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# Football and the media construction of Iranian national identity during the FIFA World Cup 2018 and AFC Asian Cup 2019

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## ABSTRACT

Elite sport success in international tournaments is supposed to play an important role in shaping national identity. In this article, we explore if and how this applies to the Iranian context. The current study made use of a Google alert with the title of 'Iran Men's National Football Team', and a general content analysis of Iranian national and sport media. The analytic focus was on media coverage of the Iranian national football team at the 2018 FIFA World Cup and the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. All relevant newspaper articles before, during, and after Iran's matches were reviewed, coded, and analysed. We developed four main themes in the coverage expressing Iranian identity in the context of the aforesaid football events: 'united passion', 'determined and conscientious', 'oppressed but great', and 'emotion-ridden'. It was concluded that political and historical references used by Iranian media contribute to the invention and reproduction of Iranian national identity through the aforementioned sporting tournaments.

## Introduction

Iran's football victory over Australia in December 1997 resulted in the second advancement to the football World Cup after 20 years. It was the first time that a sport achievement was celebrated on the streets nationwide thus driving away attention from other national sports such as wrestling.<sup>1</sup> Since then, football has been considered one of the main opportunities for Iranian people and media to express Iranian national identity.<sup>2</sup> However, there have always been challenges for such expressions. For instance, the political tensions arising from Iran's nuclear programme endangered the attendance of the national team in the 2006 FIFA World Cup.<sup>3</sup> In the same way, nuclear-related sanctions impacted the national team's preparation plans before the 2014 FIFA World Cup as well.<sup>4</sup> Some friendly matches and training camps were rescinded because of this challenging issue. Despite the consequences of re-imposed sanctions, emotions related to the national team remained strong for Iranians in the next World Cup (2018). Just as an example, after Iran's match against Portugal in the last FIFA World Cup, it was documented in Iranian media that 'a nation's shout shook the capital'.<sup>5</sup> This referred to the audio level that reached out further than average in Tehran in the ninetieth minute of the match, at the moment that Iran's striker missed a chance to score the winning goal.<sup>6</sup>

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It is widely acknowledged that major sporting events and especially football events such as FIFA World Cups can assist in (temporarily) diminishing cultural, demographical, and social boundaries by bringing people from different ethnic backgrounds together.<sup>7</sup> Worldwide, men's football has created opportunities for nations to collectively represent their commitment and express cultural beliefs, values, and myths.<sup>8</sup> Being exposed to such events and competitions can erupt many reactions and emotions amongst audiences.<sup>9</sup>

With that in mind, it was shown that 85% of the articles in the nationwide sport newspapers in Iran are published on men's football, 13% on other men's sport disciplines, and 2% on women, disabled, and kids sports.<sup>10</sup> This may represent the fondness of people for (men's) football and also the importance of football in the (re)production of socio-cultural meanings and ideologies like masculinity and nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

As the above shows, (men's) football has been of crucial importance for Iran over the past two decades. Performances of national sport teams are sometimes considered as a political tool for the government to reinforce a feeling of national identity, pride, and unity amongst the Iranian population which would facilitate (acceptance of) sport policy goals as well.<sup>12</sup> Media sources can play an important role in transmitting the feelings and values related to such feelings of national pride and unity. The present paper will investigate that how mediated sports and in particular men's football during two major football tournaments (the FIFA World Cup 2018 and the AFC<sup>13</sup> Cup 2019) play a part in the construction of a general and shared discourse of Iranian national identity.

## **Theoretical framework and context of the study**

### ***Mediated sport and nationalism***

It has been argued that nationalism is 'invented' and reproduced by (printed, electronic, and social) media.<sup>14</sup> Mass media can, indeed, shape national identity and public attitudes about the nation through the building and rebuilding of common values and concepts.<sup>15</sup> Sport media mirror and construct nationalism by using discourses about nations, nationalistic feelings (which may include military idioms), cultural and historical symbols.<sup>16</sup> Rowe asserted that even though globalization is leading to a reduction in nationalistic feelings, media portrayals of major sporting events still include many nationalistic expressions.<sup>17</sup> Nationalism also determines media coverage of sport.<sup>18</sup> By referring to the national identity of athletes during international sporting events, media place them in, and at the same time construct and reinforce, homogeneous nation-based groups.<sup>19</sup>

The role of media in representing the concept of national identity in elite sport has been investigated in different societies. Hermes, for instance, focused on the Dutch context and explained how the national football team can be considered a battlefield and context for the propagation of racism and a specific form of nationalism by men.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Cho examined media coverage of the Major League Baseball (MLB) in South Korea and concluded that the government uses TV broadcasts to achieve certain political goals, even though this is not always accepted by citizens.<sup>21</sup> Citizens in Cho's study indicated that elite sport successes cannot always contribute to national identity and social cohesion because of the political-oriented nature of media coverage.<sup>22</sup>

