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Sports Diplomacy: Leveraging Thailand's Weightlifting Success As a Soft Power Tool

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ABSTRACT

In an era where nations increasingly employ non-traditional tools to enhance global influence, sports diplomacy has emerged as a significant medium for shaping national image, fostering international relations, and promoting cultural exchange. This study examines the strategic potential of Thailand's weightlifting achievements as a tool of soft power to enhance international visibility and diplomatic influence. The research pursues three objectives: (1) to identify the effects of Thai weightlifting performances on national image and international perceptions, (2) to examine how weightlifting has fostered diplomatic and cultural relations, and (3) to propose effective strategies for leveraging weightlifting in Thailand's public diplomacy. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes relevant documents and conducts semi-structured interviews with twelve Thai and international participants across four stakeholder groups.

The findings indicate that Thailand's weightlifting success has significantly enhanced the nation's global reputation by conveying Thai values and fostering direct people-to-people engagement in international sports diplomacy. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including the absence of a coordinated national sports diplomacy framework, limited strategic communication, and constrained international marketing capabilities. The study recommends an integrated national strategy for sports diplomacy, strengthened international communication, investment in multinational training infrastructure, and positioning Thailand as a regional knowledge hub in sports development. Strategically, establishing weightlifting as a flagship sport within Thailand's broader soft power agenda can maximize its diplomatic and cultural impact. Overall, this research demonstrates that although weightlifting is not a traditional cultural sport, it holds substantial untapped potential to serve as an effective instrument of public diplomacy when supported by a coordinated and sustained strategic approach.



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Introduction

In today's interconnected world, soft power has become a central strategy for nations seeking to enhance their global influence through attraction rather than coercion. As conceptualized by Nye (2004), soft power allows countries to promote cultural values, political ideals, and policies that appeal to international audiences, often through non-state actors such as media, corporations, and cultural institutions (Melissen, 2005). A key component of this approach is public diplomacy, which encompasses tools like cultural exchange, education, tourism, and humanitarian efforts to build trust and mutual understanding (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). Among the various channels of public diplomacy, sports diplomacy has emerged as a particularly effective method for fostering international engagement. Defined as the strategic use of sport to enhance diplomatic dialogue and national image, sports diplomacy leverages the universal appeal of athletic competition to overcome political and cultural divides, facilitate cooperation, and project soft power (Murray, 2012; Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

Thailand is a country with the ability to develop its soft power across various areas, including sports, but still lacks understanding and coordination in each sector (Sukontasap, 2023). Thailand's growing interest in soft power has led the government to promote it as a strategic tool under the "5F Policy" (Food, Film, Fashion, Fighting, Festival), aiming to enhance its global image and economic value (Bangkok Post, 2023). Muay Thai, though culturally significant and supported by investments in international events and sports tourism, still faces hurdles in achieving Olympic recognition due to standardization issues. Other sports like weightlifting, badminton, and taekwondo each with international success also hold potential as soft power tools for enhancing Thailand's global reputation.

Among these, weightlifting presents a particularly compelling case for closer examination. First, it has consistently delivered success at the Olympic level, earning Thailand global recognition through medal achievements in nearly every Games since 2004. Unlike other sports where success may be intermittent or still developing, weightlifting has established a sustained track record that reflects both athlete excellence and strong institutional support. Second, the sport benefits from strategic investment by both public and private sectors, particularly from the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), which has contributed significantly to infrastructure development, athlete training, and public visibility. Third, Thailand has demonstrated its credibility in hosting major international events, most notably the 2024 IWF World Cup in Phuket, reinforcing its logistical capability and international presence in the sport. Given these strengths; performance consistency, strategic support, and hosting capability this issue holds significant importance and warrants thorough academic inquiry. Exploring the untapped potential of Thailand's weightlifting success in public diplomacy is increasingly relevant as soft power gains prominence in global affairs. Weightlifting offers a culturally rooted and practical platform to enhance national image, promote cross-cultural understanding, and strengthen international ties. Beyond national pride, it holds promise as a diplomatic asset. This research therefore examines how weightlifting can support national branding and advance Thailand's diplomatic and cultural engagement, while identifying strategic pathways for its integration into public diplomacy.

This study employs an adapted version of the Final Model of Sports Diplomacy developed by Abdi et al. (2018) to frame the analysis of how Thailand's weightlifting achievements can serve as a tool of soft power. The model conceptualizes sports diplomacy as a process where sports-related resources are strategically converted into diplomatic outcomes through

deliberate strategies, contributing to nation branding, international reputation, and global influence. In this study, the framework is tailored to the specific context of Thai weightlifting and public diplomacy efforts.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

To better understand how weightlifting may contribute to Thailand's public diplomacy, it is necessary to first understand conceptual foundations of sport diplomacy, national branding, and explore the weightlifting background including case studies review from other nations, to establish a framework for analyzing the role of Thailand's weightlifting as a soft power instrument.

