

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

*This study examines the role of sport as an emerging instrument of soft power in global politics through a qualitative meta-synthesis of 16 empirical studies published between 2005 and 2025. Drawing upon research concerning mega-sport events, nation branding, sports diplomacy and international image construction, the study analyses how states utilise sport to enhance international visibility, legitimacy and geopolitical influence. 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 nation branding, international prestige and media visibility constitute the dominant dimensions of sport-related soft power. Mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup were consistently associated with strategic image construction and diplomatic positioning. However, the findings also reveal that sport-based soft power remains highly dependent upon political credibility, media narratives and international legitimacy. The study concludes that sport functions not merely as a cultural activity but as a multidimensional diplomatic resource embedded within contemporary global communication and foreign-policy strategies.*

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

## Introduction

The contemporary landscape of global politics has grown so complex and multilayered that frameworks grounded purely in military strength or economic coercion traditionally aligned with “hard power” are no longer sufficient to account for the ways in which influence is produced or contested. In this environment, the notion of “soft power” has gained considerable prominence, referring to the ability of states to cultivate legitimacy and broaden their influence through attraction, persuasion and cultural resonance rather than compulsion (Nye, 2004). As globalisation accelerates and interdependence deepens across borders, the range and potency of soft-power resources have expanded significantly.

Within this wider assemblage of soft-power instruments encompassing culture, media, education and the arts sport has emerged as a particularly strategic diplomatic vehicle. No longer confined to a realm defined solely by elite performance and physical competition, sport has taken on a semiotic and symbolic function, acquiring cultural, economic and political layers that contribute directly to national image-making and international visibility

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1 (Postlethwaite et al., 2022). Mega-events such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA  
2 World Cup and major regional tournaments increasingly operate as arenas  
3 through which states articulate foreign-policy goals, reconfigure narratives of  
4 national identity and seek to influence global public opinion. These  
5 developments illustrate the extent to which sport has evolved into a diplomatic  
6 instrument capable of generating international legitimacy and shaping influence  
7 far beyond the boundaries of athletic performance (Næss, 2023).

8 The maturation of sports diplomacy has also unfolded within a distinctly  
9 multi-actor environment that extends beyond state-to-state engagement.  
10 International organisations, civil-society actors and multinational corporations  
11 all contribute to an ecosystem in which sport functions as a dynamic expression  
12 of soft power (Postlethwaite et al., 2022). Through this interwoven structure,  
13 sport intersects with and often amplifies the strategic domains of cultural  
14 diplomacy, public diplomacy and place or nation branding.

15 In addition to its diplomatic and communicative functions, sport has  
16 increasingly been woven into the broader architecture of place branding, in  
17 which nations and cities craft narratives about who they are and how they wish  
18 to be perceived. Mega-events in particular have become carefully orchestrated  
19 stages through which governments seek to recalibrate or amplify their  
20 international brand propositions. The Beijing 2008 Olympics, for instance, were  
21 strategically curated not merely as a display of organisational capacity but as an  
22 emblematic narrative of a ‘New China’ confident in its modernity, technological  
23 finesse and cultural heritage. Likewise, Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World  
24 Cup formed part of a deliberate nation-branding trajectory aimed at transcending  
25 regional stereotypes, signalling global connectivity and legitimising its  
26 development vision. Paris 2024, with its emphasis on sustainability, cultural  
27 openness and civic participation, similarly reflects an attempt to consolidate  
28 France’s image as a cosmopolitan and future-oriented urban brand. These  
29 examples demonstrate that contemporary sport is neither a peripheral cultural  
30 form nor a neutral entertainment sphere; rather, it has become interlaced with  
31 the symbolic labour through which places negotiate status, identity and  
32 reputational capital in the international arena.

33 Building upon this broader context, the present study employs a meta-  
34 analytic approach to examine how sport is operationalised as an instrument of  
35 soft power in global relations, how sports diplomacy has evolved over time and  
36 what implications this transformation carries for the contemporary international  
37 system. In doing so, it demonstrates that sport’s role in international relations  
38 has long surpassed that of a peripheral cultural activity and has become a  
39 deliberately crafted and increasingly indispensable foreign-policy tool.

## 40 41 42 **The Position of Sport in International Relations**

43  
44 Although sport had long occupied a marginal and culturally peripheral  
45 position within the study of modern international relations, the shifting dynamics  
46 of the global political environment have gradually recast it as a sphere of

1 diplomatic, economic and cultural significance. This shift demonstrates the  
2 extent to which sport has moved beyond its conventional association with  
3 competitive performance, assuming instead a series of strategic functions linked  
4 to international visibility, image cultivation, public diplomacy and cultural  
5 engagement (Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Dubinsky, 2019).

