

# Sports Diplomacy in Arab Countries: Sports as Soft Power in Foreign Policy

Najwa AlSaeed<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*This paper examines the critical role of sports in Arab diplomacy, focusing on countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt, and how they utilize sports to strengthen international relations and enhance their soft power. Building on theories of public diplomacy and soft power, the study explores how these nations use sports as a strategic tool to further political agendas, shape global perceptions, and stimulate economic growth. Through a detailed analysis of case studies and empirical data, the research emphasizes how sports diplomacy—particularly football—strengthens diplomatic ties and helps project soft power internationally. The findings reveal the growing importance of sports as an instrument of foreign policy, demonstrating its impact on global engagement and international influence in the Arab world.*

**Keywords:** *Sports Diplomacy, International Relations, Foreign Policy, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Egypt, Economic Interests, Cross-Cultural Exchanges, Football Players.*

## Introduction

Since Ancient Greece, sports and politics have been linked, with events like the Olympics often furthering political aims (Murray, 2012; Boykoff, 2016; Dubinsky, 2018). The broad appeal and media reach of sports make them powerful for public diplomacy, particularly during events like the Cold War when multinational organizations used them to advance foreign policy (Gilboa, 2008). Nye (2004) describes "soft power" as cultural influence, while Dubinsky (2019) emphasizes sports' role as "cultural diplomacy." Nations now strategically leverage sports to strengthen public diplomacy, economic growth, and national image, enhancing international reputation, tourism, and brand promotion, making sports a central diplomatic tool (Nadeau et al., 2008; Heslop et al., 2010; Chehabi, 2004).

In international relations, sports diplomacy allows governments to influence and build connections through sports events and exchanges. Arab nations like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt, use sports to boost their soft power and global diplomacy. This study examines how Arab nations use sports diplomacy to strengthen diplomatic ties and expand their international influence.

## Research Objective

This research examines how Arab nations use sports diplomacy to influence foreign policy and international relations. The study examines sports diplomacy's motivations, strategies, and results in the region from government officials, sports organisations, athletes, and the public. This analysis examines Arab sports diplomacy's efficacy and implications.

### *Research Significance*

This study adds to the literature on sports diplomacy and soft power in international relations, focussing on Arab nations. It seeks to inform policymakers, sports administrators, and researchers interested in sports and foreign policy. The research seeks to improve understanding of sports diplomacy by examining its motivations, strategies, and effects.

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor - City University Ajman - College of Media, Email: a.najwa@cu.ac.ae, ORCID iD: 0000-0001-9621-8634

### *Research Questions*

- To what degree did sports diplomacy effectively serve as a soft power instrument in the chosen countries, influencing the cultivation of their global reputation and fostering respect and admiration?
- How did this contribute to the enhancement of nation branding, economic growth (tourism, and foreign investment)? In what ways did the media play a role in highlighting and reinforcing these strategic objectives?

### **Literature Review**

Saboonchi and Asgarabadi (2023) propose coordinating Gulf sports events for peace with diplomatic bodies, NGOs, media, and business leaders, emphasising media, culture, and public diplomacy. According to Garamvölgyi et al. (2022), grassroots sports diplomacy can improve relationships, socioeconomic growth, and inequality. Sports diplomacy, according to Santos (2021), influences culture and values through soft power, providing insights for future applications.

The study concludes that performers, strategies, tools, and soft power dynamics influence sports diplomacy. More research is recommended to improve understanding. In 2021, Rofe and Postlethwaite examined British-Japanese sports diplomacy. Research examines a nation's soft power, its ability to persuade and culturally appeal without force. Sports diplomacy promotes international cooperation through its universal appeal.

Sports diplomacy stakeholders, including organisational groups and government oversight, are examined in this study using international sports data, media, and commentary from Japan and the UK. Shifting Olympic discourse, Japan-UK sports diplomacy versus Western models, and government influence on elite networks and agency cooperation are its themes. According to Aziz Abadi and Beheshty (2020), sports are a socio-political tool, while Abdi et al. (2019) say cultural ambassadors and media help sports diplomacy promote peace and reduce tensions.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study uses soft power and framing theory to examine how nations influence global perceptions through diplomacy, media, and cultural appeal. Joseph Nye's Soft Power theory suggests that nations gain influence through attraction rather than force, using culture, politics, and foreign policies to enhance their image. Media framing, on the other hand, focuses on how media highlights specific perspectives to shape public opinion.

Nye (2004, 2008) argues that cultural appeal and credibility help nations like the U.S. wield influence, promoting values that foster global admiration. According to Nye, promoting shared ideals strengthens diplomatic ties, with cultural diplomacy serving as a bridge for public and cultural exchange (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). National branding connects culture to history, which, as Anholt (2010) suggests, builds a nation's reputation.

Soft power through culture is most effective between countries with shared values, but cultural differences can limit impact. Context is crucial; for example, U.S. media may resonate in some regions but face rejection in conservative societies. Gulf states use sports, like football, and events, like Dubai's Expo, to strengthen global ties and national identity, showing how media, sports, and cultural engagement serve strategic diplomatic goals (Kobierecki, 2023).

## Methodology

The study utilizes a qualitative research methodology to thoroughly investigate its research objectives, employing critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles covering relevant topics. The articles selected for analysis span from January 2022 to December 2023. Additionally, interviews will be conducted, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to uncover key themes and patterns concerning sports diplomacy in Arab nations. The integration of qualitative data enables a comprehensive understanding of the role of sports as a form of soft power in the foreign policies of Arab nations.

### *Case Studies*

Multiple case studies are being conducted to examine the sports diplomacy initiatives of four Arab nations: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt. These case studies involve a detailed examination of specific events, programs, and tactics employed by each country in the realm of sports diplomacy. Information is gathered by analyzing a variety of sources, including government reports and media coverage from *Ariyadhiah* (Saudi Arabia), *Al-Ittihad* (UAE), *AlArab* (Qatar), and *Egypt* (*Al-Akhbar*). Through these case studies, a profound understanding of how Arab countries utilize sports as a form of soft power is provided.