Sports Diplomacy

Sports diplomacy refers to the use of sports as a strategic tool to foster diplomatic relations, cultural exchange, and international cooperation without coercion (Murray, 2018). It has evolved from mere cultural exchange to a form of soft power that allows nations to project national identity and influence global perceptions (Murray, 2018; Constantinou, Sharp, & Kerr, 2016). This approach not only includes sending athletes to international events but also involves hosting global competitions and cultural festivals that promote dialogue among nations (Constantinou et al., 2016). Abdi, Talebpour, and Nooghabi (2018) further argue that sports diplomacy must produce tangible diplomatic benefits, such as strengthened bilateral ties or tourism growth. Similarly, Constantinou et al. (2016) emphasize the role of sports in boosting tourism and public engagement through cultural events. In this context, athletes become symbolic ambassadors, representing their nation's values and contributing to a sense of national pride (Murray, 2018). In addition, Abdi et al. (2018) propose a sports diplomacy model at "Converting Sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcome: a Sports diplomacy model" (Abdi et al., 2018, 14) explain that how nations can convert sports resources such as athletes, mega-events, and sports products into diplomatic outcomes like trust-building, cross-cultural communication, and nation branding. However, the study also acknowledges challenges such as the risk of political controversies, economic burdens, and potential media manipulation.

The academic landscape further contextualizes these practices. Santos (2021) offered a foundational framework blending soft and sharp power in sports diplomacy, while Jeong (2021) explored how East Asian countries utilize sport mega-events for nation branding and geopolitical influence. These events such as the 2002 FIFA World Cup, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics serve not only economic and cultural purposes but also foster regional cooperation and national unity. Brand (2023) expanded the discussion by emphasizing the growing role of non-state actors, especially elite athletes and private organizations, in modern sports diplomacy. However, Méndez (2025) countered this decentralization narrative by highlighting the sustained dominance of state-led efforts in international sports policy and event hosting.

National Branding

National branding refers to a country's strategic effort to shape a positive international image, often using sports as a platform to project cultural values, national identity, and

excellence (Fan, 2010; Gudjonsson, 2005). Scholars highlight that successful national branding requires alignment between domestic values and international expectations (Olins, 2005), while hosting events and showcasing athletes serve as tools to build goodwill and soft power. Richelieu, Lin, and Leng (2024) categorize countries into three sports branding models: Diplomacy Branding (e.g., China, Qatar), Balanced Structure (e.g., Australia, Japan), and Economic Legacy (e.g., Thailand, Malaysia), with Thailand focusing on sports tourism and regional visibility. To enhance their global sports influence must implement tailored policies based on their economic capacity, sporting potential, and diplomatic objectives. Whether through elite sports dominance, hosting major sporting events, or leveraging sports for economic expansion, nations can strategically position themselves within the global sports landscape. By understanding the varied approaches to sports branding, governments can develop sustainable policies that optimize their sports potential, international reputation, and diplomatic presence while reinforcing their soft power influence.

Weightlifting: Sport Background

Weightlifting is one of the oldest competitive sports, in which athletes lift barbells loaded with weights to test their strength, power, and technique. The sport has development under the governance of the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), which is responsible for establishing rules, organizing global competitions, and promoting the sport worldwide. As of 2022, the IWF comprises 193 affiliated national federations across all five continents (International Weightlifting Federation, 2022). Major international competitions include the Olympic Games, the IWF World Weightlifting Championships, and regional events, serving as vital platforms for elite athletes. Participation levels vary by event. For instance, the 2022 World Weightlifting Championships in Bogotá, Colombia, welcomed 537 athletes from 93 nations, while the 2024 IWF World Cup held in Phuket, Thailand, attracted approximately 1,500 participants, including athletes, coaches, and staff (Torokhtiy, 2024). Weightlifting competitions are divided into two main lifts: the snatch, and the clean and jerk (Olympics.com, n.d.). Each attempt is judged by a panel of three referees using a light-based signaling system, with at least two approvals required for a valid lift. Additionally, a five-member jury is present to review or overturn decisions to ensure fairness. To maintain alignment with Olympic standards, the IWF reviews and updates its regulations every four years, particularly focusing on athlete safety and anti-doping policies. Historically, several nations including China, Russia, the United States, and Bulgaria have dominated the sport, consistently produced world-class lifters and set global records. While, Thailand has long been recognized as a key player in the international weightlifting community, both for its competitive success and its organizational capabilities. From consistency earning the medal in Olympic games since 2004 from and many times have been selected as a host for international competitions. Bringing economic and socio-cultural relations to the local place, where event hosted.

