

## **The Use of Sport in Global Politics: An Emerging Instrument of Soft Power<sup>1</sup>**

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*This study examines how sport contributes to soft-power outcomes through a qualitative meta-synthesis of 16 empirical studies published between 2005 and 2025. Rather than reaffirming that sport functions as an instrument of soft power, the study develops an explanatory perspective on the political, communicative and institutional conditions under which sport generates, constrains or undermines soft-power outcomes. Drawing upon research concerning mega-sport events, nation branding, sports diplomacy and international image construction, the dataset was compiled through systematic searches of the Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and SPORTDiscus databases and analysed using thematic content analysis supported by NVivo 12 software. The findings indicate that sport-related soft power emerges through interconnected communicative processes involving nation branding, media representation, audience interpretation and political credibility rather than through sporting events alone. The analysis further demonstrates that international visibility functions as an enabling condition rather than a sufficient determinant of soft-power success, helping explain why similar sport-related strategies generate divergent reputational outcomes across different political contexts. The study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrative explanatory framework that clarifies the analytical relationships among soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing while specifying the causal mechanisms linking sport, strategic communication and international influence.*

**Keywords:** *soft power; sports diplomacy; nation branding; sport mega-events; international relations*

### **Introduction**

The contemporary international system is characterised by increasingly complex forms of interaction in which influence is exercised not only through military capabilities or economic coercion but also through attraction, legitimacy and the capacity to shape international preferences. Within this context, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power has become a central framework for explaining how states pursue foreign-policy objectives by influencing rather than compelling others (Nye, 2004b). However, Nye's understanding of soft power has evolved considerably over time. Accordingly, contemporary understandings conceptualise soft power as a relational and context-dependent process rather than the mere possession of attractive

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resources. While his earlier work situated attraction within the broader transformations associated with globalisation and the information age (Nye, 2004a), his subsequent studies increasingly emphasised contextual intelligence and leadership (Nye, 2008), the diffusion of power through technological change and transnational networks (Nye, 2011), and, more recently, the continuing significance of attraction and credibility within an era of renewed great-power competition (Nye, 2023). Consequently, the effectiveness of soft power depends not simply on the possession of attractive cultural resources but on credibility, audience reception and political legitimacy.

Despite its widespread adoption, the concept remains theoretically contested. Scholars continue to debate the distinction between soft-power resources and soft-power outcomes, the difficulty of measuring attraction empirically, and the extent to which governments can intentionally generate favourable international perceptions. Critics further argue that the concept frequently lacks causal precision because attraction is mediated by political context, communication processes and audience interpretation rather than automatically resulting from cultural or diplomatic assets. These debates suggest that merely demonstrating the existence of soft-power resources is insufficient, as it does not explain the mechanisms through which such resources generate or fail to generate international influence.

Sport has become one of the most visible arenas through which these debates unfold. Beyond its athletic dimension, sport functions as a cultural, political and communicative resource capable of enhancing international visibility and facilitating diplomatic engagement (Postlethwaite et al., 2022). Mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup increasingly serve as platforms through which governments project national narratives, communicate foreign-policy ambitions and seek to enhance their international standing (Næss, 2023). Nevertheless, sporting visibility does not automatically translate into attraction or reputational gains. Whether sport contributes to soft-power outcomes depends upon how sporting initiatives are interpreted within particular political and communicative environments, making it essential to distinguish between sport as a potential resource and soft power as an outcome of international perception.

The growing prominence of sport has also intensified its intersection with sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing. Although these concepts are frequently used together, they represent analytically distinct phenomena. Sports diplomacy concerns the use of sporting actors, institutions and exchanges to facilitate diplomatic engagement (Postlethwaite et al., 2022), whereas soft power refers to the broader capacity to generate attraction and influence. Nation branding, by contrast, involves the strategic management and communication of national identity and reputation within competitive international environments (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2016). Anholt's concept of competitive identity emphasises that favourable international reputations cannot be sustained through promotional campaigns alone but must be supported by credible policies, institutions and political behaviour. Similarly, Dinnie conceptualises nation branding as a multidimensional process integrating identity, stakeholder coordination and international positioning. These perspectives suggest that nation branding may provide communicative mechanisms through which soft-power resources are projected, but successful image promotion should not be equated with genuine attraction or political influence.

The distinction becomes particularly important when considering the growing literature on sportswashing. Unlike nation branding, which refers to a broader process of reputation management, sportswashing represents a critical interpretation suggesting that sporting investments may be used to divert international attention from domestic political controversies or human-rights concerns. Whether a sporting initiative is interpreted as legitimate nation branding or as sportswashing therefore depends less on the event itself than on broader political context, media framing and audience evaluation. Consequently, sport should not be viewed as an inherently positive source of soft power but as a contested communicative arena in which strategic projection, political credibility and public interpretation interact to produce divergent reputational outcomes, including attraction, scepticism or what has recently been described as soft disempowerment.

Although previous research has convincingly demonstrated that states employ sport to pursue diplomatic, branding and soft-power objectives, significant conceptual and explanatory gaps remain. Existing studies frequently treat soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing as interchangeable concepts without systematically distinguishing whether they refer to resources, strategies, communicative practices or outcomes. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to explaining how sport-related visibility is transformed into international attraction, why similar sporting strategies produce different reputational consequences, and under which political, institutional and communicative conditions sport contributes to soft-power accumulation rather than reputational contestation.

Addressing these shortcomings, the present study employs a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical research to clarify the conceptual relationships among soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing. Rather than reaffirming the widely accepted proposition that sport constitutes a soft-power resource, the study develops an integrative explanatory framework identifying the causal mechanisms through which sport-related initiatives are strategically projected, mediated through international communication environments and translated into divergent reputational outcomes. Accordingly, the article shifts the debate from asking whether sport functions as an instrument of soft power towards explaining how, why and under which political, institutional and communicative conditions sport generates, constrains or undermines soft-power outcomes across different political contexts.

### **The Position of Sport in International Relations**

Although sport had long occupied a marginal and culturally peripheral position within the study of modern international relations, the shifting dynamics of the global political environment have gradually recast it as a sphere of diplomatic, economic and cultural significance. This shift demonstrates the extent to which sport has moved beyond its conventional association with competitive performance, assuming instead a series of strategic functions linked to international visibility, image cultivation, public diplomacy and cultural engagement (Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Dubinsky, 2019).