### *In-depth Interviews*

Structured interviews are carried out with notable journalists, academics, and diplomats who specialize in sports diplomacy and public diplomacy, facilitated predominantly through email correspondence. These individuals are carefully chosen from a variety of international sports organizations and academic institutions. The primary goal of these interviews is to collect valuable insights regarding the objectives, strategies, and challenges involved in utilizing sports as a means to exert soft power in international relations. Through this method, which engages a diverse array of perspectives, the interviews enable a thorough exploration of the subject matter.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how selected Op-Eds and reports (from *Ariyadhiah*, *Al-Ittihad*, *Al-Arab*, and *Al-Akhbar*) portray soccer's role in public diplomacy between January and December 2023. CDA, a field studying language's influence on politics and society, considers how powerful entities shape social norms and consensus through media, education, and corporations (Simpson and Mayr, 2010). Traditionally used to analyze news and political texts, CDA now includes online and social media communication (Thurlow, 2011; Bouvier, 2015).

The study analyzes sports articles from UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt, using sentiment analysis to assess whether articles are positive, negative, or neutral, exploring how language influences readers' perceptions of each country's foreign policy. Additionally, Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis identifies recurring themes, examining how each country uses sports diplomacy to achieve similar foreign policy goals.

Through sentiment and thematic analysis, the study reveals how Arab countries strategically employ sports as a diplomatic tool, examining motivations, strategies, and outcomes, with consideration of key stakeholders like government officials, sports organizations, and the public. The research aims to uncover sports' broader impact on regional diplomacy. Lastly, the pillars and themes will be inclusive of the following points that will be used as foundations upon which the sentiment analysis and thematic analysis will be conducted respectively:

***Making Use of Star Power:*** Every participant recognized the substantial impact that notable athletes have on enhancing the soft power of a country. Prominent individuals such as Mohamed Salah (Egypt) and Cristiano Ronaldo (Saudi Arabia) were lauded for their capacity to elevate a nation's reputation and garner global interest. This underscores the strategic utilization of renowned athletes as representatives of their country of origin.

*Image Enhancement:* Boosting a nation's international reputation through sports diplomacy emerged as a central theme across all interviews. Participants highlighted how hosting major sports events and attracting global celebrities fosters cultural exchange and positive perceptions. This strategy reflects an intentional effort to project a specific national image on the global stage through sports. The influence of star athletes and modern stadiums not only enhances a nation's sports diplomacy but also strengthens its economic standing and attractiveness for investment, ultimately elevating its diplomatic and economic profile. By demonstrating tangible economic growth through sports diplomacy, these nations show that their efforts are grounded in genuine economic development rather than mere "sports washing."

*Diplomatic Utility:* Multiple participants made reference to the diplomatic utility that sports figures and events can provide. Promoting tourism and establishing diplomatic ties with other nations are two such instances. This demonstrates that sports diplomacy can be utilized to accomplish particular foreign policy goals in addition to promoting a particular image.

*Sport Development:* Although there are benefits to utilizing star power, certain participants voiced apprehensions regarding its long-term viability. Proposed measures for cultivating indigenous athletic prowess and advancing national sports infrastructure were discussed in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. This indicates that the necessity of establishing a solid domestic sports foundation in addition to utilizing international players is becoming increasingly apparent.

Op-Ed articles and reports on the role of sports, especially soccer, in sports and public diplomacy will be selected for analysis, covering the period from January 2022 to December 2023. This timeframe was chosen as it encompasses the latest full year during which numerous significant and high-profile sports events occurred. The newspapers chosen for this analysis include *Arriyadiyah*, *Al-Ittihad*, *Al-Arab*, and *Akhbar EL-Yom*. The sentiment-driven and thematic components of the CDA will proceed as follows:

**Firstly:** In the CDA's sentiment analysis phase, which constitutes 50% of the analysis, Hume AI will be used to identify positive, negative, and neutral sentiments in selected sports articles. This approach will reveal each article's emotional tone and implicit message. Each identified theme is aligned with a specific country, reflecting that nation's unique capabilities and tools for sports diplomacy. Themes relevant to each country will be verified by analyzing corresponding newspaper articles to understand how each nation strategically uses sports for agenda-setting and enhancing foreign policy.

**Arriyadiyah:** This newspaper agency represents the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and pertains to the country's reliance on making use of star power through establishing contracts with top-level and extremely popular superstars who can elevate the status of sports in the Kingdom and also promote the nation's future plans and approaches towards becoming an international hub for recreational and sports-driven events; towards enhancing the image of the Kingdom and facilitate the formulation of diplomatic affairs with various nations across the globe.

To diversify its oil-reliant economy and cultivate new sectors, Saudi Arabia, guided by Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, has undertaken substantial investments in sports, encompassing football, golf, martial arts, racing, and tennis (Geist, 2024). Significant occurrences such as Formula 1 races and Cristiano Ronaldo's acquisition by Al-Nassr FC have established the region as an emerging sports tourism centre. The sports sector is anticipated to expand by 8.7% by 2026, exceeding the global average of 3.3%. Sports tourism, estimated at \$600 billion, significantly contributes to economic expansion, enhancing industries such as tourism and hospitality by as much as 30%. Saudi Arabia's \$2.3 billion investment in football and its plans for a \$38 billion esports hub are transforming the region's economy, supported by a youthful, technologically adept populace (Almoayed, 2023).

Cristiano Ronaldo, the most followed individual on Instagram and a five-time Ballon d'Or recipient, entered into a two-and-a-half-year contract worth €200 million to play in Saudi Arabia (KSA) in December 2022. This action constitutes a substantial investment by Saudi Arabia in global sports. Prior to additional prominent signings in 2023, Ronaldo's mere presence increased stadium attendance by 20% at home matches, 15% at away matches, and 3% at locations where he did not participate. Notwithstanding the

substantial investments, these initiatives are regarded as a strategic allocation of resources to elevate the nation's international sports standing. (Schreyer & Singleton, 2024).

