

Informed Choice or Situational Deterrence in the Immigration of Iranian Elite Athletes: Providing a Framework of Related Factors

Elham. Dehghani¹, Fazlollah. Bagherzadeh^{2*}, Davood. Hoomanian³, Keyvan. Salehi⁴

¹ PhD. Candidate Sport Psychology, Sport Sciences and Health Faculty, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

² Associate Professor, Motor Behavior, Sport Sciences and Health Faculty, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

³ Assistant Professor, Motor Behavior, Sport Sciences and Health Faculty, University of Tehran, Tehran

⁴ Associate Professor, Division of Research and Assessment, Department of Curriculum Development & Instruction Methods, Faculty of Psychology & Education, University of Tehran

* Corresponding author email address: bagherzad@ut.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Dehghani, E., Bagherzadeh, F., Hoomanian, D., & Salehi, K. (2024). Informed Choice or Situational Deterrence in the Immigration of Iranian Elite Athletes: Providing a Framework of Related Factors. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 5(7), 119-125.

<https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.5.7.13>



© 2024 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: The emigration of elite athletes from Iran has adversely affected the nation's growth and development. This study seeks to identify the determinants influencing the migration of elite Iranian athletes.

Methods and Materials: This research utilized a qualitative approach employing systematic grounded theory methodology. Participants were purposefully selected and included male and female national athletes who had changed citizenship and relocated abroad for athletic purposes. Data collection was conducted through 10 Persian and English articles and 16 interviews.

Findings: The data analysis resulted in the identification of 136 initial codes. These codes were consolidated into 12 subcategories, which included personal reasons, sports growth and development, favorable conditions in the destination country, personal weaknesses and psychological elements, resources, facilities and infrastructure, economic problems in the country, financial issues for athletes, sports management weaknesses, political restrictions, cultural challenges, and social issues. Furthermore, these subcategories were organized into three main categories: intra-personal factors, economic factors, and extra-personal factors.

Conclusion: The study suggests that senior officials should address discriminatory perspectives, ensure justice within the sports sector, provide equal opportunities, enhance management practices, offer economic support to athletes, combat discrimination, decouple politics from sports, and respect the privacy of athletes, particularly women.

Keywords: Migration, Intrapersonal factors, Extra-personal factors, Economic factors, Sports elites.

1. Introduction

Immigration stands as one of the most critical social issues today, carrying profound economic and cultural implications for countries. This demographic phenomenon

has garnered significant attention from scholars in the humanities and social sciences. The post-World War II increase in immigration and the number of immigrants intensified scholarly focus on this issue. Immigration

encompasses all types of population movements between territories, resulting in a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence (Zarghani & Mousavi, 2013). Sociologists define immigration as the movement of a population from one geographical location to another for work or life. It is associated with factors such as poverty, unemployment, natural disasters, war and insecurity, lack of essential services like education and healthcare, suitable living conditions, and political, social, and cultural freedoms (Kostakopoulou & Schrauwen, 2014). Experts consider immigration a significant form of population movement, reflecting remarkable diversity. Elite migration is influenced by various internal and external factors, including political, social, scientific, cultural, economic, educational, occupational, and livelihood factors (Wollmann et al., 2015).

Between 2013 and 2018, a substantial number of immigrants, primarily Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans fleeing armed conflicts, entered the European Union, leading to a surge in asylum applications. This movement, often termed the "refugee crisis," had profound economic, legal, political, and religious implications, straining resources and sparking political tensions within the EU (Williams & Carlson, 2020).

In today's world, a significant number of people experience immigration at some point in their lives. This pivotal event shapes the foundation of an individual's daily life, making it crucial to thoroughly examine the various dimensions and consequences of immigration. According to data from the International Monetary Fund, Iran leads in the immigration of young elites globally. A challenging business environment, unstable employment conditions, and low salaries are just a few of the issues faced by Iranian elites. These challenges, combined with a lack of social and spiritual support, have driven many of these individuals to immigrate to foreign countries. Due to the absence of comprehensive planning to address these problems, a substantial number of the country's elites have chosen to leave Iran (Heidari et al., 2023). The departure of elites and specialized professionals from the country is a sociological phenomenon resulting from economic, political, and professional factors, and it has had detrimental effects on the country's growth and development processes.

When elite immigration is discussed, the focus tends to be on scientific elites, yet the immigration of sports elites, who represent a nation on the international stage, can have equally significant and adverse effects on the country (Hosseini et al., 2020). This includes the immigration of athletes or sports coaches, a social phenomenon driven by various factors and yielding both positive and negative

consequences (Erkkilä, 2019). Following the "long immigration summer" of 2015, many European countries found themselves embroiled in contentious political debates concerning the social integration of refugees. These discussions also delved into the role of sports, often seen as a catalyst for integration (Rösch, 2010). Immigration is an issue that institutions and organizations have not adequately addressed or provided scientific solutions to resolve this national loss. Unfortunately, the significance and position of expert and professional forces in third-world countries have yet to be fully recognized. Consequently, this research seeks to answer the question, "What factors are related to the sports immigration of Iran's elite athletes?"