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

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

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

41 Sport's position in international relations is also shaped by the rise of multi-  
42 actor diplomacy. Rather than constituting an exclusively state-led field, sport  
43 forms a complex arena that involves international organisations (IOC,  
44 UNESCO, UN), civil-society networks (Peace Players, Right to Play), global  
45 sports federations, transnational media outlets and multinational brands (Adidas,  
46 Nike, Qatar Airways) (Ubaidulloev, 2018). This multi-actor architecture enables

1 sport to play important indirect roles in norm-setting, agenda-building and global  
2 governance processes (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2016).

3 Finally, understanding sport's contemporary relevance requires acknowledging  
4 its capacity for emotional and cultural mobilisation (Cha, 2009). The emotional  
5 connectivity generated through sport extending far beyond the field of play  
6 facilitates societal bonding, reinforces international representations of national  
7 belonging and enhances cultural interaction. For these reasons, sport is widely  
8 regarded as a "high-impact soft power resource" operating at both symbolic and  
9 cultural levels within international communication (Dubinsky, 2019).

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

13  
14 The historical development of sports diplomacy is deeply intertwined with  
15 the modernisation of sport and the fluctuating power dynamics of the  
16 international system (Akhmetkarimov and Aminova, 2021). Early Olympic  
17 events and international competitions emerging in the late nineteenth and early  
18 twentieth centuries functioned as cultural platforms that enhanced the visibility  
19 of nation-states; however, during this early phase, sport was largely framed  
20 through ideals of international friendship, physical cultivation and peaceful  
21 interaction. Although the foundational ethos of the modern Olympic movement  
22 foregrounded peace, fraternity and cross-cultural understanding thereby  
23 embedding sport with symbolic diplomatic value from the outset the systematic  
24 conceptualisation of sports diplomacy as a deliberate foreign-policy instrument  
25 belongs to a much later era (Cha, 2009; Murray, 2012).

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

40 With the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalisation, sports  
41 diplomacy adopted a more institutionalised and multi-actor configuration.  
42 During the 1990s and 2000s, international organisations including the United  
43 Nations, UNESCO and the IOC began to integrate sport into frameworks  
44 concerned with development, peacebuilding and social inclusion, developing  
45 programmes under the broader rubric of "Sport for Development and Peace"  
46 (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2016). In this period, sport served not only as

1 a field of prestige competition but also as a conduit for development aims, social-  
2 transformation initiatives and normative agendas. Consequently, sports  
3 diplomacy evolved from a relatively narrow, state-centred practice into a multi-  
4 layered and interdisciplinary policy domain (Zhang, 2025).

5 The 2000s constitute a phase in which mega-sport events were explicitly  
6 aligned with soft power strategies. China's hosting of the 2008 Beijing  
7 Olympics, Brazil's organisation of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio  
8 Olympics, Russia's 2014 Sochi Winter Games and Qatar's 2022 FIFA World  
9 Cup exemplify cases in which sports investments were deliberately connected to  
10 broader foreign-policy visions (Boykoff, 2016; Grix and Brannagan, 2016;  
11 Næss, 2023). During this period, concepts such as "sportswashing" and "soft  
12 disempowerment" gained prominence, underscoring that sports diplomacy was  
13 being conceptualised not only as a positive soft-power asset but also as a  
14 contested and potentially fragile domain (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018;  
15 Dubinsky, 2019). Critiques that authoritarian-leaning states or those with  
16 problematic human-rights records might use mega-sport events to sanitise their  
17 image or suppress external criticism brought the normative dimension of sports  
18 diplomacy into sharper focus. Thus, the historical evolution of sports diplomacy  
19 reflects a dual process: the expansion of soft power capacity on one hand and its  
20 entanglement with ethical, political and governance-related debates on the other  
21 (Jirouchova, 2022).

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

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

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

2  
3 The notion of soft power constitutes a major conceptual departure within  
4 international relations theory, challenging long-standing assumptions that power  
5 can be reduced to military capability or economic leverage alone (Ding, 2010).  
6 Since the early 1990s, Nye who introduced the term into scholarly discourse has  
7 redirected debates by asserting that the capacity of an actor to “get others to do  
8 what it wants” relies not only on coercion or material inducements but also on  
9 the ability to attract and persuade (Armitage and Nye, 2007). Soft power, in this  
10 sense, denotes a state’s capability to shape the preferences of others indirectly  
11 through cultural appeal, political values and foreign-policy conduct that is  
12 perceived as legitimate (Nye, 2004).

13 In Nye’s formulation, soft power rests upon three principal categories of  
14 resources: (i) cultural assets such as popular culture, the arts, linguistic influence  
15 and lifestyle imagery (Lovric, 2016); (ii) political values and institutions,  
16 including democratic norms, human rights principles and commitments to the  
17 rule of law (Berger and Lake, 2018); and (iii) perceptions of legitimacy within  
18 foreign policy, encompassing adherence to international law, support for  
19 multilateralism and consistency in normative commitments (Chong, 2017). The  
20 sharp distinction Nye draws between hard power defined by military capacity  
21 and economic coercion and soft power subsequently provided the conceptual  
22 foundation for “smart power”, a framework advocating the strategic integration  
23 of coercion and attraction as the optimal foreign-policy orientation (Biscop,  
24 2021).