Fan, Billings, Zhu, and Yu studied the association of English people to the national team during FIFA World Cup 2018.<sup>23</sup> They aimed to investigate people's connection to the national team and the country when the team performed in this tournament and concluded that even though the performance of the national team influences the national kinship, people's loyalty to the country is not classified by their association to the national team.<sup>24</sup> Dart also researched the Palestinian national football team in the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.<sup>25</sup> He concluded that only the attendance of the national team in this tournament was important due to its contribution to a sense of unity, developing social justice, and human rights for a nation, which is occupied by Israel. Football was also defined for Palestinian people as an important site to represent their national identity.<sup>26</sup>

Georgalou focused on the UEFA football championship 2004 to explain Greek national identity from the perspective of football players, coaches, and fans, and found that different aspects of national identity were expressed in Greek media by an emphasis on themes such as 'war' (bravery, ferocity, weaponry), and 'pain and injury' (playing with half a leg, weary of injuries).<sup>27</sup> He concluded that these Greek national players were identified as heroes, because of their admirable performance as well as their endurance of hardship.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in their study on media coverage of national football contests between Germany and England, Bishop and Jaworski described a number of war-oriented interpretations that refer to the long history of England and Germany's conflicts. British national players were described as being 'tenacious' and playing with 'aggression, desire' and 'classic bulldog spirit'.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, regarding their violence during football matches, some discourses reflected the behaviour of England supporters and therefore contended that there should be no pride in this tradition.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Sport, media, and Iranian nationalism***

The geographical position and huge challenges, including wars and revolutions, have modified and influenced Iranian identity over the centuries.<sup>31</sup> A vast number of national epics have been developed over time to boost nationalistic emotions in Iran.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, however, Iran is a very diverse society, and one general and comprehensive Iranian identity is hardly established.<sup>33</sup> The diversity of the country is evident, for instance, in the multi-ethnicity of the country with an ethnic majority group (Persian) and a variety of minority groups.

As was mentioned earlier, sport competitions and sport mega-events can provide opportunities for developing a national identity and national pride in and through the media.<sup>34</sup> This also applies to Iran. The most recent statistics show that the total number of national and local newspapers has gradually increased to 178 (125 national, 53 local) by 2009, including 15 national sport newspapers, over the past decades.<sup>35</sup> These numbers present the myriad of opportunities for the media to represent Iranians' emotions and identifications in the context of sporting events and competitions.

Only a few Iranian studies have investigated the subject of elite sport in connection with national identity and pride. For instance, Ahmadi, Firouzi, and Navabi, in quantitative research, compared the sense of national pride amongst Iranians before and after Iran's qualification to the 2014 FIFA World Cup.<sup>36</sup> They reported a remarkable rise in nationalist sentiments after this international tournament.<sup>37</sup> In another study, Fadaei De Cheshmeh, Eidi, and Abbasi investigated different dimensions of national pride in Iran with regard to sport pride, and their findings indicated that the achievements of the men's football and volleyball teams in the major sporting events resulted in emotional eruptions amongst Iranians, and stimulated feelings of happiness and social capital throughout the country.<sup>38</sup>

In an observational study on Iranian identity and football during the 2006 FIFA World Cup, Hashemi and Yeganeh described that Iranian fans attempted to imply 'Iran' as the one and the only thing that mattered to them regardless of the type of regime that ruled the country.<sup>39</sup> To illustrate this point, they added that a large number of women without wearing 'hijab', and with carrying the Islamic Republic's flag, supported the national team along with others who carried Iran's 'Lion and Sun' flag that represents pre-revolutionary Iran. Further, despite what Islamic culture prescribes about covering the body in public, some Iranian men supported the national team bare-chested while using Islamic emblems in the stadiums. In fact, the use of symbols of Iranian identity with the national football team inspired Iranians to support the national team, while some of them were not even football fans.<sup>40</sup>

Even though these studies focus mainly on Iranian football fans and audiences, but not much has been done to examine how Iranian media reproduces a specific idea of Iranian nationality and national identity during major sporting events. The current study, therefore, aims to scrutinize the media narratives about Iranian identity raising from the performances of the national football team in both the 2018 FIFA World and the 2019 AFC Asian Cups and to explore how Iranian identity is expressed in Iranian media during these major football tournaments.

## Method

The present study intends to examine the construction of Iranian national identity in and through media coverage of the national football team (better known as ‘Team Melli’ which literally means ‘the national team’) in both the 2018 FIFA World (June 14 – July 15) and the 2019 AFC Asian Cups (Jan 5 – Feb 1). During the football World Cup, the Iranian team won the game against Morocco (1–0), lost against Spain (0–1), while the last match ended in a draw against Portugal (1–1). It meant that the national team was knocked out of the World Cup in the group stage. Later on, in the AFC Asian Cup, the national football team qualified for the knockout phase and won the games against Oman and China in the knockout stages, but lost versus Japan in the semi-final on 28 January 2019.

