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**CROSS-NATIONAL VARIATIONS IN SOFT POWER
OUTCOMES OF MEGA-EVENT NATION BRANDING**

Mega-events are popular instruments of soft power and nation branding among states, yet their reputational impacts vary significantly from country to country. Drawing on a case study of emerging and middle-income states, this article examines why sports mega-events generate divergent soft power and nation-branding outcomes. A qualitative comparative analytical approach is employed, with Germany serving as a reference point for emerging and middle powers in the assessment of strategic leveraging, governance, and legacy management. Reputational gains require institutional integration, strategic event management and credible governance, whereas high-visibility, capital-intensive strategies can exacerbate reputational vulnerability amid global media scrutiny. This article contributes to the fields of soft power and nation branding by explaining the variation in outcomes of mega-events across different countries and identifying the conditions for long-term influence.

Keywords: sports mega-events; soft power; nation branding; FIFA; Olympic Games; public diplomacy

Literature Review

Nation branding refers to the totality of perceptions held by international stakeholders about a country, encompassing associations with its people, culture, history, places, language, cuisine, globally recognised brands, and prominent personalities; every nation thus possesses a brand, whether deliberately managed or not, which may be positive or negative, coherent or fragmented [4, p. 3]. For conceptual clarity, scholars distinguish between national identity, national image, and national reputation: national identity denotes a nation's internal self-understanding and shared psychological bonds, whereas national image concerns how the nation presents itself externally, and national reputation reflects external audiences' evaluative judgements regarding the credibility and consistency of those identity claims [3, pp. 4–5]. Nation branding primarily focuses on managing external perceptions and reputation rather than internal identity formation, recognising that a country's image is shaped beyond its borders through media representations, stereotypes, state actions, and personal experiences, and can therefore be strategically influenced in a manner similar to commercial branding [3, pp. 4–5]. Importantly, nation branding does not seek to fabricate an entirely new image but rather to align external perceptions with contemporary realities, particularly in states that have undergone significant political, economic, or social transformation, where outdated images often persist [3, p. 6]. It typically involves repeatedly disseminating simplified messages, images and symbols to broad audiences worldwide to increase familiarity and forge recognisable associations with national identity, image and perceived competitive benefits [2, p. 4]. Therefore, nation branding prioritises visibility, awareness-building and image

familiarisation, frequently relying on slogans, iconic representations and high-profile events that demonstrate modernity and global relevance.

1. Nation Branding and Soft Power

Although closely related, nation branding and soft power are analytically distinct. Soft power, defined by Nye as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion, derives from the perceived appeal of a state's culture, political values, and policies [17, p. x]. Nation branding, while not soft power itself, serves as a strategic mechanism that shapes national image and reputation, strengthening the sources of attraction on which soft power depends. In this sense, soft power reflects the outcomes of global attractiveness, whereas nation branding focuses on the deliberate management and communication processes that generate and sustain that attractiveness.

This distinction also clarifies the relationship between nation branding and public diplomacy. Nation branding prioritises broad visibility, recognition, and simple messaging for mass foreign audiences, while public diplomacy engages in targeted, interactive communication to foster trust, understanding, and long-term partnerships [2, p. 4]. Rather than competing, the two exist on a continuum: nation branding lays the groundwork for public diplomacy by creating initial visibility and receptivity, which can then be leveraged through more relational and credibility-based diplomatic efforts.

International mega-events serve as instruments of nation branding and soft power. The concept originated with the revival of the modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, which were initially intended to foster international solidarity, peaceful competition and cross-cultural exchange. Over time, however, such events have developed into sophisticated instruments of global diplomacy, catalysts for urban transformation, and vehicles for soft power projection [1, p. 5]. Nowadays, mega-events such as the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, global summits and World Expos are highly curated displays through which states attempt to influence international perceptions, increase their visibility and redefine their national identities [16, p. 337]. Technological advances in broadcasting and digital media have transformed mega-events into heavily mediated activities, whose value is now derived more from global visibility than physical attendance [1, p. 2]. Mega-events are therefore defined as large-scale, time-bound undertakings characterised by high levels of organisational complexity, an extended international reach, considerable financial costs, and notable social, economic, political as well as urban impacts [1, p. 2; 16, p. 337].

From a nation branding perspective, mega-events serve as powerful channels for conveying simplified, emotionally resonant national narratives to worldwide audiences. Host states can demonstrate organisational capacity, modernity, cultural distinctiveness and alignment with global norms by mobilising international attention and symbolic meaning, thereby altering external perceptions and national images [16, p. 337]. Differentiated strategic usage is suggested by empirical evidence: emerging and re-emerging states, such as South Africa, China, India and Qatar, utilise mega-events to garner international recognition and combat negative or outdated stereotypes. In contrast, established states, including Germany and the United Kingdom, primarily employ them to solidify and bolster pre-existing reputational assets [10, pp. 527–528].

