

Conflict Resolution Strategies Adopted by Sports Governing Bodies in South Africa and Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Sports diplomacy is increasingly recognised as a soft-power mechanism for fostering dialogue, cooperation, and conflict resolution between states. Despite its documented effectiveness in other regions, its structured application by sport's governing bodies in Southern Africa remains limited. This study examined the relationship between sports diplomacy and perceived conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe, focusing on sports communication, negotiation meetings, bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation. A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted. Data were collected from 116 sports administrators, managers, and executives drawn from thirty (30) sports federations in South Africa and Zimbabwe using a researcher-developed questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.81. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t tests, and simple and multiple regression analyses at the 0.05 level of significance. Supplementary country comparisons showed that Zimbabwean respondents reported significantly higher sports negotiation and image-management scores than South African respondents, while no significant country differences were found in sports communication, bilateral sports competitions, or policy implementation. Multiple regression analysis revealed a strong overall relationship between the sports diplomacy dimensions and perceived conflict resolution ($R = .705$; $R^2 = .498$), indicating that the dimensions jointly explained 49.8% of the variance in respondents' perceived conflict-resolution scores. Individual regression analyses showed significant positive relationships between perceived conflict resolution and sports communication ($F = 8.627$, $p = .004$), sports negotiation meetings ($F = 57.473$, $p < .001$), bilateral sports competitions ($F = 48.722$, $p < .001$), image management ($F = 86.802$, $p < .001$), and policy implementation ($F = 34.601$, $p < .001$). Multiple regression results showed that sports communication ($\beta = -.266$, $p = .011$), bilateral sports competitions ($\beta = .255$, $p = .012$), image management ($\beta = .311$, $p = .013$), and policy implementation ($\beta = .216$, $p = .042$) were significant independent predictors of perceived conflict resolution, while sports negotiation meetings did not make a statistically significant independent contribution ($\beta = .208$, $p = .070$). The study concludes that sports diplomacy dimensions are significantly associated with perceived conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe, although their independent contributions and country-level patterns differ. Institutionalising sports diplomacy within regional and national frameworks is therefore recommended.

Keywords: Sports Diplomacy, Conflict Resolution, Sports Governing Bodies, South Africa, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Sport has evolved beyond physical competition to become a strategic social and political instrument capable of influencing international relations, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises sport as a form of soft power that facilitates dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding between states and societies (Nye, 2008; Murray, 2018). This strategic use of sport within diplomatic processes, commonly referred to as sports diplomacy, has gained prominence as governments and non-state actors seek alternative mechanisms for conflict resolution in an increasingly interconnected world (Murray, 2013; Frawley & Adair, 2013).

Sports diplomacy encompasses a range of practices, including international sporting events, bilateral competitions, negotiation forums, communication strategies, image management, and policy coordination between states and institutions (Murray, 2018). Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is often confined to political elites, sports diplomacy operates across multiple levels: state, institutional, and societal, allowing sports governing bodies, athletes, and administrators to act as diplomatic intermediaries (Black, 2017). Empirical evidence from Europe, North America, and parts of Asia demonstrates that sport can help ease tensions, build trust, and support reconciliation processes when embedded within structured diplomatic frameworks (Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Masood, 2023).

Despite this growing body of literature, the application of sports diplomacy in Southern Africa remains underdeveloped and insufficiently studied, particularly regarding the role of sports governing bodies. Existing African scholarship has largely focused on sport for development and social cohesion at the community level, with limited empirical attention given to sport as an institutional diplomatic tool for resolving interstate socio-economic conflicts (Busolo, 2016; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014). This gap is notable given the cultural significance of sport and the strength of regional sports governance structures across Southern Africa.

South Africa and Zimbabwe present a particularly relevant context for examining sports diplomacy. The two countries share deep historical, political, and economic ties, yet their relationship has been strained by prolonged socio-economic tensions linked to migration, economic instability, xenophobia, and contested regional influence (Chingono & Nakana, 2009; Sachikonye, 2012; Nkala & Masuku, 2023). These tensions have periodically undermined diplomatic relations, economic cooperation, and social cohesion between their populations. While political and economic explanations of these conflicts are well documented, little empirical research has examined whether sports governing bodies have leveraged sports diplomacy as a structured mechanism to mitigate these tensions.

Sports governing bodies occupy a strategic position within this context. As custodians of sport governance, they possess the institutional capacity to design and implement diplomatic initiatives through communication, negotiation platforms, bilateral competitions, image management, and policy coordination (International Olympic Committee, 2021; African Union Sports Council, 2023). However, the extent to which these

mechanisms contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe remains empirically unclear.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the contribution of sports diplomacy facilitated by sport's governing bodies to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe. By quantitatively examining the influence of key sports diplomacy mechanisms, the study seeks to fill an important gap in African sports diplomacy literature and provide evidence-based insights for policymakers, sports administrators, and regional institutions.

Statement of Problem

Sport has historically been recognised as a platform capable of promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation among societies experiencing political or social divisions (Höglund & Sundberg, 2008; Levermore & Beacom, 2009). In several international contexts, sporting exchanges and competitions have helped ease tensions and strengthen diplomatic relations between states (Murray, 2018). In South Africa, for example, sport played a visible role in fostering national reconciliation during the post-apartheid transition, demonstrating the broader political and social influence of sporting institutions (Höglund & Sundberg, 2008).

Despite these examples, socio-economic tensions between South Africa and Zimbabwe have persisted for several decades and continue to challenge regional cooperation. These tensions are closely linked to economic instability, cross-border migration, labour market pressures, and episodes of xenophobia directed at Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa. Large-scale migration flows from Zimbabwe since the late 2000s have intensified pressures on employment opportunities and public services, contributing to periodic social conflict and strained interstate relations (Crush et al., 2015).