Case Study

Many countries have successfully utilized sports as a diplomatic tool. This study presents two case studies: Australia and South Korea, which illustrate how each nation has effectively integrated sports into their foreign policy strategies. Australia stands out with its

comprehensive sports diplomacy approach in the Indo-Pacific, notably through initiatives like the Pacific Sports Partnerships and Pacific AUS Sports. These programs promote grassroots and elite sport development, strengthen regional ties, and enhance cultural understanding. Australia's strategic hosting of mega-events such as the Australian Open and the upcoming Brisbane 2032 Olympics reinforces its global image, while sports-related trade programs and investments in sports technology further extend its influence in the Asia-Pacific (Gryshuk, 2024). Similarly, South Korea exemplifies a dual-track model of sports diplomacy. Through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the country initially promoted elite sports via taekwondo diplomacy and later shifted towards sport-for-development programs aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. By integrating cultural content and emphasizing intercultural engagement, Korea has effectively merged traditional state-led diplomacy with newer, people-centric public diplomacy, positioning itself as a responsible global middle power (Na & Dallaire, 2022). In Thailand's context, Muay Thai has emerged as a key sports diplomacy tool, promoted through cultural exchange, tourism, and strategic partnerships. Government-backed programs and global media representation have elevated Muay Thai's role in both cultural branding and diplomatic outreach (Chayanon, 2024). Yet, despite extensive research on popular and combat sports, the diplomatic potential of weightlifting remains underexplored. As a sport that has consistently delivered Olympic success for Thailand, weightlifting presents an untapped avenue for strengthening national prestige and engaging in global diplomacy, especially in contexts where niche sports may hold symbolic, economic, and political significance.

Conceptual Framework

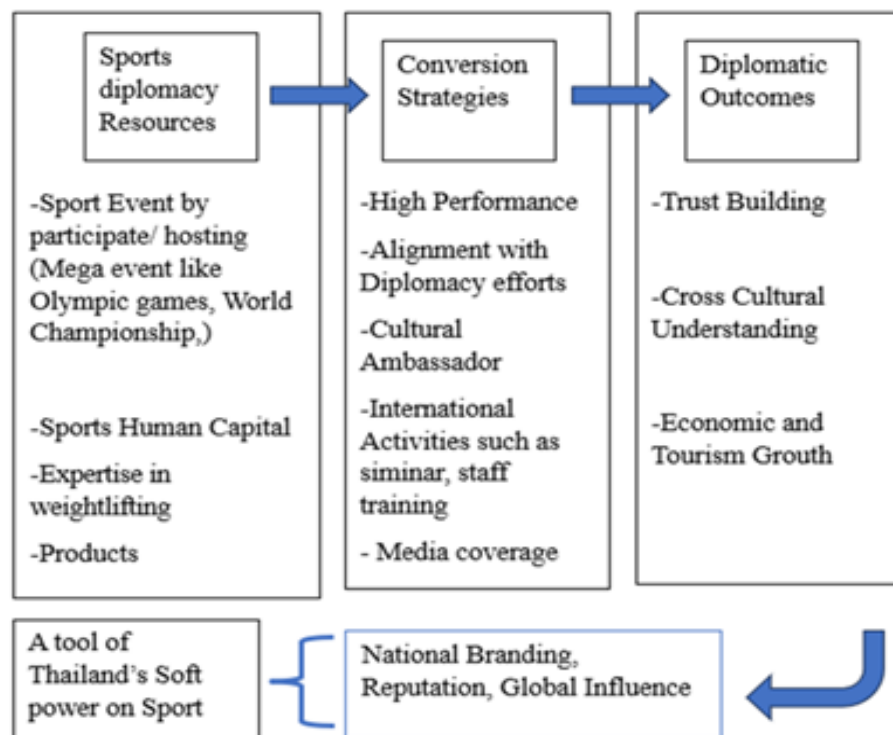


Figure 1 Theoretical Framework

Objectives

1. To identify the effects of Thai weightlifting performances on national image and international views.
2. To examine how weightlifting has fostered diplomatic and cultural relations.
3. To propose the best way to utilize sports, especially weightlifting, in Thailand's public diplomacy.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach and utilized both primary and secondary data sources to examine how Thailand can leverage weightlifting as a tool for public diplomacy. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with government officials, sports administrators, athletes, coaches, and academics. Secondary data included academic publications, organizational reports, news articles, and official content from institutions like IWF, AWF, and TAWA. Supplementary sources such as video interviews and sports websites enriched the analysis. Triangulating these diverse sources ensured a holistic understanding of how weightlifting can be strategically positioned as a soft power tool in Thailand's international engagement.

Data Collection

1. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants selected using purposive sampling. These participants were divided into four stakeholder groups

- 1) Government Officials
- 2) Sports Administrators (Thai and foreign)
- 3) Athletes and Coaches (Thai and foreign)
- 4) Academics and Experts (Thai)

The interviews were conducted in either Thai or English, depending on the participant's preference. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted face-to-face or via secure online video platforms, depending on availability and geographic location. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. For Thai-language interviews, professional translation was employed to ensure linguistic accuracy in the analysis.

To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned alphabetical codes (e.g., Participant A, B, etc.), and any identifying institutional affiliations were anonymized in the final reporting.

2. Secondary Data

- 1) Academic literature on soft power, sports diplomacy, and international relations
- 2) Institutional reports and strategic documents from IWF (International Weightlifting Federation), AWF (Asian Weightlifting Federation), and TAWA (Thai Amateur Weightlifting Association)
- 3) News articles and sports commentary
- 4) Official media, including video interviews and international sports websites



These materials served to contextualize interview findings and validate themes emerging from the qualitative data.