We examined Iranian media coverage of the national Iranian football team in both events. First, the Persian, and also Iranian-English language online and print newspapers were investigated. We considered the English language media to catch more insight on Iranians representation in those major international sporting events. It allowed us to understand (constructions of) national identity in its variety of different (media) manifestations. The reason to particularly focus on newspapers in this study (instead of other media outlets) is that most of the statements/texts around Iranian national identity in Iran emerge in newspapers and online news agencies that produce online newspapers.

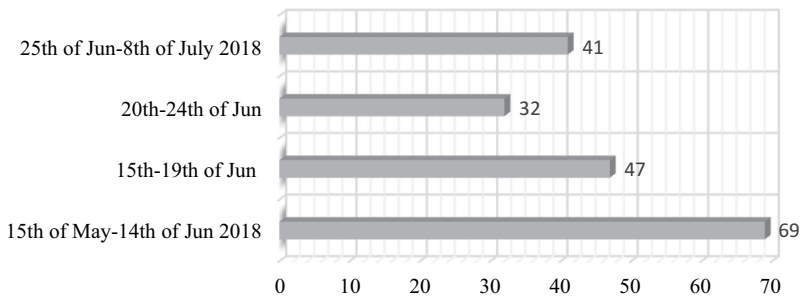
Accordingly, three main national sport daily newspapers were selected for our analysis including ‘Khabar-e-Varzeshi’ and ‘Iran-e-Varzeshi’ as the most circulated ones with a circulation number of 29,400 and 17,360, respectively, and also ‘Abrar-e-Varzeshi’ as the first published sport newspaper in contemporary Iran. These newspapers address mainly national, and also international news on different sporting disciplines. Given their popularity and their rate of circulation (which is amongst the highest of Iranian national newspapers), three daily public newspapers (Hamshahri, Iran, and Jaam-e-Jam) were also taken into account for further analysis. These newspapers were ranked according to their daily circulation of 207,200, 72,240, and 33,600 copies. As mentioned, we also considered the Iranian-English language newspapers (Tehran Times, Iran Daily, and Iran News) in this study.

Second, a Google alert with the title of ‘Iran Men’s National Football Team’ was applied four weeks before the first match of Iran against Morocco in the 2018 FIFA World Cup until two weeks after the last match in the World Cup (May 15 – July 8). The same time frame (pre-event, the event with the team active, the event with the team inactive, post-event) was applied for collecting data for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup (data were collected from December 5 until February 11). The sample dates were set as such because the coverage of the Iranian football team was mainly featured and designed in this period.

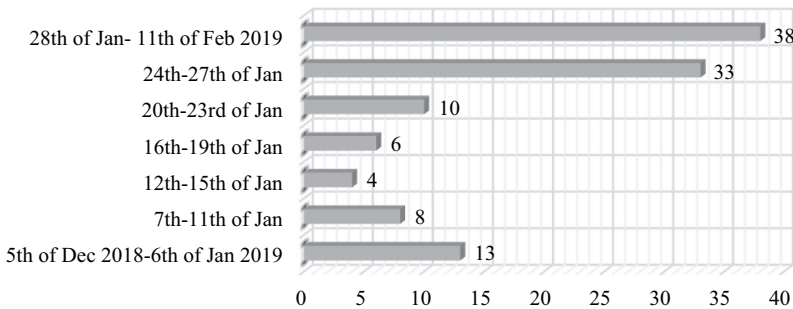
After reviewing the newspapers and Google alert articles, the items linked to the concept of ‘we’ and ‘national identity’ in the context of Iran’s national football team were extracted and then imported into an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. This analysis was done using inductive thematic analysis (TA), which identifies explicit and implicit meanings and patterns in the data, and searches for evidence and counter-evidence.<sup>41</sup> The first column of the coding scheme included a number for each code, the second column included the codes, and the third column included the labels of the codes (Determined & Conscientious’, ‘Oppressed but Great’, ‘United passion’, and ‘Emotion-ridden’). The identified themes are reflected in the following sections.

## Findings

A total of 301 items (sentences, titles, and quotations) related to the core concepts of the research were captured, of which 189 were pertinent to FIFA 2018 and 112 to AFC 2019. Before presenting and discussing the four main themes (Determined & Conscientious, Oppressed but Great, United passion, and Emotion-ridden), we provide a short numerical overview of the results.



