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Designing a Competency Model for Negotiators of International Sports Contracts (Case Study: Football)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to design a competency model for negotiators of international football contracts. The present study was an applied developmental study conducted using a mixed-methods approach (qualitative-quantitative). The statistical population included experts, specialists, faculty members, and managers of Premier League football clubs. In the qualitative section, participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, and theoretical saturation was achieved with 16 participants. In the quantitative section, football-association experts, sports-law specialists, and experienced football experts familiar with sports negotiation participated. To ensure research validity, the researchers considered prolonged and continuous engagement, persistent observation, peer review, progressive subjectivity, participant involvement, and the use of multiple sources of information. Qualitative analyses were conducted through manual coding, and quantitative analyses were conducted using Expert Choice software. The results of the final coding of the interviews showed that negotiation skill, personal competency, knowledge competency, communication competency, analytical thinking and decision-making, lawfulness and legal compliance, and marketing capabilities were the main themes identified in the professional competency of international football negotiators. The prioritization of competency themes was as follows: negotiation skill, with a relative weight of 0.298, ranked first; personal competency, with a relative weight of 0.266, ranked second; and analytical thinking and decision-making, with a relative weight of 0.160, ranked third. These were followed by knowledge competency, lawfulness and legal compliance, communication competency, and marketing capabilities.

Keywords: competency; professional; sports contract; negotiators.

Introduction

The economy of a country can be viewed as a network composed of different economic activities that are interconnected. One of the most important economic activities is related to the sports industry (Rostamzadeh & Yadegar, 2024). In the sports industry, human resources are regarded as the most important and valuable organizational resource. Because of their scarcity, value, irreplaceability, and inimitability, human resources play a highly important role, and the foundation of the development of countries and organizations is linked to the creativity and innovation of human resources (Fattahpour Marandi et al., 2016). Therefore, the existence of a merit-based system in every country contributes to its stability, acceptance, and legitimacy; accordingly, selecting competent individuals in organizations is of particular importance (Abbaspour et al., 2015).

Football has changed on the field, although the name and dimensions of the football pitch have remained the same. Yet the changes in football outside the field are different: football has completely moved beyond being a simple game and has gradually positioned itself alongside existing industries, businesses, and professions (Zohrevandian et al., 2020). The economic transformation of football has stimulated many interests. Consequently, a wide range of human, material, monetary, financial, and reputational resources has moved toward football. When football was merely a game and then a business, capital stakeholders, industrial managers, and service providers paid little attention to it. Today, however, this is no longer the case. Football has become one of the strong alternatives for various investors (Kruszyńska & Poczta, 2019). Sustainable revenue generation in sports clubs is now one of the most important concerns of managers and is at the top of their planning and implementation priorities. Although, in leading sports organizations, selling or transferring exploitation rights is considered one of the important revenue sources, how to negotiate contracts to create sustainable revenue and minimize the risk of loss for clubs is one of the most important current concerns of sports managers. Developing a winning strategy in sports negotiations is crucial. This strategy begins with deciding on the negotiation style and tactics. It reflects individual creativity and credibility in decisions about styles, and even before negotiation, some tactics are better than others (Dobрева, 2021). Negotiations, especially when players are transferred from one club to another, are complex and represent a large-scale project in which several stakeholders are involved. During interest-based negotiation, framing positions in relation to interests can create different possible solutions and a win-win solution (Fisher et al., 2011; Masteralexis et al., 2018). Most professionals are aware of the importance of negotiation in their personal and professional lives, because they spend a considerable part of their professional life negotiating and believe that their professional success and effectiveness are strongly influenced by their ability in the art and technique of negotiation. Negotiation is ongoing and has deep and long-term effects on individual and social life (Sheikh Alizadeh Haris & Tejari, 2010). Negotiation is the process of working with others to achieve useful results and is a skill that requires time and training; it does not exist innately in human beings. Negotiation may also be defined as a process in which two or more people or groups with shared and conflicting goals express their ideas and plans and discuss specific conditions in order to possibly reach an agreement (Shaw et al., 2021).

The role of human resources is highly important because of their scarcity, value, and inimitability. The foundation of the development of countries and organizations is associated with the creativity and innovation of human resources. In fact, behind every major event, transformation, achievement, and leading organization, there are outstanding managers and leaders. The role of managers in organizations is so important that some scholars have considered the presence of a capable and qualified manager sufficient for organizational success. Thus, the failure or success of any organization depends to a great extent on the quality of its management and performance. Despite the existence of numerous competency models for different administrative and managerial jobs, the identification of key competencies for sports managers and their competency profile has received less attention (Freitas et al., 2017). Research on the competency of sports managers (COSM) before 1980 was very limited. However, in the twenty-first century, organizations active in sport, like other industries, need feedback on the essential competencies of their senior managers. Accordingly, COSM has become a common keyword in academic research to refer to the competencies of sports managers (Schwab et al., 2015).