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach and the grounded theory method, aligning with the study's subject and purpose. Additionally, the study received approval from an ethics committee. The participants consisted of national male and female athletes who had changed their citizenship and relocated to another country to pursue their sports activities. The sample selection was based on data saturation, expertise, experience, and willingness.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured

Data collection involved interviews and reviewing relevant documents and reports. The interviews followed a semi-structured format. Prior to the interviews, all participants were presented with a consent form outlining the study's purpose and assuring the confidentiality of their information. Simultaneously, qualitative data were analyzed using the Strauss and Corbin method (open coding). The sampling process continued until data saturation in the categories was achieved. The qualitative research was evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative criteria.

2.3. Data analysis

The research methodology encompassed a document study and semi-structured interviews. Factors were extracted through the examination of documents, books, and articles from Persian and English databases (10 in total), as well as 16 interviews. The data analysis utilized the Strauss and

Corbin method (open coding). The coding of articles and interviews involved using the letter A for articles and P for participants. The data collection continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring that no new material was added to the researcher's knowledge. After conducting 16 interviews over three months, the data analysis indicated that

no new data was added, leading to the conclusion of the interviews.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

Immigration destination	Education	Sports experience (Years)	Kind of Sport	Gender	Age	Interviewee code
Germany	Master's	19	Individual	Male	35	P1
Azerbaijan	Bachelor's	24	Individual	Male	38	P2
Australia	Bachelor's	20	Individual	Male	32	P3
Belgium	Bachelor's	25	Individual	Female	34	P4
Azerbaijan	Diploma	12	Individual	Male	26	P5
Norway	Bachelor's	19	Individual	Male	34	P6
Germany	Diploma	30	Group	Male	41	P7
Germany	Diploma	18	Individual	Male	30	P8
Germany	Bachelor's	15	Individual	Female	28	P9
Germany	Bachelor's	21	Individual	Male	32	P10
Germany	Diploma	22	Group	Male	44	P11
Germany	Bachelor's	14	Individual	Female	28	P12
Italy	Master's	12	Individual	Male	25	P13
Switzerland	Diploma	18	Individual	Female	32	P14
Turkey	Bachelor's	15	Individual	Male	29	P15
Turkey	Associate's	16	Individual	Male	29	P16

The findings in [Table 2](#) indicate that among the categories associated with the immigration of elite Iranian athletes, 41 primary codes out of a total of 136 are linked to intrapersonal factors. These factors encompass five sub-categories:

personal reasons, sports growth and development, personal weaknesses, psychological elements, and favorable conditions in the destination country.

Table 2

Categories Related to Intrapersonal Factors

Main Category	Sub-category	Primary codes
Intrapersonal factors	Personal reasons	Seeking new experiences; Uncertainty regarding future post-retirement; Earning potential; Financial security; Modern environment; Personal and emotional considerations; Influence of family and friends; Support from family, friends, and agents; Life skills acquisition; Personal growth and development; Employment opportunities; Long-term career aspirations; Talent nurturing.
	Sports growth and development	Enhancing athletic abilities; Demonstrating expertise; Potential for progress; Achieving peak performance; Sports commercialization; Professional incentives; Type of sport.
	Personal weaknesses	Decreasing spirituality; Erosion of national identity; Pressure; Material focus; Family financial constraints; Diminished national allegiance; Lack of support; Struggles in destination country.
	Favorable conditions	Suitable platforms for professional activities; State-of-the-art facilities; Infrastructure services; Supportive facilities; Wage disparity; Favorable immigration laws; Secure future for children.
	Psychological elements	Shortage of psychologists; Neglect and lack of empathy; Emotional turmoil post-championship; Mental struggle; Elevated stress levels; Fatigue and disillusionment.

The findings in [Table 3](#) indicate that among the categories associated with the immigration of Iranian elite athletes, 27 primary codes out of a total of 136 are linked to economic factors. These factors encompass three sub-categories:

resources, facilities, and infrastructure; economic challenges within the country; and financial difficulties faced by athletes.

Table 3

Categories Related to Economic Factors

Main Category	Sub-category	Primary codes
Economic factors	Resources, facilities, and infrastructure	Insufficient facilities; Lack of laboratory equipment; Inadequate sports infrastructure; Lack of welfare and medical coverage; Resource constraints.
	Economic problems of the country	Inadequate investment; Suboptimal budget utilization; Lack of specialized budgets; Economic instability; Reliance on imported sports items; Neglect of economic issues.
	Financial problems of athletes	Inadequate rewards; Ineffective salary system; Lack of financial support during championships; Reduction of payments in case of failure; Costs related to international competitions; Official negligence.

