

Original Article

Assessing the Situation of Football Refereeing in Iran using the SOAR Framework

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the situation of football refereeing in Iran using the SOAR framework. The method of the present study was descriptive-analytical with an applied nature. The SOAR analytical technique was used to collect information from interviews and form focus groups, formulate a development strategy and explain the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and measurable results. The study's statistical population included all national and international football referees in the country, and the sample was purposefully selected (n=151). The research instrument was based on an exploratory study and rewriting of basics, interviews, and similar studies by the researcher, whose content validity was confirmed by experts, and its reliability was confirmed by Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=0.89$). The results showed that the existence of many interested in football refereeing, the great interest of Iranian youth in football refereeing, the establishment of national and international refereeing courses, and the emergence of Iranian referees in the first place in Asia, respectively the most critical priorities in terms of strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. According to the findings, to improve refereeing at the global level, it is necessary to formulate a strategic plan based on the brand-based model that can align all the potentials in the country with its overall refereeing goal.

Keywords: Aspirations; Football refereeing; Refereeing brand; SOAR strategic model;

1. Introduction

The issue of professionalization of sports has caused its popularity and popularization to expand so much in the community that sports fans have started to advertise and show professional athletes through radio, television, and the internet. In a way, part of human society's economy is tied to the sports category (Eizadi et al., 2017). The sports industry has made it possible to take advantage of advertising and media opportunities, which has created the necessary platform for interaction between industry, trade, and sports. As a strategic bridge, it has been in the service of sports development and its economic prosperity (Elahi et al., 2008).

Strategic planning is a tool for analyzing the organization's internal and external strategic factors of the organization according to the mission and long-term goals to properly manage the competition that leads to organizational success (Krawczyk-Bryłka et al., 2020). Improving the quality and quantity of sports organizations and their development and improvement at the micro and macro levels are essential issues in the strategic sector. Sports institutions in the country must be planned by managers so that the grounds for their sustainable development are constantly created, and all sports institutions, in competition with other institutions, must always plan their life and survival. Football development is no exception to this rule and is similar to strategic thinking in all its constituent dimensions (Noferesti et al., 2017). Football development is one of the most important programs of the confederations of different continents of the world, among which can mention Asia Vision. In order to develop and advance football in Asia, this institution pursues various goals such as talent identification and primary levels, improving leadership, training, and coaching staff, including referees and experts. It has also introduced the 11 elements known as the 11 Elements of Asia Vision for football development in the continent. These elements include football federation, marketing, medical affairs, referees, coaches, primary age groups and youth, futsal, men, women, and media fans (Azizi & Talebpour, 2019).

The 2020 strategic plan of the Finnish Football Federation was designed "between 2011-2012". The elements of this program were: "We are the most physically active country in the world of sports." Mission: "Support all physical activities related to all athletes, members, sports organizations, and the public; represent Finnish sports organizations in

national and international football activities; develop social activities of individuals and promote health through physical activity; quality of life of citizens; observance of equality and justice; equality between the sexes, primarily through support when participating in physical activity throughout society and encouraging high-level and competitive Finnish and international sports. Also, the simultaneous development of sports and social activities of individuals in football programs so that both are interdependent, as well as raising the level of safety and health of sports venues and facilities, were among the goals of this federation (Federation, 2012).

Given the above, it was mentioned that the referees were among the 11 groups considered by Asia Vision, and this study; will present a complete description of this group.

Apart from the management structure, sports include essential components such as players, coaches, spectators, and referees who are currently covering refereeing issues and need training and experience. The referees' efforts, expertise, and knowledge have helped to hold various sports events so that they are the third pillar of sports competitions after coaches and players and are considered the most influential members in holding sports competitions (Izadi et al., 2019). Given the importance of the sports industry and, consequently, the jobs available, one of the most critical jobs in this field is refereeing. However, there are very few reports and research about the internal characteristics and nature of sports jobs such as football refereeing, about external conditions and factors affecting the task and performance of refereeing have been researched. Researchers have shown that referees also deal with external factors such as stress (Ramezani Nejad et al., 2014).