In concession contracts, the concession holder transfers all or part of the exploitation right to the operator so that it can gain economic and social importance in society. In concession agreements, revenue generation and appropriate profit for both parties, together with ethical and professional requirements aimed at preserving mutual trust, must be considered

(Guasch et al., 2006). Contracts that do not secure the interests of both parties may create many problems, including the bankruptcy of operators, the inability of managers to conclude long-term contracts, and ultimately the lack of profitability for both parties. For years, operators have been forced to accept the rules of concession holders in contracts and have had relatively limited rights. Therefore, many of these collaborations have led either to the bankruptcy of the operator or to illegitimate rent-seeking practices (Chatterjee & Samuelson, 2014). Sport, which was once regarded merely as a social activity, has become an important economic matter in countries, and consequently private-sector investors are invited to participate. Today, professional sports contract forms are often available in prepared printed formats. Because different sport disciplines involve different issues, these contracts are completed after the parties reach agreement, ultimately forming a complete registered sports contract. Although such contract forms limit the freedom of individuals to some extent, the parties can include their desired conditions in the contractual clauses. Sports contracts are among those contracts that may be terminated by the parties when conditions or a right of termination exist. In brief, these contracts can be considered optional, immediate, reciprocal, promissory, and formal contracts (Moradizadeh, 2021).

One important topic in football is the contracts through which matters such as the contracting parties, contract amount, contract duration, contractual clauses, and obligations are clearly stated. Respect for contracts is accepted by all social groups and is not restricted to any specific field. In sport, and specifically in football, this respect is frequently reflected in rules and regulations. Article 14 of the regulations of the Football Federation of Iran states that a contract between a professional player and a club ends only upon expiration of the contract term or by mutual agreement. This article shows the value and status of contracts concluded between football clubs and players, under which the parties are obliged to fulfill their commitments. Because a football contract can affect various sectors of society, such as millions of fans, the media, commercial actors in advertising, sports officials, and others, contractual obligations between football clubs and players are highly important (Sarbaha, 2020). The importance of negotiation in relation to contracts must also be emphasized. In fact, negotiation determines the future success between two partners. Negotiation should be analyzed from three dimensions: situational, substantive, and interactive. During the negotiation process, trust must be built, because trust can lead to a genuine contractual agreement, and this method has a longer life than other marketing tools (Lewicki & Polin, 2013; Lewicki et al., 2016). In general, designing a winning negotiation strategy is highly important. This strategy begins with decisions about negotiation style, tactics, the ability to display creativity, and credibility. These negotiation styles should preferably be decided before the negotiation, and the superiority of some tactics in negotiation should be kept in mind, although timing and flexibility are also very important factors (Dobrevva, 2021).

At least eight different types of contracts exist in sport, including salary, player, coach, brand, sponsor, naming-rights, endorsement and licensing, and publishing contracts. Agents usually negotiate indirectly and must possess three types of expertise for negotiation: substantive knowledge in the specialized domain, process expertise, especially the negotiation process, and influence or lobbying expertise. There are also two distinct forms of sports-contract negotiation: negotiations for beginners and negotiations conducted by representatives or agencies (Fisher et al., 2011; Masteralexis et al., 2018). Issues such as the subject matter of the contract, obligations of each party, methods of dispute settlement, contract duration, contract amount, grounds for termination, guarantees for breach of contractual obligations, and similar matters are among the issues that a standard contract can prevent. The legal weight of words and expressions is also very important in legal texts. Some expressions may carry different meanings, and if the other party is foreign, the translation of these expressions

must precisely correspond to the expressions in the target language so that the legal weight is clear for both parties. Therefore, all these factors show that the presence of a competent person familiar with legal issues is necessary to avoid weak contracts and prevent disputes (Palganeh, 2018). One of the most important topics in sports law is the sports contract, because it can be said that the most fundamental pillar of professional sport is the registered sports contract. Until a contract is concluded and a relationship is established among sports actors, no competition takes place and many issues in sports law do not arise. For example, the rights and duties of coaches, players, clubs, sports-equipment sellers, journalists, sports agents, club physicians, sponsors, and others are defined on the basis of the contract; without a contract, none of these matters can be imagined (Moradizadeh, 2021).