**Figure 1.** The distribution of items for the 2018 FIFA WC.



**Figure 2.** The distribution of items for the 2019 Asian Cup.

**Table 1.** The distribution of relevant items over the final themes and two tournaments.

Final Themes	FIFA 2018		AFC 2019		Total	
	(n = 189)	Percent	(n = 112)	Percent	(n = 301)	Percent
Determined & Conscientious	96	51	18	16	114	38
Oppressed but Great	52	27	32	29	84	28
United Passion	41	22	24	21	65	22
Emotion-ridden	0	-	38	34	38	12

The highest number of relevant items concerning the FIFA 2018 World Cup were found in the period before the first match, which took place on 14 June 2018 ( $n = 69$ , [Figure 1](#)).

For the AFC Asian Cup 2019, the highest number of relevant items was captured after the last game ( $n = 38$ , [Figure 2](#)).

Moreover, as explained earlier, the quotations were categorized into four main themes. [Table 1](#) projects the numerical proportion of each theme in both football events showing that the Iranian national football team was mainly represented as ‘determined and conscientious’ in the football World Cup while it was finally represented as ‘Emotion-ridden’ in the AFC Asian Cup. The four themes and the differences (and similarities) in the framing of the national team in the two tournaments are presented and discussed below.

### ***Determined & Conscientious***

Before the football World Cup got started, Iran’s sport minister asserted that the national team would be defending Iran’s football credit in the upcoming tournament. Regarding the tough group that Iran had drawn, the media compared this condition to tough situations such as the 1980 Iran-Iraq war: ‘Iranians have always proven that they can obtain valuable achievements in difficult

conditions with their strong determination. Even during the war while many supported Iraq, our nation devotedly defended this land' (*Iran-e-Varzeshi*, 12 June 2018).

The *Abrar-e-Varzeshi* daily referred to the draw as 'a typical example of Iranians identity making the impossible possible with their diligence and strong determination' (9 June 2018).<sup>42</sup> The *Iran-e-Varzeshi* daily headed: 'real stars, not on paper nor virtual!' (17 June 2018) when some relatively anonymous players of the team contributed to Iran's victory over the Moroccan team, which had players playing in top football leagues in the world. Similar heroic comparisons were made between the strong defence of the Iranian football team against Spain and the Iraqi invasion in Iran in 1980 in the *Jaam-e-Jam* daily: 'the passionate narrative of Iranians resistance from Khorramshahr to Kazan; the story of the heads that blocked the ball, and therefore analogized this scene to the years of defending the Khorramshahr city – which was occupied- during the war' (23 June 2018).<sup>43</sup> References to Iranians' determination and conscientiousness were used when the Iranian team was described as: 'playing against strong teams', 'playing with heart', and 'being faced with difficulties in life'.

This is evident when *Abrar-e-Varzeshi* daily published an article describing that 'the national team underpinned its matches on the principles of courage, truth, commitment, and sacrifice in which the third one stays as a romantic principle' (25 June 2018). Appreciative statements from famous international football experts relating to the performance of the national team were reflected by the media. For instance, the former Dutch player was referred to when he called Iran a team playing with its heart (*Abrar-e-Varzeshi*, 27 June 2018). Furthermore, it was described how the German ambassador in Tehran wrote after the draw against Portugal (when Iran's goalkeeper blocked the penalty, kicked by the captain of the Portugal national team): 'Congratulations to the national team for its extraordinary matches, and to Alireza Beiranvand, a world-class goalkeeper from a nomad family in Lorestan province' (*Iran-e-Varzeshi*, 27 June 2018). This reference to a 'nomad family' – which is usually identified with hard living conditions and being self-reliant and self-efficient – and to a 'world-class goalkeeper' reflected the ambitious spirit of national players as they had experienced a challenging life.

Besides, the national team made use of the motivational atmosphere arising from people's advocacy, which also appeared in the arguments of the players. 'I thought of people the moment that we scored', an Iranian striker said after defeating Morocco in the World Cup (*Iran-e-Varzeshi*, 19 June 2018). Even though this team had neither star players nor proper preparation, the players were inspired to engage the fans and make them happy. One of the national team's players declared that 'we brought comfort to the people with our performances', (*Khabar-e-Varzeshi*, 10 June 2018). By the same token, it was argued that 'Iranians played with the sense of patriotism and thought of winning the games to maintain their people's respect' (*Abrar-e-Varzeshi*, 24 June 2018).

It was mainly the motivational spirit of the national team that was appreciated, instead of tactical or technical aspects of the games. In fact, after the World Cup, most of the media sources considered Iran as a respectable team due to the efforts that they made in each match. 'We were magnificent and that's all about football; a showcase of power and love' (*Iran-e-Varzeshi*, 26 June 2018).

Since the recent political conflicts seemingly blemished the image of the Iranian nation in the international media, the above-mentioned arguments supported the notion that the national team struggled to represent a positive picture of the Iranian people to the world apart from ongoing political tensions. Notwithstanding the violent atmosphere around the country, the media intended to reflect bright facets of Iranian identity in these tournaments.