Saudi Arabia's investment in sports has increased significantly, with its GDP contribution rising from \$2.4 billion in 2016 to \$7 billion currently. The kingdom is preparing to host significant events, such as the Asian Games in 2034 and possibly the 2030 World Cup, thereby solidifying its burgeoning presence in the global sports domain. (Gibbon, 2023).

Cristiano Ronaldo's acquisition by Al-Nassr FC has significantly boosted Saudi Arabia's economy, supporting Vision 2030's diversification objectives. His presence has increased stadium attendance and bolstered the Middle Eastern sports industry, which is expected to grow by 8.7% by 2026. The €200 million contract has boosted Saudi Arabia's soft power, commercial prospects, and GDP growth. The 2034 Asian Games and 2030 World Cup initiatives further enhance the Kingdom's international sports prominence. Saudi Arabia prioritizes the acquisition of European talents like Ronaldo and Karim Benzema, enhancing cultural assets and diversifying its economy. Sports diplomacy, using celebrities as ambassadors, has further bolstered Saudi Arabia's soft-power strategy. Ronaldo's visit to Iran exemplifies this.

**Al-Ittihad:** This press agency represents the UAE and discusses its reliance on buying top teams. However, the UAE did not deploy any Emirati football player to boost its diplomatic appeal, making star power less prominent but valid for the UAE's sport-driven diplomatic approach.

According to the Brand Finance Football 50 Report, Manchester City is the most valuable brand in the Premier League, experiencing a 7% increase to £1.4 billion in 2024. The club's achievements, comprising several titles in 2023 and a fourth successive Premier League title in 2024, have propelled unprecedented commercial and matchday revenues. The Brand Strength Index (BSI) score increased to 92.8 out of 100, achieving a AAA+ rating. The club's expansion is ascribed to its ambitious football, effective management, and Pep Guardiola's leadership, with City Football Group's COO, Roel de Vries, emphasising their long-term investment strategy. (Manchester City, 2024).

Manchester City, under the ownership of Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed, secured its fourth Premier League title in five years, generating £44 million (\$54.4 million). This signifies a notable accomplishment since the club's acquisition in 2008 for £210 million. Under the guidance of coach Pep Guardiola, Manchester City has evolved from an underachieving club to a global champion. In March, the club was designated as the world's wealthiest football club in Deloitte's Football Money League, eclipsing Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Barcelona, and Manchester United. The city's revenue increased by \$112.2 million, reaching a total of \$716.3 million over the past 25 years, with a 19% rise in total revenue last year and a profit of \$3.3 million. The club's international strategy to diversify and globalise revenues has facilitated its success and bolstered Abu Dhabi's and the UAE's global soft power. Analysts attribute the UAE's elevated regional and global influence ranking in the 2022 Global Soft Power Index (GSPI), created by Brand Finance, in part to the club's acquisition in 2008 (Sambidge, 2022).

Based on the above, Manchester City, under the ownership of the Abu Dhabi royal family, is pivotal to City Football Group's global strategy, augmenting the international prominence of both the club and the UAE. The club's success has enhanced the UAE's reputation, drawing investment, tourism, and strategic alliances, thereby stimulating economic growth. This corresponds with Chadwick et al. (2023), who underscore the significance of sports in augmenting national soft power and economic advancement (Chadwick et al., 2023).

According to the previous data, the UAE uses its football clubs, particularly City Football Group Limited, to boost its international reputation and boost its economy. This strategy boosts tourism and boosts the country's reputation. The UAE also highlights its investment potential by featuring stars from its clubs, aligning with Framing Theory. The country's influence is enhanced through acquisitions of successful clubs like Manchester City, Melbourne City, and Girona. Al Etihad newspaper highlights this strategy for image enhancement, diplomatic leverage, and celebrity influence.

**Al-Arab:** This newspaper agency represents Qatar, and pertains to the country's reliance on hosting international football events and the acquisition of internationally revered clubs. On the other hand, Qatar did not make use of any Qatari football star to expand its diplomatic appeal, and that notion makes the idea of making use of star power less prevalent, albeit valid, for Qatar's unique sport-driven diplomatic approach. Accordingly, the themes can be verified by analyzing the sentiments contained within Al-Arab's articles. Qatar has utilised Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) for economic, humanitarian, and tourism initiatives, with Qatar Airways endorsing tours and events featuring PSG athletes. The club enhanced diplomatic relations, particularly with King Charles of England, while Qatar Sports Investments augmented Qatar's influence in Europe. Qatar's primary soft-power strategy involves hosting significant, high-profile events to improve foreign relations. These initiatives, regarded as significant milestones, earned international respect and fostered collaborations with governments and enterprises. Al-Arab underscores Qatar's sports-oriented diplomacy aimed at image enhancement and strategic collaboration.

Qatar, hosting the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup, 2027 Men's Basketball World Cup, and 2030 Asian Games, aims to become the Middle East's sports hub. Qatar's National Vision 2030 focuses on economic diversification from hydrocarbons (The International Trade Administration, 2024).

The successful hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar represented a crucial milestone, catalysing substantial economic expansion and elevating the nation's international reputation. The event accounted for approximately 1% of Qatar's GDP, driven by heightened tourism expenditure and broadcasting revenue, estimated between US\$2.3 billion and US\$4.1 billion. The surge of visitors, particularly from adjacent Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, invigorated regional economic activity. Investments in infrastructure, crucial for the World Cup, have subsequently stimulated growth in Qatar's non-hydrocarbon sector. In the last ten years, Qatar's non-hydrocarbon GDP has increased from 40 billion Qatari Riyals in 1990 to over 120 billion in 2020. The World Cup significantly contributed to this transformation, attracting over 1.2 million visitors monthly in November and December 2022. (Bibolov et al., 2024).