There are also several differences between domestic and transnational football contracts. One of the most important differences concerns culture. Contracts concluded in each territory are shaped by the culture, customs, and traditions of that territory. Another difference concerns termination conditions. In international contracts, a clause entitled just cause is considered so that either party to the contract, club or player, may obtain the right of unilateral termination if the stipulated conditions are met. Such a clause is not foreseen in domestic contracts. Another difference concerns contract duration. International contracts are often concluded for longer periods, which contributes to greater coordination among players, better understanding of team tactics, and, consequently, club success. Domestic contracts, by contrast, are short-lived and thus lead to instability in clubs and ultimately to failure of the collective system.

Another difference is the deeper attention paid to youth teams and young players. Major European clubs use expert scouts to identify talented players at childhood and adolescence, conclude long-term and low-cost contracts with them, and after comprehensive development of the player, obtain considerable benefits. By contrast, Iranian football has neglected this important matter and has not developed adequate plans for youth teams and young players (Asgharian & Sarbaha, 2020). Because representatives of sports contracts are usually considered key actors in negotiations, they need the best negotiation skills and abilities to obtain the greatest benefits for the organization and other stakeholders. International negotiations in Iranian football, because of factors such as insufficient experience, unfamiliarity with international rules, weak negotiation skills, and sometimes political or economic issues, have in some cases caused financial, professional, or reputational losses for clubs, players, or the federation. The transfer of Mehdi Taremi to Rio Ave in Portugal in 2019, the contract of the Football Federation of Iran with Marc Wilmots in 2019, and the contract of Persepolis with Jurgen Locadia in 2022 are examples showing that weak international negotiations in Iranian football, whether at the level of players, coaches, or clubs, have resulted in financial losses, lost opportunities, and reduced global credibility. Given the many problems of recent years related to losses arising from international sports contracts concluded by Iranian sports clubs, one of the most recent examples being the Marc Wilmots contract, it is highly important to examine the competencies of managers and key negotiating parties in order to obtain the greatest benefits and to develop a competency model for sports managers negotiating sports contracts. Therefore, the present study seeks to answer the following questions: What are the components of the competency model for negotiators of international sports contracts? What are the levels of the competency model for negotiators of international sports contracts? What are the relationships in the competency model for negotiators of international sports contracts?

Methodology

The present study was an applied developmental study conducted using a mixed-methods approach (qualitative-quantitative). In the qualitative section, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the quantitative section, the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) technique was used to compare the identified themes and their concepts pairwise, determine their preference, and rank them. The statistical population included experts, specialists, university faculty members who had studied and conducted research on the topic of the present study, and managers of Premier League football clubs. The statistical sample was selected using purposive sampling according to the research criteria and by snowball sampling, and theoretical saturation was achieved with 16 participants.

In the quantitative section, 10 specialists from the qualitative panel and 10 additional participants, including football-association experts, sports-law specialists, and experienced football experts familiar with sports negotiation, participated. To ensure validity, the researchers considered prolonged and continuous engagement, persistent observation, peer review, progressive subjectivity, participant involvement, and multiple information sources. Reliability was also examined using inter-coder agreement and researcher coding at a specified time interval. In the qualitative section, coding was performed manually, and in the quantitative section, the AHP technique and Expert Choice software were used.

Research Findings

The statistical sample consisted of 16 practical and theoretical experts. The qualitative section of this study was conducted based on the thematic-analysis process. In-depth interviews were conducted on the research topic. The interviews started in November 2024 and continued until February 2025.

The profile of the interviewees in the qualitative phase is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. List of interviewees in the qualitative phase

Position	Education	Field of study	Executive activity	Academic activity
University faculty member	PhD	Sports Management	*	
University faculty member	PhD	Sports Management	*	
University faculty member	PhD	Sports Management	*	*
University faculty member	PhD	Sports Management	*	
University faculty member	PhD	Sports Management	*	*
University faculty member	PhD	Sports Management	*	*
University faculty member	PhD	Law	*	
University faculty member	PhD	Psychology	*	
Football expert	PhD	Management	*	*
Football expert	PhD	-	*	*
Football expert	Bachelor's degree	Sport Sciences	*	*
Sports-law specialist	PhD	Sports Management	*	*
Sports-law specialist	PhD	Sports Management	*	*
Football agent	PhD	-		*
Football agent	PhD	-		*
Football agent	PhD	-		*