A central factor in explaining sport's growing salience within international relations is its considerable capacity to generate symbolic and material capital. Mega sporting events increasingly operate as key instruments through which states engage in identity construction, reframing historical narratives and communicating strategic messages to global audiences (Kramareva, 2018). The Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup and Formula 1 among other high-profile events serve as diplomatic platforms through which states articulate cultural values, signal modernisation agendas and promote economic visions on a global stage (Al-marri et al., 2025). In this respect, sport provides an influential "display arena" that reinforces national identity at the domestic level while simultaneously repositioning it within the international sphere (Boykoff, 2016; Giulianotti, 2015).

Sport's relationship with public diplomacy mechanisms forms another critical dimension. Because sport tends to carry a relatively ideology-light character and communicates through a broadly accessible cultural idiom, it has become a valuable component of states' attraction-based foreign-policy strategies (Young, 2024). The visibility of athletes, sporting teams and international competitions offers states opportunities to exert influence at societal and cultural levels beyond the confines of formal diplomacy. Hence, sport is operationalised as a subcomponent of soft power, utilised in tandem with cultural diplomacy initiatives, international exchange programmes, media communication strategies and global branding efforts (Nye, 2004; Postlethwaite et al., 2022).

A further structural feature underpinning sport's rising prominence in international relations is its transformation into a stage for geopolitical competition. Emerging and resource-rich powers including China, Qatar, Russia and the United Arab Emirates have deployed sports-related investments in line with their broader foreign-policy objectives (Dousti et al., 2024). Through costly mega-event hosting, acquisition of international sports clubs, sponsorship diplomacy and large-scale infrastructure development, these states seek to enhance their visibility and claim symbolic space within global political discourse. In the literature, such practices have been conceptualised through notions such as the "geopoliticisation of sport" and "sportswashing," highlighting sport's dual potential for legitimacy-building and legitimacy contestation (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Grix and Brannagan, 2024).

Sport's position in international relations is also shaped by the rise of multi-actor diplomacy. Rather than constituting an exclusively state-led field, sport forms a complex arena that involves international organisations (IOC, UNESCO, UN), civil-society networks (Peace Players, Right to Play), global sports federations, transnational media outlets and multinational brands (Adidas, Nike, Qatar Airways) (Ubaidulloev, 2018). This multi-actor architecture enables sport to play important indirect roles in norm-setting, agenda-building and global governance processes (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2016).

Finally, understanding sport's contemporary relevance requires acknowledging its capacity for emotional and cultural mobilisation (Cha, 2009). The emotional connectivity generated through sport extending far beyond the field of play facilitates societal bonding, reinforces international representations of national belonging and enhances cultural interaction. For these reasons, sport is widely regarded as a "high-

impact soft power resource” operating at both symbolic and cultural levels within international communication (Dubinsky, 2019).

### **The Historical Evolution of Sports Diplomacy**

The historical development of sports diplomacy is deeply intertwined with the modernisation of sport and the fluctuating power dynamics of the international system (Akhmetkarimov and Aminova, 2021). Early Olympic events and international competitions emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries functioned as cultural platforms that enhanced the visibility of nation-states; however, during this early phase, sport was largely framed through ideals of international friendship, physical cultivation and peaceful interaction. Although the foundational ethos of the modern Olympic movement foregrounded peace, fraternity and cross-cultural understanding thereby embedding sport with symbolic diplomatic value from the outset the systematic conceptualisation of sports diplomacy as a deliberate foreign-policy instrument belongs to a much later era (Cha, 2009; Murray, 2012).

The Cold War era represents a decisive turning point during which the diplomatic role of sport became markedly visible (Vonnard and Quin, 2017). Ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union permeated international sporting arenas: medal counts, record-breaking achievements and Olympic success functioned as propaganda tools used to showcase the superiority of competing political systems. The boycotts of the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Olympics made clear that sport was far from an apolitical activity; instead, it became a prominent stage on which geopolitical tensions were projected. At the same time, sport demonstrated its potential to operate as a symbolic instrument for de-escalation, dialogue and confidence-building, as demonstrated by the 1971 “Ping-Pong diplomacy” between the United States and China (Cha, 2009). This duality highlights the paradoxical nature of sports diplomacy, which carries the capacity to both intensify political conflict and mitigate it (Murray, 2012).

With the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalisation, sports diplomacy adopted a more institutionalised and multi-actor configuration. During the 1990s and 2000s, international organisations including the United Nations, UNESCO and the IOC began to integrate sport into frameworks concerned with development, peacebuilding and social inclusion, developing programmes under the broader rubric of “Sport for Development and Peace” (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2016). In this period, sport served not only as a field of prestige competition but also as a conduit for development aims, social-transformation initiatives and normative agendas. Consequently, sports diplomacy evolved from a relatively narrow, state-centred practice into a multi-layered and interdisciplinary policy domain (Zhang, 2025).

The 2000s constitute a phase in which mega-sport events were explicitly aligned with soft power strategies. China’s hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Brazil’s organisation of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics, Russia’s 2014 Sochi Winter Games and Qatar’s 2022 FIFA World Cup exemplify cases in which sports investments were deliberately connected to broader foreign-policy visions (Boykoff, 2016; Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Næss, 2023). During this

period, concepts such as “sportswashing” and “soft disempowerment” gained prominence, underscoring that sports diplomacy was being conceptualised not only as a positive soft-power asset but also as a contested and potentially fragile domain (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018; Dubinsky, 2019). Critiques that authoritarian-leaning states or those with problematic human-rights records might use mega-sport events to sanitise their image or suppress external criticism brought the normative dimension of sports diplomacy into sharper focus. Thus, the historical evolution of sports diplomacy reflects a dual process: the expansion of soft power capacity on one hand and its entanglement with ethical, political and governance-related debates on the other (Jirouchova, 2022).

A further milestone in the historical progression of sports diplomacy is its gradual recognition as a formalised diplomatic field. Publications documenting the IOC’s work on Olympic diplomacy and UN reports addressing sport’s contributions to peace and development have aimed to situate sport within the system of global governance (International Olympic Committee, 2025; United Nations, 2016). UNESCO’s policy frameworks promoting inclusion, equality and peacebuilding through sport further reinforce the normative foundations of contemporary sports diplomacy (UNESCO, 2021). This move towards institutionalisation reflects an effort to transform sports diplomacy from sporadic, event-driven initiatives into a strategically aligned, measurable and policy-grounded domain (Abdi et al., 2018; Murray and Pigman, 2013).

In summary, the historical development of sports diplomacy may be understood along three principal axes: (i) the shift from early cultural encounters and Olympic ideals to the ideological rivalries of the Cold War (Cary, 2011); (ii) its incorporation into development, peace and multi-actor governance agendas in the post-Cold War environment (Baroncelli and Irrera, 2024); and (iii) its transformation in the 2000s and thereafter into a strategic soft-power instrument articulated through mega-events, branding initiatives and global media networks (Alshikhy et al., 2025). This layered historical trajectory indicates that contemporary sports diplomacy is no longer confined to symbolic gestures; rather, it has become a complex foreign-policy instrument shaped by geopolitical competition, normative contestation and multi-actor collaborations.