**Akhbar El-Yom:** This newspaper agency represents Egypt, and pertains to the country's reliance on making use of home-grown football superstars who are well-known worldwide and can represent the country in various European leagues and international sports events. Accordingly, the themes can be verified by analyzing the sentiments contained within Akhbar El-Yom's articles.

In 2017, Egypt experienced advancements in security, economy, and development, enhancing citizens' quality of life and elevating international standings. Sports, especially through athletes such as Mohamed Salah, significantly contributed to this resurgence. Salah became the inaugural Egyptian recipient of the African Player of the Year award, surpassing Sadio Mane and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang. Egypt distinguished itself in both individual and team sports, with champions of both genders attaining international acclaim. President El-Sisi recognised 32 athletes and coaches, commending their accomplishments. Salah's commitment to family and nation garnered him respect, with the Liverpool Echo characterising him as diligent, considerate, and courteous in interviews (State information service, 2018).

Influential commentary and celebrity engagement can profoundly impact public perception. Mohamed Salah's performance significantly enhanced Egypt's reputation, amplifying awareness in the UK by 35-fold in 2022 following his acquisition by Liverpool F.C. The influence on Egypt's public perception was chiefly assessed via social media discourse among elites and the actions of celebrities (Ibrahim, 2023).

Accordingly, Egypt's sports diplomacy is significantly dependent on Mohamed Salah, the nation's most accomplished footballer. Due to constrained resources for procuring clubs or organising significant tournaments, Egypt aims to leverage Salah's success to elevate its cultural standing and influence. By designating Salah as an ambassador, Egypt aims to establish international partnerships, although this strategy has constraints. Salah's achievements are predominantly acknowledged in the media, yet they could be more effectively utilised for tourism promotion. Akhbar El-Yom emphasises Egypt's utilisation of celebrity influence in sports diplomacy.

Secondly: The Thematic Analysis Step of the CDA: This analytical phase represents the second half of the CDA; which relies completely on the Braun and Clarke (2012) format of thematic analysis as a qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This approach involves a six-phase process: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

It is a flexible method, allowing for both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) analyses. Accordingly, thematic analysis emphasizes the role of the researcher in actively identifying themes and interpreting their significance, making it suitable for exploring complex and nuanced qualitative data.

Moreover, the previously outlined news articles that have been extracted from the four news agencies are meant to be used again as the main dataset for the thematic analysis. In this case, such datasets are going to be coded to then be transformed into compendious themes towards exploring the utilization of sports by Arab nations as a tool for exerting influence in their foreign policy endeavours. Consequently, the following steps represent the thematic analysis format comprehensively:

*Familiarization with the Data:* Before identifying codes and themes, an in-depth review of the dataset was essential to fully understand the context and connotations within the articles. Key observations reveal that sports diplomacy is often highlighted in terms of achievements by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt, with a focus on these nations' investments in clubs and star athletes to enhance their global influence. The media portrays sports diplomacy efforts as aligned with each country's strategic goals, projecting positive international images. The UAE and Qatar leverage significant financial resources to purchase clubs or host major events, which boosts their international presence. Saudi Arabia emphasizes acquiring globally recognized sports icons to elevate its soft power, while Egypt, with fewer resources, relies more on its home-grown athletes to build its international reputation. This resource disparity is evident, as the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia achieve greater diplomatic impact through these investments, whereas Egypt's influence remains more limited but is supported by the prominence of its national athletes.

*Summary of Dataset Coding Process:* The dataset was coded by extracting key meanings from news articles across four newspapers, which were then grouped into initial themes. These themes were refined to better align with the study's main findings. For instance, "Sports Diplomacy" and "Cultural Diplomacy" were merged to represent the use of sports as a diplomatic tool by Arab nations. Similarly, "Strategic Vision" and "Financial Influence" were combined to emphasize efforts to promote national agendas and global soft power. The themes "Media Impactful Ubiquity" and "Utilizing Superstars" were consolidated to focus on how media and prominent athletes are used to further national interests. Lastly, "Global Status" and "Sports-Driven Improvement" were unified to underscore the role of sports in boosting the global standing of Arab nations. This process simplified the analysis by reducing eight themes into four key categories. After reviewing the refined themes, the final four were labeled and defined as Making Use of Star Power, Image Enhancement, Diplomatic Utility, and Sports Development.

#### *Findings of Critical Discourse Analysis*

Upon identifying the final themes that express the extensive contents which contain comprehensive and detailed meanings, the following sports-driven strategies that Arab nations use to establish and enhance their diplomatic relations and enhance their foreign policies can be outlined:

*Making Use of Star Power:* Superstars and football icons are crucial in elevating the global profile of Arab nations, with strategic moves by countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Egypt. Manchester City's stars in the UAE have promoted Abu Dhabi's landmarks, leveraging their fame to boost tourism and create a positive image of the city.

This approach demonstrates how sports icons can be used effectively to promote national landmarks and attract international attention, aligning with the UAE's broader strategy of enhancing its global presence through high-profile sports investments. Saudi Arabia's acquisition of renowned footballers like Cristiano Ronaldo exemplifies the nation's strategic use of superstar athletes to garner global interest and bolster its

image. Articles such as "Ronaldo Signs for Al-Nasr. Riyadh to Receive the Portuguese Legend on Monday" and "Ronaldo Performs the 'Arda' Dance..Global News Agencies Go Wild" illustrate how Ronaldo's presence in the Saudi League has attracted worldwide media attention and elevated the profile of Saudi Arabian football.

By integrating Ronaldo's star power into national sports strategy, Saudi Arabia not only boosts the visibility of its domestic league but also aligns with its broader diplomatic and economic goals, showcasing its ability to attract and retain global sports icons. Egypt's strategic use of football superstars, particularly Mohamed Salah, underscores the impact of home-grown talent on a nation's international image.