The results of the factor analysis showed that, among 114 interpretive codes, 27 subthemes were identifiable and 7 main themes were obtained. Based on the literature, background, and existing theories, these components were named as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Condensed classification and categorization for developing the competency model of negotiators of international sports contracts in Iranian football

Final theme	Key subthemes	Condensed initial competencies
Personal competency	Psychological characteristics; ethical characteristics; intelligence abilities; linguistics	Confidence, flexibility, anxiety control, active listening, concentration, mutual respect, honesty, professional ethics, responsibility, confidentiality, emotional/political/business/cultural intelligence, international-language skills, negotiation and football terminology, and body-language awareness.
Knowledge competency	Industry knowledge; technical football knowledge; innovation and technology knowledge; value knowledge; pricing knowledge	Understanding the football industry inside and outside the country, football products and services, team dynamics, league regulations, the broader football ecosystem, digital media, e-sports, AI, market demands, player/team valuation, performance analytics, and value-based pricing.
Lawfulness and legal compliance	Mastery of football-industry laws; negotiation laws; sports law	Awareness of sports regulations, transfer rules, FIFA/UEFA requirements, player contracts, legal formatting of contracts, legal negotiation guidelines, contractual terminology, domestic and international contract clauses, fairness of agreement clauses, and disciplinary and ethical issues in football.
Analytical thinking and decision-making	Data and performance analysis; analytical and predictive skills; decision-making skills	Data-driven insight, analysis of performance indicators and match statistics, tactical and systemic evaluation, structuring large datasets, using analytical tools to understand game trends, rapid evidence-based decision-making, effective communication, stakeholder trust, and profitable alternative evaluation.
Communication competency	Networking and relationship building; influence and lobbying; effective interpersonal communication; media interactions	Building strong football-industry networks, attending industry events and conferences, creating communication channels and lobbying links, developing international relations, constructive interaction with influential figures, effective verbal techniques, tactful communication, audience recognition, listening skills, public-relations teamwork, media content production, interviews, and observance of disclosure rights.
Negotiation skill	Negotiation planning; negotiation optimization; negotiation transparency; negotiation culture; negotiation diplomacy	Setting negotiation objectives, identifying strengths and weaknesses, prioritizing issues, determining strategies and timelines, understanding all parties' needs, bargaining effectively, developing win-win scenarios, persuading others, ensuring transparency, fairness and financial clarity, respecting cultural values, preserving national identity, managing diversity, opposing discrimination, improving the image of national football, and building cooperation with foreign negotiators.
Marketing capabilities	Market mediation; brand management; marketing management	Advising players or teams in financial conflicts, representing clients in marketing negotiations, strengthening club/player brands, understanding branding and sponsorship activation, digital-brand marketing, advising on advertising contracts, finance/tax matters, and asset-investment decisions.

The conceptual model of the competency of international football negotiators is shown in Figure 1.

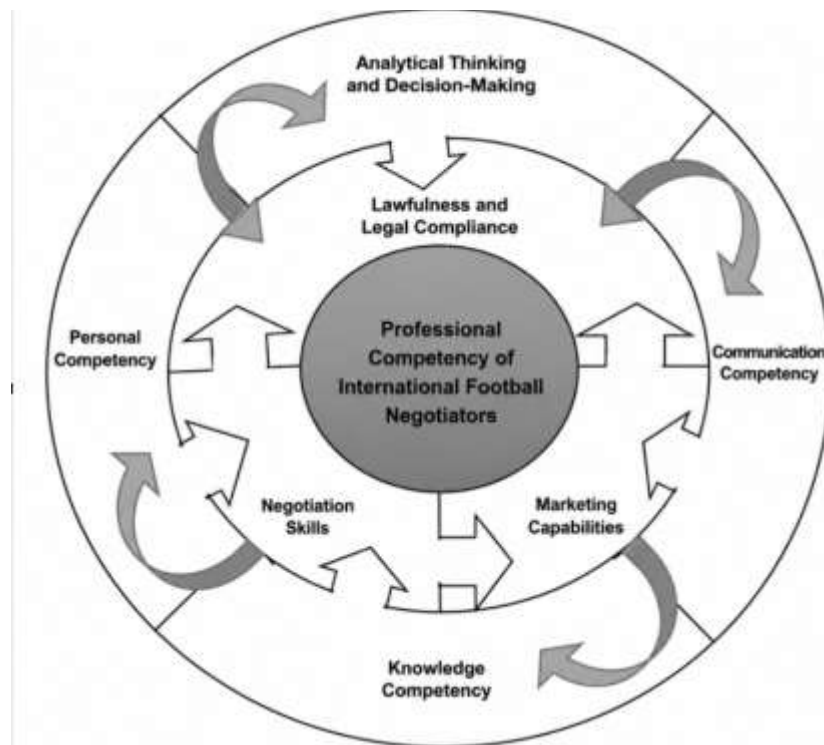


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the competency of international football negotiators