Refereeing is the most critical angle of the golden triangle of football. The referee acts as a bridge between the players and the spectators, and the opposing teams. In other words, he evaluates the game on the field and within a predetermined range (Louvet & Campo, 2019). Referees in the popular field of football are the focus of media and spectators and are one of the essential factors in the fate and position of teams and are selected according to the rules of their country federation and the program of the World Football Federation (Schenk et al., 2018). Among the various aspects of sports, the referee is the one who enforces the rules on the field. To perform the best, referees seek to maintain the principle of neutrality and not disrespect and



injustice to any team. He is also responsible for leading the teams in each match. Therefore, refereeing is a responsibility that is assumed by the referee and by making decisions during clashes and on the field (Rezapouraghdam et al., 2020).

Referees are an essential part of successful competition in almost any sport. Competitive sports are not possible without referees as impartial authority and ensuring that opponents follow the rules. However, the number of football referees is declining. The situation is particularly challenging at the district level, where the shortage of referees is regularly manifested and leads to organizational problems. For example, the German Football Association (DFB) officially announces the number of referees from 2004 to 2015. An analysis of the annual statistics reveals a steady decline from 2006 (81.372 referees) to 2015 (71.521 referees), more than 12% in that period (Giel & Breuer, 2020). Refereeing plays an essential role in the football dictionary, develops the referees' abilities, and properly prepares them by developing the nature of competition between teams to enhance their ability to make the right decisions. Undoubtedly, refereeing plays an essential role in football development, so when the level of refereeing increases, it leads to an increase in competition (Hassan et al., 2020).

SOAR is a framework for building a positive foundation for framework issues from a perspective that emerges by creating a collaborative dialogue focused on new ideas and innovations and selecting the best people and teams (Cole et al., 2018). SOAR is a "strengths-based framework with a participatory approach to strategic analysis, strategy development, and organizational change" (Stavros & Saint, 2010). The SOAR framework emphasizes strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. The SOAR framework is inherently team-oriented, participatory, and inclusive and seeks to involve all team members in a collaborative dialogue (Stavros & Cole, 2013). SOAR enhances collaborative dialogue through productive and solution-oriented communication between team members to adjust issues regarding strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results to build a positive future (Cole et al., 2018). SOAR begins with researching what works well and then identifying possible growth opportunities. SOAR helps team members identify strengths, use them based on what works best, and discuss team goals, strategic initiatives, and empowered goals. SOAR also enables team leaders to plan strategies and methods for achieving team goals, defining team

result metrics in line with team goals and objectives, and discovering innovative team opportunities. SOAR can enhance team members' freedom to envision an innovative, creative, and participatory future in which a strengths-based strategy or strategic plan is dynamic and produces positive results. SOAR is a framework for dialogue and exchange of information based on strengths that encourage all team members to collaborate in the future (Cole et al., 2018).

Since refereeing in football is one of the most sensitive and stressful jobs, identifying the factors that affect the referee's performance is one of the essential researches that can be done to improve the referee's performance and football development. On the other hand, many different methods and models for determining the refereeing status exist. Therefore, in this study, using the strategic SOAR method, the status of the country's football referees was examined, and looking to answer the fundamental question, how is the refereeing status of Iranian football according to the SOAR method?

2. Methods

This research has been done with a qualitative-quantitative method. The statistical population included all national and international referees of the Iranian Football Premier League (according to an inquiry from the Iranian Football Federation), and the sample was purposefully selected (n=151). The methods of data collection in this research are as follows:

2-1. Library Studies

In this section, to collect information in the field of theoretical foundations and literature of subject research, library resources, articles, required books, and the global information network has been used.

2-2. Research Tools

This section uses interview tools and a questionnaire to collect the data required for this research and measure the research variables.

A) The questionnaire is related to demographic characteristics, including age, the field of study, refereeing experience, and degree of refereeing.

B) In this study, interviews and focus groups were used to explain development strategies and describe strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. The questionnaire was prepared after interviewing the refereeing experts and included 27 questions (strengths= 6 questions, opportunities= 9 questions, aspirations= 6 questions, and results= 6 questions) which was rated in the Likert 5 value range (very low=1, low=2, medium=3, high=4 and very high=5). The judgments of 10 experts in the field were used to measure the content and the face validity of the questionnaire. In order to measure



reliability, Cronbach's alpha method was used, and the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.89. The data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially on a distance scale using SPSS 24 software. The descriptive section discussed central indicators, dispersion indices, percentages, frequency distribution tables, and data graphs, were discussed. In the inferential section, SOAR strategic method

and Friedman test were used to analyze the findings and test the hypotheses.