While political and economic explanations of these tensions are well-documented, far less attention has been paid to the potential role of sports institutions in addressing them. In particular, sport's governing bodies possess institutional mechanisms that could facilitate dialogue, cooperation, and relationship-building through communication strategies, bilateral competitions, negotiation platforms, and coordinated sports policies (Chappelet, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2007). However, existing scholarship on sport in Africa has largely focused on sport-for-development programmes and community-level initiatives, with limited empirical examination of how sport's governing bodies utilise sports diplomacy as a structured strategy for conflict resolution at the interstate level (Levermore & Beacom, 2009).

Consequently, there remains a significant gap in empirical research assessing the extent to which sports diplomacy mechanisms adopted by sport's governing bodies help resolve socio-economic tensions between South Africa and Zimbabwe. Addressing this gap is essential to strengthening the strategic role of sport in peacebuilding and to informing policy frameworks that promote regional cooperation in Southern Africa.

Main Research Question:

How can sports diplomacy, facilitated by sport's governing bodies, contribute to resolving conflicts between South Africa and Zimbabwe?

Specific Research Questions:

1. To what extent can sports communication contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe?
2. To what extent do sports negotiation meetings influence conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe?
3. To what extent do bilateral sports competitions contribute to resolving conflicts between South Africa and Zimbabwe?
4. To what extent does image management, employed by sport's governing bodies, influence conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe?
5. To what extent does the policy implementation by sport's governing body's impact conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in this study.

Main Hypothesis (H_0):

There is no significant relationship between sports diplomacy facilitated by sport's governing bodies and conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Specific Hypotheses

H₁: There is no significant relationship between sports communication and conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

H₂: Sports negotiation meetings do not significantly influence conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

H₃: Bilateral sports competitions do not significantly contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

H₄: Image management strategies employed by sport's governing bodies do not significantly influence conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

H₅: Policy implementation by sport's governing bodies does not significantly contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Soft Power Theory and Conflict Resolution Theory, both of which provide relevant lenses for understanding how sports diplomacy strategies adopted by sport's governing bodies can help resolve socio-economic conflicts between South Africa and Zimbabwe. These theories are particularly suitable because they explain sport's

capacity to influence interstate relations through attraction, dialogue, and cooperation rather than coercion or force.

Soft Power Theory and the Role of Sports Diplomacy in Interstate Relations

Soft Power Theory, as articulated by Nye (2008), explains how states and institutions exert influence through attraction, credibility, and shared values rather than through military or economic pressure. Soft power is derived from culture, values, and policies that others perceive as legitimate and appealing. In contemporary international relations, sport has increasingly emerged as one of the most visible and effective sources of soft power due to its global reach, emotional appeal, and symbolic significance.

Within sports diplomacy, sport functions as a cultural and institutional resource through which states and organisations project positive values such as unity, fairness, respect, and cooperation (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Sport's governing bodies play a critical role in this process by organising international competitions, managing media communication, shaping institutional image, and implementing policies that reflect ethical and inclusive sporting values. Through these mechanisms, sport becomes a means of influencing perceptions and improving relationships between states experiencing tension (Cornelissen, 2008; Black, 2017).

Empirical studies suggest that sport-based soft power can reduce hostility by creating shared experiences that humanize rival states and foster mutual understanding (Murray & Pigman, 2014). In the Southern African context, where historical, economic, and migration-related tensions persist, sport offers a non-confrontational avenue for engagement. Through sustained bilateral sports competitions, strategic communication, and positive image management, sport's governing bodies can help improve relations and ease socio-economic tensions between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

In this study, Soft Power Theory provides the foundation for understanding how sports communication, bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation operate as influence-based mechanisms that support conflict resolution.

Conflict Resolution Theory and Sport as a Medium for Dialogue and Negotiation

Conflict Resolution Theory focuses on the processes through which conflict is managed and transformed through dialogue, negotiation, and relationship-building rather than confrontation (Lederach, 1997; Avruch & Black, 1993). Central to this theory is the idea that sustainable conflict resolution depends on communication, trust, and continuous interaction among conflicting parties.

When applied to sport, conflict resolution theory views sporting platforms as relatively neutral spaces that allow opposing groups to interact in less politically charged environments (Giulianotti, 2011). Sports negotiation meetings, joint sporting programmes, and bilateral competitions create opportunities for institutional actors to engage in dialogue, clarify misunderstandings, and develop cooperative relationships over time. These interactions are particularly valuable in contexts where formal political negotiations may be sensitive or constrained.

Scholars have noted that sport facilitates informal diplomacy by lowering barriers to interaction and encouraging repeated contact, which is essential for building trust and reducing long-standing mistrust (Keim, 2003; Darby, 2013). Sports communication further strengthens this process by shaping narratives, countering stereotypes, and promoting messages of peace and cooperation through media and public engagement (Pedersen et al., 2007; Keim, 2003).

In the context of South Africa and Zimbabwe, Conflict Resolution Theory helps explain how sport's governing bodies can utilise negotiation meetings, communication strategies, and structured sporting interactions to address socio-economic tensions linked to migration, economic pressure, and public perceptions. Sport, therefore, functions not merely as an event, but as an ongoing process through which dialogue, trust, and cooperation are gradually established.