25 The advancement of soft power theory has evolved in close tandem with the  
26 expanding scholarship on public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy (Zamorano,  
27 2016). Government-led communication strategies targeting international  
28 publics, cultural-exchange programmes, scholarship schemes, international  
29 broadcasting platforms and nation-branding campaigns have all been identified  
30 as operational mechanisms for the production of soft power (Rosenbaum-Elliott  
31 et al., 2018). As such, soft power extends beyond an abstract potential for  
32 attraction and emerges as a policy tool that is institutionally governed,  
33 strategically coordinated and actively managed. It intersects with the logic of  
34 “new public diplomacy”, which emphasises multilayered communication  
35 systems spanning state–society, state–state and society–society spheres.  
36 Consequently, soft power has increasingly been conceptualised as a broad  
37 communicative space that transcends traditional diplomacy while incorporating  
38 pronounced cultural and media dimensions (Dodds and Khatib, 2009).

39 Ultimately, the theoretical evolution of soft power challenges realist  
40 traditions centred predominantly on hard material capabilities by elevating  
41 elements such as culture, values and legitimacy often dismissed as peripheral  
42 into central analytical categories (Shalaby, 2008). Nonetheless, the concept’s  
43 normative weight, coupled with the inherent difficulty of empirical  
44 measurement, renders it both analytically illuminating and simultaneously  
45 contested. This conceptual foundation provides an essential framework for  
46 understanding why highly visible and culturally resonant domains such as sport

1 play an increasingly prominent role within state-level soft power strategies  
2 (Kang and Houlihan, 2021).

### 3 4 5 **The Role of Sport in the Use of Soft Power** 6

7 One of the most prominent contributions of sport to soft-power production  
8 lies in its capacity to enhance international recognition and project national  
9 image (Dubinsky, 2019). Mega sporting events most notably the Olympic  
10 Games, the FIFA World Cup and the Formula 1 Grand Prix offer host states  
11 opportunities to showcase modernity, economic dynamism, technological  
12 innovation and cultural diversity before global audiences (Gruneau and Horne,  
13 2015). Grix and Brannagan (2024) illustrate that such events are deliberately  
14 employed as instruments of “image engineering,” emphasising their ability to  
15 influence international perceptions positively. Boykoff (2016) similarly argues  
16 that mega-events do more than generate prestige; they enable states to shape  
17 narrative constructions within the global political arena.

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

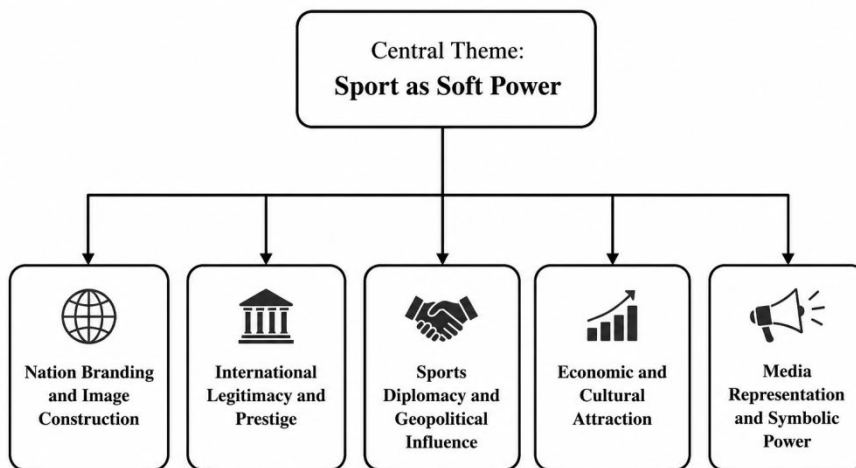
30 Another crucial contribution of sports diplomacy to soft-power dynamics  
31 concerns its potential for diplomatic communication and peacebuilding. Given  
32 its universal idiom, sport offers a powerful medium for reducing hostility  
33 symbolically and creating alternative channels of interaction (Nygård and Gates,  
34 2013). Historical episodes including Ping-Pong diplomacy, inter-Korean joint  
35 sporting initiatives and various forms of intercultural engagement during  
36 international competitions demonstrate how sport can operate as a “confidence-  
37 building diplomatic tool” during periods of heightened political tension  
38 (Mangan, 2014). Murray (2012) frames this sphere as one of “dual impact”,  
39 noting that sport can simultaneously reinforce national identity and contribute to  
40 conflict-mitigation processes.