3. Results

At the beginning of this section, the demographic characteristics of the referees are presented (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the referees

Variable	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Less than 30 years	34	22.5
	Between 31 to 40 years	97	64.2
	More than 41 years	20	13.3
Field of Study	Physical Education	85	56.3
	None Physical Education	66	43.7
Refereeing Experience	Less than 10 years	16	10.6
	Between 11 to 20 years	98	64.9
	More than 21 years	37	24.5
Degree of Refereeing	First degree	52	34.4
	National degree	62	41.1
	International degree	37	24.5

Next, given that the significance level of all variables used in the study was lower than 0.05, so the distribution of data on the above variables is abnormal and non-parametric tests are used.

The SOAR model process includes the steps of starting and taking the first step, recognizing and examining, imagining, innovating and implementing. Subsequently, these steps were used in the process of refereeing the country's football using the SOAR framework.

3-1. Starting and taking the first step

At this point, members of the leadership and planning team discussed how to use the SOAR model. In these meetings, stakeholders and those who are somehow involved in the development and progress of the community were identified, and then, how to involve these stakeholders in the planning process was discussed. In the process of this research, in the first step, the planning group consisted of two authors. Stakeholders and actors in this work were identified and after identifying these people, it was decided to talk to them during meetings.

3-2. Recognition and examining

This step is a step towards strategies by examining and recognizing values, perspectives, internal strengths and external environment in order to create opportunities and turn them into aspirations and results. At this point, the planning team identified individuals and meetings. In these meetings, each

person explained the strengths of the country's football refereeing, as well as the opportunities ahead and their aspirations.

3-3. Imagining

In the meetings of the third stage (and the fourth) initiative and innovation (set of strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results) are discussed and meetings to examine the set of strengths and opportunities and their adaptation to the ideals and ultimately the formation of a common vision is formed. The participants of the meetings use the power of positive imagination to imagine a desirable future and results and actions. At this stage, the stakeholders were asked to have a positive idea of the favorable future of football refereeing and, if the plan is implemented, to express measurable and tangible results.

3-4. Innovation and initiative

At this stage, innovative strategies are identified and prioritized. Of course, new and changing trends in system, structure, culture, etc. may need to support new goals. These changes are created by identifying strengths and opportunities in order to achieve aspirations and results.

At this stage in the research process, the set of strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results were reviewed and challenged, and finally, changes were made in them. The summary of the results of these four steps is showing in Table 2.



Table 2.The results of four steps

Row	Items
Strengths	
1	Iranian youth are very interested in football refereeing
2	Iranian women are very interested in football refereeing
3	Financial support from the government and relevant institutions
4	Using religious potentials and pilgrims to strengthen the sport of football in terms of refereeing
5	Iran Football Federation is among the top 10 Asian federations
6	Attendance of athletes in Asian Premier Leagues
Opportunities	
1	The attention of the Iranian Football Federation to the referees
2	Attendance of Iranian referees in world-famous competitions such as the World Cup, the Asian Cup
3	Government support for the sport of football
4	There are many fans of football refereeing
5	Encouraging the media toward football and referee of the sport
6	The attention and interest of the Iranian people in football and its refereeing
7	Government and federation financial support for refereeing classes
8	Public support for football referees
9	Iran's strategic position in the Middle East
Aspirations	
1	Placement of Iran's referees in the FIFA rankings
2	Iranian referees ranked first in Asia
3	Presence of Iranian referees in important competitions such as the World Cup
4	Football refereeing as the 10 highest paid jobs in Iran
5	Holding international grade refereeing classes for referees from neighboring countries
6	Positioning of Iran's football referee in the first rank of Asia and the world
Results	
1	Attracting more refereeing applicants in Iran
2	Holding national and international refereeing courses
3	Presence of top referees in Asian and world competitions
4	Introducing the top referees to world football
5	Establishment of Iranian Football refereeing Training Academy
6	Financial support for Iranian referees

In the following, the possible opportunities for refereeing the country's football are prioritized (Table 3).