Participant Profile and Sampling Rationale

A total of 12 participants were selected based on strict inclusion criteria tailored to each stakeholder group (see Table 1). The selection emphasized relevance, experience, and positional authority, ensuring that all informants had direct involvement in weightlifting governance, international competition, or policy formation.

While 12 participants may appear limited in number, data saturation was achieved. Themes began to recur by the 10th interview, and no significant new insights emerged from subsequent interviews, aligning with established qualitative research standards (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts and supplementary materials were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

- 1) Familiarization with data
- 2) Generating initial codes
- 3) Searching for themes
- 4) Reviewing themes
- 5) Defining and naming themes
- 6) Producing the report

Manual coding was conducted with iterative comparison across interviews. Codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting key aspects of how weightlifting is utilized or perceived in the context of Thailand's soft power and public diplomacy.

To aid trustworthiness, the following strategies were employed:

- 1) Credibility: Triangulation of primary and secondary sources, member checks with select participants to confirm interpretations, and peer debriefing with academic advisors.
- 2) Dependability: Use of an audit trail documenting data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical memos.
- 3) Confirmability: Reflexive journaling by the researcher throughout the research process to record personal biases, assumptions, and methodological decisions.
- 4) Transferability: Thick description of participant contexts and institutional roles, allowing readers to determine the applicability of findings to other settings.

The study involved 12 participants divided into four groups:

1. Government Officials (Thai)

Senior representatives from agencies such as the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Criteria: (1) ≥5 years' experience in sports development, tourism, or diplomacy related to international sporting events, and (2) senior-level position (C-9 or equivalent). Their insights support analysis of Thailand's weightlifting success and its alignment with national soft power strategies.

2. Sports Administrators (Thai and foreign)

Thai and international administrators involved in weightlifting governance, athlete development, and event management. Criteria: (1) ≥5 years' experience in sports



administration, event hosting, or international sports governance, and (2) high-level positions (C-8 or equivalent, e.g., TAWA, AWF, IWF executives). The group also includes experts in event operations and sponsorship, providing a comprehensive view of Thailand's weightlifting governance and sports diplomacy role.

3. Athletes and Coaches (Thai and foreign)

Weightlifting athletes and coaches with experience in global competitions. Coaches: ≥ 5 years at major events (Olympics, Asian Games, World Championships). Athletes: ≥ 5 years of international competition, medal or top-five placement, and for foreign athletes, participation in Thai-hosted events or training.

4. Academics and Experts (Thai)

Scholars in sports diplomacy, soft power, and international relations. Criteria: (1) ≥ 5 years' experience in relevant fields, (2) Ph.D. or master's degree, and (3) affiliation with academic or research institutions. Their insights provide a theoretical foundation for understanding Thailand's use of weightlifting in public diplomacy and comparative perspectives on niche sports as tools of international influence.

To protect confidentiality, participants were labeled alphabetically (Participant A, B, C, etc.). Table 1 summarizes participant groups and backgrounds.

Table 1: Participant group and Background

No.	Focus Group	Group of participants	Ministry or Institution or specialist area
1	Participant A	Government Official	Ministry of Tourism and Sports
2	Participant B	Government Official	Sports Authority of Thailand (SAT)
3	Participant C	Administrative	Thai Amateur Weightlifting Association (TAWA) and South East Asia Weightlifting Federation
4	Participant D	Administrative	Thai Amateur Weightlifting Association (TAWA)
5	Participant E	Foreigner Administrative	Singapore's Weightlifting Federation and SEA Weightlifting Federation
6	Participant F	Thai Coaches	Thailand's weightlifting national team and Olympic medalist
7	Participant G	Thai Athletes	Thailand's national athlete and Olympic medalist
8	Participant H	Coach (Foreigner)	Philippines Weightlifting National Team
9	Participant I	Athletes (Foreigner)	Philippines weightlifting national team, Olympic Medalist
10	Participant J	Academic and Expert	Sport Management and International Relations
11	Participant K	Academic and Expert	Sport Management and Olympic Academy
12	Participant L	Academic and Expert	International Relations

Results

1. Weightlifting Achievement Effect on National Image and Global Recognition

Weightlifting achievement has significantly enhanced Thailand's national image and global recognition in three key ways. One, international sporting success reinforces credibility, with consistent medal wins placing Thailand on the global sports map. Participant J (Personal Communication, March 13, 2025) noted, "Weightlifting is one of the few sports where Thailand has repeatedly proven itself," while Participant D (Personal Communication, April 12, 2025) added it symbolizes "discipline and national focus." Two, the professionalism of the Thai Weightlifting Association (TAWA) strengthens Thailand's image beyond athletics. Participants H (Personal Communication, March 30, 2025) praised Thailand's "hospitality, logistics, and respectful atmosphere," and Participant C emphasized the country is recognized for hosting with "fairness and genuine care." Three, Thai weightlifters often exhibit humility, calmness, and traditional gestures, such as smiling before lifting and bowing. These behaviors resonate globally, reflecting Thailand's cultural values and serving as a form of "quiet diplomacy." As Participant A (Personal Communication, March 22, 2025) said, "Smiling before lifting and bowing... they're identity." Participant L described these behaviors as "quiet diplomacy." Though weightlifting has limits as a soft power tool, but it has become a part of Thailand's modern international identity shaped through athlete conduct, organizational professionalism, and cultural values.