### **The Theoretical Development of the Soft Power Concept**

The notion of soft power constitutes a major conceptual departure within international relations theory, challenging long-standing assumptions that power can be reduced to military capability or economic leverage alone (Ding, 2010). Since the early 1990s, Nye who introduced the term into scholarly discourse has redirected debates by asserting that the capacity of an actor to “get others to do what it wants” relies not only on coercion or material inducements but also on the ability to attract and persuade (Armitage and Nye, 2007). Soft power, in this sense, denotes a state’s capability to shape the preferences of others indirectly through cultural appeal, political values and foreign-policy conduct that is perceived as legitimate (Nye, 2004).

In Nye’s formulation, soft power rests upon three principal categories of resources: (i) cultural assets such as popular culture, the arts, linguistic influence and

lifestyle imagery (Lovric, 2016); (ii) political values and institutions, including democratic norms, human rights principles and commitments to the rule of law (Berger and Lake, 2018); and (iii) perceptions of legitimacy within foreign policy, encompassing adherence to international law, support for multilateralism and consistency in normative commitments (Chong, 2017). The sharp distinction Nye draws between hard power defined by military capacity and economic coercion and soft power subsequently provided the conceptual foundation for “smart power”, a framework advocating the strategic integration of coercion and attraction as the optimal foreign-policy orientation (Biscop, 2021).

The advancement of soft power theory has evolved in close tandem with the expanding scholarship on public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy (Zamorano, 2016). Government-led communication strategies targeting international publics, cultural-exchange programmes, scholarship schemes, international broadcasting platforms and nation-branding campaigns have all been identified as operational mechanisms for the production of soft power (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). As such, soft power extends beyond an abstract potential for attraction and emerges as a policy tool that is institutionally governed, strategically coordinated and actively managed. It intersects with the logic of “new public diplomacy”, which emphasises multilayered communication systems spanning state–society, state–state and society–society spheres. Consequently, soft power has increasingly been conceptualised as a broad communicative space that transcends traditional diplomacy while incorporating pronounced cultural and media dimensions (Dodds and Khatib, 2009).

Ultimately, the theoretical evolution of soft power challenges realist traditions centred predominantly on hard material capabilities by elevating elements such as culture, values and legitimacy often dismissed as peripheral into central analytical categories (Shalaby, 2008). Nonetheless, the concept’s normative weight, coupled with the inherent difficulty of empirical measurement, renders it both analytically illuminating and simultaneously contested. This conceptual foundation provides an essential framework for understanding why highly visible and culturally resonant domains such as sport play an increasingly prominent role within state-level soft power strategies (Kang and Houlihan, 2021).

### **The Role of Sport in the Use of Soft Power**

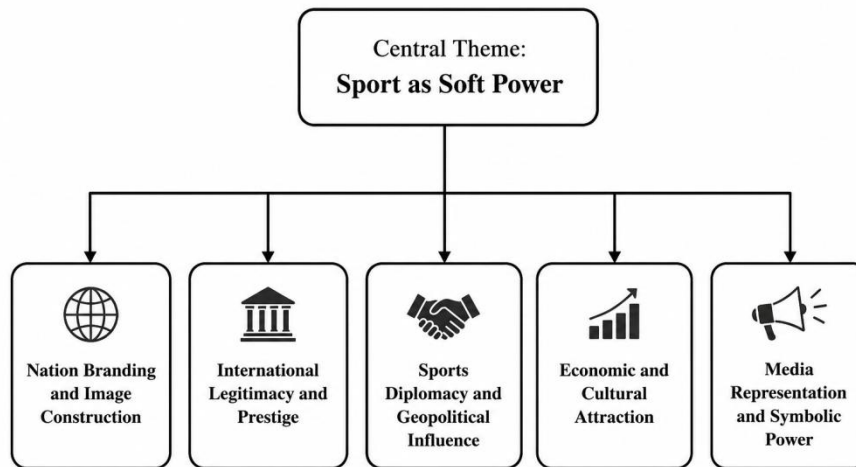
One of the most prominent contributions of sport to soft-power production lies in its capacity to enhance international recognition and project national image (Dubinsky, 2019). Mega sporting events most notably the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup and the Formula 1 Grand Prix offer host states opportunities to showcase modernity, economic dynamism, technological innovation and cultural diversity before global audiences (Gruneau and Horne, 2015). Grix and Brannagan (2024) illustrate that such events are deliberately employed as instruments of “image engineering,” emphasising their ability to influence international perceptions positively. Boykoff (2016) similarly argues that mega-events do more than generate prestige; they enable states to shape narrative constructions within the global political arena.

Sport also represents a significant dimension of states' cultural diplomacy strategies. Cultural exchange facilitated through athletes, coaching teams and international clubs strengthens the capacity to build societal connections across borders. In this regard, sport fuses with the symbolic capital created through culture, nurturing positive sentiments among foreign publics (Maguire, 2002). Dubinsky (2019) conceptualises sport's cultural-diplomacy function as a form of "high-visibility cultural representation," identifying elite athletes and global sporting icons as influential carriers of international appeal. Moreover, the cultural transmission embedded in sponsorship initiatives by multinational brands such as Nike and Adidas further enhances sport's value as a transnational soft-power resource that extends beyond the confines of national boundaries (Giulianotti, 2015).

Another crucial contribution of sports diplomacy to soft-power dynamics concerns its potential for diplomatic communication and peacebuilding. Given its universal idiom, sport offers a powerful medium for reducing hostility symbolically and creating alternative channels of interaction (Nygård and Gates, 2013). Historical episodes including Ping-Pong diplomacy, inter-Korean joint sporting initiatives and various forms of intercultural engagement during international competitions demonstrate how sport can operate as a "confidence-building diplomatic tool" during periods of heightened political tension (Mangan, 2014). Murray (2012) frames this sphere as one of "dual impact", noting that sport can simultaneously reinforce national identity and contribute to conflict-mitigation processes.

The economic dimension of sport functions as an additional component of soft-power generation. The global growth of the sports industry contributes to economic diplomacy through sponsorship arrangements, broadcasting revenues and increased tourism flows (Chadwick et al., 2020). Emerging powers such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and China deploy sports-related investments not only for economic return but also to extend their political influence. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018), who link Qatar's sports investments to "soft power and the pursuit of legitimacy," highlight the strategic integration between economic ambition and foreign-policy objectives.