Table 3.Prioritizing opportunities for refereeing the country's football

Statistics	Value	Variable	Mean Ranks	Priority
Chi-Square	151/039	There are many fans of football refereeing	6.06	First
Degree of Freedom	8	Iran's strategic position in the Middle East	5.84	Second
P-Value	0/001	The attention and interest of the Iranian people in football and its refereeing	5.69	Third
		The attention of the Iranian Football Federation to the referees	5.39	Forth
		Encouraging the media toward football and referee of the sport	5.09	Fifth
		Government support for the sport of football	4.57	Sixth
		Public support for football referees	4.52	Seventh
		Government and federation financial support for refereeing classes	3.94	Eighth
		Attendance of Iranian referees in world-famous competitions such as the World Cup, the Asian Cup	3.90	Ninth



As can be seen in Table 3, the significance level is less than (0.01); Therefore, there is a significant difference between the opportunities for refereeing the country's football so that there are many fans of football refereeing, the strategic position of the country in the Middle East and the attention and

interest of the Iranian people in football and it's refereeing are in the first to third priorities, respectively.

In the following, the strengths for refereeing the country's football are prioritized (Table 4).

Table 4. Prioritizing strengths for refereeing the country's football

Statistics	Value	Variable	Mean Ranks	Priority
Chi-Square	113/442	Iranian youth are very interested in football refereeing	4.21	First
Degree of Freedom	5	Attendance of athletes in Asian Premier Leagues	4.13	Second
P-Value	0/001	Iran Football Federation is among the top 10 Asian federations	3.81	Third
		Financial support from the government and relevant institutions	3.43	Forth
		Iranian women are very interested in football refereeing	2.82	Fifth
		Using religious potentials and pilgrims to strengthen the sport of football in terms of refereeing	2.60	Sixth

As shown in Table 4, the significance level is less than (0.01); Therefore, there is a significant difference between the strengths of football refereeing in the country, so that the great interest of Iranian young people in football refereeing, the attendance of athletes in Asian Premier Leagues and the Iranian Federation being among the top 10

Asian federations are in the first to third priorities, respectively.

In the following, the aspirations for refereeing the country's football are prioritized (Table 5).

Table 5. Prioritizing aspirations for refereeing the country's football

Statistics	Value	Variable	Mean Ranks	Priority
Chi-Square	41/177	Iranian referees ranked first in Asia	4.03	First
Degree of Freedom	5	Holding international grade refereeing classes for referees from neighboring countries	3.81	Second
P-Value	0/001	Positioning of Iran's football referee in the first rank of Asia and the world	3.64	Third
		Presence of Iranian referees in important competitions such as the World Cup	3.31	Forth
		Placement of Iran's referees in the FIFA rankings	3.16	Fifth
		Football refereeing as the 10 highest paid jobs in Iran	3.06	Sixth

As can be seen in Table 5, the significance level is less than (0.01); Therefore, there is a significant difference between the aspirations of the country's football refereeing, so that the Iranian referees being ranked first in Asia, holding international refereeing classes for referees from neighboring countries and Iranian football refereeing being ranked first in the top Asian and the world are in the first to third priorities, respectively.

In the following, the results for refereeing the country's football are prioritized (Table 6).



Table 6. Prioritizing results for refereeing the country's football

Statistics	Value	Variable	Mean Ranks	Priority
Chi-Square	9/109	Holding national and international refereeing courses	3.80	First
Degree of Freedom	5	Attracting more refereeing applicants in Iran	3.54	Second
P-Value	0/001	Establishment of Iranian Football refereeing Training Academy	3.52	Third
		Financial support for Iranian referees	3.49	Forth
		Presence of top referees in Asian and world competitions	3.32	Fifth
		Introducing the top referees to world football	3.29	Sixth

As can be seen in Table 6, the significance level is less than (0.01); Therefore, there is a significant difference between the results in the country's football refereeing, so that holding national and international refereeing courses, attracting more refereeing applicants in Iran and establishing a football referee training academy are in the first to third priorities, respectively.