As highlighted in "Salah is in the Lead for the Ideal Lineup in Africa-2022" and "Salah Achieves another Historic Record in the Premier League," Salah's accomplishments have significantly enhanced Egypt's reputation on the global sports stage. His recognition as one of the best football players worldwide, as noted in "'Globe Soccer': Fans Vote Salah as the Best Football Player Worldwide," reflects how individual success can be utilized to project a positive image of a nation. Salah's achievements not only bring attention to Egyptian football but also reinforce the country's cultural and sporting identity on an international scale.

These nations are affected by superstar athletes and football icons' global appeal. The UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt use sports to promote their image, international engagement, and national interests. These nations use football and its icons to boost their global standing and diplomatic relations by promoting national landmarks, high-profile signings, or homegrown talent.

*Image Enhancement:* The UAE has used sports investments to boost its international image and economic and cultural goals. The article "Manchester City Achieves Revenues of £569.8 Million" highlights Abu Dhabi United Group-owned Manchester City's financial success. This financial success shows the UAE's investment power and ability to influence global sports markets. By partnering with a successful club, the UAE can boost its global profile and portray itself as a modern, prosperous nation. Also, "Aldar Properties to Become an Exclusive Partner with Manchester City," shows how the UAE uses its corporate assets to expand its global sports footprint. This partnership allows the UAE to promote its real estate and business interests abroad while strengthening its ties with a global football entity.

The UAE supports Girona FC's "Girona FC Return to La Liga through an Emirati Vision" and "Success through the 'Emirati Way'" to develop football talent Girona FC Wins La Liga After 93 Years." The UAE's City Football Group Limited has helped Girona FC succeed, demonstrating the strategic vision of investing in foreign football clubs to develop talent and succeed internationally. This highlights the Emirati investment and commitment to football excellence abroad. As mentioned in "City Group's Spirit Guides Girona FC's Excellence," the City Football Group's strategic guidance reinforces the UAE's role in shaping successful football narratives, boosting its international image through its affiliated clubs.

Saudi Arabia has effectively promoted its cultural and national agendas with football stars like Cristiano Ronaldo. The articles "Cristiano Ronaldo: The Saudi Football League is Set to Be in the Tops Five Leagues Worldwide" and "Ronaldo: I'm Not Going Back to Europe..My Youth Has Been Revived Thanks to Al-Nasr" show how Ronaldo has raised the Saudi League's profile. In "Ronaldo: I Give My Thanks to Saudi Arabia..I'm Extremely Jubilant," Ronaldo shows Saudi Arabia's welcoming nature and growing sports prominence.

Since hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup and partnering with international sports brands, Qatar has improved its global image. Qatar promotes itself through sports events, as shown in "The Parisian Club Arrives Today at Doha as Part of the Stadium-Tour of World Cup 2022" and "Qatar Airways Becomes the Official Sponsor of Paris Saint-Germain". Qatar's partnership with Paris Saint-Germain and launch of exclusive travel packages, as described in "Qatar Airways Holidays' Launches Travel-Packages for Paris Saint-Germain Fans," show its support for sports tourism and economic development. Qatar's global image has been enhanced through strategic partnerships with global sports organisations, such as hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup and partnering with international sports brands. Qatar promotes itself through sports events, such as the arrival of the Parisian Club at Doha and the official sponsorship of Paris Saint-Germain

by Qatar Airways. This support for sports tourism and economic development is evident in the launch of exclusive travel packages for Paris Saint-Germain fans.

*Diplomatic Utility:* Sports-based tools and strategies have proven to be instrumental for Arab nations like the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia in advancing their diplomatic agendas and enhancing their global standing. The "Manchester City-Abu Dhabi Cup" series, exemplified by articles such as "'Manchester City-Abu Dhabi Cup' Kicks Off in February," "130 teams Participate in 'Manchester City-Abu Dhabi Cup'," and "1000 Scored in 'Manchester City-Abu Dhabi Cup'," underscores the UAE's strategic use of sports events to establish international engagement and showcase its organizational capabilities.

The UAE's partnership with Manchester City and Qatar's strategic sports investments have strengthened its diplomatic ties and global image. The UAE's partnership with Manchester City exemplifies how aligning with successful sports franchises can enhance diplomatic influence. Qatar's strategic sports investments, such as a historic strategic agreement with Paris Saint-Germain and preparations for the 2022 World Cup, demonstrate its organizational skills and support its diplomatic and economic goals. The integration of sports, national development, and diplomacy allows Qatar to use these tools to boost its global standing and international connections. This approach demonstrates the importance of sports in advancing national interests and strengthening international relations.

*Sport Development:* For Arab nations such as the UAE and Qatar, developing local talent is crucial for building a sustainable sports culture that can enhance their global standing and influence. By cultivating home-grown football icons, these countries can create a genuine connection with international audiences, leveraging the global appeal of these athletes to generate interest and support. Local stars who achieve prominence on the world stage not only boost national pride but also serve as ambassadors for their country, promoting its culture, values, and aspirations more authentically.

Local athletes are more appealing to global fans and media, making it easier for nations to communicate their agendas and strategic goals through sports representatives. Local sports heroes can promote cultural exchange and international collaboration, aiding diplomatic efforts. The international recognition of local athletes can help build diplomatic relationships through friendly matches, joint ventures, and sports diplomacy. Bilateral relations and the nation's ability to influence global perceptions and negotiate agreements improve. Empowering their athletes will help the UAE and Qatar achieve their global goals and use sports as a diplomatic tool.