In the field of international relations, sporting mega-events are increasingly recognised as instruments of soft power [16, p. 337]. Soft power relies on both tangible and intangible resources to communicate influence and legitimacy, operating through cooperation, shared interests, and relational capital [1, p. 1]. Sporting mega-events possess particular soft power value in this context due to their capacity to engage global spectators through shared cultural

norms related to sport, their emotional appeal, and their symbolic universality [10]. Consequently, governments may strategically host such events to enhance their diplomatic legitimacy, economic opportunities, and overall international standing [1, p. 1].

Large-scale international events serve as key instruments for nation branding and public diplomacy by first raising global visibility through media coverage and symbolic messaging, and subsequently fostering credibility via cultural narratives, shared values, governance competence, and interpersonal engagement [2, pp. 3–11]. When integrated into long-term legacy and communication strategies, such events can translate symbolic appeal into tangible outcomes, including tourism growth, investment, and enhanced diplomatic positioning, while offering platforms for domestic nation-building and emotionally resonant cultural projection [2, pp. 11–13; 10, pp. 529–530]. However, these benefits are neither automatic nor guaranteed: international criticism, political protest, domestic governance issues, high costs, and controversial urban legacies can undermine image-building efforts, highlighting the need for careful planning and alignment between spectacle, strategy, and long-term governance objectives [10, pp. 527–528; 1, p. 2].

From an analytical perspective, mega-events can be conceptualised as multifaceted phenomena characterised by four interconnected dimensions: visitor appeal, mediated reach, cost and urban transformation [1, pp. 3–4]. These dimensions reveal how mega-events operate as strategic soft power infrastructures, bridging the visibility-driven approach of nation branding with the relational goals of public diplomacy. Their effectiveness does not depend merely on scale or spectacle, rather it depends on the extent to which image production is embedded in sustained communication, good governance and legacy strategies that can convert symbolic attraction into long-lasting international influence.

The differences between national branding and soft power in the implementation of international events. Although closely related, nation branding and soft power are conceptually distinct strategies of international influence. Soft power is defined as a state's ability to attract and persuade others through the appeal of its culture, political values, and policies, rather than through coercion or inducement [11, pp. 1–3; 17, p. x]. It emerges when these elements are perceived as legitimate, credible, and morally appealing by external audiences, shaping preferences and fostering voluntary alignment with a state's interests. Importantly, soft power is an outcome rather than a deliberate communication strategy, reliant on long-term credibility, normative appeal, and relational trust achieved through consistency between discourse and practice [11, pp. 3–4]. By contrast, nation branding is the deliberate, strategic management of a country's image to influence external perceptions, functioning as a mechanism to cultivate soft power rather than as an equivalent concept. Drawing on branding, marketing, and public relations logics, nation branding packages cultural identity, symbolic assets, and positive national attributes to achieve reputational and economic objectives, including tourism, investment, exports, and international prestige [11, p. 6]. Unlike soft power, it emphasizes raising awareness, attracting attention, and shaping preferences through simplified, repetitive, and recognisable messaging aimed at mass audiences [2, pp. 3–4].

The key difference between the two concepts lies in their ***intentionality, function and operational principles***. Soft power aims to influence the behaviour and preferences of other actors over the long term, covering political alignment, normative legitimacy, and sustained international cooperation [11, pp. 1, 3–4]. While capable of contributing indirectly to influence, nation branding is more instrumentally oriented towards measurable reputational and economic results, such as destination attractiveness, investment flows, competitiveness in exports, and international recognition [11, p. 6]. Methodologically, soft power is rooted in tangible sources such as culture, values, and foreign policy, and is exercised through relational mechanisms like educational and cultural exchange, diplomacy, and international

broadcasting. These mechanisms gradually and interactively cultivate attraction [11, pp. 3–4]. In contrast, nation branding relies explicitly on strategic communication tools such as campaigns, slogans, visual identity and symbolic representation. It functions largely as a one-directional, cross-cultural communication process that is closely aligned with the logics of commercial branding [11, pp. 6–7; 2, p. 4].

Instead of being interchangeable, nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power occupy distinct yet interconnected positions within a hierarchical process of international influence. Nation branding functions at the foundational level, placing a state on the global cognitive map and fostering initial familiarity and basic appreciation through recognizable associations. Public diplomacy operates at a higher level in this hierarchy, fostering dialogue, trust and long-term relationships through engagement with targeted foreign audiences. This enhances credibility and relational strength [2, p. 4]. Soft power emerges as the cumulative outcome of this process when branding-driven familiarity is reinforced by credible interaction, policy alignment, and sustained engagement. At this stage, attraction becomes robust enough to influence behaviour in areas such as tourism choices, investment decisions, and political support [2, pp. 3, 11–12]. Therefore, nation branding is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for soft power, requiring public diplomacy and consistent policy performance to convert image into influence.