4. Discussion

In the analytical section, four main dimensions of the strategic method of SOAR were examined, and the final output was derived from 6 strengths, nine opportunities, six aspirations, and six results for the development and refereeing situation of the country, which resulted in 7 operational strategies for development the country's football refereeing. The seven strategies are

1. The strategy of developing talent identification centers and removing existing barriers
2. The strategy of increasing financial resources and government support for football refereeing
3. The strategy of creating interest through effective advertising
4. The strategy of developing and removing barriers to women's football refereeing
5. The strategy of adjusting the costs of football refereeing training
6. The strategy of considering refereeing as a job
7. The strategy of developing the football refereeing brand

4-1. Strategy for developing talent identification centers and removing existing barriers

According to Azizi and Talebpour (2018), increasing the number of football school graduations and injecting talented players into higher-level teams are the most critical priorities regarding strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results.

Barriers to skills and shared knowledge of the implementers of the talent identification project, and little interaction with school sports have the most significant impact on talent identification in

refereeing sports, especially football (Soloviev & M, 2018). One of the most critical obstacles in the structural sector was the ineffective communication of talent identification institutions with each other, which has been transferred to the project's implementation stage and is an obstacle in the implementation of talent identification projects. Lack of interaction between sports delegations and school sports is one of the most critical obstacles in implementing such projects. Countries that have the highest global rankings in the field of talent identification have always mentioned school sports as the foundation of any sport, and the interaction between education and affiliated federations in each sport is one of the most important strategic goals in the field of talent identification and later stages, is considered a championship sport. The most important obstacles in implementing talent identification projects are

- the lack of use of experts,
- lack of financial and material resources,
- lack of cooperation of families,
- low skills and knowledge of talent implementers, and
- the lack of a monitoring and evaluation system in the implementation phase.

As long as these obstacles are not removed, the talent identification sector that underlies each country's championship sport will remain disabled. Talent identification in any field is the prelude to future success and significant growth. Prosperous countries go through the process of identifying talent for the development of their sport in any field from childhood and guide the individual on the path to success with primary and correct education. Institutions such as education have a decisive role in this, and by identifying talented people in any sport and introducing them to talent centers, they play an essential role in developing sports in each country. In football refereeing, the creation of talent identification centers and the growth of talented football refereeing individuals in Iran are important and necessary. They can be a mighty lever for the development of football refereeing in Iran, and through these good qualities were selected for football refereeing and, in the coming years, will



make Iran stand out in terms of refereeing in Asia and the world.

4-2. Strategy to increase financial resources and government support for football refereeing

The driving force of any job and process is financial resources and financial support for that job. Allocating the necessary funds for football refereeing can increase the motivation of referees to further grow their brand.

Giel & Breuer (2020) state that self-orientation motivation, the respect shown by athletes, coaches, and spectators to referees, refereeing compatibility with work and private life, perceived organizational support, and referees' satisfaction with predicting positive intent show the referees to continue their work.

4-3. Strategy to create interest through effective advertising

Television, radio, the Internet, and newspapers are considered the most important mass media because they are accessible to a large number of people around the world, meaning media coverage is the amount that the media pays to clarify a particular issue (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). For example, newspapers of American and Canadian men's ice hockey teams participating in the 2010 Winter Olympics cover more than women's teams (Warner et al., 2013). When television media coverage is low, other social media can be used to promote sports where fans can control the content (Vann et al., 2015). Advertising can help develop an audience's interest in sports. Advertising convinces and reminds consumers of certain products (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). Therefore, advertising has an influential role in developing sports and even individuals. Due to the unique stresses and tensions in this job, football refereeing has caused a minimal number of people to be interested in this field, so sports managers and the Iranian Football Federation can attract people through effective advertising of football refereeing.

4-4. Strategy to develop and remove barriers to women's football refereeing

While sport is significant to society, and although it has helped break many boundaries, there is one boundary that, in most cases, has not yet been broken. This border is the role of women in sports. While there are many female athletes and female fans, they are rarely given the same respect as their male counterparts. Today, women have a very significant role in the development of sports in any country, and the presence of female athletes in world competitions has created a positive image of women's sports in that country world and is an important factor in the growth of sports in each country. However, the share of women in football refereeing is much lower than the men, and this is less in Muslim countries than in other countries; this has led to a minimal number of women in football refereeing in the past, passing existing barriers, so

there should be positive thinking for convergence and public opinion of people and governments in this regard.