#### *Interview Analysis*

The researcher has interviewed eight officials from the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt as shown in the following table:

Dr.Ahmad SaadAlsharif	UAE	- Chairman of the Association for Sports &Drassa Academy, Sports Management Consultant and Senior Lecturer
Mohammed Al Joker	UAE	- Researcher, historian, and media personality from the Emirates - Secretary General of the Emirates Sports Media Association - Vice President of the Gulf Sports Media Federation
Ali Hussein	Qatar	- Head of the sports section of the Qatari Al-Arab newspaper
Ashraf Mahmoud	Egypt	- President of the Arab Federation for Sports Culture Sports critic for Al-Ahram newspaper and sports commentator
Ayed Al-Harbi	Saudi Arabia	- Professor at King Saud University, Mass Communication

Muhammad Atallah	Egypt	- Head of the sports department Erem News
Sadiq Al-Ammari	Qatar	- Director of the Qatari Center for Journalism
Dr. Saud Kateb	Saudi Arabia	- Former Deputy Minister for Public Diplomacy at the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Professor at King Abdul Aziz University and Columnist at Al Madina Newspaper

The themes generated from the interviews revolve around four issues represented in making use of star power, image enhancement, diplomatic utility, and sports development. These issues can be discussed in detail as follows:

Star power in sports diplomacy involves using elite players, teams, and events' international impact to achieve diplomatic and foreign policy goals. Khaldoon Al Mubarak's status as the world's best club president is crucial for the UAE's soft power plan through sports. Qatar's international sports involvement benefits diplomacy. Egyptian players, such as Mohamed Salah at Liverpool, Mohamed Elneny at Arsenal, and Wissam Morsi at Ipswich, have influenced European teams and served as ambassadors for their countries. However, Mohamed Salah's role in counterterrorism efforts has not improved Egypt's tourism or international image.

Ayed Al-Harbi says "foreign players have left an indelible mark on Saudi sports, particularly in the realm of cultural tourism" by actively participating in international media interviews and endorsing the country's quality of living and accommodation, which encourages others to visit and boosts the nation's global identity. Muhammad Atallah says Ronaldo's words have dispelled many preconceptions about Saudi Arabia. According to Saud Kateb, "Ronaldo's recent move to Saudi Al-Nasr Club catalysed a meteoric rise in the club's online presence, surging from 840,000 to 4.2 million followers on the X platform". The Saudi league also has Benzema, Mahrez, Neymar, Kante, Firmino, Mendy, Mane, and others, who were chosen to complement a larger sporting effort and boost the league's international image. This initiative supports Vision 2030's sports industry goals of boosting earnings, ranking the Saudi League at the top of the world, and increasing its market value to over eight billion riyals.

The second theme discusses the use of sports events and activities to enhance a nation's brand and international image. Football's soft power has helped the UAE achieve great things, as demonstrated by Manchester City's financial success. This enhances the UAE's image as an economic and investment power in the sports sector, making it more attractive to international companies seeking successful commercial and investment partnerships. The UAE's commitment to international relations, reputation, and tourism is also evident in the numerous delegations attending tournaments.

Sadiq Al-Ammari shows that football shapes Qatar's global image. "Qatar has made substantial investments in global sports and become a notable presence by hosting major events like the 2022 FIFA World Cup". Muhammad Atallah says the World Cup boosted Qatar's image. Ali Hussein shows that Qatar's 2022 World Cup, Copa America, and Gold Cup successes raised its profile. Administrative skills helped win sports. Television has also been important, and Sadiq Al-Ammari says BeIN Sports reaches millions worldwide. It promotes Qatari culture, customs, and brand. BeIN Sports can boost Qatar's regional and international image, says the Framing Theory.

Image enhancement has improved greatly in recent months. Muhammad Atallah shows that Croatia visited Egypt and Luka Modric played football under the pyramids to showcase its beauty. Sports help "showcase an ideal, positive image of Egypt and acquaint the world with its beauty and culture through participating teams who venture out to explore tourist attractions and capture memorable photos", says Mahmoud. Images work globally and are crucial for country marketing. Saudi Arabia hosts Formula One, Paris-Dakar Rally, freestyle wrestling, golf, and snooker championships, says Ayed Al-Harbi. In Spain and Italy, the

Kingdom hosted Swiss matches and other sports. Through these efforts, "Saudi Arabia has effectively showcased its evolving image on the global stage".

Muhammad Atallah also claims that Lionel Messi's Saudi Arabia ad and Ronaldo's comments about Saudi life have changed Westerners' views of Saudi Arabia. This supports the Framing Theory that audience information shapes beliefs.

The third theme, the diplomatic utility of sports diplomacy, highlights how sports initiatives can enhance returns on investment. Muhammad Atallah and Ahmad SaadAlsharif confirm that Manchester City serves as a key tool for UAE soft power, strengthening UAE-UK relations through economic ties, community programs, and tourism. Mohammed Al Joker notes the Emirates brand's prominence in sports, with sponsorships of major teams, stadium branding, and logo placements on top players' jerseys. Similarly, Qatar leverages sports, like the FIFA World Cup, for diplomatic goals. Ali Hussein and Sadiq Al-Ammari show that owning Paris Saint-Germain has bolstered ties with France and improved Qatar's favorability, though Muhammad Atallah confirms it fell short of advancing sports diplomacy objectives.

At the Egyptian level, Muhammad Atallah demonstrates that football players, especially, have been utilized as a diplomatic tool on the global stage. However, Egypt has not fully capitalized on the presence of a global star like Mohamed Salah, whether in enhancing the country's international image or boosting the tourism sector. According to Saud Kateb, the significance of sports figures is complex as they help to show the Kingdom as a developed nation that is safe and prosperous. Furthermore, it enhances the Kingdom's standing as a desirable destination for investment, travel, and education, solidifying its position on the international scene.

Sports development and improvement conclude the discussion. Ahmad SaadAlsharif says the UAE's world-class sports infrastructure, which supports many sports, has helped the sports industry succeed. Development of such infrastructure requires investment. Ahmad Saad Alsharif emphasises investing in international sports clubs, cooperating with international sports federations, developing local sports capabilities, supporting sports academies, strategic and media communication, and improving sports research and education.

