports.

On the other hand, sports in Iran strongly depend on the government, and due to its spread in various public, championship and professional sectors, more than the budget allocated for it is needed, especially in the championship and professional sectors. In the meantime, a tiny share of sports has been given to the private sector and the amount of government support for this sector is minimal. There are also complicated rules for this handover, which makes the process very time-consuming, tiring and expensive, so that many investors have less desire to invest in and support professional sports and its income-generating benefits have not been well presented to them. The continuation of these conditions strengthens the dependence of sports on the government and reduces

their dynamism, making generating income in sports a severe problem. This issue reinforces the motivation of many elite athletes to emigrate from the country.

Iran's social-cultural factors also influence the emigration of elite athletes from this country because a society that is not in a suitable position in this regard is bound to be indifferent to the status of sport and its elite athletes. Currently, sport is considered as one of the essential indicators of development in any society, and neglecting it is considered a weakness of that society's culture. The existence of such conditions has caused the feelings and wishes of elite athletes not to be appreciated as the country's human capital, and the officials and mass media have been indifferent towards them. As a result, it discourages them from their own society and can be the basis for the decision of elite athletes to migrate to other countries. Another significant factor influenced by cultural-social aspects is the weakening sense of patriotism and nationalism that affects the emigration of elite Iranian athletes. According to participants in this research, there has been an increase in societal indifference and a departure from collective identity in recent years, which can impact individuals' perceptions of their national identity. The feelings of individuals, including elite Iranian athletes, towards their society and country are more influenced by a sense of injustice, social satisfaction, and public trust than by personal factors. Consequently, it might be argued that the current state of Iranian society diminishes the elite athletes' perception of their national identity, reduces the difficulty of detaching from national and identity ties, makes migration hardships more bearable, and thus leads to an increase in the migration of elite Iranian athletes to other countries.

Also, in countries such as Iran, there are many cultural, religious and political restrictions that reduce the social and civil liberties of people, including elite athletes. Imposed behavioral patterns also emerge. According to the athletes participating in the study, they must adhere to specific behavioral patterns during competitions, camps, and deployments that have no connection to their athletic performance and go against their wishes, thereby curtailing their freedoms. Most of the athletes in this research believe restrictive societal rules are a significant factor in their decision to migrate from Iran. Requirements stemming from the type of governing system in Iran, found mainly in countries with religious governance, have led to a clause in the constitution named "upholding Islamic values." This clause, alongside "protecting the system's interests," has imposed various restrictions on many of the personal freedoms of the Iranian populace, including elite athletes. Differing interpretations of these clauses have sometimes prevented the formation of women's teams, hindered sending teams to certain competitions, forced athletes to refrain from competing with certain countries and obliged athletes to follow specific behaviors.

Therefore, it could be said that insisting on these non-technical issues has not been ineffective, even when it comes to discrimination against minorities, ethnicities, sports branches, and women's sports, leading to an increase in the migration of elite Iranian athletes from the country.

Issues like the mandatory observance of the Islamic hijab for women athletes, the implementation of imposed behaviour patterns and the closed space that, in many cases, encourages elite athletes to live in a modern environment and away from traditional and religious prejudices, is the basis for their migration to other countries. It should be noted that all of these restrictions in Iran are much greater for women than for men. Female professional athletes in this country are paid much less than male professional athletes. There are many problems and limitations on professional sports facilities and equipment, and women need to be better supported by the government and the private sector. Also, as regards Iran's political and religious conditions, the issue of women athletes' clothing when participating in international sports competitions is of great concern to officials and managers. In some cases, their participation in some international competitions is prevented. This issue can waste years of the athlete's effort and make her angry and upset. The attention of the authorities to the wearing of the hijab by female athletes has caused proper media coverage of their sports events in the country, and this issue itself is one of the important reasons that fewer financial sponsors are willing to support women's sports in the country. Even after years since the issue of women entering sports stadiums was raised, many women in Iran are not allowed to enter sports stadiums. Only in a small number of large cities and only for selected competitions are a limited number of women allowed to participate, and this depends on meeting the conditions set for them in terms of clothing. In recent years, all of these issues have caused the dissatisfaction of many women in this country and their protests. It is also known to be one of the factors that have deprived Iran of the possibility of hosting many sports events.

Other factors affecting the emigration of Iranian elite athletes are professional factors, the most important of which is non-compliance with a system of meritocracy and the relationship-oriented system in the country's sports, which is a significant problem in management and search for talent in professional sports. It is also considered an obstacle to its development. Most of the researchers, administrators, deputies and sports coaches participating in this study emphasized that managing organizational environments, including sports organizations, inherently requires a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the groups and the duties of those under supervision, which in turn requires general and specialized skills and competencies. They stated that the existing management system in Iranian sports organizations disregards the

necessary expertise and principles for management. However, the dominance of non-technical and non-performance-based criteria leaves no room for the activities of specialized individuals. In fact, the selection of managers in the field of professional sports based on the existence of relationships, rather than competence, has led to the weakening of the country's sports management structure. Their lack of understanding of the professional sports environment and the primary and vital needs of elite athletes is basis for the emergence of many injustices and discriminations within and outside of disciplines in the sports environment. In addition, it causes unequal distribution of facilities, opportunities and their extreme attention to some popular media fields such as football and little attention to other areas of sport. To the extent that it is even possible in some fields, coherent and organized professional leagues will not be created. Such issues increase dissatisfaction and disagreement between athletes and the authorities and provide the conditions for elite athletes to migrate after receiving attractive financial and welfare offers from other countries.