However, sport's role in producing soft power does not invariably lead to positive outcomes. Escalating event costs, human-rights criticisms, environmental concerns and allegations of media restriction may all erode the soft-power benefits states seek to attain. Boykoff (2016) and Grix and Brannagan (2024) describe this dynamic as "soft disempowerment," noting that the mismanagement or politicisation of sport may result in trust deficits and reputational decline. Consequently, the strategic coherence, ethical consistency and transparency of sports-related initiatives are essential conditions for ensuring sport's effectiveness as a soft-power instrument (Chadwick et al., 2020).

**Figure 1.** *Thematic Structure of Sport as a Soft-Power Instrument*

Note. Developed by the authors based on thematic synthesis findings.

The thematic synthesis demonstrated that these dimensions operate interdependently rather than independently. The analysed studies collectively suggest that sport-related soft power emerges through the interaction of symbolic visibility, diplomatic communication, global media circulation and cultural consumption processes. Rather than functioning as isolated mechanisms, these dimensions appear to reinforce one another within broader state-led public diplomacy strategies.

## Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis design to examine the role of sport as an emerging instrument of soft power in global politics. Unlike conventional statistical reviews based on aggregated effect sizes, qualitative meta-synthesis enables the systematic integration of conceptually related empirical studies in order to identify recurring patterns, interpretive frameworks and thematic relationships across different geopolitical contexts (Cooper, 2017; Borenstein et al., 2021). The approach was considered appropriate because the existing scholarship on sport and soft power is methodologically heterogeneous and predominantly composed of qualitative case studies, discourse analyses and mixed-method research rather than standardised experimental datasets.

The analytical focus of the study centred on how sport functions as a diplomatic, symbolic and reputational resource within international relations, particularly through mega-sport events, nation-branding initiatives and transnational image-construction processes.

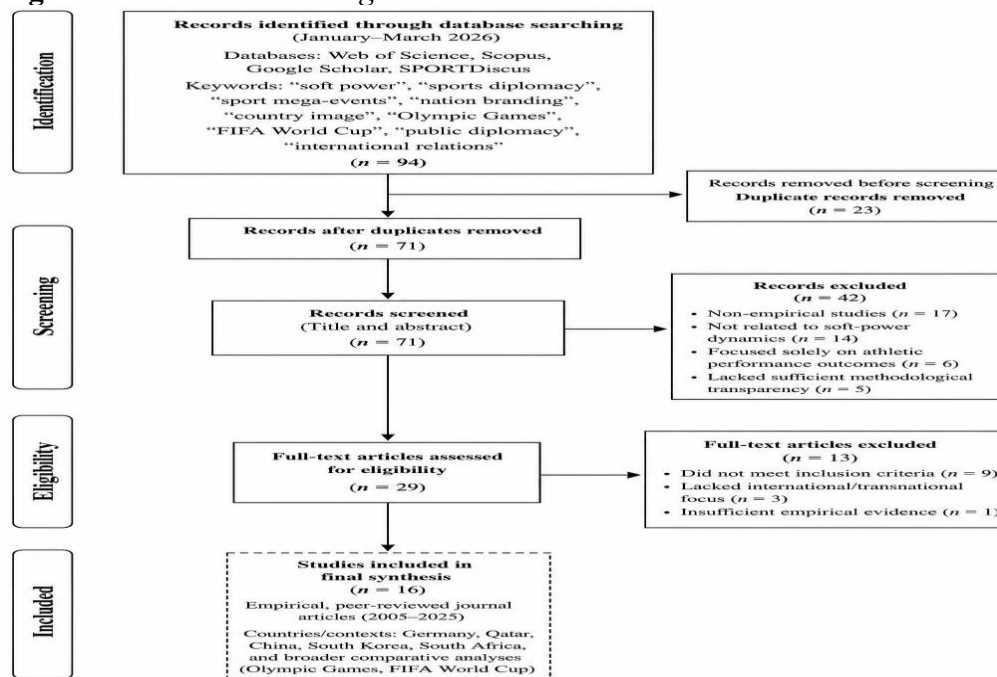
## Selection of Studies

The dataset consisted exclusively of peer-reviewed empirical journal articles published between 2005 and 2025. To enhance methodological consistency and analytical transparency, books, book chapters, editorials, conceptual essays and policy commentaries were excluded from the analysis. The literature search was conducted between January and March 2026 using four major academic databases: Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and SPORTDiscus.

The search strategy employed combinations of the following keywords: “soft power”, “sports diplomacy”, “sport mega-events”, “nation branding”, “country image”, “Olympic Games”, “FIFA World Cup”, “public diplomacy” and “international relations”. Boolean operators (“AND”, “OR”) were used to refine the search strings. Only English-language studies published in indexed academic journals were considered eligible.

The initial database search identified 94 records. After duplicate removal, 71 studies remained for title and abstract screening. Subsequently, 42 studies were excluded because they were either non-empirical, unrelated to soft-power dynamics, focused solely on athletic performance outcomes, or lacked sufficient methodological transparency. Full-text assessment was then conducted for the remaining 29 studies. Following eligibility evaluation, 16 studies satisfied all inclusion criteria and were retained for final synthesis.

**Figure 2.** *PRISMA Flow Diagram*



Note. Adapted from Page et al. (2021).

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) The study had to examine sport within the framework of soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding or international image construction. (ii) The study had to contain empirical material (e.g., surveys,

interviews, discourse analysis, social media data, policy analysis or comparative case studies). (iii) The publication had to be peer-reviewed and indexed in recognised academic databases. (iv) The study had to focus on international or transnational dimensions of sport-related political influence.

The final sample included studies addressing Germany, Qatar, China, South Korea and South Africa, as well as broader comparative analyses concerning Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup events.

## Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions: (i) How is sport conceptualised as an instrument of soft power within contemporary international relations? (ii) Through which mechanisms do mega-sport events contribute to nation branding and international image construction? (iii) In what ways do states utilise sport diplomacy to pursue foreign-policy and reputational objectives? (iv) Which recurring thematic dimensions emerge across empirical studies examining sport and soft power?

## Characteristics of the Included Studies

**Table 1.** *Methodological Distribution of the Studies Included in the Meta-Synthesis*

| Type of Study                               | Number (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Qualitative case study / discourse analysis | 8          | 50.0           |
| Quantitative survey-based study             | 5          | 31.3           |
| Mixed-method research                       | 2          | 12.5           |
| Social media / digital data analysis        | 1          | 6.2            |
| <b>Total</b>                                | <b>16</b>  | <b>100</b>     |

Note. Compiled by the authors.