The distinction between nation branding and soft power is particularly evident in the context of international mega-events. Nation branding uses such events to generate global visibility, media attention, and simplified symbolic representations that signal modernity, competence, or uniqueness, effectively “putting the country on the map” [2, pp. 9, 11–12]. Soft power, however, extends beyond image projection, encompassing cultural exchange, interpersonal contact, and relationship building that shape perceptions of credibility, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, with durable outcomes such as tourism growth, investment inflows, and political influence when embedded within sustained engagement and aligned with international norms [2, pp. 11–12]. While event-based nation branding produces short-term gains measurable through media exposure, tourism, and investment [2, p. 9; 11, p. 6], soft power is cumulative and long-term, relying on coherence between projected images and actual policies and assessed via indirect measures such as legitimacy and preference [11, pp. 2–4; 2, pp. 11, 13]. Thus, nation branding is a necessary but insufficient condition for soft power, as visibility alone may fail to generate trust or influence without sustained public diplomacy and policy credibility [2, p. 13; 11, pp. 6–7].

Conditions for Mega-Events to Successfully Enhance a State's Global Image. The ideal-type model outlines the key domains and resources through which states generate soft power, and the mechanisms by which these resources are strategically mobilised for diplomatic purposes [8, pp. 11, 15–16]. It defines soft power as emerging from five interlinked domains: culture, encompassing arts, language, identity, and values, within which sporting mega-events (SMEs) function as cultural assets [8, pp. 16–18]; *tourism*, as SMEs attract visitors and generate multiplier effects through repeat visits and informal promotion [8, pp. 18–19]; *place and nation branding*, involving deliberate strategies to signal status and reshape international perceptions, with SMEs serving as high-visibility branding platforms [8, pp. 17–18]; *diplomacy and public diplomacy*, extending beyond formal state relations to networked engagement involving international organizations, sports bodies, and sponsors, with sport operating as a diplomatic “ice breaker” [8, pp. 15, 17–18]; and *trade and economic signaling*, whereby SMEs demonstrate infrastructural capacity, logistical competence, and business credibility, stimulating investment, human capital flows, and trade partnerships [8, p. 18]. Sport occupies a cross-cutting position across all five domains, functioning

simultaneously as a cultural, economic, diplomatic, and branding resource, which enhances its strategic value within state soft power frameworks [8, pp. 16, 18].

According to empirical research, international visibility is a necessary precondition for image change, as media exposure generates awareness and allows new associations to form [15, pp. 2, 4]. The strongest effects are observed among on-site attendees, who report more positive image shifts than non-attendees, especially when experiences are emotionally engaging and socially shared [15, pp. 9-13]. These positive outcomes are further reinforced by favourable on-site conditions, which include safety, efficient transport, quality accommodation and hospitable service [15, pp. 6, 9].

However, the extent and longevity of image change are influenced by factors such as familiarity with the destination prior to the event and exposure to it beforehand. Event-motivated visitors report higher satisfaction and stronger behavioural intentions after the event [15, pp. 5, 11-15]. Crucially, short-term image improvements do not automatically lead to long-term reputational benefits. Organisational quality, particularly with regard to security, crowd management and host-guest interactions, plays a decisive role in sustaining positive perceptions; conversely, negative incidents can rapidly erode gains [15, pp. 9, 16]. Without active post-event exploitation through marketing, tourism development and legacy planning, the effects on image tend to fade over time, [15, p. 4].

Based on this evidence, it can be concluded that mega-events only enhance a country's global image when several interrelated conditions are met. Firstly, the attributes of the event must clearly foreground the features of the destination that the host wishes to promote, such as cultural identity, natural assets or modern infrastructure, and these must be communicated consistently across event narratives [12, p. 160]. Secondly, the safe and efficient delivery of the event is essential, as the absence of major operational or security failures reinforces perceptions of national competence and reliability [ibid]. Thirdly, coordinated marketing and communication strategies are required to explicitly link positive event narratives to the destination's broader brand associations, thus enabling effective image transfer [12, pp. 150, 161].

Overall, mega-events serve as high-profile but high-risk instruments for nation branding. When they are strategically organised, competently delivered and aligned with strategies for audience engagement, destination identity and the legacy of the event, they can generate meaningful enhancement of the nation's image. However, when these factors are absent, heightened visibility may instead amplify reputational damage.

2. The Reputational Risks of Using Mega-Events for Nation Branding

Sport mega-events (SMEs) are often used as a quick way to build a nation's brand because they generate exceptional global visibility and are widely seen as a powerful form of soft power. In line with Anholt's (2007) nation branding framework, events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup are often seen as chances for host nations, particularly emerging states seeking accelerated international recognition, to improve their image [14, p. 149]. However, although SMEs offer significant opportunities for improving a nation's reputation, positive branding outcomes are neither automatic nor guaranteed. Hosts face considerable reputational risk if they fail to meet expectations or if heightened visibility exposes underlying political, social or governance shortcomings [13, pp. 149–150].