41 The economic dimension of sport functions as an additional component of  
42 soft-power generation. The global growth of the sports industry contributes to  
43 economic diplomacy through sponsorship arrangements, broadcasting revenues  
44 and increased tourism flows (Chadwick et al., 2020). Emerging powers such as  
45 Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and China deploy sports-related investments  
46 not only for economic return but also to extend their political influence.

1 Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018), who link Qatar’s sports investments to “soft  
2 power and the pursuit of legitimacy,” highlight the strategic integration between  
3 economic ambition and foreign-policy objectives.

4 However, sport’s role in producing soft power does not invariably lead to  
5 positive outcomes. Escalating event costs, human-rights criticisms,  
6 environmental concerns and allegations of media restriction may all erode the  
7 soft-power benefits states seek to attain. Boykoff (2016) and Grix and Brannagan  
8 (2024) describe this dynamic as “soft disempowerment,” noting that the  
9 mismanagement or politicisation of sport may result in trust deficits and  
10 reputational decline. Consequently, the strategic coherence, ethical consistency  
11 and transparency of sports-related initiatives are essential conditions for  
12 ensuring sport’s effectiveness as a soft-power instrument (Chadwick et al.,  
13 2020).

14 **Figure 1.** *Thematic Structure of Sport as a Soft-Power Instrument*  
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16 Note. Developed by the authors based on thematic synthesis findings.  
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19 The thematic synthesis demonstrated that these dimensions operate  
20 interdependently rather than independently. The analysed studies collectively  
21 suggest that sport-related soft power emerges through the interaction of  
22 symbolic visibility, diplomatic communication, global media circulation and  
23 cultural consumption processes. Rather than functioning as isolated  
24 mechanisms, these dimensions appear to reinforce one another within broader  
25 state-led public diplomacy strategies.  
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## 28 **Materials and Methods**

29  
30 This study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis design to examine the role  
31 of sport as an emerging instrument of soft power in global politics. Unlike  
32 conventional statistical reviews based on aggregated effect sizes, qualitative  
33 meta-synthesis enables the systematic integration of conceptually related

1 empirical studies in order to identify recurring patterns, interpretive frameworks  
2 and thematic relationships across different geopolitical contexts (Cooper, 2017;  
3 Borenstein et al., 2021). The approach was considered appropriate because the  
4 existing scholarship on sport and soft power is methodologically heterogeneous  
5 and predominantly composed of qualitative case studies, discourse analyses and  
6 mixed-method research rather than standardised experimental datasets.

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

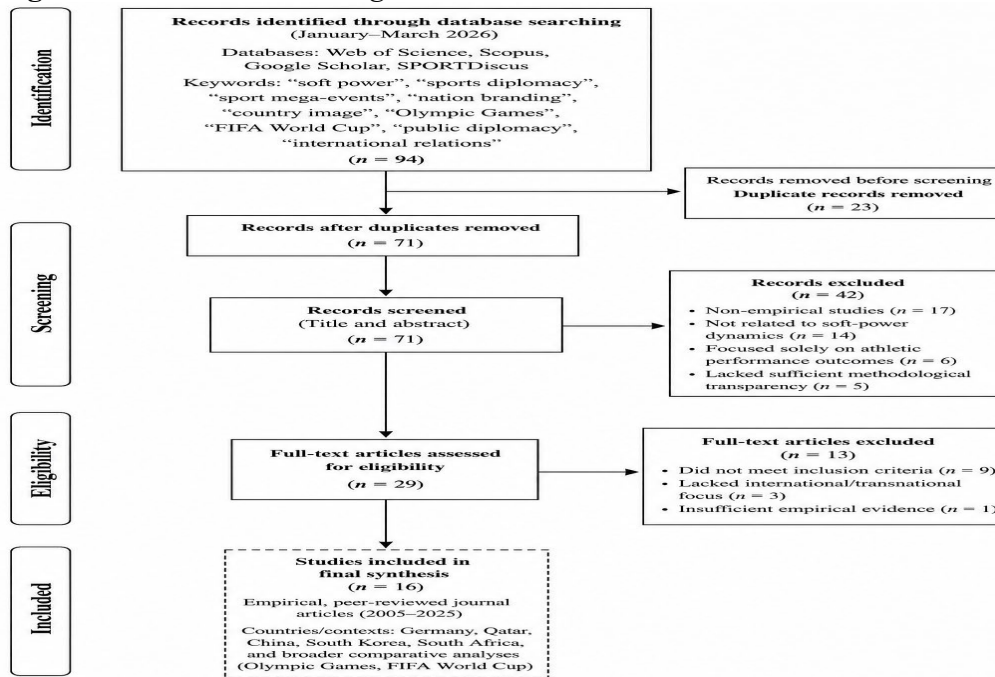
### 13 Selection of Studies

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

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

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

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1 **Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram**

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

4  
5 The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) The study had to examine sport  
6 within the framework of soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding or  
7 international image construction. (ii) The study had to contain empirical material  
8 (e.g., surveys, interviews, discourse analysis, social media data, policy analysis  
9 or comparative case studies). (iii) The publication had to be peer-reviewed and  
10 indexed in recognised academic databases. (iv) The study had to focus on  
11 international or transnational dimensions of sport-related political influence.  
12 The final sample included studies addressing Germany, Qatar, China, South  
13 Korea and South Africa, as well as broader comparative analyses concerning  
14 Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup events.