Table 1 demonstrates that qualitative case-study and discourse-analysis approaches constituted the dominant methodological orientation within the analysed literature, accounting for 50% of the included studies. Quantitative survey-based research represented the second-largest methodological category, while mixed-method and social media-based analyses appeared less frequently. This distribution indicates that the literature on sport and soft power remains predominantly interpretive and context-oriented in methodological character.

**Table 2.** *Characteristics and Main Findings of the Studies Included in the Meta-Synthesis*

| Author(s)                   | Focus / Case                        | Methodological Orientation                | Main Soft-Power Finding                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brannagan & Rookwood (2016) | Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup           | Qualitative interviews                    | Mega-events increased visibility but also generated “soft disempowerment” through international criticism. |
| Dun et al. (2022)           | Qatar 2022 / Twitter discourse      | Social media analysis                     | Digital media narratives significantly shaped international perceptions of Qatar.                          |
| El-Dabt et al. (2025)       | Nation branding through sport       | Conceptual-empirical analysis             | Sustainable sport strategies strengthened long-term nation-branding capacity.                              |
| Grix (2012)                 | Germany 2006 FIFA World Cup         | Qualitative case study                    | Germany used the World Cup to reconstruct its international image positively.                              |
| Grix & Brannagan (2016)     | Soft power strategies through sport | Comparative conceptual analysis           | Sport diplomacy operates through attraction, legitimacy and symbolic projection.                           |
| Grix & Lee (2013)           | Emerging states and mega-events     | Comparative qualitative analysis          | Emerging powers use mega-events to enhance prestige and geopolitical visibility.                           |
| Gripsrud et al. (2010)      | Mega-events and country image       | Quantitative survey                       | Hosting mega-events positively influenced national image perceptions.                                      |
| Hahm et al. (2018)          | Olympic Games and destination image | Quantitative tourism analysis             | Olympic image significantly influenced destination and country perceptions.                                |
| Jeong et al. (2024)         | China’s soft-power strategy         | Qualitative policy analysis               | China integrated mega-events into broader state-led soft-power strategies.                                 |
| Kim & Morrison (2005)       | South Korea 2002 FIFA World Cup     | Survey-based research                     | The World Cup improved foreign tourists’ perceptions of South Korea.                                       |
| Kim et al. (2014)           | Destination and country image       | Quantitative analysis                     | Mega-events positively affected destination attractiveness and symbolic image.                             |
| Knott et al. (2015)         | South Africa 2010 FIFA World Cup    | Qualitative case study                    | Mega-events created opportunities for nation branding and international visibility.                        |
| Knott et al. (2017)         | South Africa and nation branding    | Hospitality-oriented qualitative analysis | Sport mega-events reinforced symbolic positioning and global recognition.                                  |

| Author(s)                   | Focus / Case                | Methodological Orientation  | Main Soft-Power Finding                                                    |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kobierecki & Strozek (2017) | Sport and nation branding   | Quantitative analysis       | Sport functioned as a measurable contributor to nation-branding processes. |
| Lee & Chappelet (2012)      | Olympic host-city selection | Policy-oriented analysis    | Soft-power considerations influenced Olympic host-city decisions.          |
| Manzenreiter (2010)         | Beijing Olympics            | Critical discourse analysis | International media narratives limited China's soft-power effectiveness.   |

Note. Developed by the authors through qualitative meta-synthesis.

Table 2 provides a systematic overview of the empirical focus, methodological orientation and principal findings of the studies included in the qualitative meta-synthesis. Although the methodological orientations of the analysed studies varied considerably, ranging from qualitative case studies and discourse analyses to quantitative surveys and digital media analysis, a substantial degree of conceptual convergence emerged across the literature. The findings consistently suggested that sport functions as a multidimensional soft-power resource through which states attempt to enhance international visibility, symbolic legitimacy and geopolitical influence.

Overall, the reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that sport-related soft power is not produced automatically through event hosting itself, but rather through broader processes involving diplomatic communication, global media visibility, symbolic representation and strategic nation-branding practices.

## Data Analysis

The analytical stage employed thematic content analysis following the procedures proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008). All selected studies were systematically coded in order to identify recurring conceptual and empirical patterns regarding the use of sport within soft-power strategies.

The coding process proceeded in three stages: (i) open coding, (ii) thematic categorisation and (iii) interpretive synthesis. Through iterative comparison across the dataset, five overarching thematic domains were identified: (i) Nation branding and image construction (ii) International legitimacy and reputational enhancement (iii) Sports diplomacy and geopolitical influence (iv) Economic and cultural attraction (v) Media representation and symbolic power

To improve analytical transparency and consistency, NVivo 12 software was utilised for qualitative coding and thematic clustering. Coding reliability was assessed through independent coding by two researchers. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, yielding  $\kappa = 0.81$ , which indicates a strong level of reliability according to the interpretive thresholds proposed by Landis and Koch (1977).

### **Reliability and Validity**

Several procedures were employed to enhance methodological rigour. First, a transparent inclusion–exclusion protocol was established prior to data collection in order to minimise selection bias. Second, the use of multiple academic databases improved source diversity and reduced database dependency. Third, independent coding and cross-checking procedures strengthened thematic consistency and interpretive reliability.

Construct validity was reinforced through interdisciplinary triangulation, as the selected studies originated from the fields of international relations, sport management, tourism studies, communication and diplomacy research. This interdisciplinary structure enabled a multidimensional interpretation of sport as a soft-power instrument.

### **Limitations**

The study contains several limitations. First, the literature on sport and soft power remains heavily concentrated in Western and English-language academic publishing, which may restrict the geographical representativeness of the findings. Second, because the analysis relied on qualitative synthesis rather than quantitative aggregation, the study does not provide direct measurements of causal impact. Third, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies limited the possibility of generating directly comparable empirical outcomes across all cases. Nevertheless, the qualitative meta-synthesis design provided substantial interpretive depth by enabling cross-contextual comparison of how sport functions as a diplomatic and symbolic resource in global politics.

### **Results**

The qualitative meta-synthesis of the 16 empirical studies indicated that sport functions as a multidimensional soft-power instrument operating simultaneously across diplomatic, symbolic, cultural and reputational domains. Despite methodological heterogeneity among the analysed studies, a substantial degree of thematic convergence emerged concerning the strategic use of mega-sport events for international image construction, legitimacy enhancement and geopolitical visibility. The reviewed literature generally suggests that sport has increasingly evolved beyond entertainment and competition into a strategic mechanism through which states attempt to cultivate attraction, recognition and international influence.

### **Distribution of Empirical Focus Areas**

The first analytical stage examined the primary substantive focus of the included studies. As shown in Table 3, the majority of the literature concentrated on nation branding and international image construction through mega-sport events,

particularly the FIFA World Cup and Olympic Games. Since several studies contained overlapping conceptual dimensions, each study was classified according to its dominant analytical emphasis.