The findings presented in [Table 4](#) indicate that out of a total of 136 primary codes related to the immigration of elite Iranian athletes, 68 are associated with extra-personal

factors. These factors can be categorized into four sub-categories: sports management weaknesses, political restrictions, cultural problems, and social issues.

Table 4

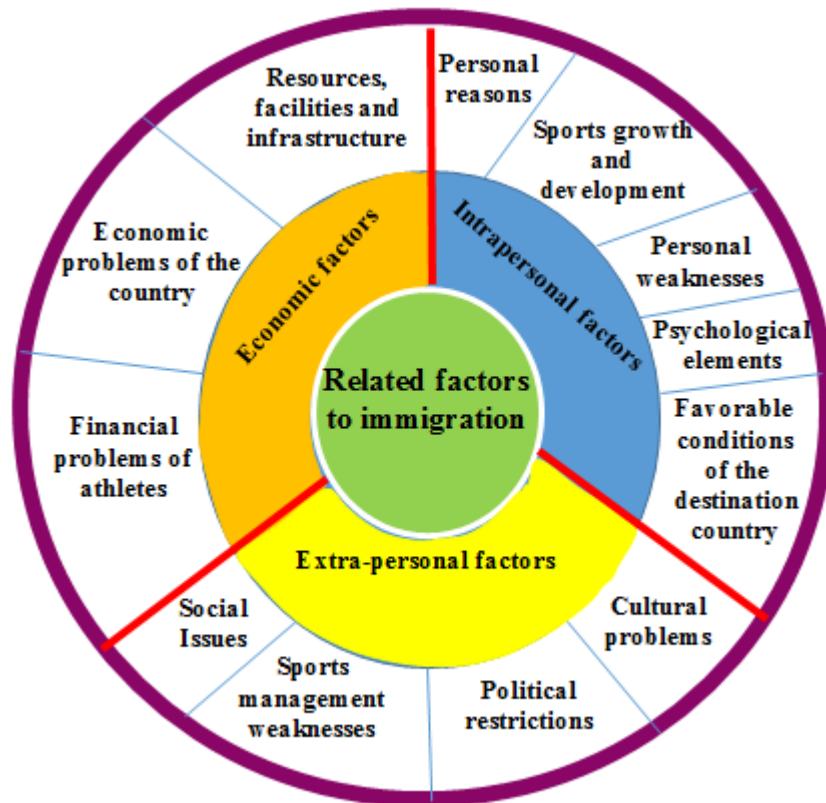
Categories Related to Extra-Personal Factors

Main Category	Sub-category	Primary codes
Extra-personal factors	Social issues	Lack of social recognition of sports; Inappropriate attitudes towards women's sports; Disrespect towards athletes; Failure to implement social benefits laws; Undefined social position of athletes; Status and socio-economic disparities; Social status of athletes; Lack of respect from officials; Public suspicion towards athletes' incomes.
	Sports management weaknesses	Lack of government jobs; Injustice and discrimination in sports fields; Inappropriate selection mechanisms; Lack of meritocracy; Failure to employ experienced trainers; Non-regular holding of leagues; Neglect of basic level athletes; Not sending teams to competitions; Lack of effective unions; Weak laws supporting sports elites; Overreliance on camps; Officials' lack of sports familiarity; Inappropriate behavior from federation officials; Poor management; External pressures; Negligence in athlete support; Inability to organize major events.
	Political restrictions	Prohibition of competition against certain countries; Inefficient management; Instrumental view of athletes; Lack of planning for military service; Lack of job security; Injustice in team selection; Religious, ethnic, or gender discrimination; Sports not prioritized; Political interference; Managers' self-interest; Unprofessional management; Political divisions; Transportation restrictions; Federation's involvement in private issues; Centralization of resources.
	Cultural problems	Restrictions on women's sports attire; Lack of behavioral protocol; Imposed behavior patterns; Religious restrictions; Unfavorable conditions for women; Discriminatory views towards athletes from certain provinces; Promoting a culture of immigration.

The conceptual framework derived from the research findings is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1

The Conceptual Framework



4. Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the primary factors influencing the immigration of elite Iranian athletes abroad. Through a review of documents, articles, and interviews with 19 elites, three main categories were identified: intrapersonal factors, extra-personal factors, and economic factors. The first category, intrapersonal factors, encompassed five sub-categories: personal reasons, sports growth and development, favorable conditions in the destination country, personal weaknesses, and psychological elements. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Agergaard & Ronglan, 2015; Heidari et al., 2023; Maguire & Pearton, 2000).