The schematic model designed for the professional competencies of international football negotiators presents a fully connected circular structure that places professional competency at the center and distributes the other competencies—personal competency, negotiation skill, knowledge competency, communication competency, analytical thinking and decision-making, lawfulness and legal compliance, and marketing capabilities—symmetrically in two outer layers. The two-way arrows among all themes, including between the outer and inner environmental competencies and among those competencies themselves, indicate a dynamic and interactive network in which each competency not only affects the profession of negotiation but is also affected by other competencies. For example, communication competency can strengthen marketing capabilities, and personal competency can influence analytical thinking and decision-making. The model emphasizes synergy and mutual dependence and indicates that success in international negotiations requires the coordinated development of all these competencies, which cyclically reinforce one another. Nevertheless, the importance of some indicators is naturally greater than others and they play a more prominent and decisive role. Therefore, in the next stage, 20 experts and specialists specified in the quantitative section compared the identified themes pairwise using the AHP questionnaire and determined the degree of preference of each theme.

When the opinions of more than one expert are used for pairwise comparison of elements, there are several techniques for reaching an overall view. Aczél and Saaty (1983) introduced the geometric mean as the best method for combining pairwise comparisons. To calculate the geometric mean of n numbers, the numbers must be multiplied together and then the n th root of the product must be calculated.

Geometric-mean equation: $(\prod_{i=1}^n a_i)^{1/n} = \sqrt[n]{a_1 a_2 a_3 \dots a_n}$.

To calculate the weight of each indicator, the geometric mean of the degrees of importance was first calculated for each cell of the matrix; then, using Expert Choice software, the weight of each theme was calculated. The demographic characteristics of the participants in the quantitative section are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of participants in the quantitative section

Demographic characteristic	Category	Frequency	Frequency percentage
Gender	Male	14	70%
Gender	Female	6	30%
Age	Under 30 years	2	10%
Age	31 to 40 years	6	30%
Age	41 to 50 years	7	35%
Age	51 to 60 years	4	20%
Age	Over 60 years	1	5%
Occupation	University faculty member	8	35%
Occupation	Football club manager	1	5%
Occupation	Football expert	2	10%
Occupation	Sports-law specialist	3	15%
Occupation	Football agent	3	15%
Occupation	Football coach	4	20%
Education level	PhD	12	60%
Education level	Master's degree	6	30%
Education level	Bachelor's degree	2	10%
Total	Total	20 people	