**Table 3.** *Primary Empirical Focus of the Included Studies*

| <b>Empirical Focus Area</b>                  | <b>Number (n)</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Nation branding and country image            | 6                 | 37.5                  |
| Sports diplomacy and soft power strategy     | 5                 | 31.3                  |
| Mega-event legacy and international prestige | 3                 | 18.7                  |
| Media representation and digital perception  | 2                 | 12.5                  |
| <b>Total</b>                                 | <b>16</b>         | <b>100</b>            |

Note. Compiled by the authors.

As demonstrated in Table 3, nation branding and country image emerged as the dominant analytical focus within the examined literature, accounting for 37.5% of the included studies. The reviewed studies generally indicate that nation branding constitutes the central analytical concern across the literature. Research focusing on Germany, South Africa, Qatar and South Korea consistently suggested that mega-events are strategically utilised to reshape international perceptions and improve national reputation. In particular, Kim and Morrison (2005), Knott et al. (2015) and Hahm et al. (2018) demonstrated that positive destination-image and country-image outcomes were frequently associated with successful event hosting and extensive international media visibility.

### Geographical Distribution of Cases

A second analytical dimension concerned the geographical concentration of the empirical evidence. The distribution of cases is presented in Table 3.

**Table 4.** *Geographical Distribution of Examined Cases*

| <b>Country / Region</b>              | <b>Number of Studies (n)</b> |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Qatar                                | 4                            |
| South Africa                         | 2                            |
| China                                | 2                            |
| Germany                              | 1                            |
| South Korea                          | 1                            |
| Comparative / Multi-country analyses | 6                            |
| <b>Total</b>                         | <b>16</b>                    |

Note. Compiled by the authors.

As presented in Table 4, the geographical distribution of the examined studies demonstrates that scholarship on sport-related soft power is heavily concentrated

around emerging or strategically image-sensitive states seeking increased international visibility. Qatar emerged as the most frequently analysed case, reflecting the country's extensive investment in sport diplomacy and mega-event hosting strategies associated with the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Similarly, studies concerning China and South Africa frequently interpreted mega-events as instruments for repositioning national identity, enhancing symbolic legitimacy and increasing international recognition.

### **Nation Branding and International Image Construction**

One of the most consistent findings across the analysed studies concerns the role of sport in nation branding and international image reconstruction. Mega-sport events were repeatedly conceptualised as platforms through which states seek to generate favourable international perceptions and strengthen symbolic legitimacy.

Kim and Morrison (2005) demonstrated that the 2002 FIFA World Cup positively altered foreign tourists' perceptions of South Korea, particularly regarding modernity, hospitality and cultural attractiveness. Similarly, Grix (2012) argued that Germany strategically leveraged the 2006 FIFA World Cup to reconstruct its international image through narratives of openness, friendliness and democratic normalisation.

Knott et al. (2015; 2017) further suggested that South Africa used the 2010 FIFA World Cup to position itself as both a regional leader and a globally integrated destination. Collectively, these studies indicate that mega-events function not merely as sporting spectacles but also as strategic communication mechanisms designed to enhance international reputation and diplomatic visibility.

**Table 5.** *Major Nation-Branding Outcomes Identified in the Literature*

| <b>Country / Event</b>   | <b>Major Soft-Power Outcome</b>       |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Germany – FIFA 2006      | Image normalisation and friendliness  |
| South Korea – FIFA 2002  | Improved tourist perceptions          |
| South Africa – FIFA 2010 | Increased international visibility    |
| Qatar – FIFA 2022        | Strategic global positioning          |
| China – Olympics         | International prestige and legitimacy |

Note. Compiled by the authors.

The findings presented in Table 5 demonstrate that mega-sport events have frequently been utilised as strategic instruments for the reconstruction, enhancement and international projection of national image. Across the examined cases, states employed globally visible sporting events not merely as entertainment platforms, but as mechanisms for symbolic communication, diplomatic signalling and reputational management within the international system.

The German case associated with the 2006 FIFA World Cup particularly illustrated how sport may contribute to the normalisation of national identity and the promotion of positive emotional narratives such as openness, hospitality and democratic modernity. Similarly, the South Korean experience following the 2002 FIFA World Cup suggested that mega-events may significantly improve external perceptions among

international visitors, especially regarding cultural attractiveness, tourism appeal and global recognition.

The findings concerning South Africa and Qatar further indicate that emerging or strategically repositioning states frequently utilise mega-events to strengthen international visibility and reinforce geopolitical relevance. In these contexts, sport appears to function not only as a cultural resource but also as a form of symbolic capital capable of enhancing international legitimacy and soft-power capacity. The Chinese case likewise demonstrated that Olympic hosting strategies may serve broader state-led efforts aimed at consolidating prestige, projecting modernity and strengthening global influence.

More broadly, the comparative synthesis suggests that nation branding through sport becomes more effective when accompanied by extensive international media visibility, coherent diplomatic messaging, institutional coordination and long-term strategic planning. The analysed studies collectively indicate that positive soft-power outcomes rarely emerge automatically from event hosting itself; rather, they depend upon the ability of states to integrate sporting spectacles into wider public-diplomacy and communication strategies. At the same time, several studies implied that reputational gains remain highly contingent upon international political context and media interpretation, meaning that mega-events may simultaneously generate visibility, scrutiny and geopolitical contestation.

### **Sports Diplomacy and Geopolitical Influence**

Another major finding concerns the increasing institutionalisation of sports diplomacy within foreign-policy strategies. Several studies conceptualised mega-events as tools of geopolitical attraction designed to strengthen diplomatic influence through symbolic and reputational mechanisms rather than coercive power.

Grix and Lee (2013) argued that emerging states increasingly rely on mega-events to enhance international status and symbolic recognition. Similarly, Grix and Brannagan (2016) demonstrated that sport diplomacy frequently operates through indirect mechanisms of attraction, legitimacy and reputational projection rather than immediate political outcomes.

The Qatar-focused studies were particularly illustrative in this regard. Brannagan and Rookwood (2016) identified both “soft power” and “soft disempowerment” dynamics, arguing that while Qatar successfully increased international visibility, the country simultaneously became more vulnerable to criticism concerning labour rights, governance and political legitimacy.

Jeong et al. (2024) similarly demonstrated that China strategically integrates mega-events into broader state-led soft-power initiatives aimed at enhancing global influence while reinforcing domestic legitimacy.

## Media Representation and Symbolic Power

The qualitative meta-synthesis also highlighted the growing importance of digital communication and media representation in shaping sport-related soft power. Dun et al. (2022), through Twitter/X data analysis, demonstrated that online discourse significantly influenced global perceptions of Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup period.