Moreover, it was repeated that all the players strove in each game of the Asian Cup to make people happy. Even after being eliminated from the tournament at the semi-final stage, many of the players in their interviews considered themselves ashamed in front of the people. In fact, the indisputable support of the people and their emotional bonding with the national team had created a sense of commitment in the players towards the national shirt. Failing to meet people's

expectations from the national team caused shame among the players since this was one of the few opportunities for representing a positive image of the Iranian people in the international media.

### **Oppressed but great**

The national team was supposed to represent the dignity of a nation with a rich cultural and well-known historical background, which was indicated in the farewell ceremony for the World Cup: 'Billions around the world will be watching you as the representatives of a country with a rich culture and proud history. Hence, your good performance can amplify our national pride' (*Abrar-e-Varzeshi*, 21 May 2018). It was also hoped that 'this team would be a representative of Iranians' dignity in the circumstances that many are planning to humiliate them' (*Khabar-e-Varzeshi*, 12 June 2018).

In particular, the defensive line of the national team was specified by *Hamshahri* daily as a 'resemblance aspect of the national team with a nation that had to always defend against invaders over its long history' (26 June 2018).<sup>44</sup> The attendance of the national team in the World Cup was also connected to the recent political conflicts. 'During these years, we have been ignored or negatively represented. The keyword of "Iran" has been used along with issues such as war, sanctions, and the nuclear agreement, over the past years. Regardless of who was right, we have been noticed only in such a heavy and violent atmosphere. Even though they come to conclusion in policy and then act, in the unique world of football, all teams have the same chance to act first and then be judged' (*Hamshahri*, 20 June 2018). The media tried to signify that Iranians have managed to succeed, despite facing many challenges (i.e. wars, etc.). The analogy between the defensive tactics of the national team and the defence of the country in the recent war is illustrative of this discourse.

The recent political encounters influenced the national team as well. There was a lot of global enthusiasm for Iran exactly because of the hostility of the US government towards the country which manifested itself in the cancellation of the Nike boots contract just a short time before the World Cup started. The Nike company, which manufactures sporting products, forbade the national team's players to wear the company's goods. This news caused an unpleasant psychological atmosphere for both players and the national team's advocates. In response, by mocking up NIKE's iconic 'Just do it', the national team's fans stated that 'Nike we just did it without you' after Iran won its opening game against Morocco (*Tehrantimes*, 16 June 2018).<sup>45</sup> Dealing with such a situation, the national team endeavoured to perform in a way that vivifies Iranians' honour. Since Nike's action was considered as an obvious political interference in sport, the media tried to imply that even despite such deprivations, Iranians are still able to perform well.

After the tournament was finished, the sport minister stated: 'our attendance in the World Cup was an opportunity to resonate Iran's magnificent name' (*Khabar-e-Varzeshi*, 10 June 2018)<sup>46</sup> after the national team was back home. It appeared especially after the first match versus the African champion, Morocco, such that the newspapers regarded the national team as representative of a nation with an ancient culture and history, and therefore competent enough to be respected.

Following the performance of the national team in the World Cup, it seems that the media incremented the expectations from this team to win the Asian Cup. For instance, before this tournament, some of the domestic media titled the national team 'the best team in Asia', searching for their position in the upcoming tournament, since they had achieved good results in the previous World Cup. Furthermore, some of the football experts mentioning the historical backdrop of the national team in Asia called it the first team of this continent, and Iran as 'the Great Iran' as they have always been one of the best in Asian football tournaments. It also appeared in the disclosing argument of the national team's head coach in his last working days in Iran. 'During these years, I had been trying to revive Iranians' honour by inspiring their greatness in history' (*Iran daily*, 30 January 2019).<sup>47</sup>



### **United passion**

Regarding several indicators such as fans' loyalty, the importance of the game to the nations' psyche, and the kind of support that national teams get at home and away from home, it was reported that Iranians as one out of seven nations across the globe are incredibly passionate about pursuing national and international football events.<sup>48</sup> The national Iranian football federation reflected this passion by the selected strapline for the 2018 FIFA World Cup: '80 million, one nation, and one heartbeat'. In fact, it constructed the unity of a multicultural nation under the umbrella of the national team. Following such a contribution, Iranian women were allowed to watch an international men's football match (Iran-Spain) along with men for the first time in forty years through a TV broadcast in the biggest football stadium 'Azadi', which means 'freedom' in Persian.<sup>49</sup> Despite losing the match, they celebrated the performance of the national team waving the national flag and wearing the countries colours of green, white, and red. In the same way, Spain's national team captain also referred to Iranian women when he made a statement after this attendance: "They are the ones who won tonight."<sup>50</sup>

In fact, Iran's flag in three common colours along with the name of 'Iran' as the most stable symbols of empathy and unity between people and athletes, contributed to the common ambitions in the 2018 FIFA World Cup despite some cultural distinctions. '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' colour, we can do everything all together', one of the national team players said (*Iran-e-Varzeshi*, 26 May 2018).