A major source of reputational risk surrounding sports mega-events is the *intensity and framing of international media scrutiny*. Rather than addressing negative perceptions, mega-events can exacerbate existing controversies concerning governance, labour practices, human rights or political legitimacy, enabling negative narratives to dominate global coverage [14,

pp. 1–3]. In such contexts, branding efforts can backfire, resulting in what Knott et al. refer to as '*soft disempowerment*', whereby attempts to appear attractive ultimately damage the international reputation [14, pp. 2–3]. Such risks are particularly acute for emerging or non-Western hosts, who face deeply rooted stereotypes and imbalanced geopolitical media coverage [14, pp. 1–3].

Comparative cases highlight this dual potential. For example, South Africa's hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup demonstrated that effective event delivery can counter pre-event scepticism and contribute to a more positive national brand. This signals competence, global participation and post-apartheid re-emergence, despite prior concerns over crime and inequality [13, pp. 149–150]. In contrast, Qatar's long-term investment in mega-events, culminating in the 2022 World Cup, shows the limitations of event-led reputation management. Although the event was aligned with National Vision 2030 and intended to challenge negative stereotypes, it was dominated by sustained media criticism over corruption and migrant labour conditions. This exposed Qatar's heightened reputational vulnerability rather than achieving any long-term gains [14, pp. 1–3].

Moreover, these cases reveal a persistent credibility gap between positive short-term on-site experiences and negative long-term external narratives. Although visitor perceptions of hospitality and organisational competence may improve, these gains are often not enough to offset ongoing media scrutiny of governance and human rights. This increases the risk that mega-event branding will be seen as insincere or meaningless [14, pp. 4–6].

Alongside image management, SMEs can also cause reputational damage through *social and ethical disempowerment*. Mega-events can amplify existing inequalities by causing forced displacement, labour exploitation, cultural marginalisation and restrictions on civil liberties. Examples of this can be seen in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2014 and 2016 Rio Olympics and the 2022 Qatar World Cup [1, p. 16]. If such outcomes attract sustained international attention, the resulting reputational damage can extend beyond the event itself, thereby undermining diplomatic credibility, foreign investment and post-event tourism [14, pp. 2, 5].

The media is central to the reputational impact of mega-events, as mediated representations often outweigh direct experience by shaping visibility and dominant narratives, with hybrid and social media environments simultaneously enhancing opportunities for positive engagement while amplifying reputational risks—especially when host messaging lacks coherence, transparency or credibility [2, pp. 9–13; 1, p. 12].

The scale of reputational risk associated with mega-events is influenced by contextual factors such as pre-existing national images, the media landscape, and hosting strategies. States that rely on one-off mega-events face higher reputational risks and have fewer opportunities to make a positive impact. In contrast, those that pursue sustained event portfolios and consistent sports diplomacy are better placed to manage narratives and reinforce credibility over time [14, p. 6]. Therefore, risk mitigation requires the embedding of reputational management across the entire event lifecycle. This should include early attention to labour standards, governance transparency and sustainability, as well as proactive but credible media engagement that allows for independent scrutiny [14, pp. 2, 7].

From a theoretical perspective, scholars caution against treating sporting mega-events as universally effective instruments of soft power. Intense international scrutiny means that governance failures or human rights concerns can undermine branding objectives and result in soft power losses. This was evident in Qatar's experience, despite its extensive investment and image management efforts [8, p. 26]. Overall, this body of work highlights that, while mega-events offer unparalleled visibility, they are inherently high-risk instruments of nation branding. Without ethical consistency, governance credibility and sustained public diplomacy,

heightened visibility is more likely to result in reputational vulnerability than in the establishment of durable soft power.

Media strategies that maximise positive perceptions during mega-events. Media exposure constitutes the primary mechanism through which mega-events shape international perceptions, making the tone, framing and continuity of coverage crucial for image enhancement [5, p. 10]. Positive reputational outcomes are most likely when media narratives emphasise organisational competence, efficient logistics, security, public engagement, and tangible destination attributes such as infrastructure, safety and hospitality, while emotionally engaging portrayals of cultural expression and communal celebration further strengthen favourable associations [5, pp. 6–10; 15, pp. 15–17]. Conversely, coverage focused on political controversy, operational failures or unmet expectations can undermine credibility and damage the host country's image, particularly if promotional narratives exceed actual delivery [5, p. 10]. Sustained post-event media presence and legacy storytelling are therefore essential, as image gains tend to fade without continued communication and reinforcement [15, p. 4].