Similarly, Manzenreiter (2010) argued that the Beijing Olympics illustrated the limitations of soft power when international media narratives remain shaped by ideological or geopolitical tensions. The reviewed studies therefore suggest that sport alone cannot fully control international perception; rather, soft-power outcomes are mediated through global media ecosystems and transnational public discourse.

This pattern further indicates that symbolic power in sport increasingly operates within digital communication environments where state narratives compete with alternative interpretations produced by journalists, activists and global audiences.

**Table 6.** *Dominant Thematic Codes Identified in the Nvivo Analysis*

| Thematic Code          | Frequency |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Nation branding        | 14        |
| International prestige | 13        |
| Soft power strategy    | 12        |
| Media visibility       | 10        |
| Diplomatic influence   | 9         |
| Cultural attraction    | 8         |
| Global legitimacy      | 7         |

Note. Frequencies represent the number of studies in which each thematic code appeared at least once.

The thematic coding frequencies presented in Table 6 provide further evidence that nation branding, symbolic reputation and international prestige constitute the dominant conceptual foundations of the analysed literature. Among the identified themes, “nation branding” emerged as the most frequently recurring code, appearing in 14 of the 16 studies, followed closely by “international prestige” and “soft power strategy.” This distribution suggests that the existing scholarship predominantly conceptualises sport as a strategic instrument for enhancing state visibility, legitimacy and international attractiveness rather than merely as a cultural or recreational activity.

The prominence of media visibility and diplomatic influence further indicates that soft power in sport is largely mediated through global communication processes and transnational audience engagement. In this regard, the reviewed literature consistently emphasises that mega-sport events derive political value not solely from the events themselves, but from their capacity to generate international narratives, symbolic recognition and global public attention. Similarly, the recurring emphasis on cultural attraction highlights the role of sport in facilitating cross-cultural communication and emotional connectivity between states and international audiences.

At the same time, the comparatively lower frequency associated with “global legitimacy” suggests that although legitimacy remains an important dimension of

sports diplomacy, it is often discussed indirectly through broader concepts such as prestige, image construction and reputational management. Overall, the thematic distribution identified through NVivo analysis reveals a strong degree of conceptual convergence across the literature, indicating that sport-based soft power is primarily understood as a process of symbolic projection, international positioning and strategic image management within contemporary global politics.

## **Interpretation of the Results**

Overall, the qualitative meta-synthesis demonstrates that sport has become an increasingly institutionalised instrument of soft power within contemporary international relations. Across different geopolitical contexts, mega-sport events were generally associated with efforts to generate international visibility, strengthen diplomatic legitimacy and reshape national reputation.

However, the findings also reveal several important limitations and contradictions. Soft-power outcomes appear unstable, context-dependent and highly vulnerable to external political narratives. Several studies particularly emphasised that reputational gains may coexist with intensified international scrutiny, criticism and geopolitical contestation.

Consequently, the reviewed literature suggests that sport should not be understood as an autonomous source of soft power, but rather as a strategic platform whose effectiveness depends upon broader political credibility, media representation and international legitimacy structures.

## **Discussion**

The present qualitative meta-synthesis moves beyond simply confirming that sport functions as an instrument of soft power and instead identifies a recurring explanatory process through which sport-related initiatives may generate, constrain or even undermine soft-power outcomes across different political contexts. Across the analysed studies, sport itself rarely emerged as the direct source of international attraction. Rather, attraction appeared to result from a sequence of interconnected mechanisms involving strategic nation branding, media representation, audience interpretation and the perceived credibility of state behaviour. This finding shifts analytical attention from viewing sport merely as a soft-power resource towards understanding the communicative processes through which sporting initiatives are translated into international influence.

This explanatory perspective also clarifies the analytical relationship between soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing. The synthesis suggests that these concepts should not be treated as interchangeable. Rather, they occupy different positions within the same causal process. Sports diplomacy functions primarily as a policy instrument through which states employ sporting activities to communicate internationally. Nation branding represents the strategic communication process through which preferred national narratives are projected,

whereas sportswashing constitutes a competing interpretive frame that may challenge those narratives. Soft power, by contrast, represents the outcome of this broader communicative process, emerging only when international audiences perceive those narratives as credible, legitimate and attractive. By distinguishing these concepts analytically, the study addresses an important source of conceptual ambiguity identified in previous scholarship.

The synthesis further demonstrates that the effectiveness of sport-based soft power is neither automatic nor politically neutral. Although mega-events frequently generate substantial international visibility, visibility alone does not necessarily produce legitimacy or attraction. The Qatar case illustrates this point particularly clearly. While the 2022 FIFA World Cup significantly enhanced Qatar's global recognition and diplomatic visibility, several studies simultaneously highlighted increased scrutiny concerning labour rights, governance and political legitimacy. This duality supports Brannagan and Giulianotti's (2018) concept of the "soft power–soft disempowerment nexus." More importantly, it suggests that sporting visibility constitutes an enabling condition rather than a causal determinant of soft-power accumulation. Reputational outcomes remain contingent upon political credibility, media framing and audience evaluation, helping explain why similar sport-related strategies generate divergent soft-power outcomes across different political contexts.

Another important implication concerns the process-oriented nature of sports diplomacy. The reviewed studies collectively indicate that sport-related diplomatic influence emerges gradually through cumulative communicative mechanisms involving media visibility, symbolic recognition and audience engagement rather than through immediate foreign-policy outcomes. This observation aligns with Murray's (2012) understanding of sports diplomacy as a long-term communicative process operating through indirect cultural and symbolic channels. The findings further demonstrate that mega-events derive diplomatic value not solely from the events themselves but from the narratives, emotional associations and media representations surrounding them. Sport therefore functions less as an isolated diplomatic instrument than as a communicative platform through which states seek to embed themselves within favourable international narratives.

The findings also contribute to ongoing debates concerning the relationship between soft power and geopolitical competition. The geographical concentration of the analysed literature around states such as Qatar, China and South Africa suggests that sport-based soft-power strategies are particularly prominent among emerging or strategically repositioning powers seeking enhanced visibility within the international system. This pattern reflects broader transformations in global politics in which symbolic legitimacy and international reputation increasingly complement traditional forms of material power. As Grix and Lee (2013) argue, emerging states frequently utilise mega-events not only to demonstrate economic capacity but also to signal geopolitical relevance and international ambition. The present synthesis extends this interpretation by suggesting that geopolitical influence depends not only on hosting events but also on the credibility of the political narratives communicated through them.