Besides the crucial role of these symbols in national bonding, Iran-e-Varzeshi daily even called the ethnic diversity *per se* as a key success factor of the national team (30 May 2018), especially after Iran's players from different ethnicities contributed to the team successes in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. The players used the term 'family' or 'super team' to describe the dominant atmosphere of the camp in these events. For example, it was argued in an interview before the World Cup that 'Iran is a team of 80 million people, not only 23 players' (*Khabar-e-Varzeshi*, 27 May 2018).

Even though players from diverse ethnicities played for the national team, it was assumed as the only genuine asset for all Iranian fans. 'It does not matter which ethnic group we belong to or which language we speak in, we all are Iranian, and therefore must support the national team wherever we are', an Iranian Arab leader said when he was asked about the national team in the Asian Cup (*Iran-e-Varzeshi*, 15 January 2019).

The sympathy and coherence of the national team along with people's supports were specified as the most important strength and inspiration source unlike Iran's opponents, which were distinguished in taking advantage of star players or being fully prepared for these events.

The strong sense of solidarity was also fleshed out by an Iranian former professional football players who argued: 'We suffered from not having team cohesion in the past, but the national team's unity scares the opponents now' (*Iran*, 27 January 2019).<sup>51</sup> In the same way, the national team's head coach indicated before the first match in the World Cup: 'Our team star would be Iran' (*Khabar-e-Varzeshi*, 11 June 2018). In fact, he played an important role in creating a strong team spirit in these competitions, which was appreciated by the media as well. 'The philosophy of our head coach is a philosophy through which the players celebrate each others' successes. This team has many warriors on the football pitch. It does not matter if they are playing versus Argentina or Qatar, they do not have any fear nor false pride', Iran-e-Varzeshi daily wrote (27 June 2018). Such a notion illustrates the influence of team bonding and the players' self-confidence to obtain any achievement without under/overestimating the opponents' position. Since Iran is assumed a multi-cultural country, being represented as a united nation was seemingly at the centre of the media attention.

### **Emotion-ridden**

The 3–0 defeat against Japan in the Asian Cup was regarded as a big shock and unexpected result by domestic media and some football experts. This is because for a long time before the World Cup

2018 till the game against Japan in the 2019 Asian Cup, Iran often scored the first goal and won the games against its opponents or they ended in a draw, without experiencing such a heavy loss with its long-standing coach. Since the national team had not received even one goal in the previous games in the Asian Cup, such a loss was not anticipated.

Given that, the team was criticized by the media for not being trained to come back in a game. 'We become super happy when we win and super upset when we lose. We should learn how to confront crises to come back to the game again after receiving a goal.'<sup>52</sup> This is because Japan scored the first goal while the national team's defenders ignored the Japanese striker when arguing with the referee. From then on, they seemingly lost their focus for the rest of the match.

This defeat also changed the direction of appreciative statements in the media. The media played the main role in raising the social expectations from the national team. Given this contribution, when this team failed to meet those expectations, the direction of statements turned from pride into shame, generally speaking. While after the last match in the World Cup the number of pride-oriented discourses increased, it was gradually replaced by a sense of regret and shame after the last match in the Asian Cup. The media were also accused by some football experts of overdevelopment of emotional narratives. For example, it was stated that 'we lost to the media. They made this match super crucial so that the players could not focus well on the match and perform with their entire ability' (*Khabar-e-Varzeshi*, 29 January 2018).

This result of the national football team triggered discourses around political and economic issues as well: 'We are penalized for four years because of some mistakes.'<sup>53</sup> This means that Iran's 42-year waiting for the championship was extended for another four years. Such arguments implicitly criticized the nuclear agreement – enacted by the Iranian moderate party- for not being able to solve political tensions. Furthermore, by comparing the economic structures of Iran and Japan, this loss was also considered as a symbol of the country's recent drawbacks. On the other hand, Japanese economic successes were emphasized and admired. However, some journalists believed individual and team mistakes in football are natural and incomparable with policy and economy.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it was exemplified as unfair behaviour to assess the performance of the national team based upon only one scene in a series of admirable displays in both the World and Asian Cups. In the same way, in contrast to the standpoint considering the national football team's successes as a reason of happiness for people, some claimed that football should be regarded just as an entertaining phenomenon and irrespective of life, unable to solve the current politically-rooted-economic problems (*Hamshahri*, 25 January 2019).