## 15 16 17 **Research Questions**

18  
19 The study was guided by the following research questions: (i) How is sport  
20 conceptualised as an instrument of soft power within contemporary international  
21 relations? (ii) Through which mechanisms do mega-sport events contribute to  
22 nation branding and international image construction? (iii) In what ways do  
23 states utilise sport diplomacy to pursue foreign-policy and reputational  
24 objectives? (iv) Which recurring thematic dimensions emerge across empirical  
25 studies examining sport and soft power?  
26

1 **Characteristics of the Included Studies**

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3 **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>

4 Note. Compiled by the authors.

5

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

13

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

15

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.

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Focus / Case</b>	<b>Methodological Orientation</b>	<b>Main Soft-Power Finding</b>
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.
Kobierecki & Strożek (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.

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

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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.

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

## 7 **Data Analysis**

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

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

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

## 27 **Reliability and Validity**

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

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

## 42 **Limitations**

44 The study contains several limitations. First, the literature on sport and soft  
45 power remains heavily concentrated in Western and English-language academic  
46 publishing, which may restrict the geographical representativeness of the

1 findings. Second, because the analysis relied on qualitative synthesis rather than  
 2 quantitative aggregation, the study does not provide direct measurements of  
 3 causal impact. Third, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies  
 4 limited the possibility of generating directly comparable empirical outcomes  
 5 across all cases.

6 Nevertheless, the qualitative meta-synthesis design provided substantial  
 7 interpretive depth by enabling cross-contextual comparison of how sport  
 8 functions as a diplomatic and symbolic resource in global politics.

## 11 Results

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

### 25 Distribution of Empirical Focus Areas

27 The first analytical stage examined the primary substantive focus of the included  
 28 studies. As shown in Table 2, the majority of the literature concentrated on  
 29 nation branding and international image construction through mega-sport events,  
 30 particularly the FIFA World Cup and Olympic Games. Since several studies  
 31 contained overlapping conceptual dimensions, each study was classified  
 32 according to its dominant analytical emphasis.

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

Empirical Focus Area	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
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>

35 Note. Compiled by the authors.

37 As demonstrated in Table 2, nation branding and country image emerged as  
 38 the dominant analytical focus within the examined literature, accounting for  
 39 37.5% of the included studies. The reviewed studies generally indicate that

1 nation branding constitutes the central analytical concern across the literature.  
 2 Research focusing on Germany, South Africa, Qatar and South Korea  
 3 consistently suggested that mega-events are strategically utilised to reshape  
 4 international perceptions and improve national reputation. In particular, Kim and  
 5 Morrison (2005), Knott et al. (2015) and Hahm et al. (2018) demonstrated that  
 6 positive destination-image and country-image outcomes were frequently  
 7 associated with successful event hosting and extensive international media  
 8 visibility.

### 11 Geographical Distribution of Cases

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

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

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

17 Note. Compiled by the authors.

18  
 19 As presented in Table 3, the geographical distribution of the examined  
 20 studies demonstrates that scholarship on sport-related soft power is heavily  
 21 concentrated around emerging or strategically image-sensitive states seeking  
 22 increased international visibility. Qatar emerged as the most frequently analysed  
 23 case, reflecting the country's extensive investment in sport diplomacy and mega-  
 24 event hosting strategies associated with the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Similarly,  
 25 studies concerning China and South Africa frequently interpreted mega-events  
 26 as instruments for repositioning national identity, enhancing symbolic  
 27 legitimacy and increasing international recognition.

### 30 Nation Branding and International Image Construction

31  
 32 One of the most consistent findings across the analysed studies concerns the  
 33 role of sport in nation branding and international image reconstruction. Mega-  
 34 sport events were repeatedly conceptualised as platforms through which states  
 35 seek to generate favourable international perceptions and strengthen symbolic  
 36 legitimacy.

1 Kim and Morrison (2005) demonstrated that the 2002 FIFA World Cup  
 2 positively altered foreign tourists' perceptions of South Korea, particularly  
 3 regarding modernity, hospitality and cultural attractiveness. Similarly, Grix  
 4 (2012) argued that Germany strategically leveraged the 2006 FIFA World Cup  
 5 to reconstruct its international image through narratives of openness, friendliness  
 6 and democratic normalisation.