Within this study, Conflict Resolution Theory provides the explanatory basis for understanding how sports communication and negotiation meetings contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Empirical Framework

In this study, sports diplomacy is operationalised through three broad but interrelated thematic domains: (i) communication and negotiation mechanisms, (ii) bilateral sporting engagement, and (iii) institutional image and policy execution. These domains reflect the practical ways through which sport's governing bodies engage in diplomacy and peace-oriented activities.

Communication and Negotiation Mechanisms

Sports communication and negotiation meetings are treated as complementary processes within the empirical framework. Sports communication refers to the deliberate use of traditional media, digital platforms, official statements, and public engagement initiatives by sport's governing bodies to promote messages of unity, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence (Bairner et al., 2016; Pedersen et al., 2007). Positive communication is assumed to influence public perception, counter negative stereotypes, and create an environment conducive to peaceful interaction.

Negotiation meetings, on the other hand, represent structured and informal dialogue platforms facilitated through sport. These include meetings among sports administrators, executives, and institutional stakeholders from South Africa and Zimbabwe to address areas of disagreement, coordinate sporting activities, and strengthen cooperation (Keim, 2003). Together, communication and negotiation mechanisms are expected to promote dialogue, build trust, and reduce misunderstandings, which are essential elements of conflict resolution (Avruch & Black, 1993).

Bilateral Sporting Engagement

Bilateral sports competitions form the second major empirical theme of the framework. These competitions represent direct sporting interactions between South Africa and Zimbabwe and are viewed as practical expressions of sports diplomacy. Scholars argue that bilateral sporting events provide neutral and socially accepted platforms for interaction, fostering repeated contact and shared experiences that can ease tensions between rival states (Murray & Pigman, 2014; Hill, 2003).

In the Southern African context, bilateral competitions have historically contributed to regional identity and social cohesion, although their outcomes are not always predictable (Van der Merwe & Van der Westhuizen, 2007; Höglund & Sundberg, 2008). Within this framework, bilateral sporting engagement is assumed to promote peaceful coexistence by encouraging cooperation, enhancing mutual respect, and strengthening interpersonal and institutional relationships between sports actors from both countries.

Institutional Image Management and Policy Implementation

The third empirical domain integrates image management and policy implementation, reflecting the institutional dimension of sports diplomacy. Image management entails the efforts of sport's governing bodies to project a positive institutional and national image through ethical leadership, fair play, transparency, and responsible governance (Cornelissen, 2008; Grix et al., 2015). A positive image is assumed to enhance trust, legitimacy, and goodwill, all of which are critical for conflict-sensitive engagement.

Policy implementation reflects the extent to which sport's governing bodies operationalise existing sports and peace-related policies, including regional frameworks such as the African Union Sports Policy. Effective policy implementation provides consistency, sustainability, and institutional legitimacy for sports diplomacy initiatives (Giulianotti, 2011; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). By contrast, weak governance, inconsistent policy implementation, and limited institutional accountability can undermine the long-term effectiveness of sport-based peace initiatives (Busolo, 2016; Forster, 2016).

Conflict Resolution Outcome

The dependent variable in this framework is conflict resolution, conceptualised as the perceived reduction of socio-economic tensions between South Africa and Zimbabwe. This includes improved cooperation, reduced hostility, enhanced trust, and more peaceful interaction at both institutional and societal levels (Lederach, 1997; Avruch & Black, 1993; Wilson, 2016). Conflict resolution is measured through the perceptions of sports administrators, managers, and executives, reflecting institutional-level assessment rather than community-level outcomes.

Overall, the empirical framework assumes that when sport's governing bodies effectively integrate communication, negotiation, bilateral sporting engagement, image management, and policy implementation, sports diplomacy can meaningfully contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe. These relationships are tested

empirically using regression analysis to assess both the individual and combined effects of sports diplomacy strategies on conflict resolution outcomes.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research approach, employing a descriptive survey design to investigate conflict resolution strategies adopted by sport's governing bodies in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The descriptive survey design was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic collection of data from a relatively large population and allows examination of relationships between variables in real-world settings (Creswell, 2014). The design was suitable for assessing how sports diplomacy strategies influence conflict resolution without manipulating the study environment.

Population and Sampling Procedures

The study population comprised sports administrators, managers, and executives working within national sports governing bodies (sports federations) in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The two countries were selected due to their prominent roles in Southern African sport governance and their history of socio-economic tensions, which provide a relevant context for examining sports diplomacy (Busolo, 2016).

A two-stage sampling procedure was employed. First, a probability sampling technique (simple random sampling) was used to select thirty (30) sports federations, comprising fifteen (15) federations from South Africa and fifteen (15) from Zimbabwe. The federations were randomly selected from those registered with the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC) and the Zimbabwe Olympic Committee, respectively. This approach ensured an unbiased selection of sports federations and minimised organisational selection bias.

Second, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents within the selected federations. Participants included presidents, secretaries-general, chief executive officers, managers, and administrators occupying governance and management positions. Purposive sampling was appropriate because these individuals possess direct knowledge and experience relevant to sports diplomacy and institutional conflict-resolution practices (Etikan et al., 2016).

A total of 120 questionnaires were distributed, of which 116 were valid and returned, representing a response rate of 96.7%. Of the 116 respondents, 39 (33.6%) were South African and 77 (66.4%) were Zimbabwean.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire titled Conflict Resolution Strategies Questionnaire (CRSQ). The instrument was developed because standardized instruments specifically measuring sports diplomacy mechanisms and conflict resolution within the African sports governance context are limited.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections.

Section A captured demographic information including age, sex, nationality, organizational affiliation, and years of experience in sports management or administration.

Section B measured the independent variables representing sports diplomacy mechanisms using a four-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Agree (SA)* to *Strongly Disagree (SD)*.