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that some elite Iranian athletes choose to immigrate primarily for personal and family reasons, aiming to secure a better future for themselves and their children. Regarding sports growth and development, previous studies have highlighted the desire to enhance skills, gain recognition as professional athletes, achieve peak performance, and commercialize their sports abilities (Allen & Hopkins, 2015). The favorable conditions

in the destination countries, including advanced sports facilities, infrastructure services, and higher wages, significantly influence their decision to immigrate. Personal weaknesses such as materialism, lack of support, and weak patriotism are also cited, along with psychological elements such as pressure and burnout.

Economic factors, including financial problems and the country's economic situation, are also crucial considerations. Overall, the findings suggest that a combination of intrapersonal, extra-personal, and economic factors contribute to the immigration of elite Iranian athletes. Concerning the financial problems faced by athletes, previous studies (Mutuku et al., 2017) have emphasized the insufficient and ineffective salary and benefits system for sports champions in international arenas, the lack of proper financial support for national athletes during championship periods, delayed payment of bonuses and approved awards, inadequate bonus points for special competitions, lack of awards for champions, insufficient salaries, officials' indifference to athletes' livelihood issues, and reduced payments when there are no results.

Interviewees also mentioned the imposition of expenses related to sending athletes to international competitions, the

lack of financial support from federations, and domestic clubs' failure to fulfill their financial obligations towards athletes. Additionally, the interviewees highlighted other factors related to weaknesses in sports management. Therefore, based on these findings, it can be concluded that managerial weaknesses in Iran's sports sector are a significant factor contributing to the decision of elite Iranian athletes to emigrate abroad. This issue has wide-ranging implications, particularly the presence of non-sports managers at high levels of sports management, which has caused significant damage to Iran's sports sector.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Based on the research findings, several recommendations can be made to prevent the immigration of elite Iranian athletes. Policymakers should focus on utilizing sports managers and formulating an effective management system, eliminating instrumental thinking towards athletes, developing facilities and infrastructure, addressing the economic issues and living conditions of professional athletes, providing job opportunities and security, separating politics from sports, and creating appropriate banking facilities for athletes. Officials and coaches should eradicate discriminatory and biased views, establish justice within and between sports disciplines, prioritize meritocracy and create equal opportunities, eliminate injustice and bias in national team selection, address religious, ethnic, and gender discrimination seriously, commit to athletes' duties, and avoid interfering in the personal issues of athletes.

However, some limitations of the research, such as the non-cooperation of some athletes, failure of some interviewees to provide detailed information, and difficulties in communication due to internet limitations, should be considered when interpreting the results.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally.

References

- Agergaard, S., & Ronglan, L. T. (2015). Player migration and talent development in elite sports teams: A comparative analysis of inbound and outbound career trajectories in Danish and Norwegian women's handball.
- Allen, S. V., & Hopkins, W. G. (2015). Age of peak competitive performance of elite athletes: a systematic review. *Sports medicine*, 45, 1431-1441. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-015-0354-3>
- Erkkilä, A. (2019). The factors behind successful immigrant athletes.
- Heidari, H., Davoudi, N., & Talebi, F. (2023). Macroeconomic and sectoral effects of labor immigration: application of CGE model. *Quarterly Journal of Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 22(4), 25-42.
- Hosseini, Z., Honari, H., & Ghafouri, F. (2020). Modeling the Factors Affecting the Sport Migration of Iranian Elite Athletes. *Organizational Behavior Management in Sport Studies*, 7(1), 95-109.
- Kostakopoulou, D., & Schrauwen, A. (2014). Olympic citizenship and the (un) specialness of the national vest: Rethinking the links between sport and citizenship law. *International Journal of Law in Context*, 10(2), 143-162. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552314000081>
- Maguire, J., & Pearton, R. (2000). The impact of elite labour migration on the identification, selection and development of European soccer players. *Journal of sports sciences*, 18(9), 759-769. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410050120131>
- Mutuku, E. N., Kioli, F. N., & Gaudin, B. (2017). Psychosocial Challenges Facing Athletes (Medium and Long distance Runners) in Eldoret, Kenya. In: IRD Editions.
- Rösch, S. (2010). Towards Measuring the Level of Identification with Multicultural Practices and Values in German National Culture: A Critical Discourse Analytic Study on Multicultural Representations in the German National Integration Plan.
- Williams, N. E., & Carlson, E. D. (2020). Conceptualizing the Syrian refugee crisis and migration during armed conflict.

Comparative demography of the Syrian diaspora: European and Middle Eastern destinations, 3-12.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24451-4_1

Wollmann, A. S., Vonk, O., & de Groot, G.-R. (2015). Towards a sporting nationality? *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, 22(2), 305-321.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1023263X1502200208>

Zarghani, H., & Mousavi, Z. (2013). International emigrations and national security. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 16(59), 7-26.