3. Comparative Mega-Event Strategies Across Developed and Emerging States

3.1 Germany 2006 as a Benchmark of Effective Image Leveraging

The geopolitical circumstances in which major sporting events are held significantly impact their ability to influence a host country's international image and soft power. While such events offer opportunities to project identity and strategic narratives, the outcomes vary according to national circumstances. For example, Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup was part of its Vision 2030 agenda to diversify the economy and enhance its global standing beyond hydrocarbons. Meanwhile, Brazil used the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games to reinforce its status as an emerging sporting power, despite domestic economic constraints. Russia's hosting of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics occurred amid tensions surrounding Crimea and Ukraine and primarily served to bolster domestic legitimacy and an assertive geopolitical stance rather than to project soft power externally. By contrast, South Africa's 2010 FIFA World Cup was closely linked to post-apartheid nation-building and African renaissance narratives. Established powers such as Germany and the United Kingdom, however, leveraged the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2012 London Olympics respectively to recalibrate pre-existing reputations, challenge stereotypes and signal modernity and openness within shifting geopolitical and economic contexts [9, pp. 339–340, 577].

Germany's hosting of the 2006 FIFA World Cup is a prime example of the effective use of a sporting mega-event to improve a country's image. Rather than treating the tournament as a standalone event, the German government embedded it within a coordinated strategy integrating cultural diplomacy, tourism promotion and public diplomacy, with the aim of countering negative stereotypes associated with the country's history in the 20th century [6, p. 289; 9, p. 7]. Key initiatives included nationwide hospitality training, comprehensive cultural programming and the long-term 'Welcome to Germany: Land of Ideas' campaign - projected an image of openness, innovation and social inclusivity [1, pp. 13–14; 9, pp. 9–10].

A central component of Germany's 2006 FIFA World Cup strategy was the integration of arts and ancillary events, or 'cultural augmentation,' to boost audience engagement and extend tourism and branding benefits beyond the tournament itself, facilitated by corporatist governance that enabled cross-sector collaboration despite initial tensions with FIFA [6, pp. 10–11]. Extensive media coverage, supported by a multilingual broadcast infrastructure and domestic telecommunications, amplified Germany's visibility in over 200 countries, aligning with event-leveraging principles [6, p. 12]. This coordinated approach successfully shifted

international perceptions, particularly in British media, from historical stereotypes to a modern, multicultural, and welcoming image, generating lasting reputational gains through increased tourism, visitor spending, and strengthened national confidence, illustrating how governance, media, and cultural integration can turn a mega-event into an effective tool of soft power and public diplomacy [6, pp. 12, 16; 9, pp. 7–8].

In contrast to Germany's approach during the 2006 FIFA World Cup, the UK's management of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games demonstrates a more *cautious, supplementary and diplomatically restrained model* of sport-based soft power. The two cases share important similarities. Like Germany, the UK used a major sporting event to change international perceptions, challenge negative stereotypes and present a modern, open and inclusive national identity [9]. In each case, the events formed part of broader public diplomacy and nation-branding strategies, combining culture, tourism, media visibility, and values-based messaging. The UK's *International Inspiration* programme, for example, is similar to Germany's *cultural enhancement* and hospitality initiatives, demonstrating how sport was used to convey openness, creativity, and social diversity [16, p. 341].

However, the extent to which the image was leveraged differed substantially. Germany's 2006 World Cup was characterised by strategic coherence, domestic consensus and long-term coordination between the state, the media, businesses and cultural organisations. This enabled sport to function as a credible source of soft power. This approach resulted in sustained changes to media narratives and tangible improvements in tourism, investment and international reputation indices [6, pp. 12–16].

In contrast, the UK's stance on London 2012 was more instrumental and supplementary. While the Foreign and Commonwealth Office pursued a strategy of promoting investment and values such as openness, supported by initiatives like *International Inspiration* and Olympic ambassadors, sport operated as a complement rather than a driver of British soft power [7, pp. 468–470]. While the Games generated positive global media coverage and reinforced perceptions of Britain as a vibrant, business-friendly nation, their impact was largely incremental. They did not significantly alter the UK's broader foreign policy posture or its reliance on hard power tools [7, p. 13]. Overall, Germany 2006 is a prime example of how to leverage a transformative image, whereas the UK 2012 case shows that sport mega-events are not effective soft power tools for established powers. The outcomes of such events tend to consolidate existing reputations rather than reshape them.

3.2. Emerging and Middle-Power Adaptations

For emerging and middle-power states, sport can contribute to sustainable nation branding and soft power only if it is embedded within long-term development strategies, rather than being deployed as one-off spectacles. Gradually progressing from smaller events to mega-events enables states to build institutional capacity, credibility and international visibility, while limiting reputational risk. When backed by authentic cultural programming, transparent governance in line with international standards and proactive public diplomacy, sport can convey competence, modernity and openness. However, sustainability also depends on legacy-oriented infrastructure, measurable socio-economic outcomes and the institutionalisation of reforms beyond the event. This enables short-term visibility to translate into long-term soft power gains [2, pp. 2–13].

Political values and governance practices shape international image, particularly as states are evaluated through media exposure, tourism and global sporting events. Effective sports-based nation branding therefore requires long-term, coherent policymaking. For example, China's hosting of the Olympic Games projected a strong sense of state capacity and

reshaped global perceptions, while South Korea's sustained strategy of hosting events generated lasting emotional engagement. Similarly, African cases demonstrate how strategically organised events can counter negative stereotypes and improve national and continental images [2, p. 3].