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

13 **Table 5.** *Major Nation-Branding Outcomes Identified in the Literature*  
 14

Country / Event	Major Soft-Power Outcome
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

15 Note. Compiled by the authors.  
 16

17 The findings presented in Table 4 demonstrate that mega-sport events have  
 18 frequently been utilised as strategic instruments for the reconstruction,  
 19 enhancement and international projection of national image. Across the  
 20 examined cases, states employed globally visible sporting events not merely as  
 21 entertainment platforms, but as mechanisms for symbolic communication,  
 22 diplomatic signalling and reputational management within the international  
 23 system.

24 The German case associated with the 2006 FIFA World Cup particularly  
 25 illustrated how sport may contribute to the normalisation of national identity and  
 26 the promotion of positive emotional narratives such as openness, hospitality and  
 27 democratic modernity. Similarly, the South Korean experience following the  
 28 2002 FIFA World Cup suggested that mega-events may significantly improve  
 29 external perceptions among international visitors, especially regarding cultural  
 30 attractiveness, tourism appeal and global recognition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 36 **Media Representation and Symbolic Power**

38 The qualitative meta-synthesis also highlighted the growing importance of  
39 digital communication and media representation in shaping sport-related soft  
40 power. Dun et al. (2022), through Twitter/X data analysis, demonstrated that  
41 online discourse significantly influenced global perceptions of Qatar during the  
42 2022 FIFA World Cup period.

43 Similarly, Manzenreiter (2010) argued that the Beijing Olympics illustrated  
44 the limitations of soft power when international media narratives remain shaped  
45 by ideological or geopolitical tensions. The reviewed studies therefore suggest  
46 that sport alone cannot fully control international perception; rather, soft-power

1 outcomes are mediated through global media ecosystems and transnational  
2 public discourse.

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

7  
8 **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

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

11  
12 The thematic coding frequencies presented in Table 5 provide further  
13 evidence that nation branding, symbolic reputation and international prestige  
14 constitute the dominant conceptual foundations of the analysed literature.  
15 Among the identified themes, “nation branding” emerged as the most frequently  
16 recurring code, appearing in 14 of the 16 studies, followed closely by  
17 “international prestige” and “soft power strategy.” This distribution suggests that  
18 the existing scholarship predominantly conceptualises sport as a strategic  
19 instrument for enhancing state visibility, legitimacy and international  
20 attractiveness rather than merely as a cultural or recreational activity.

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

30 At the same time, the comparatively lower frequency associated with  
31 “global legitimacy” suggests that although legitimacy remains an important  
32 dimension of sports diplomacy, it is often discussed indirectly through broader  
33 concepts such as prestige, image construction and reputational management.  
34 Overall, the thematic distribution identified through NVivo analysis reveals a  
35 strong degree of conceptual convergence across the literature, indicating that  
36 sport-based soft power is primarily understood as a process of symbolic

1 projection, international positioning and strategic image management within  
2 contemporary global politics.

### 3 4 5 **Interpretation of the Results**

6  
7 Overall, the qualitative meta-synthesis demonstrates that sport has become  
8 an increasingly institutionalised instrument of soft power within contemporary  
9 international relations. Across different geopolitical contexts, mega-sport events  
10 were generally associated with efforts to generate international visibility,  
11 strengthen diplomatic legitimacy and reshape national reputation.

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

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

### 21 22 23 **Discussion**

24  
25 The present qualitative meta-synthesis demonstrates that sport has evolved  
26 into a strategically institutionalised instrument of soft power within  
27 contemporary international relations. Across the analysed studies, mega-sport  
28 events were consistently associated with attempts to generate international  
29 visibility, strengthen diplomatic legitimacy and reshape national reputation  
30 through attraction-based mechanisms rather than coercive forms of influence.  
31 These findings substantially reinforce Nye's (2004) conceptualisation of soft  
32 power as the ability to shape preferences through legitimacy, symbolic appeal  
33 and cultural attraction rather than material coercion alone.

34 One of the most significant findings emerging from the synthesis concerns  
35 the centrality of nation branding within sport-related soft-power strategies. The  
36 dominance of "nation branding" and "international prestige" within the NVivo  
37 coding structure suggests that contemporary states increasingly perceive sport as  
38 a reputational resource embedded within broader public diplomacy and  
39 international communication strategies. In this respect, the findings align closely  
40 with previous scholarship arguing that mega-events function as symbolic stages  
41 through which states attempt to project narratives of modernity, openness and  
42 global relevance (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Dubinsky, 2019). The analysed  
43 cases particularly Germany, South Korea, South Africa, China and Qatar  
44 collectively demonstrate that mega-event hosting frequently operates as a form  
45 of strategic image management designed to reposition states within the global  
46 political imagination.