Weightlifting as a Platform for Cultural Diplomacy and International Engagement

In the finding emphasized there are three ways that weightlifting has seen as a platform Cultural Diplomacy and International Engagement. First, hosting international competitions allows Thailand to showcase its culture informally while boosting local economies. Participant D (Personal Communication, April 12, 2025) observed that the events drew over 4,000 attendees and featured branded hotels, cultural tours, and Thai cuisine, stating "By blending sport with cultural elements like traditional music, mascots, and cuisine, Thailand effectively showcased its rich culture." Second, Thailand fosters regional cooperation through informal technical exchanges with countries like Singapore, Brunei, Laos, and Bhutan. As Participant C (Personal Communication, March 20, 2025) explained, "This cooperation happens informally, based on trust and mutual support among staff." Third, competitions create opportunities for diplomatic interaction. Participant C observed that inviting ambassadors facilitates informal diplomacy, while Participant L (Personal Communication, April 10, 2025) emphasized, "Soft power comes from sincerity... when people feel welcomed, that's soft power at work." Participant D added that such events also improve training access, athlete visibility, and economic opportunities.

Capacity building as public diplomacy through weightlifting

Participants perspectives converge on three interrelated possible ways. The first aspect concerns social mobility. Participants A and B emphasized that weightlifting opens opportunities for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. Weightlifting could be considered as sport for hope. These accounts reflect Thailand's soft power through human development and



merit-based success, showcasing a national image rooted in inclusivity and empowerment. The second aspect highlights international cooperation through sports activities and educational exchanges, such as training programs and seminars to other countries especially to developing country. These initiatives are ongoing and mutually beneficial; Thailand's have got trust and got back their sincerity. Additionally, the involvement of TAWA staff in international governing bodies demonstrates the recognition and respect they have earned within the global weightlifting community. Participant C (Personal Communication, March 20, 2025) has mentioned that Thai staff have been selected to hold many positions in the regional federation. "We got 6 important positions in the Asian Weightlifting Federation; for example, Madame Bussaba Yodbangtoey serves as the Honorary Secretary-General and Advisor to the President of the Weightlifting Federation. Dr. Niwat Limsuknirand has been elected to the Executive Board of the Asian Weightlifting Federation (AWF). Meanwhile, Dr. Siriluck Thatmun has been appointed as a member of the Technical Committee." The third aspect relates to global presence and credibility by sending the athletes to participate in international competition and hosting the event.

Structural and Strategic Challenges in Positioning Weightlifting as a Tool of Soft Power

Participants identified four structural and strategic challenges. First, long-term continuity and sustainability. Participant C (Personal Communication, March 25, 2025) noted, "We need consistent leadership, not just medals. Developing athletes and gaining international presence takes time and teamwork." Second, weak marketing and public communication. Five participants including D, H, I, J, K emphasized the lack of media engagement. Participant D (Personal Communication, April 12, 2025) said that, "We rely too much on medals to get attention. We need proper marketing, audience data, and external support." Third, budget constraints and infrastructure limitations. Participant A (Personal Communication, March 22, 2025) explained, "Funding prioritizes sport tourism, not elite sports like weightlifting." Participant D (Personal Communication, April 12, 2025) added, "We could host foreign teams, but we lack space and facilities. Our main center is still on a military base." Fourth, reputation risks from doping and lack of global visibility. Several participants noted the need for credibility rebuilding. Participant L (Personal Communication, April 10, 2025) stated, "To be taken seriously, we need transparency, strategic messaging, and to show leadership not just in medals but in management."

Recommendations for Policy and Strategic Development

The research findings suggest six strategic directions to strengthen the use of weightlifting as a tool of Thailand's public diplomacy. First, seven participants emphasized the need for a clear, long-term vision that aligns weightlifting development with national strategies such as sport tourism, with a bottom-up approach recommended to empower local actors. As Participant A (Personal Communication, March 22, 2025) noted, "Top-down policy moves slowly local actors and private partners can act faster and more effectively." Second, participants proposed enhancing Thailand's presence in international sports governance, especially by embedding Thai officials in global bodies like the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), which Participants J and L stated would "amplify Thailand's voice and allow us to project both sporting excellence and cultural diplomacy simultaneously." Third, six