4-5. Strategy to adjust the costs of football refereeing training

The cost of refereeing training is high for some people, who may have financial difficulties entering it, despite having a lot of talent in this field. The government and the football federation can facilitate the process of attracting talented people in this field by adjusting costs and offering special discounts in the refereeing sector.

4-6. Strategy to consider refereeing as a job

According to the research (Turbin & A, 2009), creating job security for referees and that the focus of football referees is only on the task of refereeing and having sufficient income can help the growth of this field and attract more interested people. Furthermore, referees need enough time to improve their level of performance as well as technical knowledge. On the other hand, refereeing as a second job may affect their performance. Therefore, helping referees to focus on the job and keeping them away from the stresses caused by economic problems. In this case, a bright future can be imagined for refereeing Iranian football.

4-7. Strategy to develop football refereeing brand

The value of a brand is a name, phrase, design, sign, or combination of these elements that determine the identity of a service organization and distinguishes it from other competitors and is judged by the intellect, logic, senses, and emotions of customers. Also, creating a sense of comfort and convenience is planned as the role of a brand because the brand determines the personality, lifestyle, aspirations, and behavior of customers. The brand determines the origin and reference of the product manufacturer (product/service), assigns responsibilities to the product manufacturer, creates commitment, reduces search costs, and displays the product's quality. In today's marketing world, the human brand has an attractive and engaging concept, and the brand's share can be successfully developed through good customer relationship management, respect, and attention to their needs. A well-known name for a brand can increase the profit of the product and cause it to earn more advertising profit than a brand that does not have a famous name. Therefore, the brand plays a decisive role in the growth of each person. By creating a brand, countries will be getting bold. In sports, several countries are branded. When the brand is mentioned, the country is associated with the minds of all sports fans.

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ارزیابی وضعیت داوری فوتبال در ایران با استفاده از چارچوب SOAR

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چکیده: هدف این پژوهش، بررسی وضعیت داوری فوتبال در ایران با استفاده از چارچوب SOAR بود. روش پژوهش حاضر توصیفی-تحلیلی با ماهیت کاربردی بود. برای جمع‌آوری اطلاعات، از مصاحبه‌ها و تشکیل گروه‌های کانونی، تدوین استراتژی توسعه و تشریح نقاط قوت، فرصت‌ها، آرزوها و نتایج قابل اندازه‌گیری، از تکنیک تحلیلی SOAR استفاده شد. جامعه آماری پژوهش، شامل کلیه داوران ملی و بین المللی فوتبال کشور بوده و نمونه به صورت هدفمند انتخاب شد ($n=151$). ابزار تحقیق مبتنی بر مطالعه اکتشافی و بازنویسی مبانی، مصاحبه و مطالعات مشابه توسط محقق بوده که روایی محتوایی آن توسط متخصصان و پایایی آن با آلفای کرونباخ ($\alpha=0.89$) تایید شده است. نتایج نشان داد که وجود علاقه مندان فراوان به داوری فوتبال، علاقه زیاد جوانان ایرانی به داوری فوتبال، راه اندازی دوره های داوری ملی و بین المللی و حضور داوران ایرانی در رتبه اول آسیا به ترتیب از مهمترین اولویت ها از نظر نقاط قوت، فرصت ها، آرزوها و نتایج، هستند. با توجه به یافته ها، می توان نتیجه گرفت که برای تقویت داوری کشور در سطح جهانی، تدوین یک برنامه راهبردی بر اساس مدل برند محور که بتواند تمامی پتانسیل های موجود در کشور را با کل داوری آن همسو کند، ضروری است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: آرزوها؛ داوری فوتبال؛ برند داوری؛ مدل استراتژیک SOAR؛

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این نماد به معنای مجوز استفاده از اثر با دو شرط است یکی استناد به نویسنده و دیگری استفاده برای مقاصد غیرتجاری.