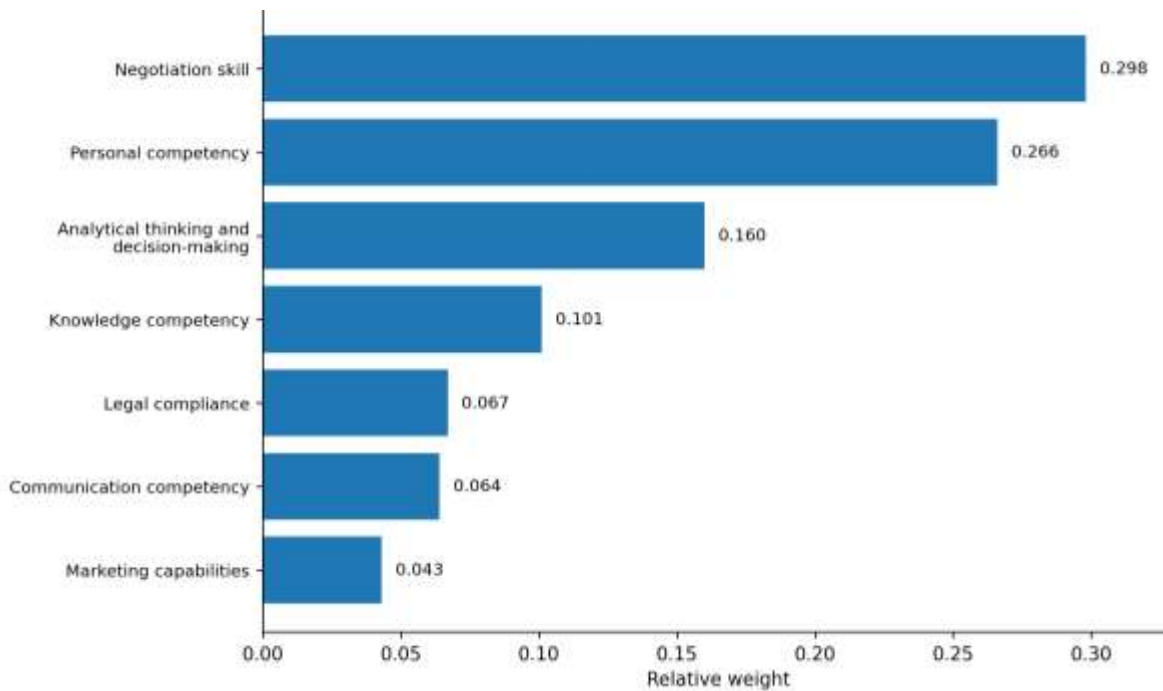
As reported in Table 3, 14 participants were men and 6 were women. Two participants were under 30 years old, 6 were 31 to 40 years old, 7 were 41 to 50 years old, 4 were 51 to 60 years old, and 1 was over 60 years old. Eight participants were university faculty members, 1 was a football-club manager, 2 were football experts, 3 were sports-law specialists, 3 were football agents, and 4 were football coaches. In terms of education, 12 participants held a PhD, 6 held a master's degree, and 2 held a bachelor's degree. To determine the priority of the main themes, pairwise comparison based on the criteria was conducted. In this study, the final themes of the competency of international football negotiators were classified into seven categories: personal competency, knowledge competency, lawfulness and legal compliance, analytical thinking and decision-making, communication competency, negotiation skill, and marketing capabilities.

The prioritization of the main competency themes is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Prioritization of the main themes of competency among international football negotiators

Rank	Relative weight	Factors
1	0.298	Negotiation skill
2	0.266	Personal competency
3	0.160	Analytical thinking and decision-making
4	0.101	Knowledge competency
5	0.067	Lawfulness and legal compliance
6	0.064	Communication competency
7	0.043	Marketing capabilities

According to the results of Table 4, the prioritization of competency themes is as follows: negotiation skill, with a relative weight of 0.298, ranked first; personal competency, with a relative weight of 0.266, ranked second; and analytical thinking and decision-making, with a relative weight of 0.160, ranked third. These were followed respectively by knowledge competency, lawfulness and legal compliance, communication competency, and marketing capabilities.



The prioritization of the competency of international football negotiators is illustrated in Chart 1.

Figure 2. Prioritization of the competency of international football negotiators

The inconsistency rate was calculated to examine the consistency of respondents' judgments in the pairwise comparisons. The inconsistency rate was 0.08, indicating very good consistency of judgments and the validity of the results.

Discussion and Conclusion

The importance of the competencies of negotiators of international football contracts is a key issue because of the complexity, high competitiveness, and multilateral nature of this industry. These competencies enable negotiators to conclude beneficial, transparent, and sustainable contracts in a dynamic and global environment. The results showed that these competencies include personal competency, knowledge competency, lawfulness and legal compliance, analytical thinking and decision-making, communication competency, negotiation skill, and marketing capabilities.

The final coding of the interviews showed that personal competency is one of the final themes affecting the professional competency of international football negotiators. These competencies include psychological and ethical characteristics, intelligence capabilities, and language skills, which were identified as key themes. Research shows that negotiators with high emotional stability maintain calm in stressful situations and make better decisions (Sharma et al., 2013). Fulmer and Barry (2004) showed that emotional intelligence is positively related to the ability to regulate emotions in negotiations and to achieve win-win outcomes. Football negotiations are often long, tense, and multilateral (Fulmer & Barry, 2004). Negotiators with high emotional intelligence can understand the emotions of the other party and build sustainable professional relationships. Research on negotiation and trust shows that emotional regulation, cognitive ability, and trust-building are closely linked to more effective negotiation processes (Fulmer & Barry, 2004; Lewicki & Polin, 2013; Sharma et al., 2013).

Organizational-psychology studies show that emotional intelligence (EQ) has a substantial effect on interpersonal interactions and the management of professional relationships. This finding is consistent with the present study because football negotiators must manage international relationships carefully. For instance, in the transfer negotiation of a

prominent player between two international clubs, a negotiator with high emotional intelligence can understand the feelings of the other party, such as a club manager or player agent, and build trust through empathic communication. This can reduce tension and lead to a win-win agreement.