This section consisted of five sub-scales, each containing five items:

- Sports Communication (5 items)
- Negotiation Meetings (5 items)
- Bilateral Sports Competitions (5 items)
- Image Management (5 items)
- Policy Implementation (5 items)

Section C measured the dependent variable, Perceived Socio-Economic Conflict Resolution, using 15 items assessing respondents' perceptions of how sports diplomacy contributes to reducing tensions between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

To establish validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in sports management, sports diplomacy, sports governance, and conflict resolution from South Africa and Zimbabwe. Their feedback ensured face and logical validity through refinement of the instrument items and alignment with the study objectives.

To determine reliability, the instrument was pilot-tested among fifteen (15) sports executives from the African Union Sports Council (AUSC) Secretariat who were not part of the main study but shared similar characteristics with the study population. Data obtained from the pilot test were analysed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.81, which indicates acceptable internal consistency for social science research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Bryman, 2012).

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using an online survey questionnaire (Google Forms). An introductory letter from the Pan African University Institute of Life and Earth Sciences (PAULESI) was submitted to the Chief Executive Officer of the African Union Sports Council (AUSC) Region 5 to obtain permission to administer the questionnaire.

Following approval, the questionnaire link was circulated via official communication channels to the selected sports federations in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Respondents completed the questionnaire voluntarily within the specified timeframe.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Ethics Review Committees at PAULESI and the University of Ibadan. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and given their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. No identifying information was collected, and all data were used strictly for academic purposes.

Data Analysis and Model Specification

Collected data were coded and analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics and scores on the study variables. Inferential analyses were conducted using independent-samples t tests and simple and multiple regression analyses.

Supplementary independent-samples t tests were conducted to compare South African and Zimbabwean respondents across the five sports diplomacy dimensions. Levene's test was used to assess the assumption of homogeneity of variance. Mean differences, 95% confidence intervals, and Cohen's d effect sizes were reported. Absolute Cohen's d values of approximately 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 were interpreted as small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

For the regression analyses, the dependent variable was perceived conflict resolution, while the independent variables were sports communication, negotiation meetings, bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation. Simple regression analyses examined the separate relationships between each sports diplomacy dimension and perceived conflict resolution, while multiple regression analysis examined their combined and independent relationships with perceived conflict resolution.

Standardised regression coefficients and their 95% confidence intervals were reported to indicate the magnitude, direction, and precision of the relationships. Because each simple regression contained only one predictor, the standardised coefficient was equivalent to the bivariate correlation coefficient, and its confidence interval was calculated using Fisher's r-to-z transformation. Cohen's f^2 was calculated as $R^2 / (1 - R^2)$, with values of .02, .15, and .35 interpreted as small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

All statistical tests were two-tailed and evaluated at the .05 level of significance. Regression assumptions relating to linearity, normality, independence of errors, and multicollinearity were considered before analysis.

Methodological Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study has some limitations. The use of self-reported data may introduce response bias, and the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. In addition, the study focused on selected sports federations, which may restrict the generalizability of findings beyond the sampled institutions.

Results

Hypothesis Analysis

Test of Main Hypothesis

(H₀): There is no significant relationship between sports diplomacy facilitated by sport's governing bodies and conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether sports communication, negotiation meetings, bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation jointly predicted perceived conflict resolution.

Table 1: Combined Multiple Regression Analysis of Sports Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution

Panel A: Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard error of the estimate
1	.705	.498	.475	4.656

Panel B: Analysis of Variance

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Regression	2362.369	5	472.474	21.797	< .001
Residual	2384.390	110	21.676		
Total	4746.759	115			

Note. N = 116. Predictors: sports communication, negotiation meetings, bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation. Dependent variable: perceived conflict resolution.

Table 1 presents the combined multiple regression analysis examining the relationship between the five sports diplomacy dimensions and perceived conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(5, 110) = 21.797$, $p < .001$. The multiple correlation coefficient of .705 indicates a strong combined relationship between the predictor variables and perceived conflict resolution. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = .498$, indicates that sports communication, negotiation meetings, bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation jointly explained 49.8% of the variance in respondents' perceived conflict-resolution scores. After adjustment for the number of predictors included in the model, the adjusted R^2 was .475. The overall model produced Cohen's f^2 of .992, indicating a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Based on these results, the main null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, the sports diplomacy dimensions, when considered collectively, were significantly associated with perceived conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Multiple Regression Analysis of Sports Diplomacy Variables

To further examine the individual contributions of each sports diplomacy mechanism to conflict resolution, a multiple regression analysis was conducted.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis of Sports Diplomacy Variables

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	9.672	3.461		2.795	.006
Communication	-.638	.246	-.266	-2.588	.011
Negotiation	.567	.310	.208	1.828	.070

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Bilateral Sport Competitions	.901	.353	.255	2.554	.012
Image Management	.973	.386	.311	2.518	.013
Policy Implementation	.532	.258	.216	2.062	.042

Note. N = 116. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient. Dependent variable: perceived conflict resolution. Overall model: $R = .705$, $R^2 = .498$, adjusted $R^2 = .475$, $F(5, 110) = 21.797$, $p < .001$.

Table 2 presents the independent contributions of each component of sports diplomacy to socio-economic conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The results indicate that communication, bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation made statistically significant contributions to conflict resolution, as their respective p-values are less than the 0.05 level of significance. Specifically, communication ($\beta = -0.266$, $p = 0.011$) shows a significant contribution, although the negative beta suggests an inverse relationship. Bilateral sports competitions ($\beta = 0.255$, $p = 0.012$) and image management ($\beta = 0.311$, $p = 0.013$) demonstrate positive and significant effects, with image management emerging as the strongest predictor among the variables. Policy implementation ($\beta = 0.216$, $p = 0.042$) also contributes positively and significantly to conflict resolution outcomes.