1 At the same time, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of sport-based  
2 soft power is neither automatic nor politically neutral. Although mega-events  
3 often generate substantial international visibility, the reviewed studies  
4 consistently suggest that visibility itself does not necessarily translate into  
5 positive legitimacy outcomes. The Qatar case constitutes perhaps the clearest  
6 illustration of this contradiction. While the 2022 FIFA World Cup significantly  
7 enhanced Qatar's global recognition and diplomatic visibility, several studies  
8 simultaneously highlighted increased scrutiny concerning labour rights,  
9 governance and political legitimacy. This duality strongly supports Brannagan  
10 and Giulianotti's (2018) argument concerning the "soft power–soft  
11 disempowerment nexus," according to which the same sporting spectacle  
12 capable of generating attraction may also intensify criticism and reputational  
13 vulnerability. Consequently, the findings suggest that soft power through sport  
14 should be understood as a fragile and contested process rather than a guaranteed  
15 diplomatic asset.

16 Another important implication of the findings concerns the process-oriented  
17 nature of sports diplomacy. The reviewed studies collectively indicate that sport-  
18 related diplomatic influence emerges gradually through cumulative mechanisms  
19 involving media visibility, symbolic recognition and audience engagement  
20 rather than through immediate foreign-policy outcomes. This observation aligns  
21 with Murray's (2012) understanding of sports diplomacy as a long-term  
22 communicative process operating through indirect cultural and symbolic  
23 channels. The findings further demonstrate that mega-events derive diplomatic  
24 value not solely from the events themselves, but from the broader narratives,  
25 emotional associations and media representations surrounding them. In this  
26 regard, sport appears less as an isolated diplomatic instrument and more as a  
27 platform through which states attempt to embed themselves within favourable  
28 international narratives.

29 The findings also contribute to ongoing debates regarding the relationship  
30 between soft power and geopolitical competition. The geographical  
31 concentration of the analysed literature around states such as Qatar, China and  
32 South Africa suggests that sport-based soft-power strategies are particularly  
33 prominent among emerging or strategically repositioning powers seeking  
34 enhanced visibility within the international system. This pattern reflects broader  
35 transformations in global politics in which symbolic legitimacy and international  
36 reputation increasingly complement traditional forms of material power. As Grix  
37 and Lee (2013) argue, emerging states frequently utilise mega-events not only  
38 to showcase economic capacity but also to signal geopolitical relevance and  
39 international ambition. The present findings support this interpretation by  
40 demonstrating that sport-related investments are often deeply integrated into  
41 wider foreign-policy and nation-branding agendas.

42 Moreover, the synthesis highlights the growing importance of digital  
43 communication environments in shaping soft-power outcomes. The inclusion of  
44 social media-based research particularly Dun et al. (2022) indicates that  
45 contemporary sports diplomacy is increasingly mediated through transnational  
46 digital networks where states no longer exercise exclusive control over

1 international narratives. Instead, symbolic power is continuously negotiated  
2 among governments, journalists, activists, audiences and global media  
3 platforms. This finding reinforces contemporary public diplomacy literature  
4 emphasising the decentralised and interactive nature of international  
5 communication in the digital era (Dodds & Khatib, 2009). The implication is  
6 that sport-related soft power can no longer be analysed solely through state-  
7 centric frameworks; rather, it must be understood within a broader ecosystem of  
8 networked global communication.

9 The findings additionally reveal an important normative tension within  
10 contemporary sports diplomacy. While many studies highlighted the capacity of  
11 sport to facilitate intercultural dialogue, international recognition and symbolic  
12 cooperation, others simultaneously pointed to concerns regarding  
13 sportswashing, reputational manipulation and governance deficits. This  
14 contradiction reflects the increasingly politicised nature of global sport  
15 governance. Similar concerns have also been discussed in relation to the “3S”  
16 (soft power, sportswashing and sports diplomacy) framework of FIFA-related  
17 diplomacy, particularly in the context of the BRICS countries and the Qatar  
18 World Cup (Bettine de Almeida & Özdemir, 2023). Mega-events therefore  
19 appear to function simultaneously as instruments of attraction and sites of  
20 contestation. Such findings challenge overly optimistic interpretations of sports  
21 diplomacy by demonstrating that sport does not inherently produce legitimacy  
22 or peace-building outcomes. Instead, the political effects of sport remain highly  
23 contingent upon institutional credibility, ethical consistency and international  
24 media interpretation.

25 From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the soft-power  
26 literature by demonstrating that sport should not merely be conceptualised as a  
27 subcomponent of cultural diplomacy, but rather as a multidimensional strategic  
28 field intersecting with public diplomacy, nation branding, geopolitical  
29 communication and symbolic governance. The thematic convergence identified  
30 across the analysed studies indicates that sport increasingly functions as an  
31 integrated foreign-policy resource embedded within broader systems of  
32 international image production and legitimacy management.

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

43 Future research may therefore benefit from adopting mixed-method  
44 comparative frameworks capable of integrating qualitative interpretation with  
45 longitudinal quantitative indicators of reputation, diplomatic influence and  
46 international perception. In particular, comparative studies examining the long-

1 term reputational effects of mega-events across different political systems could  
2 significantly deepen understanding of the conditions under which sport-based  
3 soft power succeeds or fails. Additionally, the growing influence of digital media  
4 environments suggests the importance of incorporating computational  
5 communication analysis and transnational audience studies into future sports  
6 diplomacy research agendas.