Ethical characteristics such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility are recognized as a foundation for creating trust in international negotiations. In football, which sometimes faces ethical issues such as financial corruption or unprofessional behavior, ethical competencies help negotiators maintain professional credibility. This is aligned with theories of professional ethics (Rest, 1986), which emphasize the importance of ethical decision-making in competitive professions. Honesty in negotiation, especially when presenting accurate information about contract conditions or player capabilities, creates trust. If a negotiator gives inaccurate information about a player's injury status, a short-term agreement may be reached, but in the long term, the credibility of the negotiator and the organization will be damaged. Conversely, honesty in transfer negotiations, such as the 2021 transfer of Lionel Messi to Paris Saint-Germain, where financial information and contract conditions were presented transparently, helped build trust and support negotiation success.

Types of intelligence and analytical capabilities play a key role in complex negotiations, especially in analyzing contracts, evaluating risks, and predicting outcomes. International football negotiators must be able to process complex and multidimensional information, including financial, legal, and sporting data. Mastery of language skills, particularly intercultural linguistic competence, is vital for international negotiators. The ability to communicate effectively in different languages or understand culture through language can reduce communication barriers and help build lasting relationships. This is consistent with research on intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2003), which emphasizes the importance of language competence in international negotiations.

The final coding of the interviews showed that knowledge competency is another final theme affecting the professional competency of international football negotiators. McKersie and Walton (1991) discussed the role of specialized knowledge in negotiations, especially in industrial and commercial contexts, and emphasized that negotiators with deep knowledge of the negotiation subject can design more effective strategies and achieve better results (McKersie & Walton, 1991). Knowledge competency includes industry knowledge, technical football knowledge, innovation and technology, value, and pricing, enabling negotiators to make informed decisions. Negotiators must be aware of FIFA rules, market trends, and analytical technologies in order to evaluate the real value of players or contracts. In sport-management and football-performance research, specialized industry knowledge and data-informed analysis are emphasized as important foundations for reducing operational, financial, and performance-related risks (Masteralexis et al., 2018; Rein & Memmert, 2016; Sarmiento et al., 2014).

Industry knowledge refers to a deep and comprehensive understanding of the football industry, including its commercial, legal, cultural, and sporting dimensions. This competency is vital for success in complex and multilateral international contracts, including player transfers, sponsorship contracts, and broadcasting agreements. Technical football knowledge refers to understanding sporting and tactical aspects of football, including playing styles, team needs, player characteristics, and their effect on team performance. This competency helps negotiators make more informed decisions and evaluate the real value of players or contracts according to the technical needs of teams.

Knowledge of innovation and industry technology refers to the ability to understand and use emerging technologies, digital tools, and innovations related to the football industry. This competency includes the use of data, advanced analytics, and

new technologies to improve decision-making, evaluate player value, and strengthen negotiation strategies. Value knowledge refers to the ability to understand, evaluate, and manage the real value of players, contracts, and other football-related assets from financial, sporting, commercial, and strategic perspectives. Pricing knowledge refers to the ability to determine, analyze, and negotiate fair market-based prices for players, sponsorship contracts, broadcasting rights, and other football assets.

The final coding of the interviews showed that lawfulness and legal compliance is one of the final themes affecting the professional competency of international football negotiators. Violation of rules, such as financial fair play regulations, can result in heavy penalties or contract termination. Sports-law scholarship and regulatory documents emphasize that legal compliance, contractual clarity, and dispute-resolution mechanisms reduce legal uncertainty and protect the parties to sports contracts (Court of Arbitration for, 2023; Fédération Internationale de Football, 2024; Gardiner et al., 2012). Lawfulness and legal compliance refer not only to obeying formal rules and regulations but also to commitment to ethical principles, professional norms, and international standards in negotiations. In international football negotiations, these concepts include compliance with FIFA regulations, player-transfer rules, professional contracts, and sports-arbitration standards such as the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

The final coding showed that analytical thinking and decision-making is another final theme affecting professional competency. Data analysis and performance metrics, analytical and forecasting skills, and decision-making skills were identified as subthemes. Analytical thinking refers to the ability to analyze complex information, identify patterns, evaluate options, and predict outcomes. In international football negotiations, this ability helps agents, club managers, and federation representatives understand complex situations and design effective strategies. Negotiators must analyze performance, financial, and market data to make strategic decisions. Research on football match analysis and big data shows that systematic performance data can support more accurate evaluation and tactical decision-making in elite football contexts (Rein & Memmert, 2016; Sarmiento et al., 2014).