However, negotiation meetings ($\beta = 0.208$, $p = 0.070$) did not make a statistically significant contribution, as the p-value exceeds the 0.05 threshold. This suggests that, while negotiation meetings may have some influence, their independent effect is not strong enough to be considered statistically significant within this model.

Overall, the results demonstrate that most dimensions of sports diplomacy significantly influence conflict resolution, though their magnitude and direction of influence vary.

Test of Hypothesis One (H_1)

H_1 : There is no significant relationship between sports communication and conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of sports communication to conflict resolution.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Sports Communication and Conflict Resolution

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	333.926	1	333.926	8.627	.004
Residual	4412.833	114	38.709		
Total	4746.759	115			

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
R		=			.265
R ²		=			.070
Adjusted R ² = .062					

Note. N = 116. Dependent variable: perceived conflict resolution. Predictor: sports communication.

The regression results presented in Table 3 show that sports communication had a statistically significant positive relationship with perceived conflict resolution, $F(1, 114) = 8.627$, $p = .004$. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = .070$, indicates that sports communication accounted for 7.0% of the variance in respondents' perceived conflict-resolution scores.

Based on these findings, the specific null hypothesis (H_{01}) was rejected. Sports communication was therefore significantly associated with perceived conflict resolution when examined as the sole predictor.

Test of Hypothesis Two (H_2)

H₂: Sports negotiation meetings do not significantly influence conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of negotiation meetings to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Negotiation Meetings and Conflict Resolution

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	1590.984	1	1590.984	57.473	< .001
Residual	3155.775	114	27.682		
Total	4746.759	115			
R		=			.579
R ²		=			.335
Adjusted R ² = .329					

Note. N = 116. Dependent variable: perceived conflict resolution. Predictor: sports negotiation meetings.

The results presented in Table 4 show that negotiation meetings had a statistically significant positive relationship with perceived conflict resolution, $F(1, 114) = 57.473$, $p < .001$. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = .335$, indicates that negotiation meetings accounted for 33.5% of the variance in respondents' perceived conflict-resolution scores when examined as the sole predictor.

Based on these findings, the specific null hypothesis (H_{02}) was rejected. Negotiation meetings were therefore significantly associated with perceived conflict resolution in the simple regression model.

Test of Hypothesis Three (H₃)

H₃: Bilateral sports competitions do not significantly contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of bilateral sports competitions to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Bilateral Sports Competitions and Conflict Resolution

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	1421.262	1	1421.262	48.722	< .001
Residual	3325.496	114	29.171		
Total	4746.759	115			
R		=	.547		
R²		=	.299		
Adjusted R² = .293					

Note. N = 116. Dependent variable: perceived conflict resolution. Predictor: bilateral sports competitions.

The results presented in Table 5 show that bilateral sports competitions had a statistically significant positive relationship with perceived conflict resolution, $F(1, 114) = 48.722$, $p < .001$. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = .299$, indicates that bilateral sports competitions accounted for 29.9% of the variance in respondents' perceived conflict-resolution scores when examined as the sole predictor.

Based on these findings, the specific null hypothesis (H₀₃) was rejected. Bilateral sports competitions were therefore significantly associated with perceived conflict resolution in the simple regression model.

Test of Hypothesis Four (H₄)

H₄: Image management does not significantly contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of image management to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Table 6: Regression Analysis of Image Management and Conflict Resolution

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	2051.908	1	2051.908	86.802	< .001
Residual	2694.851	114	23.639		
Total	4746.759	115			
R	=				.657
R ²	=				.432
Adjusted R ² = .427					

Note. N = 116. Dependent variable: perceived conflict resolution. Predictor: image management.

The results presented in Table 6 show that image management had a statistically significant positive relationship with perceived conflict resolution, $F(1, 114) = 86.802$, $p < .001$. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = .432$, indicates that image management accounted for 43.2% of the variance in respondents' perceived conflict-resolution scores when examined as the sole predictor.

Based on these findings, the specific null hypothesis (H_{04}) was rejected. Image management was therefore significantly associated with perceived conflict resolution in the simple regression model.

Test of Hypothesis Five (H_5)

H_5 : Implementing sports policies between governing bodies does not significantly contribute to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of policy implementation to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Table 7: Regression Analysis of Policy Implementation and Conflict Resolution

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	1105.262	1	1105.262	34.601	< .001
Residual	3641.496	114	31.943		
Total	4746.759	115			
R	=				.483
R ²	=				.233
Adjusted R ² = .226					

Note. N = 116. Dependent variable: perceived conflict resolution. Predictor: policy implementation.

The results presented in Table 7 show that policy implementation had a statistically significant positive relationship with perceived conflict resolution, $F(1, 114) = 34.601$, $p < .001$. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = .233$, indicates that policy implementation accounted for 23.3% of the variance in respondents' perceived conflict-resolution scores when examined as the sole predictor.

Based on these findings, the specific null hypothesis (H_{05}) was rejected. Policy implementation was therefore significantly associated with perceived conflict resolution in the simple regression model.

Table 8: Standardised Regression Coefficients, 95% Confidence Intervals, and Effect Sizes for the Simple Regression Models

To facilitate comparison across the five simple regression models, the standardised coefficients, 95% confidence intervals, and effect-size estimates are summarised in Table 8.