Moreover, the synthesis highlights the growing importance of digital communication environments in shaping soft-power outcomes. The inclusion of social media-based research, particularly Dun et al. (2022), indicates that contemporary sports

diplomacy is increasingly mediated through transnational digital networks in which states no longer exercise exclusive control over international narratives. Instead, symbolic power is continuously negotiated among governments, journalists, activists, audiences and global media platforms. This finding reinforces public diplomacy scholarship emphasising the decentralised and interactive nature of international communication in the digital era (Dodds and Khatib, 2009). Consequently, sport-related soft power should be understood as an interactive process of communication rather than a state-controlled projection of influence.

The findings additionally reveal an important normative tension within contemporary sports diplomacy. While many studies highlighted sport's capacity to facilitate intercultural dialogue, international recognition and symbolic cooperation, others simultaneously identified concerns regarding sportswashing, reputational manipulation and governance deficits. This contradiction reflects the increasingly politicised nature of global sport governance. Similar concerns have been discussed in relation to the "3S" (soft power, sportswashing and sports diplomacy) framework developed in the context of the BRICS countries and the Qatar World Cup (Bettine de Almeida and Özdemir, 2023). These findings challenge overly optimistic interpretations of sports diplomacy by demonstrating that sport does not inherently generate legitimacy or peace-building outcomes. Rather, political effects remain conditional upon institutional credibility, ethical consistency and international media interpretation.

From a theoretical perspective, the principal contribution of this study is not to argue that sport constitutes a soft-power resource, since this proposition is already well established in the literature. Rather, the contribution lies in developing an integrative explanatory framework specifying the causal mechanisms linking sport, strategic communication and international influence. The synthesis suggests that sport generates soft-power outcomes only when three conditions operate simultaneously: coherent strategic projection, credible political behaviour, and favourable audience interpretation. When one or more of these conditions is absent, sport may instead reinforce scepticism, reputational contestation or soft disempowerment. This framework therefore shifts analytical attention from asking whether sport functions as soft power towards explaining how, why and under which conditions sport produces divergent reputational outcomes.

Nevertheless, several limitations warrant further consideration. First, the analysed literature remains heavily concentrated in English-language and Western academic contexts, potentially limiting the representativeness of alternative regional perspectives. Second, because the study employed qualitative meta-synthesis rather than statistical effect-size aggregation, the findings should be interpreted primarily as conceptual and interpretive tendencies rather than universally generalisable causal relationships. Third, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies, particularly the coexistence of discourse analyses, surveys, policy analyses and social media studies, complicates direct cross-case comparability.

Future research may therefore benefit from adopting mixed-method comparative frameworks capable of integrating qualitative interpretation with longitudinal quantitative indicators of reputation, diplomatic influence and international perception. Comparative studies examining the long-term reputational effects of

mega-events across different political systems could substantially deepen understanding of the causal conditions under which sport-based soft power succeeds, fails or produces unintended reputational consequences. Additionally, the growing influence of digital communication environments suggests the importance of incorporating computational communication analysis and transnational audience studies into future sports diplomacy research.

Overall, the findings suggest that sport has become an increasingly central communicative arena through which states seek to negotiate visibility, legitimacy and influence within the contemporary international system. However, sport should not be understood as an autonomous producer of soft power. Rather, its effectiveness depends upon the interaction between strategic communication, political credibility and audience interpretation. Accordingly, soft power emerges not from sport itself but from the communicative and political processes through which sporting initiatives are interpreted within broader international contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the role of sport in contemporary soft-power strategies through a qualitative meta-synthesis of 16 empirical studies published between 2005 and 2025. Rather than reaffirming the widely accepted proposition that sport constitutes an instrument of soft power, the study sought to explain how, why and under which political, communicative and institutional conditions sport contributes to divergent soft-power outcomes. The findings demonstrate that sport should be understood not as a direct source of international attraction but as a strategic communicative resource whose effectiveness depends upon broader processes of political credibility, media representation and audience interpretation.

The synthesis indicates that sport-related soft power is generated through an interconnected communicative process rather than through sporting events alone. Nation branding provides the strategic projection of national narratives, sports diplomacy facilitates international engagement, and sportswashing represents a competing interpretive frame capable of undermining those narratives. Soft power therefore emerges not from sport itself but from the extent to which international audiences perceive these narratives as credible, legitimate and attractive. This analytical distinction contributes to clarifying the conceptual relationships among soft power, sports diplomacy, nation branding and sportswashing, which have frequently been treated as interchangeable within previous scholarship.

A central conclusion of the study is that international visibility should not be interpreted as a sufficient indicator of soft-power success. Although mega-events frequently increase global attention, reputational outcomes remain contingent upon political credibility, ethical consistency, media framing and audience evaluation. Consequently, sporting visibility functions as an enabling condition rather than a causal determinant of attraction. This finding helps explain why similar sport-related strategies may generate markedly different reputational consequences across different political and institutional contexts.

The study further demonstrates that sports diplomacy operates as a cumulative communicative process rather than producing immediate diplomatic outcomes. Diplomatic influence develops gradually through symbolic recognition, media narratives, public engagement and sustained international communication. The growing importance of digital media environments further reinforces that soft power is continuously negotiated among governments, media organisations, civil-society actors and international audiences rather than being controlled exclusively by states.

From a theoretical perspective, the principal contribution of this study lies in developing an integrative explanatory framework specifying the causal mechanisms linking sport, strategic communication and international influence. The findings suggest that sport generates soft-power outcomes only when three interrelated conditions operate simultaneously: coherent strategic projection, credible political behaviour and favourable audience interpretation. When one or more of these conditions is absent, sport may instead reinforce reputational contestation, scepticism or soft disempowerment. By shifting analytical attention from asking whether sport functions as an instrument of soft power towards explaining how, why and under which conditions sport produces divergent reputational outcomes, the study extends existing scholarship beyond predominantly descriptive accounts.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysed literature remains geographically concentrated around a relatively small number of high-profile host states and predominantly reflects English-language scholarship. Furthermore, because the study employed qualitative meta-synthesis rather than statistical aggregation, the findings should be interpreted as explanatory conceptual patterns rather than universally generalisable causal laws.

Future research would benefit from comparative mixed-method designs capable of integrating qualitative interpretation with longitudinal quantitative indicators of international reputation, diplomatic influence and audience perception. Greater attention should also be devoted to examining how different political systems, communication environments and media ecologies condition the effectiveness of sport-based soft-power strategies over time.

Overall, the findings suggest that sport should not be regarded as an autonomous producer of soft power. Rather, its diplomatic value depends upon the interaction between strategic communication, political credibility and audience interpretation. Accordingly, soft power emerges not from sport itself but from the communicative and political processes through which sporting initiatives are interpreted within broader international contexts.

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