7 Overall, the findings of this study suggest that sport has become an  
8 increasingly central mechanism through which states seek to negotiate visibility,  
9 legitimacy and influence within the contemporary international system.  
10 However, the effectiveness of sport as a soft-power instrument appears  
11 fundamentally dependent upon broader political credibility, institutional trust  
12 and international media dynamics. Accordingly, sport should not be understood  
13 as an autonomous producer of soft power, but rather as a strategic  
14 communicative arena within which global reputations are continuously  
15 constructed, negotiated and contested.

## 17 **Conclusion**

18  
19  
20 This study examined the role of sport as an emerging instrument of soft  
21 power in global politics through a qualitative meta-synthesis of 16 empirical  
22 studies published between 2005 and 2025. Drawing upon research concerning  
23 mega-sport events, nation branding, sports diplomacy and international image  
24 construction, the study demonstrated that sport has evolved far beyond the  
25 boundaries of athletic competition and increasingly functions as a strategic  
26 mechanism of international communication, symbolic projection and diplomatic  
27 influence.

28 The findings revealed that sport-related soft power is primarily articulated  
29 through processes of nation branding, international prestige construction and  
30 geopolitical visibility. Across the analysed literature, mega-sport events such as  
31 the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup were consistently associated with  
32 attempts by states to strengthen international legitimacy, reshape external  
33 perceptions and enhance symbolic recognition within the global political arena.  
34 In this respect, sport emerged not merely as a cultural activity but as a  
35 multidimensional diplomatic resource integrated into broader foreign-policy and  
36 public-diplomacy strategies.

37 A major conclusion of the study is that the effectiveness of sport as a soft-  
38 power instrument depends heavily upon broader political credibility, media  
39 representation and strategic coherence. Although mega-events frequently  
40 generate substantial international visibility, the findings demonstrated that  
41 visibility alone does not automatically produce positive legitimacy outcomes.  
42 Rather, sport-related soft power appears highly contingent upon the interaction  
43 between state narratives, global media interpretation and international political  
44 context. The analysed literature repeatedly suggested that reputational gains may  
45 coexist with intensified scrutiny, criticism and geopolitical contestation,

1 particularly in cases involving governance controversies or human-rights  
2 concerns.

3 The study further demonstrated that sports diplomacy operates through  
4 gradual and process-oriented mechanisms rather than immediate diplomatic  
5 outcomes. Media visibility, symbolic recognition, cultural attraction and  
6 audience engagement collectively contribute to the accumulation of soft-power  
7 capacity over time. Consequently, sport-related diplomatic influence should be  
8 understood as relational and communicative rather than coercive or directly  
9 measurable through conventional foreign-policy indicators.

10 Another important conclusion concerns the increasingly multi-actor nature  
11 of sports diplomacy. The findings indicated that contemporary sport-related soft  
12 power is shaped not only by states, but also by international organisations, global  
13 media platforms, multinational corporations, civil-society actors and digital  
14 audiences. This multidimensional structure reflects the broader transformation  
15 of diplomacy within an increasingly interconnected and mediatized international  
16 environment. In particular, the growing role of digital communication and social  
17 media demonstrates that symbolic power in sport is continuously negotiated  
18 across transnational communication networks rather than exclusively controlled  
19 by governments.

20 From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature by  
21 positioning sport as a central component of contemporary soft-power strategies  
22 rather than as a peripheral cultural phenomenon. The thematic convergence  
23 identified across the analysed studies suggests that sport occupies an  
24 increasingly institutionalised role within global image management, public  
25 diplomacy and international legitimacy-building processes. Accordingly, the  
26 study supports the argument that sport has become an important arena through  
27 which states seek to negotiate status, visibility and influence in the international  
28 system.

29 Nevertheless, the study also acknowledges several limitations. The existing  
30 literature remains geographically concentrated around a limited number of high-  
31 profile host states and predominantly reflects English-language academic  
32 perspectives. Furthermore, because the analysis relied on qualitative meta-  
33 synthesis rather than statistical aggregation, the findings should be interpreted as  
34 conceptual and interpretive patterns rather than universally generalisable causal  
35 relationships.

36 Overall, the study concludes that sport constitutes one of the most visible  
37 and symbolically powerful instruments of contemporary soft power. However,  
38 its diplomatic effectiveness depends not solely on the organisation of sporting  
39 events themselves, but on the broader political, ethical and communicative  
40 environments within which those events are embedded. In an era characterised  
41 by global media interconnectedness, reputational competition and increasing  
42 reliance on attraction-based diplomacy, sport is likely to remain a strategically  
43 significant component of international relations and foreign-policy practice.

44

45

46

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