Predictor	Standardized β	95% CI for β	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Cohen's f^2	Effect-size interpretation
Sports communication	.265	[.086, .426]	.070	.062	.075	Small
Negotiation meetings	.579	[.443, .688]	.335	.329	.504	Large
Bilateral sports competitions	.547	[.405, .663]	.299	.293	.427	Large
Image management	.657	[.540, .750]	.432	.427	.761	Large
Policy implementation	.483	[.329, .611]	.233	.226	.304	Medium

Note. N = 116. Because each model contained one predictor, the standardised coefficient (β) was equivalent to R. The 95% confidence intervals were calculated using Fisher's r-to-z transformation. Cohen's f^2 was calculated as $R^2/(1 - R^2)$. Values of .02, .15, and .35 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988).

As shown in Table 8, all five standardised coefficients were positive, and none of their 95% confidence intervals included zero. Sports communication produced a small effect ($\beta = .265$, 95% CI [.086, .426], $f^2 = .075$). Negotiation meetings, bilateral sports competitions, and image management produced large effects, with image management recording the largest effect ($\beta = .657$, 95% CI [.540, .750], $f^2 = .761$). Policy implementation produced a medium effect ($\beta = .483$, 95% CI [.329, .611], $f^2 = .304$). These findings demonstrate that the statistically significant relationships also varied meaningfully in magnitude.

Table 9. Descriptive Comparison of Sports Diplomacy Dimensions and Perceived Conflict Resolution between South African and Zimbabwean Respondents

Sports diplomacy dimension	South Africa, n = 39 M (SD)	Zimbabwe, n = 77 M (SD)	Mean difference
Sports communication	13.18 (2.46)	13.22 (2.80)	-0.04
Sports negotiation	12.74 (1.96)	14.27 (2.38)	-1.53
Bilateral sports competitions	13.28 (2.05)	13.48 (1.70)	-0.20
Image management	12.64 (1.68)	14.64 (1.90)	-2.00
Policy implementation	11.51 (3.07)	12.19 (2.32)	-0.68
Perceived conflict resolution	38.44 (4.49)	42.45 (6.85)	-4.02

Note. Mean differences were calculated as South Africa minus Zimbabwe. Therefore, negative values indicate higher mean scores among Zimbabwean respondents.

Table 9 presents the mean differences in the five sports diplomacy dimensions between South African and Zimbabwean respondents. Regarding sports communication, South African respondents obtained a mean score of 13.18 (SD = 2.46), while Zimbabwean respondents obtained a mean score of 13.22 (SD = 2.80). The mean difference of 0.04 indicates that there was virtually no difference between the two groups.

For sports negotiation, South African respondents had a mean score of 12.74 (SD = 1.96), whereas Zimbabwean respondents had a mean score of 14.27 (SD = 2.38). The mean difference of 1.53 indicates that Zimbabwean respondents reported higher sports negotiation scores than South African respondents.

South African respondents obtained a mean score of 13.28 (SD = 2.05) for bilateral sports competitions, compared with 13.48 (SD = 1.70) among Zimbabwean respondents. The mean difference of 0.20 indicates only a slight difference between the two groups.

For image management, South African respondents recorded a mean score of 12.64 (SD = 1.68), whereas Zimbabwean respondents recorded a mean score of 14.64 (SD = 1.90). The mean difference of 2.00 indicates a notable difference, with Zimbabwean respondents reporting higher image-management scores.

Finally, South African respondents obtained a mean score of 11.51 (SD = 3.07) for policy implementation, while Zimbabwean respondents obtained a mean score of 12.19 (SD = 2.32). The mean difference of 0.68 indicates a relatively small difference between the two groups, with Zimbabwean respondents reporting slightly higher policy-implementation scores.

Table 10. Independent-Samples t Tests of Differences in Sports Diplomacy Dimensions between South African and Zimbabwean Respondents

Sports diplomacy dimension	Mean difference	95% CI	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Sports communication	-0.04	[-1.09, 1.01]	-0.08	114	.938	-0.02
Sports negotiation	-1.53	[-2.40, -0.65]	-3.46	114	.001	-0.68
Bilateral sports competitions	-0.20	[-0.91, 0.51]	-0.55	114	.581	-0.11
Image management	-2.00	[-2.71, -1.28]	-5.56	114	< .001	-1.09
Policy implementation	-0.68	[-1.69, 0.33]	-1.34	114	.184	-0.26
Perceived conflict resolution	-4.02	[-6.12, -1.91]	-3.79	106.35	< .001	-0.65

Note. Mean differences and Cohen's *d* were calculated as South Africa minus Zimbabwe; negative values therefore indicate higher scores among Zimbabwean respondents. Welch's t-test was reported for perceived conflict resolution because the homogeneity-of-variance

assumption was not met. Following Cohen's (1988) guidelines, absolute d values of approximately 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively. CI = confidence interval.

Table 10 presents the independent-samples t-test results comparing South African and Zimbabwean respondents across the five sports diplomacy dimensions. No statistically significant difference was found in sports communication, $t(114) = -0.08$, $p = .938$. The negligible effect size ($d = -0.02$) confirms that the communication scores of the two groups were virtually identical.

A statistically significant difference was found in sports negotiation, $t(114) = -3.46$, $p = .001$. The second null hypothesis was therefore rejected. Zimbabwean respondents reported significantly higher negotiation scores than South African respondents, and the effect size was medium to large ($d = -0.68$).

The difference in bilateral sports competition scores was not statistically significant, $t(114) = -0.55$, $p = .581$. The third null hypothesis was therefore not rejected. The effect size was negligible ($d = -0.11$), indicating only a minor difference between the two groups.