Ali Hussein suggests fostering cooperation with sports industry decision-makers, giving national hiring priority in continental and international federations, signing cooperative agreements between national media organisations and major partners in Europe and the West, diversifying elite European league sports team ownership, continuing to bring in famous athletes to regional competitions, and simplifying the process.

Ashraf Mahmoud suggests embassies have sports attachés to help Egyptian athletes compete internationally. Ayed Al-Harbi suggests recruiting elite athletes in every sport, developing plans to use them to boost the country's reputation, sending Saudi teams to international competitions, especially in developed sports infrastructure countries, and implementing continuous review and evaluation. In Saudi sports, Muhammad Atallah promotes sustainability. Saud Kateb says Saudi sports are complex. Explore all factors affecting it for full development. Mohammed Al Joker suggests expanding investment opportunities, welcoming more sports, attracting more global and regional sports organisations, and speeding up athlete and sports professional residency and travel. Sadiq Al-Ammari proposes cultural exchange, international relations, media development, and tournaments.

## Conclusion

Sports diplomacy is a strategic tool for using sports-related activities to encourage cultural exchanges, help build trust, reduce tensions among nations, foster mutual understanding, strengthen bilateral ties, and shape international discourse and priorities. A planned and strategic approach is necessary for the effective use of star power in sports diplomacy. Countries can promote cultural exchanges, strengthen their international status, and further their diplomatic goals by making use of the star power. Nations can shape their international reputation by strategically incorporating sports diplomacy into their overall image

enhancement strategy. Through the strategic utilization of sports' international reach and soft power, nations can expand their diplomatic assets and effectively pursue a diverse array of foreign policy objectives. Qatar needs to enhance the diplomatic utility of Paris Saint-Germain, while Egypt needs to invest more in the star power to enhance tourism attraction, encourage investment, and promote positive image enhancement.

Sports diplomacy has improved the chosen countries' global reputation and garnered international respect and admiration. Manchester City's success has shown Abu Dhabi as a global player. Saudi Arabia's ambitious sports investments, like Cristiano Ronaldo's high-profile transfer to Al Nassr, aligned sports with Vision 2030 goals, strengthening its soft power. Qatar's successful hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup showcased its organisational skills and made it a global sports powerhouse. These initiatives show how these nations have used sports to project influence and improve their global image.

Strategic investments and partnerships in sports have significantly enhanced nation branding and driven economic growth by attracting tourism, foreign investment, and international collaborations, showcasing a foundation in authentic economic development rather than merely "sports washing." Saudi Arabia's investment in sports has boosted GDP and established it as a regional sports hub, amplifying tourism and hospitality. Qatar's hosting of the World Cup spurred visitor spending and infrastructure investment, further diversifying its non-hydrocarbon economy. Abu Dhabi has drawn investment and global recognition for its sports achievements, particularly through Manchester City's success under UAE ownership. These initiatives highlight how sports diplomacy has become a powerful tool for economic development and nation branding across each country. Media has played a crucial role in globalizing these achievements, promoting and reinforcing strategic goals. From Ronaldo's arrival in Saudi Arabia to Qatar's extensive World Cup preparations and Manchester City's success, the widespread media presence—strengthened by digital platforms and social media—has raised global awareness, attracted foreign interest, and boosted tourism, advancing these nations' soft power and strategic objectives through positive public perception and admiration.

Egypt has leveraged home-grown talents like Mohamed Salah to strengthen its sports diplomacy efforts. Despite limited resources for hosting major international events or acquiring foreign clubs, Egypt has utilized Salah's success in European football to bolster its global reputation. Media coverage, particularly in outlets such as Akhbar El-Yom, emphasized how Salah's influence on the world stage contributed to Egypt's diplomatic initiatives, especially in enhancing ties with countries like the UK. While Egypt's sports diplomacy strategy has primarily focused on promoting individual athletes, there is still significant untapped potential in fully capitalizing on the presence of a global star like Salah, particularly in improving the country's international image and boosting tourism.

In summary, the four countries have utilized sports diplomacy in various ways, each emphasizing different aspects of the sports industry, including star power, high-profile events, and strategic ownership of sports clubs to enhance their global standing. By attracting international attention through the achievements of athletes, hosting prestigious events, and investing in globally recognized clubs, these nations have been able to cultivate a positive international image and foster diplomatic relationships. Through media coverage and in-depth interview analysis, it is evident that sports diplomacy has had a significant impact on nation branding, contributing to economic growth through increased tourism, foreign investment, and commercial opportunities. The use of sports as a platform for soft power has not only enhanced their global reputations and stimulated economic growth but also opened avenues for cultural exchange and international collaboration. These efforts highlight the growing significance of sports diplomacy as a key strategic tool for advancing foreign policy and strengthening global influence.

## References

- Abdi, K., Talebpour, M., Fullerton, J., Ranjkesh, M. J., & Nooghabi, H. J. (2019). Identifying sports diplomacy resources as soft power tools. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 15, 147-155.
- Akhbar El-Yom. (2024). Sports news. Akhbar El-Yom.