participants called for improved marketing and communication strategies, including hiring professional marketing agencies, training athletes in digital storytelling, and appointing charismatic sports ambassadors. Fourth, infrastructure and financing were identified as key concerns. Five participants advocated for securing stable funding, upgrading training facilities, and fostering public-private partnerships. A central proposal was to establish a national training hub that could host international camps and integrate cultural elements framed as “training tourism.” Participant D (Personal Communication, April 12, 2025) noted, “Foreign teams want to train here, but we lack space. A national center would unlock real potential.” Fifth, participants highlighted the importance of investing in human capital for global engagement. Thailand must clearly define whether it aims to be a leader, facilitator, or partner in the international weightlifting community. As Participant A (Personal Communication, March 22, 2025) warned, “Without clear positioning, our efforts risk being scattered.” Language and intercultural training, alongside the promotion of Thai strengths such as sports science and mindfulness, were recommended to enhance regional influence. Finally, participants recognized weightlifting’s potential to promote inclusion, peacebuilding, and cultural diplomacy. Grassroots programs were seen as effective tools for social mobility and national unity. Participant F (Personal Communication, April 10, 2025) emphasized that these initiatives “uplift underprivileged youth and create a sense of belonging,” while Participants D, K, and L highlighted the role of women and the importance of involving non-state actors such as private firms, academia, and civil society to broaden public engagement. In summary, the recommendations emphasize that building effective soft power through weightlifting will require consistency, cross-sector collaboration, and strategic investment in people, policy, and narrative framing.

Discussion

The effects of Thai weightlifting performances on national image and international views

Drawing upon the adapted theoretical framework, the findings highlight four key dimensions below and identifies critical gaps, particularly the lack of cohesive strategic communication and nation branding efforts needed to fully leverage these achievements for the achievement provides Thailand with a long-term diplomatic advantage. First, the athletic excellence demonstrated by Thai weightlifters has played a pivotal role in cultivating admiration and trust toward Thailand on the international stage. Consistent success in world championships, Asian competitions, and Olympic Games has positioned Thai athletes as elite competitors, contributing to perceptions of Thailand as a serious sporting nation. According to Fan (2010) and Gudjonsson (2005), repeated success in competitive sports enhances a nation's international credibility, as athletic triumphs symbolize broader national strengths such as discipline, perseverance, and strategic investment in human capital. Interview participants emphasized that Thailand’s sustained performance, particularly in traditionally strong categories like the women's 48kg and 53kg divisions, has earned admiration from international federations and foreign audiences. This admiration not only heightens Thailand’s prestige but also fosters trust in its capabilities beyond sports, thus supporting broader diplomatic and cultural engagements.



Second, the professionalism of the Thai Weightlifting Association in hosting international competitions has further strengthened Thailand's reputation as an efficient and reliable sporting nation. Events such as the EGAT Cup and the IWF World Cup in Phuket were praised for their logistical excellence, fairness, and authentic hospitality. According to Fan (2010), systematic organizational professionalism enhances a nation's credibility in the international arena. Participants noted that foreign delegations frequently expressed admiration for Thailand's meticulous organization, transparency in competition management, and warm, culturally respectful hosting practices. These impressions not only boosted the credibility of Thai sports governance but also positioned Thailand as a trusted and capable partner within the global sporting community, reinforcing the country's image as a nation committed to excellence both on and off the field.

Third, the demeanor and cultural behavior of Thai athletes and officials—marked by humility, composure, emotional control, and traditional gestures such as smiling and the "wai"—serve as subtle yet powerful vehicles for communicating Thai values on the international stage. These behaviors embody an organic expression of Thailand's soft power, reflecting the nation's cultural identity through authentic and non-coercive means. As Murray (2018) and Constantinou, Sharp, and Kerr (2016) emphasize, athletes function as cultural ambassadors, promoting their national values and fostering mutual understanding without resorting to political coercion. This approach aligns with Fan's (2010) and Gudjonsson's (2005) perspectives on how sports contribute to national branding by projecting admired qualities such as discipline, resilience, and respect. Observers often associate Thai athletes with respectfulness, humility, and emotional resilience under pressure, thereby reinforcing a positive perception of Thailand's cultural character. Furthermore, as noted by Pongprasert and Karnjanakit (2019) and Boonveerabut (2019), Thai athletes not only enhance Thailand's sporting image but also serve as bridges for intercultural understanding, helping to strengthen diplomatic ties and build goodwill among international audiences. Through their demeanor and conduct, Thai athletes thus extend Thailand's soft power influence, complementing the country's broader efforts in public diplomacy and cultural exchange.

Forth, The Emergence of a Self-Reinforcing "Cycle of Success". the findings further reveal the development of a self-reinforcing "Cycle of Success," wherein sporting achievements fuel greater investment, inspire future generations, and attract international recognition, thereby creating a virtuous cycle that strengthens Thailand's sporting ecosystem and enhances global reputation. Successes at international competitions have led to increased governmental support, expanded private sector sponsorships, and heightened media attention, each feeding back into the system to nurture future champions. This dynamic is consistent with the theoretical model of soft power conversion, where sporting accomplishments serve as catalysts for broader socio-cultural and economic benefits (Murray, 2018; Richelieu et al., 2024). Participants highlighted that role models such as Sukanya Srisurat and Sopita Tanasan have inspired youth engagement in weightlifting, ensuring a continuous pipeline of talent. Simultaneously, Thailand's reputation as a regional hub for weightlifting expertise attracts international delegations for training and exchanges, thereby extending the country's diplomatic outreach through sport. However, the absence of coordinated branding strategies risks underutilizing the full diplomatic potential of this success cycle.