A statistically significant difference was found in image-management scores, $t(114) = -5.56$, $p < .001$. The fourth null hypothesis was rejected. Zimbabwean respondents reported significantly higher image-management scores than South African respondents. The effect size was large ($d = -1.09$), making image management the dimension with the largest difference between the two national groups.

Finally, the difference in policy-implementation scores was not statistically significant, $t(114) = -1.34$, $p = .184$. The fifth null hypothesis was therefore not rejected. Although Zimbabwean respondents reported slightly higher scores, the effect size was small ($d = -0.26$).

Overall, the comparative analysis indicates that South African and Zimbabwean respondents differed significantly in sports negotiation and image management but not in sports communication, bilateral sports competitions, or policy implementation. These results describe differences in respondents' reported scores and should not be interpreted as evidence of causal differences between the two countries.

Discussion

Communication and Institutional Dialogue in Conflict Resolution

The findings of this study show that communication and negotiation mechanisms play complementary yet uneven roles in resolving conflicts between South Africa and Zimbabwe. Sports communication helps shape perceptions and foster a cooperative climate, while negotiation meetings demonstrated a strong bivariate association with perceived conflict resolution. However, the independent contribution of negotiation meetings was not statistically significant after the other sports diplomacy dimensions were controlled, $\beta = .208$, $p = .070$. This suggests that part of the bivariate relationship may overlap with the other dimensions. In relation to Objectives One and Two, this pattern suggests that communication initiatives by sport's governing bodies are most effective

when they move beyond information dissemination and support structured dialogue platforms for discussing, clarifying, and addressing issues collaboratively.

This outcome aligns closely with Conflict Resolution Theory, which emphasises dialogue, trust-building, and sustained interaction as central to managing socio-economic conflict (Lederach, 1997). Communication alone fosters awareness and openness but lacks the depth needed to transform entrenched tensions, whereas negotiation meetings offer opportunities for relationship-building and problem-solving. From a Soft Power perspective, communication enhances the legitimacy and attractiveness of engagement processes, but it is the interactive nature of negotiation that translates influence into tangible outcomes (Nye, 2008). Empirical studies likewise note that sport-based dialogue mechanisms are more effective when communication serves as a gateway to negotiation rather than an end in itself (Keim, 2003; Pedersen et al., 2007; Busolo, 2016).

Symbolic and Experiential Sports Engagement as Soft Power

The findings demonstrate that bilateral sporting competitions and image management jointly play a critical role in conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe, with image management emerging as the strongest explanatory factor. In relation to Objectives Three and Four, this suggests that while bilateral sporting events provide opportunities for interaction and shared experience, their impact is significantly amplified when supported by deliberate efforts to manage institutional and national image. Sporting encounters alone may generate temporary goodwill, but sustained influence appears to depend on how these interactions are framed, communicated, and governed by sports institutions.

This pattern aligns closely with Soft Power Theory, which emphasises attraction, legitimacy, and credibility as key sources of influence in international relations (Nye, 2008; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Bilateral competitions serve as experiential platforms where states and institutions interact under shared rules and norms, fostering familiarity and mutual recognition (Murray & Pigman, 2014; Hill, 2003). Image management extends this effect by shaping how such interactions are interpreted domestically and internationally, reinforcing narratives of professionalism, fairness, and cooperation (Cornelissen, 2008; Grix et al., 2015). Recent studies further argue that, in politically sensitive contexts, institutional reputation and ethical sporting conduct are central to sustaining diplomatic gains achieved through sport (Grix et al., 2015; Chadwick, 2022). The strong contribution of image management observed in this study therefore indicates that sports diplomacy is most effective when symbolic sporting engagement is embedded within coherent strategies for reputation-building and legitimacy enhancement.

Institutionalisation of Sports Diplomacy through Policy

The results indicate that policy implementation by sport's governing bodies makes a statistically significant contribution to conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe, although its effect is weaker than that of relational and symbolic mechanisms. In relation to Objective Five, this suggests that policies provide an essential institutional backbone for sports diplomacy but, on their own, do not generate the relational depth

required to resolve socio-economic tensions. Rather, policy implementation appears to function as a stabilising mechanism that supports and sustains communication, negotiation, and sporting engagement over time.

This finding is consistent with Conflict Resolution Theory, which emphasises the importance of institutional frameworks in embedding peace-oriented practices within organisations and governance systems (Lederach, 1997). Policies help formalise commitments, define roles, and ensure continuity beyond individual events or leadership changes, thereby reducing the risk of ad hoc or symbolic engagement (Giulianotti, 2011; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). However, recent studies caution that weak governance, limited institutional capacity, inadequate accountability mechanisms, and inconsistent policy implementation often constrain the effectiveness of sports diplomacy and sport-based peace initiatives (Busolo, 2016; Forster, 2016; Chadwick et al., 2023). The moderate contribution observed in this study therefore suggests that while policy implementation is necessary for institutionalising sports diplomacy, its impact on conflict resolution is maximised when aligned with active dialogue mechanisms and credible image management strategies.

Cross-National Comparison of Sports Diplomacy Scores

The supplementary country comparison showed that Zimbabwean respondents reported significantly higher sports negotiation scores than South African respondents, $t(114) = -3.46$, $p = .001$, $d = -0.68$, representing a medium-to-large difference. Zimbabwean respondents also reported significantly higher image-management scores, $t(114) = -5.56$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.09$, representing a large difference. However, no statistically significant country differences were found in sports communication, bilateral sports competitions, or policy implementation.

These findings suggest that respondents' perceptions or reported practices differed particularly in relation to negotiation and image management. The higher scores among Zimbabwean respondents may reflect differences in institutional experiences, diplomatic priorities, or exposure to sports diplomacy practices. However, because the analysis was based on cross-sectional self-reported data, these results should not be interpreted as evidence that nationality caused the observed differences.