The final coding showed that communication competency is another final theme affecting professional competency. Football negotiations often include parties from different cultures, such as Europe, Brazil, or Asia. Intercultural negotiation research shows that awareness of cultural differences, communication styles, and trust-building practices improves the quality of multinational negotiation processes (Brett, 2014; Gudykunst, 2003; Lewicki et al., 2016). This part of the findings is consistent with negotiation and intercultural-communication literature emphasizing trust, conflict management, information exchange, and relationship building (Brett, 2014; Kopelman et al., 2006; Lewicki & Polin, 2013; Lewicki et al., 2016). Communication competency in international football negotiation refers to the set of skills, knowledge, and personality traits that enable negotiators to act effectively in complex and multicultural negotiations involving player contracts, transfers, sponsorships, and international agreements.

The final coding showed that negotiation skill is one of the final themes affecting the professional competency of international football negotiators. Negotiators must balance the interests of the player, the agent, and both clubs. According to Fisher et al. (2011), interest-based negotiation techniques create more sustainable outcomes (Fisher et al., 2011). Negotiation skill includes several sub-indicators that are important for negotiation success: negotiation-planning skill, negotiation optimization, transparency in negotiation, principles of negotiation culture, and diplomacy in negotiations.

Negotiation-planning skill refers to the ability to design and implement a structured plan to direct negotiations toward specific objectives. This includes determining objectives, stages, timing, and appropriate strategies for managing complex

interactions among players, agents, clubs, and lawyers. Negotiation optimization refers to the ability to use advanced strategies and techniques to maximize the interests of one's own party, create added value, and reach win-win agreements while maintaining professional relationships with the other party. Transparency in negotiation refers to professional commitment to providing accurate, honest, and clear information at all negotiation stages. It creates mutual trust, reduces misunderstandings, and ensures compliance with rules and ethical standards.

The principles of negotiation culture refer to awareness, understanding, and respect for cultural differences, customs, and negotiation styles in different countries in order to create effective, trust-building, and constructive interactions. Respect for local customs is a fundamental pillar of negotiation culture and is particularly important in international football contracts. Diplomacy in negotiations plays an important role in managing complex interactions among the different actors of the football industry, including players, coaches, clubs, federations, and sponsors. It includes effective communication, conflict management, trust-building, and reaching win-win agreements in a competitive and multicultural environment.

The final coding showed that marketing capabilities are another final theme affecting the professional competency of international football negotiators. Marketing capabilities refer to the skills and strategies negotiators use to promote the value of players, clubs, or contracts; attract sponsorship; and increase the attractiveness of deals in the global football market. In modern, commercialized football, this ability plays an important role in negotiation success (Masteralexis et al., 2018; Mullin et al., 2014). Players with strong brands, such as Ronaldo or Messi, generate substantial commercial revenues. Sport-marketing scholarship indicates that brand equity, sponsorship activation, fan engagement, and media positioning can increase the commercial value of athletes, clubs, and sport-related contracts (Masteralexis et al., 2018; Mullin et al., 2014).

The findings also showed that the prioritization of competency themes was as follows: negotiation skill ranked first, personal competency ranked second, and analytical thinking and decision-making ranked third. These were followed by knowledge competency, lawfulness and legal compliance, communication competency, and marketing capabilities. Negotiation-skill competency refers to the set of techniques, strategies, and practical abilities that negotiators use to manage the negotiation process, achieve favorable agreements, and resolve conflicts. The findings show that compared with other factors, negotiation skills play a more central role in the success of international football negotiators because they directly affect the ability to manage complex and multilateral negotiations.

The professional competency of international football negotiators is influenced by a combination of personal competency, specialized knowledge, lawfulness, analytical thinking and decision-making, communication skills, negotiation techniques, and marketing capabilities. These factors function in an integrated manner and enable negotiators to manage effective and sustainable agreements in the complex and competitive football environment. Developing these competencies through training and experience can improve negotiators' performance and lead to success in international negotiations.

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Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

AI use statement

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language editing, translation refinement, formatting, and consistency checks. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy of the data, analyses, interpretations, citations, and final content of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted using interview and questionnaire data. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants' responses was preserved. The research procedure was designed to avoid harm to participants and to respect the principles of informed participation and academic integrity.

Transparency of Data

Reasonable requests for research materials should be directed to the corresponding author, subject to university policies and participant confidentiality.

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