Nonetheless, compared to nations like the US, China, Korea, and Australia (Richelieu, Lin, and Leng, 2024), Thailand shares the characteristic of leveraging sports success to enhance global visibility. However, Thailand still lacks a cohesive strategic communication effort and



long-term branding initiatives to fully capitalize on these successes. Unlike Australia or Korea, where government and sporting institutions coordinate systematically to project soft power, Thailand's efforts remain fragmented, representing a critical gap in conversion strategy.

Overall, while Thailand's weightlifting success has already contributed substantially to enhancing the nation's image and international perceptions, maximizing its soft power potential requires more deliberate conversion strategies that integrate athletic success into coherent nation branding and diplomatic outreach campaigns.

Examining weightlifting that has fostered diplomatic and cultural Relations

Weightlifting has supported Thailand's diplomatic and cultural engagement through consistent participation in global competitions, event hosting, and technical cooperation with neighboring countries. These activities have projected Thai cultural values, strengthened interpersonal ties, and enhanced Thailand's soft power abroad. Based on the theoretical framework, these are considered conversion strategies turning sporting success into diplomatic capital. Findings show that weightlifting fosters cross-cultural understanding and diplomacy, especially within ASEAN and with developing countries seeking technical expertise. Competitions, training exchanges, and officiating workshops help build trust and mutual recognition, aligning with Abdi et al.'s (2018) model of sports diplomacy through people-to-people interaction. This supports Murray (2018) and Constantinou et al. (2016), who argue that sports function as "quiet diplomacy," enabling informal engagement beyond official channels. Symbolic participation also plays a role. Inviting ambassadors and dignitaries to competitions creates informal diplomatic opportunities that strengthen goodwill. As Na and Dallaire (2022) noted in South Korea's case, symbolic gestures like Taekwondo demos and volunteer exchanges deepened cultural ties. Similarly, Thailand's symbolic efforts if strategically managed can contribute to public diplomacy. Weightlifting also promotes social mobility, offering youth from underprivileged backgrounds a merit-based path to success. This aligns with Nye's (2004) concept of soft power through human development. Na and Dallaire (2022) showed how Korea's KOICA sport programs enhanced both social development and international standing reinforcing the value of Thailand's grassroots initiatives.

However, most of these benefits have emerged organically, without coordination under a national strategy. As Gudjonsson (2005) and Na and Dallaire (2022) emphasized, lacking strategic direction weakens the long-term impact of sports diplomacy. In contrast, Australia's Sports Diplomacy 2030 policy integrates sports, foreign affairs, trade, and development into a unified soft power agenda (Gryshuk, 2024), with measurable outcomes and cross-sector collaboration. Korea's evolution in sports diplomacy also became more effective once guided by formal foreign policy frameworks.

Finally, findings point to Thailand's untapped potential as a regional knowledge hub in weightlifting. By formalizing coaching, refereeing, and technical exchanges, Thailand could export human capital, echoing South Korea's KOICA model. This aligns with Nye's (2004) vision of soft power through expertise and global contribution.

The best way to utilize sports, especially weightlifting, in Thailand's public diplomacy

The findings point to six interrelated strategies for enhancing weightlifting as a tool of public diplomacy in Thailand, grounded in the concept of soft power that is, the ability to



influence and attract through culture, values, and relationships rather than coercion. These strategies demonstrate how weightlifting can serve not only as a competitive sport but also as a diplomatic asset that projects Thailand's identity, fosters international goodwill, and contributes to long-term global engagement.

First, Strategic Alignment with National Policy. To maximize weightlifting's diplomatic impact, the sport must be embedded within broader national strategies. Inter-ministerial collaboration especially among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, and the Thailand Weightlifting Association (TAWA) can institutionalize support for weightlifting diplomacy. Integrating weightlifting into the sport tourism agenda may attract government funding by demonstrating economic benefits. Drawing from South Korea's model (Na & Dallaire, 2022), formal linkages between sport and foreign policy ensure that athletic success contributes to sustained soft power influence.

Second, Multi-Sector Partnerships and Private Sector Engagement. While government support ensures legitimacy, partnerships with private entities bring agility, marketing expertise, and long-term investment. Abdi et al. (2018) and Na & Dallaire (2022) emphasize the importance of involving NGOs, cultural institutions, and corporate sponsors to extend the reach and adaptability of sports diplomacy initiatives. Thailand can apply this model to strengthen weightlifting's national and international visibility.

Third, Capacity Building and Regional Leadership. Developing both athletic and administrative talent is essential to expanding Thailand's influence in regional and international weightlifting. Grassroots programs, elite athlete development pipelines, and technical exchanges with neighboring countries can establish Thailand as a knowledge hub. This reflects Korea's success in exporting Taekwondo expertise as a form of soft power (Na & Dallaire, 2022), suggesting Thailand can similarly leverage human capital development for long-term diplomatic gains.