## Discussion

The present study explored how the media contribute to representing Iranian national identity in both the 2018 FIFA World and the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. After analysing the media sources, the following four themes around this national identity were defined: 'determined & conscientious', 'oppressed but great', 'united passion', and 'emotion-ridden'. As discussed earlier, the themes, 'determined & conscientious' and 'emotion-ridden' comprised the highest number of discourses, respectively.

Based upon the wide extent of emotional support for the national team and the expression of mutual sympathetic feelings by the players, Iranians were represented as a united nation in the media. Van Sterkenburg, in his study on the effect of watching the Dutch national football team during the 2010 World Cup on national bonding in the Netherlands, reported a sense of national bonding among the Dutch national team viewers as well with stronger support from the European-Dutch compared to minorities like Surinamese-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch during the World Cup.<sup>55</sup> Representing Iranians as a united nation was an obvious goal for domestic politicians, as Iran is assumed a multicultural country. In fact, apart from what people were looking for in these tournaments, politicians, as well as media, aligned the current situation in the country to the tough circumstances that Iran has been dealing with for a long time in its

history. It has been generally indicated that improving unity and social coherence are what politicians are searching for in mega sporting events.<sup>56</sup> Adib-Moghaddam also argues that political leaders try to pursue their own goals by taking advantage of terms such as emotion and identity.<sup>57</sup>

The media framed Iranians also as a determined and conscientious nation that has achieved remarkable successes with their strong determination despite facing many challenges over the past years. Referring to their history, the national media considered Iranians as a determined nation and competent enough to be respected, and accordingly the national team as a tool for implying this idea worldwide in circumstances that the recent political tensions are supposedly tarnishing the national esteem. It was mainly the contribution of the historical and political narrations that led to the construction of the first two (determined & conscientious, oppressed but great) themes. While these discourses were positively representing Iranian national identity, they mostly turned into challengeable reports after the defeat against Japan in the AFC Asian Cup. This seems to be the result of the media's contribution to the high expectations from the national team. In addition to the re-invention of Iranian identity, these major football events led to emotional expressions and reactions among both people and the players. This result is consistent with Fan et al.<sup>58</sup> They similarly reported that instead of a team's win or lose, it was the expectations of England fans' team predicting the emotional arousal.<sup>59</sup> The national Iranian team was criticized especially after a heavy loss before the final stage in the Asian Cup, which was unexpected to many Iranian football fans. Billings, Devlin, and Brown also in their research on fan identification and nationalism in England during the 2014 FIFA World Cup argued that people may not have a remarkable good feeling towards their country after a victory, but these feelings could be destructively influenced when a national team loses a match.<sup>60</sup>

It is, however, worth noting that the recent political challenges and economic sanctions, imposed by the US government seemed to play the main part in determining the nature of the generated comments and statements by Iranian media. Iranian football fans consequently experienced these major football events as an opportunity to express themselves and spread happiness and hope in society since they had considered themselves isolated due to the political conflicts. This squares with the argument that 'the more that national-political, and economic are undermined, the greater the need for states to construct a semiotically potent cultural nation'.<sup>61</sup> By the same token, Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow indicated that sport plays an important role in bringing people together in crises when they need to positively represent themselves.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

By using concepts such as 'identity' and 'emotion', the aforesaid media (re-)invent Iranian national identity in the 2018 FIFA World and the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. Influenced by both patriotic sentiments and political conflicts, many statements are found related to Iran's national football team and national identity. Iranian media try to stand for Iran's credibility even beyond the national team as this credibility is assumed to be restricted on international stages due to the political tensions. Nevertheless, these major football tournaments are experienced by Iranian football fans as a pleasant timeout of the political and economic tensions and as an opportunity to represent themselves irrespective of political constraints.

Generally speaking, the media provide a site to improve national bonding, pride, and representing national identity through mega sporting events to meet the stakeholders (politicians, sport governing bodies, and fans) goals.<sup>63</sup> This is similar to what Iranian media seek from attending international football tournaments, a popular sport among Iranians. It is, still, recommend these media make a balance in producing nationalistic statements around the national team's performance, especially in terms of losing the games in the major international events. Boosting the public expectations on the national football team may not always be constructive regarding national identity, pride, and unity goals.

Besides, since political and economic circumstances play a considerable role in determining the nature of the generated statements/texts in this study, Iranian national identity might be represented differently under other conditions. Thus, it seems that a longitudinal study of the construction of Iranian national identity in the next major international sporting events may help to provide a more consistent picture of Iranian national identity.