Theoretical Insights from Sports Diplomacy Practices

When viewed together, the findings suggest that sports diplomacy works through a balance of influence and interaction. Strategies such as image management and bilateral sporting engagement appear to be effective because they shape how states and institutions are perceived, both by each other and by the wider public. This supports Soft Power Theory, which argues that attraction, credibility, and shared values can influence relationships without direct political pressure (Nye, 2008; Grix & Houlihan, 2014). In this study, sports governing bodies that consistently project professionalism, fairness, and cooperation seem better positioned to use sport as a diplomatic resource, helping to explain why image

management and experiential engagement show strong links to conflict resolution (Murray & Pigman, 2014; Cornelissen, 2008; Chadwick, 2022).

At the same time, the findings highlight that influence alone is not enough to resolve socio-economic tensions. Practices that involve direct interaction particularly negotiation meetings play a critical role by creating spaces for dialogue, trust-building, and joint problem-solving. This reflects the core assumptions of Conflict Resolution Theory, which emphasises sustained engagement over symbolic gestures (Lederach, 1997; Avruch & Black, 1993). Policy implementation supports this process by providing structure and continuity, although its effectiveness depends on institutional capacity and commitment (Giulianotti, 2011; Grix et al., 2015). Taken together, the results suggest that sports diplomacy is most effective when reputation-building and symbolic engagement are reinforced by regular dialogue and embedded within institutional frameworks a combination that helps explain how sport's governing bodies can meaningfully contribute to conflict resolution in Southern Africa.

Governance and Policy Implications

The findings of this study have clear practical implications for sport's governing bodies in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the wider Southern African region. First, they suggest that sports diplomacy initiatives are most effective when they are deliberately designed rather than treated as by-products of sporting activity. Governing bodies should therefore invest in structured negotiation platforms, coordinated communication strategies, and well-managed bilateral competitions that prioritise dialogue and relationship-building alongside performance outcomes. Particular attention should be given to image management, as the results indicate that credibility, ethical conduct, and professional governance significantly enhance the conflict-resolution potential of sport.

At the policy level, the study underscores the importance of embedding sports diplomacy within formal governance frameworks. National sports policies and regional instruments should explicitly recognise sport as a tool for cooperation and conflict mitigation, with clear guidelines for implementation and coordination across institutions. However, the findings also caution that policy alone is insufficient without effective enforcement and institutional capacity. For policymakers and regional bodies, such as continental and sub-regional sports councils, the implication is that sustained investment in institutional coordination, leadership development, and monitoring mechanisms is essential if sports diplomacy is to contribute meaningfully to long-term conflict resolution and regional stability.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationships between sports diplomacy strategies adopted by sport's governing bodies and perceived conflict resolution between South Africa and Zimbabwe. The findings suggest that sport may serve as a valuable non-traditional mechanism for managing socio-economic tensions when it is deliberately structured and institutionally supported. While sports communication demonstrated a positive bivariate relationship with perceived conflict resolution, its coefficient became negative after the

other sports diplomacy dimensions were controlled. Bilateral sports competitions, image management, and policy implementation demonstrated significant positive independent associations with perceived conflict resolution. Negotiation meetings also demonstrated a strong positive bivariate relationship, although their independent contribution was not statistically significant in the combined model, $\beta = .208$, $p = .070$. The supplementary country comparison further showed that Zimbabwean respondents reported significantly higher negotiation and image-management scores than South African respondents, while no significant country differences were found in communication, bilateral sports competitions, or policy implementation. Grounded in Soft Power Theory and Conflict Resolution Theory, the findings suggest that sports diplomacy may be most effective when influence-based approaches are combined with sustained dialogue and embedded within formal governance frameworks, thereby highlighting the strategic role that sport's governing bodies can play in advancing cooperation and stability in Southern Africa.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, this study recommends that sport's governing bodies in South Africa and Zimbabwe take a more deliberate and coordinated approach to using sport as a diplomatic tool for conflict resolution. Rather than treating sports diplomacy as an incidental outcome of sporting activity, governing bodies should intentionally create regular negotiation platforms and well-structured bilateral sporting engagements, given their practical value as platforms for structured dialogue, institutional engagement, and relationship-building. Communication efforts should therefore support dialogue and engagement processes, while image management should be strengthened through ethical leadership, transparency, and consistent governance practices that build trust and credibility. At the policy level, sports diplomacy should be clearly embedded within national and regional sports frameworks, supported by practical implementation guidelines and capacity-building initiatives. Strengthening coordination among sports institutions, policymakers, and regional bodies will further enhance the ability of sport to contribute meaningfully to sustained cooperation and stability in Southern Africa.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The research adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between sports diplomacy strategies and conflict resolution. Data were based on self-reported perceptions of sports administrators and officials, which may be influenced by personal bias or institutional positioning. In addition, the study focused on selected sport's governing bodies in South Africa and Zimbabwe, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other countries or regions. These limitations, however, do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather provide context for their interpretation.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could build on this work by adopting longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to capture changes in sports diplomacy practices and conflict-resolution outcomes over time. Qualitative methods, such as interviews or case studies, could provide deeper insight into how negotiation processes, image management, and policy implementation operate in practice within sports institutions. Further research could also extend the analysis to other Southern African or African countries to allow for comparative assessment and regional generalisation. Additionally, examining the perspectives of athletes, fans, and policymakers alongside sports administrators could offer a more holistic understanding of the role of sports diplomacy in conflict resolution.

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