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, hosted by China, represent a prominent example of sport as public diplomacy and soft power projection. The Games signalled China's emergence as a global player, demonstrating its political, economic and organisational capacity under intense international scrutiny [10, pp. 531–532]. Building on earlier traditions of sports diplomacy, such as 'ping-pong diplomacy', the Olympics transformed sport into a highly visible display of national capability. However, extensive global media attention on human rights issues also highlighted the reputational risks associated with mega-events, showing how they can both strengthen and challenge soft power objectives simultaneously [10, pp. 531–532].

Similarly, South Africa utilised the 2010 FIFA World Cup to demonstrate unity, equality and progress in the post-apartheid era, while promoting its infrastructure development and tourism potential [1, pp. 14–15]. Building on experience gained from hosting smaller international events, the global reach of the tournament enabled South Africa to reshape perceptions of the nation and the African continent, thus supporting post-apartheid state formation and its aspiration to act as a middle power in international relations [10, p. 534]. While economic benefits were uneven and media scrutiny posed challenges, the World Cup effectively served as a politics-of-attraction strategy, reinforcing domestic legitimacy and enhancing international credibility [10, p. 534].

Some states address the challenge of achieving a unified national brand identity by adopting *sector-specific sub-branding strategies*. Qatar is an example of this approach, having prioritised culture and sport in order to differentiate itself both regionally and globally. Investments in museums, heritage initiatives and major sporting events mean that sport functions as both a sub-brand and a co-branding mechanism. This transfers symbolic value from international events to the national image, thereby reinforcing Qatar's broader nation-branding and soft power strategy [2, p. 8].

3.3. Asserting global actor status: Brazil, Russia, and Qatar

Brazil's hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games was part of a deliberate soft power strategy. This strategy aimed to enhance Brazil's international image and influence through cultural diplomacy, increased visibility on the global stage, and the projection of national values. This strategy is often referred to as "ball diplomacy" [16]. By hosting consecutive mega-events, Brazil was signalling its transition from regional leadership to established global actor status [10], not merely seeking symbolic recognition.

Building on its experience of hosting international events, Brazil successfully engaged with key decision-makers within FIFA and the IOC. This reinforced perceptions of its organisational capability and political maturity [10, pp. 534–535]. Unlike emerging states that use mega-events as a symbolic 'coming out' strategy, Brazil presented its bids as confirmation of its existing global status. This approach was consistent with its broader economic and geopolitical ambitions in the early 2010s, which included an expanded peacekeeping role and aspirations for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council [7, pp. 14–15]. Previous events, such as the 2007 Pan American Games, the Rio+20 Sustainable Development Conference and the 2013 World Youth Day, further solidified Brazil's reputation for organisational competence and global engagement [7, pp. 15–16]. Nevertheless, wide-scale domestic

protests concerning public spending revealed the tensions between elite-driven global ambitions and societal priorities, highlighting the controversial nature of soft power strategies led by mega-events [10, pp. 534–535].

Russia's hosting of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics exemplifies an alternative approach to the deployment of soft power. Rather than focusing on attracting external audiences, the Games were primarily intended for domestic viewers, with the aim of reinforcing national self-worth, patriotism and a resurgent great-power identity. The Western media largely framed Sochi as an attempt to secure international recognition and assert Russia's position in the global hierarchy, particularly amid rising tensions with the West. However, Russia's soft power strategy was more about internal consolidation than external persuasion, contributing to an increasingly imperial and anti-Western national narrative rather than attracting support from abroad [16].

In contrast, Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup exemplifies a soft power model centred on investment, nation branding, institutional development and sports diplomacy [8, pp. 25, 34]. Within a long-term legacy framework, Qatar used football to signal modernity, economic capacity, and global relevance [16]. This strategy involved making extensive investments in sports broadcasting through beIN Sports, acquiring international assets such as the purchase of the London Olympic Village by Qatari Diar, and establishing sports-related institutions including the Aspire Academy, the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, and the International Centre for Sports Security [8, pp. 12–13, 25, 34]. Diplomatic initiatives such as the Generation Amazing programme further established sport as a tool for development and foreign policy.

Unlike Germany's 2006 World Cup, however, Qatar's approach was characterised by sustained negative international media scrutiny, primarily concerning labour conditions and governance practices. This illustrates how mega-events can amplify reputational vulnerabilities when under continuous global media scrutiny, resulting in ambiguous soft power outcomes despite substantial investment [8, pp. 25–26].