- <https://akhbarelyom.com/news/newssection/23/1/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A9>
- Al-Arab. (2024). International sports. Al-Arab. <https://alarab.qa/category/%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9?page=1>
- Aletihad. (2024). Sports. Aletihad. <https://www.aletihad.ae/category/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B6%D9%8A>
- Almoayed, A. (2023). How major sporting events are boosting Middle East economies. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/03/sports-middle-east/>
- AlOmari, R. (2018). Framing Bahrain through public diplomacy: A qualitative analysis of frames communicated by the Bahraini government during the 2011 crisis.
- Anholt, S. (2010). Identity, image, and reputation.
- Arning, C. (2013). Soft power, ideology and symbolic manipulation in Summer Olympic Games opening ceremonies: A semiotic analysis. *Social Semiotics*, 23(4), 523-544.
- Arriyadiyah. (2024). Latest news. Arriyadiyah. <https://arriyadiyah.com/>
- Bibolov, A., Miyajima, K., Rehman, S., & Yuan, T. (2022). FIFA World Cup: Economic impact on Qatar and regional spillovers. International Monetary Fund.
- Bouvier, G. (2015). What is a discourse approach to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media: Connecting with other academic fields. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 10(2), 149-162.
- Boykoff, J. (2016). Power games: A political history of the Olympics. Verso Books.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Vol. 2. Research designs* (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association.
- Chadwick, S., Nicholas, B., Widdop, P., & Bond, A. (2023). Networks, strategy and sport: The case of City Football Group. *Journal of Strategy and Management*, 15, 1-30.
- Dubinsky, Y. (2018). The image of Beijing and London in Israeli media coverage of the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games. *The International Journal of Sport and Society*, 9(2), 37.
- Dubinsky, Y. (2019). From soft power to sports diplomacy: A theoretical and conceptual discussion. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 15, 156-164.
- Garamvölgyi, B., Bardocz-Bencsik, M., & Dóczy, T. (2022). Mapping the role of grassroots sport in public diplomacy. *Sport in Society*, 25(5), 889-907.
- Gibbon, G. (2023). Ronaldo's signing goes beyond money for Saudi Arabia. *Arabian Gulf Business Insight*. <https://www.agbi.com/analysis/business-of-sport/2023/01/cristiano-ronaldo-al-nassr-saudi-arabia/>
- Gilboa, E. (2008). Searching for a theory of public diplomacy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 55-77.
- Haider, A. S. (2016). A corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of the representation of Qaddafi in media: Evidence from Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Khaleej newspapers. *International Journal of Linguistics and Communication*, 4(2), 11-29.
- Heslop, L. A., Nadeau, J., & O'Reilly, N. (2010). China and the Olympics: Views of insiders and outsiders. *International Marketing Review*, 27(4), 404-433.
- Ibrahim, S. S. (2023). How can the government utilize elites & celebrities to manage global public opinion on Egypt? An exploratory study of Mo Salah & Egypt (Master's thesis). The American University in Cairo, Cairo.
- James, T. B. (2021). Soft power and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.
- KhosraviNik, M., & Unger, J. W. (2015). Critical discourse studies and social media: Power, resistance and critique in changing media ecologies. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse studies* (pp. 205-233). Sage.
- Kobierecki, M. M. (2023). Sport at the World Expo: Analysis of sports diplomacy at the non-sporting event. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 1-13.
- Manchester City. (2024). Manchester City retains position as the Premier League's most valuable football club brand. Manchester City. [https://www.mancity.com/news/club/manchester-city-brand-football-finance-report-2024-63856798?utm\\_source=x&utm\\_medium=organic\\_social](https://www.mancity.com/news/club/manchester-city-brand-football-finance-report-2024-63856798?utm_source=x&utm_medium=organic_social)
- Mautner, G. (2005). Time to get wired: Using web-based corpora in critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 16(6), 809-828.
- Mohammadi Aziz Abadi, M., & Beheshty, S. S. (2020). Political sociology of sport: The impact of sports and professional athletes on political life.
- Murray, S. (2012). The two halves of sports diplomacy. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 23(3), 576-592.
- Murray, S. (2018). *Sports diplomacy: Origins, theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Nadeau, J., Heslop, L., O'Reilly, N., & Luk, P. (2008). Destination in a country image context. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(1), 84-106.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. *Public Affairs*.
- Papadopoulos, N., & Heslop, L. (2002). Country equity and country branding: Problems and prospects. *Journal of Brand Management*, 9, 294-314.
- Preuss, H. (2018). A framework for identifying the legacies of a mega sport event. In *Leveraging mega-event legacies* (pp. 29-50). Routledge.
- Rofe, J. S., & Postlethwaite, V. (2021). Scholarship and sports diplomacy: The cases of Japan and the United Kingdom. *Diplomatica*, 3(2), 363-385.
- Saboonchi, R., & Hosseni Asgarabadi, M. (2023). Sports diplomacy in the development of Iran's

international relations with the countries of the Persian Gulf. *Strategic Studies on Youth and Sports*.

Sambidge, A. (2022). The cost of being champions: Manchester City's \$2bn investment. *Arabian*

*Gulf Business Insight*. <https://www.agbi.com/business-of-sport/2022/05/the-cost-of-being-champions-manchester-citys-2bn-investment/>

Santos, N. D. A. E. S. F. D. (2021). The interplay of soft power and sharp power in sport diplomacy: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 1-19.

Schreyer, D., & Singleton, C. (2024). Cristiano of Arabia: Did Ronaldo increase Saudi Pro League attendances? *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 1-19.

Signitzer, B. H., & Coombs, T. (1992). Public relations and public diplomacy: Conceptual convergences. *Public Relations Review*, 18(2), 137-147.

Simpson, P., & Mayr, A. (2010). *Language and power*. Routledge.

Singer, N. (2022). Role of World Cup soccer in healing the Gulf region: Zeal of Qatar's sport diplomacy and soft power. *Arab Media & Society*, (33).

State Information Service. (2018). *Mo Salah: Never stop dreaming*. Cairo: Author.

Szondi, G. (2010). From image management to relationship building: A public relations approach to nation branding. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6, 333-343.

The International Trade Administration. (2024). *Qatar - Market challenges*.

<https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/qatar-market-challenges>

Thurlow, C. (2011). Speaking of difference: Language, inequality, and interculturality. In R.

Halualani & T. Nakayama (Eds.), *Handbook of critical intercultural communication* (pp. 227-247). Blackwell.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage.

Wang, J. (2006). Managing national reputation and international relations in the global era: Public diplomacy revisited. *Public Relations Review*, 32(2), 91-96.