Forth, Strategic Communication and Narrative Framing. Currently, weightlifting's media presence peaks only during international competitions. To sustain public engagement, Thailand should invest in professional communication strategies, train athletes in digital storytelling, and appoint marketing professionals within TAWA. Collecting audience data and crafting athlete-driven narratives can humanize the sport and enhance global recognition similar to the branding success of Muay Thai and South Korea's Taekwondo diplomacy.

Five, Integration with Sport Tourism and Cultural Experiences Weightlifting events should be positioned as platforms for cultural exchange and economic diplomacy. Combining competitions with tourism activities such as training camps, local cultural tours, and traditional performances can deepen diplomatic ties and stimulate economic growth. South Korea's integration of sports and cultural tourism provides a viable model (Na & Dallaire, 2022).

Six, Clarifying Thailand's Diplomatic Identity through Sport. Thailand must define its strategic role in international weightlifting whether as a regional leader, facilitator, or collaborative partner. A clear identity would guide diplomatic messaging and inform strategic decisions across government and sport agencies. As Méndez (2025) and Nye (2004) emphasize, credible governance and value-driven engagement are critical for building trust and influence. Thailand's long-term success will depend on cultivating globally competent personnel, embedding officials in international federations, and exporting technical expertise to neighboring countries thus transforming weightlifting into a channel for sustained soft power projection.

Building on its regional leadership, Thailand should prioritize the development of human capital capable of influencing the global stage. Establishing structured talent development pipelines for athletes, coaches, referees, and administrators is essential to preparing individuals for roles within international organizations such as the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF). According to Green (2005) and Abdi et al. (2018), strategic human resource development enhances a nation's long-term diplomatic leverage. Moreover, Nye (2004) emphasized that exporting human capital in the form of expertise and leadership strengthens a nation's soft power. By systematically advancing its personnel into global sporting bodies, Thailand would amplify its credibility, visibility, and influence in international weightlifting diplomacy, consistent with the strategies outlined by Murray (2012) and Jung (2021) regarding middle power diplomacy. Reflecting Na and Dallaire's (2022) analysis, Korea's focus on developing citizen-diplomats and sport leaders illustrates how investing in human capital is critical for achieving sustained, globally recognized diplomatic influence.

Conclusion

This research examined how weightlifting, a non-traditional yet high-performing sport in Thailand, can serve as a tool of soft power to strengthen the country's image and global influence. Using qualitative data from stakeholders across government, sports administration, and academia, the findings affirm that Thailand's weightlifting achievements have enhanced its international credibility not only through consistent medal performances, but also through the dignified conduct of Thai athletes and the country's ability to host international events with professionalism and cultural hospitality. Beyond its role in sports, weightlifting has facilitated informal diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges, particularly within the ASEAN region and among developing nations. Hosting tournaments, offering technical cooperation, and involving Thai officials in regional federations have contributed to building trust, mutual respect, and regional connectivity. However, many of these benefits have emerged without formal integration into national foreign policy or long-term strategic planning.

To unlock the full potential of weightlifting as a tool of public diplomacy, the study recommends five strategic priorities. First, Thailand should develop a national sports diplomacy strategy that integrates weightlifting with tourism, cultural diplomacy, and foreign affairs. Government support would enable TAWA to create events aligned with the nation's plans. Second, public-private partnerships must be formalized to increase funding, marketing outreach, and long-term investment in the sport, particularly in infrastructure and education, to facilitate multinational training and seminars. Third, ongoing human capital development is crucial, including training for athletes, coaches, and officials in both technical and diplomatic skills, this will help establish Thailand as a sports powerhouse in weightlifting and enhance the capability of its people to integrate with regional and global weightlifting governance bodies. Fourth, professional strategic communication particularly through digital storytelling and media engagement is essential to shape compelling narratives and enhance global visibility. In addition, athletes and staff should be trained in public speaking, cultural etiquette, and emotional composure to effectively represent national values like humility, confidence, and discipline. Well-prepared spokespersons help project a positive image and reinforce Thailand's soft power through both performance and presence. Fifth, Thailand should position itself as a regional hub for weightlifting expertise, backed by infrastructure investment and international exchange programs that reflect local identity and traditional Thai practices.



Recommendations

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

1. Demonstrating how non-traditional sports, such as weightlifting, can enhance a nation's international image and foster diplomatic relations.
2. Highlighting the mechanisms through which athlete performances, people-to-people interactions, and international sports events translate into cultural and diplomatic influence.
3. Providing a conceptual framework for integrating sports achievements into national public diplomacy strategies, offering a reference model for other nations seeking to leverage sports for soft power.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Conduct quantitative studies to measure the direct impact of sports diplomacy on national image and international perceptions.
2. Explore comparative studies of other non-traditional sports in Southeast Asia to identify best practices and regional trends.
3. Investigate long-term effects of sports achievements on tourism, trade, and diplomatic relations to strengthen evidence for policy-making.
4. Examine the role of social media and digital campaigns in amplifying sports diplomacy efforts.

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