Overall, these cases demonstrate the empirical usefulness of the ideal-type model in identifying shared soft power domains and explaining different outcomes for hosts [8, pp. 19–20, 25–26]. For example, China and South Africa primarily utilised sporting mega-events to demonstrate state capability and reinforce domestic legitimacy, whereas Brazil leveraged consecutive mega-events to project its transition from regional leadership to global actor status [10, pp. 531–535; 1, pp. 14–15]. In contrast, Russia's Sochi Winter Olympics largely served as a domestically focused soft power strategy, aimed at consolidating national identity and asserting great-power prestige rather than cultivating external appeal [16]. Germany's coordinated, credibility-driven approach, which benefited from favourable media framing and long-term policy alignment, produced durable reputational gains. Meanwhile, Qatar's investment-led strategy, which combined high global visibility with sustained reputational vulnerability under intense international scrutiny, resulted in more ambivalent soft power effects [8, pp. 25–26].

High-visibility risk and reputational vulnerability. Sporting mega-events are used as instruments of soft power, combining nation branding, cultural diplomacy and economic signalling. However, their outcomes depend heavily on political objectives, audience orientation and geopolitical context. Above all, mega-events function as high-visibility mechanisms that simultaneously amplify reputational opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup is an example of a small state's investment-led strategy aimed at enhancing global visibility, signalling modernity, and supporting economic diversification through legacy initiatives such as Generation Amazing [8, pp. 12–13]. Although Qatar's international profile was strengthened by extensive investment in

infrastructure and broadcasting, sustained media scrutiny of labour practices and governance shows how heightened visibility can magnify reputational risks, especially for non-Western hosts operating within unequal media environments [8, pp. 25–26].

Similarly to Brazil's 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which combined soft power ambitions with investment-led branding to assert global actor status amid economic constraints [7, pp. 14–16], the 2020 Tokyo Olympics sought to leverage soft power through branding. Although organisational capacity and international credibility were indicated, protests over public spending at home exposed tensions between the ambitions of the elite and societal priorities, complicating the intended soft power narrative [10, pp. 534–535].

In contrast, Russia prioritised domestically oriented soft power at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, reinforcing national identity and great-power symbolism. Meanwhile, South Africa blended nation-building with strategies aimed at an international audience at the 2010 FIFA World Cup, seeking to improve its post-apartheid image and project African capability [1, pp. 14–15; 10, p. 534]. These cases highlight how audience orientation — domestic versus international — shapes both reputational exposure and soft power outcomes.

In general, mega-events are flexible but inherently risky soft power instruments. Intensified global media attention can amplify narratives of competence and openness, but it can also expose governance failures, economic strain and social contestation [13, pp. 9–11; 8, pp. 25–26]. Although emerging and middle-income states may achieve greater relative gains than established powers, sustained reputational gains depend on leveraging opportunities systematically across the pre-, during and post-event phases, rather than relying on visibility alone [13, pp. 5–6, 11, 14; 16].

4. Discussion

This study explains the differences in the soft power and national branding outcomes of mega-events among countries, particularly between developing and emerging nations. The study shows that simply hosting does not always yield lasting prestige; rather, the outcomes are highly dependent on institutional integration and alignment with broader political, economic, and cultural objectives. In this regard, for developing countries, mega-events are high-visibility but high-risk tools, and their effectiveness depends on identifiable strategic conditions.

4.1. Conditions for Sustainable Nation Branding

First, sustainable branding results require *strategies beyond the event* itself. Cases like Germany and South Africa show that mega-events are more effective when implemented within the framework of long-term public diplomacy, tourism, and cultural strategies, rather than being treated as isolated events [13, pp. 5–6]. In contrast, hosts who rely on one-off events or symbolic visibility, without sustained post-event communication or policy follow-up, struggle to achieve lasting soft power gains.

Secondly, *governance credibility and policy alignment* are of great importance. An international audience is increasingly evaluating host countries not just for hosting events, but also for their governance practices, labor standards, transparency, and sustainability. The examples of Qatar and Brazil make it clear that reputational weakness is exacerbated when branding narratives are contradicted by apparent governance failures or internal disputes [8, pp. 25–26; 7, pp. 14–16]. Developing countries in particular face asymmetric media scrutiny, which suggests that management alignment, rather than being complementary to successful nation branding, is a necessary condition.

Third, *cultural authenticity and narrative consistency* increase credibility. Mega-events are more likely to enhance a national image when the values and identities they present resonate with both domestic realities and international expectations. Germany's emphasis on openness and hospitality, South Africa's post-apartheid reconciliation narrative, and Brazil's cultural diplomacy strategy demonstrate how authentic storytelling enhances soft power outcomes [9, p. 7–10; 10, pp. 531–535]. Conversely, perceived gaps between projected images and lived experience risk accusations of symbolic or “performative” branding.

Moreover, *scale and sequencing* matter too. Incremental hosting strategies, which progress from smaller events to mega-events, allow states to build institutional capacity, credibility and the effects of learning, while reducing negative exposure to their reputation. This is in contrast to high-stakes, investment-heavy strategies, which compress visibility, scrutiny and expectation into a short timeframe, thereby amplifying potential gains and losses [2, pp. 2–13]. However, even hosting sequential events can sometimes yield negative results if the narratives presented do not align with local realities.