## Notes

1. Chehabi, 'The Politics of Football in Iran'.
2. Ahmadi, 'Investigating the Outcomes of Iran's National Soccer Team'.
3. Ibid.
4. Salehi, 'Sanctions Bite into Iran's Football World Cup Dreams'. <https://Www.Thenational.Ae/World/Sanctions-Bite-into-Iran-S-Football-World-Cup-Dreams-1.243832>
5. 'The Nation's Shout Shook the Capital Again', *Iran-e-Varzeshi*, June 28, 2018.
6. Ibid.
7. Falcous and Maguire, 'Imagining "America"'; and Leng et al., 'Make me proud!'.
8. Hallmann et al., 'Happiness, Pride and Elite Sporting Success'.
9. Shin et al., 'Exploring Ethnic Identity Perceptions'.
10. Sharifian et al., 'Content Analysis of National Newspapers'; and Kordi, 'Investigation of Sport Journals in Iran'.
11. Cooky et al., "'It's dude time!'"; and Vincent et al., "'We are GREAT Britain'".
12. Dousti et al., 'Sport Policy in Iran'.
13. Asian Football Confederation.
14. Breuilly, 'Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities'.
15. Vincent et al., "'We are GREAT Britain'"; Rowe, 'Sport and the Repudiation of the Global'; and Bartoluci and Doupona, 'He's Ours, Not Yours!'.
16. Jakubowska and Ličen, 'The Role of Newspapers'.
17. Rowe, 'Sport and the Repudiation of the Global'.
18. Ibid.
19. Cho, 'Unfolding Sporting Nationalism in South Korean Media'; and Hermes, 'Burnt Orange'.
20. Hermes, 'Burnt Orange'.
21. Cho, 'Unfolding Sporting Nationalism in South Korean Media'.
22. Ibid.
23. Fan et al., 'Twitter-Based BIRGing'.
24. Ibid.
25. Dart, 'Palestinian Football and National Identity Under Occupation'.
26. Ibid.
27. Georgalou, 'Scoring a Hat trick'.
28. Ibid.
29. Bishop and Jaworski, "'We Beat'em'", 14.
30. Ibid.
31. Zahed, 'National Identity of Iranians'.
32. Gholami and Alizadeh, 'Sociological Analysis of the National Pride Concept in Iran'.
33. Abdolahi, 'National Identity in Iran (Meta-analysis of Persian articles)'.
34. Elling et al., 'Topsport als Motor Voor Nationale Trots?'; and Van Hilvoorde et al., 'How to Influence National Pride?'.
35. Tabnak, 'The List of Iran's Newspapers'. <https://B2n.Ir/482998>.
36. Ahmadi et al., 'Comparison of National Pride Before and After Iran's National Soccer Team's Advancement'.
37. Ibid.
38. Fadaei Deh Cheshmeh et al., 'Providing the National Pride Model'.
39. Hashemi and Yeganeh, 'Football and National Identity'.
40. Ibid.
41. Braun and Clarke, 'Successful Qualitative Research'.
42. 'We have a Difficult Mission But We Can', *Abrar-e-Varzeshi*, June 9, 2008.
43. 'The Stories of the Heads that Blocked the Balls', *Jaam-e-Jam*, June 23, 2018.
44. 'The Proudful End', *Hamshahri*, June 26, 2018.
45. 'Nike We Just Did it Without You: Iranian Fans', *Tehran Times*, June 16, 2018.
46. 'Note of the Sports Minister before the World Cup', *Khabar-e-Varzeshi*, June 10, 2018.
47. 'I did it my way' sings Iran's Queiroz to end his reign', *Iran daily*, January 30, 2019.

48. Harmer, '7 Countries Most Passionate About Football', <https://Www.Hitc.Com/En-Gb/2018/05/07/7-Countries-Most-Passionate-About-Football/>
49. Golgowski, 'After 40-Year Ban, Iranian Women Allowed to Watch World Cup with Men'.
50. Sergio Ramos, 'They are the Ones Who Won Tonight'. *On Twitter* (accessed July 24, 2020).
51. 'The Unity of the National Team Players Scares the Opponents', *Iran*, January 27, 2019.
52. Ahmadi et al., 'Comparison of National Pride Before and after Iran's National Soccer Team's Advancement'.
53. Hamidrasaee, 'Some Mistakes Are Punished for Four Years'.
54. Hasanasadiz, 'Individual and Collective Mistakes'.
55. Van Sterkenburg, 'National Bonding and Meanings'.
56. Green and Houlihan, 'Elite Sport Development'; and Herovic and Veil, 'Some Lines Bring Us Together'.
57. Adib-Moghaddam, 'Psycho-Nationalism'.
58. Fan et al., 'Twitter-Based BIRGing'.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Billings et al., 'BIRGing with the Best'.
61. Ulmer et al., 'Post-Crisis Communication and Renewal', 133.
62. Rowe et al., 'Come Together'. See also Dart, 'Palestinian Football and National Identity'.
63. Cho, 'Unfolding Sporting Nationalism in South Korean Media'; Georgalou, 'Scoring a Hat Trick'; Van Sterkenburg, 'National Bonding and Meanings Given to Race and Rthnicity'; and Herovic and Veil, 'Some Lines Bring Us Together'.

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