Various personal situations are also a key factor affecting the phenomenon of elite athletes' emigration from Iran. One of the most important is the athlete's effort to prove himself and his sports capabilities to others if he is placed in more favourable conditions, achieves more sports successes, and criticizes the existing conditions in his country. Moreover, Many Iranian elite athletes have migrated to gain new experiences and stand alongside other famous athletes and coaches, improving their work and professional resumes and the favourable living and working conditions of other elite athletes and their success, which gives them stronger motivation. Another important issue related to the personal aspects of emigration is having better and more personal and family comfort, prosperity and gaining confidence in the future. Even during retirement, it reduces related worries and leads to a more peaceful life, which is a powerful motivator for elite athletes to migrate. Consequently, according to the participants in this research, it can be said that personal factors can play a significant role in choosing the path to achieve professional goals. Individuals have varying character traits, such as their degree of optimism, their hierarchy of needs, an inclination towards hedonism, levels of motivation, and emotional dependencies. These factors can influence their decision to pursue professional goals in a different environment.

The migration of elite athletes can bring many positive and negative consequences in various economic, sports, cultural-social and security-political dimensions for the country of origin and destination. Currently, the economic development of countries depends on their human capital more than any other factor. Human capital is known as the most crucial tool for achieving development in a country, in such a way that if a country has sufficient

natural resources and capital, but insufficient and efficient human resources, it will not be successful. Certainly, one of the most influential human capitals for any country and symbols in international forums are its elite athletes. The activity of elite athletes at the championship and professional level is a place where huge sums are exchanged at the global level in the sports industry. If a country does not succeed in maintaining its elite athletes, after spending money on their education and training, it will not be able to perform correctly and attract the sports elites of other countries. In this way, a one-way flow will be formed to the benefit of the immigrant-receiving countries, mostly developed countries, and to the detriment of the immigrant-sending countries, mostly developing countries. Over many years, this issue, along with other factors affecting the economy of a country, can slow economic growth in developing countries and deepen the gap between them and developed countries, due to developing countries exporting their elite human capital to advanced industrial countries in order to accelerate the economic growth and development of those industrialized countries.

Another issue concerning the emigration of Iranian elite athletes is the social-cultural consequences for the country. Elite athletes usually attract the attention of people. Many of their actions, behaviours and words are broadcast in the media and many young people choose them as their role models. If they decide to emigrate for a brighter personal future and express dissatisfaction with the country's internal conditions to justify their move, they can induce a sense of despair in the country and strengthen social frustration among young people, leading to an increased rate of migration, particularly among young people and the elites.

The security-political consequences are another critical effect of the emigration of Iranian elite athletes. These people, as essential human capital and cultural ambassadors of the country, have induced a sense of inefficiency of the political and administrative system of the country among their fellow citizens and globally. This can significantly reduce the status of Iran's national brand, which is determined by a set of political, cultural, social and economic factors. Because the state of a country, politically and managerially, will determine the performance of politicians and officials in other economic, cultural and social dimensions. If the political and managerial dimension of the country is weak, other dimensions will not have suitable and acceptable conditions. As a result, the continuation of these conditions increases the desire of elite athletes and other country elites to migrate.

According to the above, in order to deal with the phenomenon of the emigration of Iranian elite athletes, different incentives and policy solutions could be employed. Incentive strategies provide internal and external incentives to Iranian athletes and top sports talents in order to

encourage them to stay in the homeland. These incentives include the provision of facilities related to employment, housing and marriage, men's military status, continuing education in related fields, the membership of elite athletes in the general assemblies of sports federations of the relevant fields, and so on. It is possible to help develop sports talents and gain honour for the country with the proper education and training of elite athletes from the beginning of their activities, as well as the development of individual and social life indicators, providing them with professional facilities and familiarizing them with professional laws, regulations and legal principles.

Political strategies can also be very effective in dealing with the emigration of elite athletes. Among the most meaningful solutions, we can enumerate the approval of laws related to providing more financial, livelihood and social welfare facilities for elite athletes and the approval of laws related to financial and spiritual support of professional sports. When an issue becomes law, its implementation becomes necessary and many obstacles are removed from its implementation. In addition, the government should consider special conditions and privileges for investors in professional sports so that it can transfer a large part of the country's sports to the private sector, create a more competitive environment in sports, and provide more financial income for sports. Other important and effective strategies are less involvement of politicians in professional sports affairs and emphasis on meritocracy instead of family connections. In this way, qualified people take over the management of different sports sectors of the country and can make appropriate plans for their growth and development with their knowledge, by treating athletes of different fields with more justice, imagining a hopeful future for them in terms of personal and professional life, and encouraging them to stay in the country and make it proud.

Competing interests

None of the authors have financial, interpersonal, or other connections to other people or organizations that would create a conflict of interest.

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