Explanation of different outcomes. The findings shed light on why some developing states have succeeded while others have faced mixed or negative results. Audience orientation plays a crucial role: While China and Russia prioritize domestic legitimacy and national pride, Brazil and Qatar, by focusing on externally oriented recognition, subjected them to greater international media framing and normative scrutiny [10]. States that fail to appreciate the disciplining effect of global media visibility face a higher risk of reputational loss, especially when events draw attention to unresolved political or social issues [13, pp. 9–11].

Conclusion

This study examines how developing and middle-income countries use mega-events for national branding and soft power projection, shedding light on both the opportunities and limitations. Events ranging from Germany 2006 and the UK 2012 to China 2008, South Africa 2010, Russia 2014, Brazil 2014–2016, and Qatar 2022 have yielded different outcomes in different contexts.

First, strategic impact is important. Mega-events do not automatically translate visibility into soft power; coordinated efforts in cultural diplomacy, tourism promotion, public diplomacy, and media are potential successes. Germany 2006 is a successful example of a model that combines hospitality campaigns, arts and culture programs, and sustained media strategies to reinforce a contemporary and accessible national image. In contrast, Qatar 2022 shows that high investment and visibility can further increase reputational risks if governance, labor, or social issues are consistently highlighted.

Second, contextual factors shape outcomes. Audience orientation, geopolitical positioning, domestic governance capabilities, and pre-existing international perceptions all contribute to the effectiveness of event-based soft power. China in 2008 and South Africa in 2010 used mega-events to signal state capabilities and enhance domestic legitimacy, while Brazil in 2014–2016 aimed to assert its status as a global actor by demonstrating that both domestic and international goals must be carefully aligned.

Third, reputational risks are inherent to high-visibility events. Mega-events can amplify both successes and failures if governance shortcomings, economic tensions, or social opposition are exposed alongside positive achievements, highlighting the need for risk management, transparency, and succession planning.

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FƏRQLİ ÖLKƏLƏRDƏ MEQA-TƏDBİRLƏRƏ ƏSASLANAN MİLLƏT
BRENDİNQİNİN MÜXTƏLİF YUMŞAQ GÜC NƏTİCƏLƏRİ
XÜLASƏ

Açar sözlər: idman meqa-tədbirləri; yumşaq güc; millət brendinqi; FIFA; Olimpiya Oyunları; ictimai diplomatiya

Meqa-tədbirlər dövlətlər tərəfindən yumşaq güc və millət brendinqi alətləri kimi geniş istifadə olunur, lakin onların imic təsirləri ölkədən ölkəyə əhəmiyyətli dərəcədə fərqlənir. İnkişaf etməkdə olan və orta gəlirli dövlətlərin nümunə tədqiqinə əsaslanan bu məqalə idman meqa-tədbirlərinin niyə fərqli yumşaq güc və millət brendinqi nəticələri yaratdığını araşdırır. Metodoloji baxımdan keyfiyyət müqayisəli analitik yanaşma tətbiq olunur və bu tədbirlərdən strateji istifadə, idarəetmə və irs siyasətinin qiymətləndirilməsində Almaniya nümunə ölkə kimi dəyərləndirilmiş və inkişaf etməkdə olan., eləcə də orta güc dövlətləri ilə müqayisələr aparılmışdır. Reputasiya qazancı institusional inteqrasiya, strateji tədbir idarəçiliyi və etibarlı idarəetmə tələb edir. Lakin, qeyd olunmalıdır ki, yüksək görünürlüyə malik tədbirlər qlobal media nəzarəti şəraitində reputasiya həssaslığını artırır və ya zəiflədə bilər. Məqalə meqa-tədbirlərin müxtəlif ölkələrdə fərqli nəticələr verməsini izah etməklə və uzunmüddətli təsirin şərtlərini müəyyən etməklə yumşaq güc və millət brendinqi sahələrinə töhfə verir.

РАЗЛИЧНЫЕ РЕЗУЛЬТАТЫ МЯГКОЙ СИЛЫ МЕГА-СОБЫТИЙНОГО
БРЕНДИНГА НАЦИИ В РАЗНЫХ СТРАНАХ
РЕЗЮМЕ

Ключевые слова: спортивные мега-события; мягкая сила; брендинг нации; ФИФА; Олимпийские игры; публичная дипломатия

Мега-события активно используются государствами для продвижения мягкой силы и национального брендинга, однако их эффект сильно зависит от страны. В статье на основе качественного сравнительно-аналитического подхода рассматриваются причины различий в результатах таких мероприятий для развивающихся и стран со средним уровнем дохода. Германия служит эталоном стратегического использования мероприятий, систем управления и политики наследия, что сопоставляется с практикой других стран. Репутационные выгоды требуют институциональной интеграции, стратегического управления и надежного государственного контроля, тогда как высокопубличные события под глобальным медийным наблюдением могут как укреплять, так и ослаблять имидж страны. Статья поясняет условия долгосрочного влияния мега-событий и вносит вклад в исследования мягкой силы и брендинга нации.